Marx at the Margins
On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies
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After the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871, Marx focused again on forms of resistance to capital outside Western Europe and North America. Three strands in his writings illustrate this turn toward agrarian non-Western societies during his last decade, 1872–83. Taken as a whole, these indicate a new turn, part of a gradual evolution in Marx’s thought since the late 1850s. The first of these strands is found in the changes he introduced to the French edition of *Capital*, as discussed in the previous chapter.

The second of these strands, to be discussed in the present chapter, can be found in the 1879–82 excerpt notebooks on non-Western and precapitalist societies, some of them still unpublished in any language, which extend to over three hundred thousand words. These notes on studies by other authors, many of them anthropologists, cover a wide range of societies and historical periods, including Indian history and village culture; Dutch colonialism and the village economy in Indonesia; gender and kinship patterns among Native Americans and in ancient Greece, Rome, and Ireland; and communal and private property in Algeria and Latin America.

A group of shorter but better-known texts on Russia from the years 1877 to 1882 form the third strand of Marx’s late writings. He started to learn Russian in 1869; his interest in that society was increased further by the wide discussion generated by the 1872 Russian translation of *Capital*, volume I. In his correspondence with the Russian exile Vera Zasulich and elsewhere, Marx began to suggest that agrarian Russia’s communal villages could be a starting point for a socialist transformation, one that might avoid the brutal process of the primitive accumulation of capital. His interest in the Russian rural commune
as a locus of revolution was no theory of agrarian autarky, however; to achieve a successful socialism, Russia would need connections to Western technology and above all, reciprocal relations with the Western labor movement, he held.

Except for a brief preface to an 1882 Russian edition of *The Communist Manifesto*, coauthored with Engels, Marx never published any of the results of his new research on non-Western and precapitalist societies before his death at age sixty-four in 1883.

During his last decade, he published little, as illustrated by the fact that he did not complete volumes II and III of *Capital*, which Engels edited and published after Marx’s death. Marx’s best-known work from this period is the *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875), also published posthumously. Many studies of Marx’s life and thought have suggested that by 1879, he had lost the capacity for serious intellectual work. The great Marx editor, David Riazanov, who launched the first MEGA in the 1920s, expresses such an attitude when he writes that by that time, “any strenuous intellectual work was a menace to his overwrought brain,” this due to his “shattered health”: “After 1878 [the year Marx turned 60!] he was forced to give up all work on *Capital*;” but “he was still able to make notes” (Riazanov [1927] 1973, 205–6). Riazanov was almost certainly referring to the notebooks under consideration in the present chapter, among other things. Moreover, in 1925, in a report on his preparations for the first MEGA, Riazanov characterizes these excerpt notebooks as examples of “inexcusable pedantry” (1925, 399). The suggestion that Marx’s multilingual explorations of gender and class across a wide variety of geographical locations, cultures, and historical periods were less intellectually serious than the critique of political economy surely smacks of Eurocentrism, if not sexism. The surviving Marx correspondence does not offer a clear-cut explanation of the relationship of these late writings to the unfinished *Capital*; however, a possibility not considered by Riazanov is that Marx intended to extend the geographic scope of his critique of political economy.

More recent discussions of Marx’s late writings have challenged the notion that his last years were marked by intellectual decline, although it remains the dominant one. In 1972, Lawrence Krader published a careful transcription entitled *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx*. This pathbreaking multilingual volume, which contained several hundred pages from Marx’s notebooks from 1880 to 1882, made the extent and depth of these notebooks on non-Western and precapitalist societies, which were not included in Marx’s *Collected Works* in English or German, evident for the first time. Krader published Marx’s notes on anthropological works by Lewis Henry Morgan on Native Americans and ancient Greece and Rome, Henry Sumner Maine on
social relations in ancient Ireland, John Budd Phear on village India, and John Lubbock on a number of preliterate societies.⁷ Krader’s edition of The Ethnological Notebooks contains only about half of Marx’s 1879–82 notes on non-Western and precapitalist societies, however. The remainder, some of it not yet published in any language, concerns Marx’s notes on the Russian anthropologist Maxim Kovalevsky’s study of communal property in the Americas, India, and Algeria; on Indian history based on a book by the colonial civil servant Robert Sewell; on the writings of the German social historians Karl Bücher, Ludwig Friedländer, Ludwig Lange, Rudolf Jhering, and Rudolf Sohm on class, status, and gender in Rome and medieval Europe; on the British barrister J. W. B. Money’s study of Indonesia (Java); on new works in physical anthropology and paleontology; on Russian-language studies of rural Russia; and finally, on Britain’s moves into Egypt in the 1880s. Including those previously published by Krader, these notes would total over eight hundred printed pages.⁸

In his analysis of these notebooks, Krader (1974, 1975) stressed their relationship to Marx’s earlier work on the Asiatic mode of production and their contribution to anthropological thought. The German historian Hans-Peter Harstick, who published Marx’s 1879 notes on Kovalevsky’s book on communal property, saw these notebooks as more of a new departure: “Marx’s gaze turned from the European scene . . . toward Asia, Latin America, and North Africa” (1977, 2). Dunayevskaya ([1982] 1991, 1985) emphasized their focus on gender and the differences between Marx’s notes on Morgan and what Engels developed from them in his The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State (1884).⁹ Dunayevskaya’s work, which attracted the attention of the feminist poet Adrienne Rich ([1991] 2001), first brought The Ethnological Notebooks to the attention of a wider public.

Written in an unpolished, sometimes ungrammatical mixture of English, German, and other languages, these are not draft manuscripts, but working notebooks in which Marx recorded or summarized passages from books he was studying. However, they are far more than summaries of other authors. As Dunayevskaya suggests, these notebooks “let us hear Marx think” (2002, 294). First, they show Marx as a “reader.” Not only do they contain his direct or indirect critique of the assumptions or conclusions of the authors he is studying, but they also show how he connected or took apart themes and issues in the texts he was reading. Second, they indicate which themes and data he found compelling in connection with these studies of non-Western and precapitalist societies. In short, they offer a unique window into Marx’s thinking at a time when he seemed to be moving in new directions.
Gender and Social Hierarchy among the Iroquois, the Homeric Greeks, and Other Preliterate Societies

Because Engels based *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* on them, Marx’s excerpt notes on Lewis Henry Morgan’s *Ancient Society* (1877) are the best known of his 1879–82 notebooks on non-Western and precapitalist societies, at least indirectly. In his pioneering book, Engels made an unusually strong argument for gender equality, challenging the prejudices not only of mainstream public opinion but also of socialist discourse, where some figures like Proudhon had expressed an untrammeled hostility to women’s rights. Moreover, Engels offered an alternative to liberal feminism, since he tied women’s subordination to the economic sphere, arguing that women’s emancipation could not be fully achieved as long as class domination persisted. At the same time, as will be argued below, Engels’s book was burdened with a deterministic framework that did not do justice to the subtlety of Marx’s notes on Morgan.

In his celebrated book, Engels sees the American anthropologist Morgan as virtually a materialist in the Marxian sense, someone who “rediscovered in America, in his own way, the materialist conception of history that had been discovered by Marx forty years ago” and who “was led by this conception to the same conclusions, in the main points, as Marx.” Moreover, Engels writes, but without providing any evidence, that Marx “had planned to present the results of Morgan’s researches” in published form (MECW 26, 131).

After surveying a number of preliterate, stateless societies as analyzed by Morgan—from the Iroquois to the early Greeks, Romans, and Germans—Engels argues that the state was a new and transitory human institution: “The state, then, has not existed from eternity. There have been societies that managed without it, that had no idea of the state and state authority” (MECW 26, 272). The gens, or clan—the non-state organizational form that Morgan had found across a wide range of preliterate cultures—structured these societies. (Marx, Engels, and Morgan all used the Roman-based terms “gentes,” “gens,” and “gentile” instead of “clan,” the common usage of today.) Looking forward to the stateless and socialist society that he saw on the horizon, Engels concludes *The Origin of the Family* by citing Morgan’s prediction of “a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient gentes” (MECW 26, 276, Morgan 1877, 552). Striking an almost Rousseauian note, Engels maintains that the new data of anthropology had conclusively proved, when one took account of the whole period of human existence, that what was
called civilization, with its hierarchies of class, property, and gender, was an atypical—and it was implied, unnatural—way of ordering human affairs. Unlike Rousseau, however, and this to his credit, Engels placed gender equality at the center of his concerns.

Engels maintains that these early egalitarian societies were “doomed to extinction” because of their low level of economic and technological development (MECW 26, 203). Sooner or later, new institutions like private property, social classes, the state, and the patriarchal family overwhelmed them. Striking a Hegelian chord concerning gender, Engels concludes that the rise of these new hierarchies marked “the world-historic defeat of the female sex,” wherein women’s participation in political decision-making died out, as did matrilineal forms of descent (165). Since private property, the state, and patriarchy formed a totality, Engels argues that they could likewise be overcome only by a total socialist transformation. Overall, Engels was making an economic determinist argument, according to which the development of the capitalist economy, combined with a strong workers’ movement toward socialism, would reverse the world-historic defeat of the female sex, this in quasi-automatic fashion.

The Origin of the Family has come to be seen as the classic Marxist statement on gender and the family. By the mid-twentieth century, however, some feminist thinkers began to critique the book’s economic determinism, which they usually linked to Marx as well. For example, the existentialist feminist Simone de Beauvoir holds, against Engels, that it is “not clear that the institution of private property must necessarily have involved the enslavement of women” ([1949] 1989, 56). As a result, the error of Engels lay in how “he tried to reduce the antagonism of the sexes to class conflict” (56, 58). But this critique of Engels, powerful as it was, also exhibited some weaknesses. For as many of its critics rooted in Marxism or structuralism have held, existentialism gives too much weight to individual subjectivity and choice, as against economic and social conditions (Marcuse [1948] 1972, Dunayevskaya [1973] 1989, Bourdieu 1977).

The publication in 1972 of Marx’s notes on Morgan in Krader’s Ethnological Notebooks created new ground for what was by then an old debate. To be sure, Engels had utilized Marx’s excerpts and comments on Morgan, and, as he maintains in his introduction to The Origin of the Family, he worked to “reproduce” those “critical notes” in his own book (MECW 26, 131). But until The Ethnological Notebooks first appeared, few were aware of just how comprehensive Marx’s notes on Morgan had been, roughly equal in length to Engels’s book. By the simple act of publishing Marx’s Morgan notes alongside those on other anthropologists, whose work took up a number of non-Western societies, especially India, Krader pointed to something Engels had
not taken up at all in his book: the possibility that Marx’s 1880–82 notebooks were concerned not so much with the origins of social hierarchy in the distant past, as with the social relations within contemporary societies under the impact of capitalist globalization.

In his notes, Marx seemed to accept Morgan’s clan-centered approach, especially the notion that the clan long preceded the family. Moreover, he seemed to agree that the family, as it developed out of the breakdown of the clan system, contained multiple forms of domination, as in Rome. In a brief remark also quoted by Engels, Marx sketches this: “The modern family contains in embryo not only *servitus* (slavery) but also *serfdom*, since from the outset it refers to *services for* agriculture. It contains within itself in miniature all the antagonisms that later develop widely in society and its state” (Marx [1880–82] 1974, 120; see also Engels in MECW 26, 166).

To an extent, Marx also connected Morgan’s clan-centered approach to his own materialist one. Additionally, he seemed in basic accord with Morgan’s thesis concerning the relative gender equality of early clan societies. However, where Morgan and Engels focused solely on the breakdown of clan society as the source of male domination, of class society, and of the state, Marx’s notebooks show a more nuanced, dialectical approach that resists such schema. To be sure, Marx seems to appreciate Morgan’s view of the remarkable degree of power held by women in Iroquois society, as in the following passage he records in his notes:

Rev. Asher Wright, many years a missionary among the Senecas, wrote to Morgan in 1873 on them: “. . . . The women were the great power among the clans, as everywhere else. They did not hesitate, when occasion required, *to knock off the horns,* as it was technically called, from the head of a chief, and send him back to the ranks of the warriors. The original nomination of the chiefs also always rested with them.” (Marx [1880–82] 1974, 116; original emphasis)

Marx does not leave it at that, however. As Dunayevskaya asserts, Marx, unlike Engels, saw “limitations” to the type of freedom enjoyed by women in these clan societies (1982 1991, 182). She singles out the following passage Marx recorded from Morgan, again on the Iroquois, where women are seen to have speaking but not decision-making rights: “The women allowed to express their wishes and opinions through an orator of their own election. Decision given by the [male] Council” (Marx [1880–82] 1974, 162 [original emphasis]; see also Morgan 1877, 117).
Marx took up yet another core insight of Morgan, the reconceptualization of early Greco-Roman society through the lens of Iroquois clan society. The following selection, mainly a passage from Morgan on male domination in classical Greece, contains two bracketed sentences by Marx, who poses male domination there as a contradictory phenomenon, containing at least some hints of resistance:

From beginning to end under the Greeks a principle of studied selfishness among the males, tending to lessen the appreciation of women, *scarcely found among savages*. The usages of centuries stamped upon the minds of Grecian women a sense of their inferiority. [[But the relationship to the goddesses on Olympus shows remembering and reflection back to an earlier, freer and more powerful position for women. Juno craving for domination, the goddess of wisdom springs from the head of Zeus, etc.]]14 . . . The Greeks remained *barbarians* in their treatment of the female sex at the height of their civilization; their education superficial, intercourse with the opposite sex denied them, their inferiority inculcated as a principle upon them, until it *came to be accepted as a fact by the women themselves*. The wife not companion equal to her husband, *but in the relation of a daughter*. (Marx [1880–82] 1974, 121; original emphasis)15

As against the utterly bleak portrait of male domination in Greece in Engels and Morgan, Marx’s bracketed insert makes the passage more dialectical, suggesting that Greek gender ideology was riven with deep fault lines.

Immediately following this, Marx incorporates into his notes a long passage from Morgan concerning the relatively freer position of Roman women:

*Materfamilias* was mistress of the family; went into the streets freely without restraint from her husband, frequented with the men the theaters and festive banquets; in the house not confined to particular apartments, nor excluded from the table of the men. Roman females thus more personal dignity and independence than Greek; but *marriage* gave them *into power of the husband*; was = daughter of the husband; he had the power of correction and of life and death in case of adultery (with concurrence of the council of her gens) (Marx [1880–82] 1974, 121; original emphasis)16

Here and above, Marx’s notes seemed to run in a different direction from Engels’s formulation of a “world-historic defeat of the female sex” at the time clan society died out and was replaced by class society and state forms. Not
only did Greek goddesses offer an alternative perspective within the patriarchal order, but in the later Roman society, women’s position also improved somewhat, albeit with many severe restrictions remaining.\(^{17}\)

Again differing somewhat from Morgan and Engels, Marx focuses upon indications of stratified hierarchy within early clan society. As Morgan interpreted the traditional accounts, the legendary early Athenian ruler Theseus had tried to undermine the egalitarianism of the clan system, this during a period long before its collapse. Morgan suggested that Theseus had attempted to set up a class system, but this had failed due to the lack of a social base within the clan society of that era. As a result, he writes, there was “in fact no transfer of power from the gentes” under Theseus (Morgan 1877, 260). Marx disagrees with Morgan on this point, viewing the early clan structures themselves as a source for the growth of social inequality:

The statement of Plutarch, that “the lowly and poor eagerly followed the summons of Theseus” and the statement of Aristotle quoted by him, that Theseus “was predisposed toward the people” seem however, in spite of Morgan, to imply that the chiefs of the gentes etc. because of wealth etc. already engaged in conflict of interests with the mass of the gentes. (Marx [1880–82] 1974, 210; original emphasis)

Dunayevskaya sees Marx’s remark on Theseus as suggesting the possibility of a nonclass form of social stratification, caste:

Marx demonstrates that, long before the dissolution of the primitive commune, there emerged the question of ranks within the egalitarian commune. It was the beginning of the transformation into opposite—gens into caste. That is to say, within the egalitarian communal form arose the elements of its opposite—caste, aristocracy, different material interests. (1985, 214)

This is in keeping with how Marx singles out caste at another point in his notes on Morgan:

In the situation where conquest would be added onto the gentile principle, could the gentes little by little give occasion for caste formation? . . . . As soon as difference of rank stands between consanguinity of gentes, this comes into conflict with the gentile principle and can rigidify the gens into its opposite, caste. (Marx [1880–82] 1974, 183; original emphasis)
Engels, who concentrated on the rise of private property, missed the possibility that collectivist forms of domination that minimized private property could also create very pronounced social hierarchies.

Had Engels taken up Morgan’s chapter on the Aztecs, as Marx did at some length, these distinctions might have become clearer to him. Then Engels might not have written with such assurance of Native American clan societies with “no room . . . as a rule, for the subjugation of alien tribes” (MECW 26, 203). For the Aztec confederacy was a collectivist clan society, one that Morgan termed a “military democracy,” which nonetheless ruled over numerous subordinate tribes (1877, 188).

Marx continued to look at matrilineal societies in his notes on the Darwinist John Lubbock’s The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man (1870). He treated Lubbock with scorn throughout these brief notes from late 1882. At several points, he mocks Lubbock’s patriarchal prejudices, as in the bracketed and parenthetical comments interspersed within the following passage on Africa:

“Among many of the lower races relationship through females is the prevalent custom,” hence “the curious (!) practice that a man’s heirs [[but they were not then the man’s heirs, these civilized jackasses cannot get free of their own conventionalities]] are not his own, but his sister’s children.” (105) “Thus when a rich man dies in Guinea, his property, excepting the armor, descended to the sister’s son.” (MECW 1880–82 1974, 340; Marx’s emphasis)

At another point, Marx refers in parenthetical remarks to an Australian Aborigine as “the intelligent black,” this in contrast to an ethnocentric anthropologist cited approvingly by Lubbock:

The belief in the soul (not identical with ghosts), in an universal, independent and endless existence is confined to the highest (?) races of mankind. The Reverend Lang in his The Aborigines of Australia had a friend, which friend “tried long and patiently to make a very intelligent Australian understand (should be called make him believe) his existence without a body, but the black never would keep his countenance . . . for a long time he could not believe (‘he’ is the intelligent black) that the “gentleman” (i.e. Reverend Lang’s silly friend) was serious, and when he did realize it (that the gentleman was an ass in good earnest), the more serious the teacher was the more ludicrous the whole affair appeared to
be.” (245, 246) (Without realizing it Lubbock makes a fool of himself.) (Marx [1880–82] 1974, 349; Marx’s emphasis)

He does not confine such strictures to the superficial Lubbock, however.

Marx sounds similar chords in his lengthier notes on the distinguished jurist Henry Sumner Maine’s Early History of Institutions (1875), where he frequently chides the English scholar for his patriarchal, colonialisr, and ethnocentric assumptions. As the American social theorist David Norman Smith (forthcoming) notes: “Of all Marx’s writings on ethnological subjects,” these “are the richest in criticism.” Most of Maine’s book concerned the communal social forms and the customary law of ancient Ireland, based upon the recently published Brehon laws, especially the Senchus Mor and the Book of Aicill. Maine frequently compared Irish customary law to similar legal institutions in India, where he served as a high-ranking colonial official during the 1860s.

In his first chapter, Maine argues that “the collective ownership of the soil,” once widespread in Western Europe, was still a major factor in many other parts of the world (1875, 1). He refers specifically to the contemporary Slavic peoples of Eastern Europe and to India, this with some foreboding: “It is one of the facts with which the Western world will some day assuredly have to reckon, that the political ideas of so large a portion of the human race, and its ideas of property also, are inextricably bound up with the notions of family interdependency, of collective ownership, and of natural subjection to patriarchal power” (2–3). Maine attributes non-Western backwardness to the persistence of these forms. Krader holds that Maine believed “that the English could transmit the advanced form of property in land and of the State to Ireland and India” and in this regard, “Maine offered his historical jurisprudence to the service of empire” (Krader 1975, 263). While Marx was to hammer Maine repeatedly for assuming the patriarchal family as the oldest and most basic form of social organization, the two writers were in agreement on one fundamental point: communal social forms in Russia and Asia represented an obstacle and a challenge to bourgeois property relations.

In taking issue with Maine’s assumption that the patriarchal family came first historically, Marx writes: “Herr Maine as a blockheaded Englishman does not start with the gens, but rather with the patriarch, who becomes the Chief, etc. Height of silliness” (Marx [1880–82] 1974, 292). Marx attacks the related notion that the substantial power of women in ancient Ireland was due to later influences, like Christianity: “This Maine takes for Church influence, although it arises everywhere in the higher state of savagery, for example among Red
Indians” (288). Marx referred as well to Morgan’s superior insight concerning early non-patriarchal forms.

A second element of the discussion of gender concerned sati and women’s inheritance rights in India. Again, Marx attacked the way in which Maine, still positing the patriarchal family as the original form, sometimes explained marital property held by the wife as an innovation. Marx views this instead as the vestige of an earlier, matrilineal social order marked by “descent within the clan along the female line” (Marx [1880–82] 1974, 325). He holds the Brahmins and their treatises on law responsible for the shift.

Concerning sati and female inheritance, Marx brings into his notes material from Thomas Strange’s *Elements of Hindu Law* (1835), which he finds more illuminating than Maine:

The beastliness of the Brahmins reaches its height in the “Suttee” [sati] or widow burning. Strange considers this practice to be a “malus usus,” not “law,” since in the *Manu* and other high authorities there is no mention of it. . . . The matter is clear: the *suttee* is simply *religious murder*, in part to bring the inheritance into the hands of the (spiritual) Brahmins for the religious ceremonies for the deceased husband and in part through Brahmin legislation to transfer the inheritance of the widow to the closest in the gens, the nearer family of the *husband*. . . . Although *suttee* an innovation introduced by the Brahmins, in the Brahmin mind this *innovation* was conceived as a survival from the older barbarians (who had buried a man with his possessions)! Let it rest. (Marx [1880–82] 1974, 325–27; original emphasis)

Moreover, Marx saw all of this not in terms of Indian alterity, but in connection to Western societies, as he delved into the medieval Catholic Church’s appropriation of property, albeit in a different manner than the Brahmins. He remarks that while it curtailed other rights of women, “in relation to ‘proprietary right,’ the wily Church certainly had an interest in securing the rights of women (the opposite interest from the Brahmins!).” This was because it wanted women to donate property (327).

Marx, like Maine, was interested in how the ancient Irish clan structures began to be transformed into a new class society, and on these issues, he occasionally expressed some affinity to Maine. He incorporated into his notes much of Maine’s discussion of the breakdown of the clans in Ireland. Here again, Marx singled out the role of the pre-Christian clergy in these transfor-
mations. He also followed closely Maine’s discussion of the accumulation of livestock, especially cattle, as crucial to the process class differentiation.

The transformation of the ancient clan structures into a class system eventually led to the formation of states, a topic that led to another attack by Marx on Maine. Referring to Thomas Hobbes, Jeremy Bentham, and John Austin, Maine writes that the state was predicated upon “the possession of irresistible force, not necessarily exerted but capable of being exerted” (Marx [1880–82] 1974, 328; Maine 1875, 350). Marx attacks this version of commandism, writing that “where States exist (after the primitive communities, etc.), i.e. politically organized society, the state in no way is the prince; it just seems so” (329). Instead, Marx points to the changes in the economic base as the source of the rise of the state, this in one of his longest remarks in these notebooks. One particular problem for Marx at this point is Maine’s notion of the “moral,” as separate from the economic base: “This ‘moral’ shows how little Maine understands the matter. So far as these influences (economical before everything else) do have a ‘moral’ mode of existence, this mode is always a secondary, derived mode, never the primary one” (329; Marx’s emphasis). A second problem for Marx was that the English jurist’s analytical construct of state power sought to abstract out history. For example, Maine writes, in a passage not incorporated by Marx, that his “theory of sovereignty” made it possible to “class together the coercive authority of the great King of Persia, of the Athenian Demos, of the later Roman Emperors, of the Russian Czar, and of the Crown and Parliament of Great Britain” (Maine 1875, 360).22 To Marx, such notions were ahistorical and abstract, merging together uncritically institutions from quite different modes of production.

But the biggest problem for Marx concerned Maine’s Austin-derived commandist theory. I quote this passage extensively, for it reveals some late developments in Marx’s theory of the state, on the basis of his anthropological studies:

Maine ignores the much deeper aspect: that the seemingly supreme independent existence of the state itself is only an illusion, since the state in all its forms is only an excrescence of society. Just as the state only appears at a certain stage of social development, the state will also disappear when society reaches a stage of development that until now it has not reached. First the separation of individuality from the shackles of the group—this means the one-sided development of individuality. These shackles were originally not despotic (as blockhead Maine understands it)
but comprised the social bonds of the group, the primitive community. But
the true nature of the latter can only be understood if we analyze its con-
tent—in the “last” analysis, interests. We find then, that these interests
are common to certain social groups. They are class interests, which in
the last analysis have economic relations as their basis. The state is built
upon these as its basis and the existence of the state presupposes the exis-
tence of class interests . . . fundamental error . . . that political superiority,
whatever its peculiar shape, and whatever the ensemble of its elements,
is taken as something standing over society, resting solely upon itself . . .
For example, better armaments depend directly on improvements in the means of production—these coincide directly, e.g. in hunting and
fishing, with the means of destruction, means of war . . . A good example
is the half-crazy Ivan IV.23 While he was angry at the boyars and also at
the Moscow rabble, he sought, and indeed had to, to present himself as
the representative of peasant interests. (Marx [1880–82] 1974, 329–30; original emphasis)

Probably the most notable new feature above was the way Marx brought in the
material from Morgan and Maine on clan societies in order to update his state
theory, which remained rooted in notions of economic interest.
As we have seen, Marx’s frequent attacks on Maine sometimes masked ar-
eas where he appropriated, albeit critically, some of the British jurist’s data
and arguments. These concerned especially (1) the rise of class differentiation
within the Irish clan and (2) the rejection of the category of “feudalism” as a
generic term for premodern agrarian societies. However, for the most part he
portrays Maine as an ideologue defending capital and empire, rather than a
real scholar.

India’s Communal Social Forms under the Impact of Muslim and European Conquest

Although his notes on Maine contained some discussion of India, in major
parts of the 1879–82 excerpt notebooks, Marx concentrated entirely on that
society. This can be seen in his lengthy notes on the young anthropologist
Maxim Kovalevsky’s Communal Landownership: The Causes, Course, and
Consequences of Its Decline, published in Russian in 1879, most of which is
devoted to India. It can also be seen in his equally lengthy notes on the young
historian Robert Sewell’s Analytical History of India (1870), and in those
on ethnologist John Budd Phear’s The Aryan Village in India and Ceylon
(1880). Marx’s notes on the Indian subcontinent from this period comprise nearly ninety thousand words. As against the notes on Morgan, Lubbock, and Maine, however, Marx made far fewer remarks in his own voice in these India notes.

Writing mainly in German, but with some passages in Russian, Marx appears to have excerpted Kovalevsky’s book on communal property in the fall of 1879, a year or two before his notes on Morgan, Maine, and Lubbock. In a letter of September 19, 1879 to Nikolai Danielson, one of the translators of *Capital* into Russian, Marx refers to the young Kovalevsky as “one of my ‘scientific friends’” (MECW 45, 409). It was Kovalevsky, who saw Marx in London fairly frequently during this period, who provided him with a copy of Morgan’s *Ancient Society* (Krader 1974, White 1996). In the parts of his notes on Kovalevsky dealing with India, Marx examined social relations, especially in terms of communal property, across the entirety of Indian history, covering (1) the period before the Muslim conquests, (2) that of Muslim domination, and (3) that of British colonialism. At the beginning of these excerpts, he quotes Kovalevsky to the effect that “no country” besides India has experienced so much “variety in the forms of land relations” (Marx [1879] 1975, 346).

In the first part, Marx closely follows Kovalevsky’s historical typology of communal forms in rural India, which consisted of three stages: (1) clan-based communities owning and tilling the land in common; (2) more differentiated village communities, where kinship did not bind together the entire village but where land was allotted to some extent on the basis of kinship; (3) village communities not organized around kinship and that periodically redivided the common land on an equal basis, the latter “a relatively late form in the history of Indian forms of landed property” (Marx [1879] 1975, 351). Somewhat later, Marx remarks that even such “individual shares of land” within a communal village “are not private property!” (362).

Given this focus on broad changes in India’s communal forms, it would appear that Hindu India was for Marx no longer an “unchanging” society without any real history, as in 1853 (MECW 12, 217). Inserting his own remarks (which I have italicized) into a quote from Kovalevsky, Marx writes of social antagonisms within the early Indian village, of “the danger that threatens the system of shares determined by degree of kinship from the more distant descendants and the newly arrived settlers, inasmuch as this antagonism indeed leads ultimately to the system of periodic redistribution of the communal land in equal shares” (Marx [1879] 1975, 357). Thus for Marx, more than Kovalevsky, the contradiction between the older system of clan or kinship and
that of equality within the broader-based communal village was the major force behind the social changes in the early Indian village.

At another level, Marx seems to have concluded that the evolution of Hindu law from the early Code of Manu onwards also facilitated the breakdown of communal property as such. This, he emphasizes, came through bequests and gifts to religious bodies, as seen in the passage below, where the parts inserted by Marx into his quotes from Kovalevsky are again italicized:

The priestly pack thus plays a central role in the process of individualization of family property. (113). The chief sign of undivided family property is its inalienability. In order to get at this property, the legislation, which is developed under Brahmin influence, must attack this bastion more and more. . . . [[Alienation by gifts everywhere the priestly hobbyhorse!]]. . . . Among other peoples as well, for instance in the Germanic-Roman world (vide Merovingians, Carolingians) the same rank order is also found—gifts to the priest first, preceding every other mode of alienation of immovable property. (Marx [1879] 1975, 366–67)

In the last sentence above, Marx is again emphasizing parallels of Indian history with that of other cultures, in this instance to early medieval Europe, as against notions of Indian alterity.

While Marx seems to share much of Kovalevsky’s argument concerning India’s communal property, on occasion he takes issue with the young ethnologist’s assumptions. For example, in response to Kovalevsky’s statement that the rise of communal property in land formed the basis of “common exploitation of the soil by the members of the clans,” Marx writes that cooperation, “made necessary by the conditions of the hunt, etc.,” came about even before settled agriculture among “nomadic and even savage peoples” (Marx [1879] 1975, 356–57). As the Marxist humanist philosopher Peter Hudis notes, Marx rejects “Kovalevsky’s identification of communal social relations with communal property forms” (2004, 63). Here again, as in the Grundrisse, Marx saw communal forms of production as historically prior to and more fundamental than communal property.

The second part of Marx’s notes on Kovalevsky on India, which deals with the impact of Muslim rule on these earlier social relationships, calls forth one of his most explicit attacks on the notion that precolonial India was feudal. Muslim conquerors introduced the iqta, a form of benefice in which military leaders received land, or the income from land, in return for further military service. As against Western feudalism’s fiefs, however, iqtas were not normally
there were also severe limits on how much land could be handed over as *iqtas*, and in most cases the Hindu subjects retained possession of their land. In an extended comment, Marx expresses exasperation over his friend Kovalevsky’s interpretation of these relations as feudal:

Because “benefices,” “farming out of offices” [but this is not at all feudal, as Rome attests] and commendation found in India, Kovalevsky here finds feudalism in the Western European sense. Kovalevsky forgets, among other things, serfdom, which is not in India, and which is an essential moment. [In regard to the individual role of defense, however (cf. Palgrave), not only of the unfree, but also the free peasants by the feudal lords (who play a role as wardens), this plays a limited role in India, except for the wakuf] [of the poetry of the soil which the Romanic-Germanic feudalism had as its own (see Maurer), as little is found in India as in Rome. The soil is nowhere noble in India, so that it might not be alienable to commoners!] (Marx [1879] 1975, 383; original emphasis)

This passage underlines Marx’s adamant opposition to the view, sometimes held up as Marxist orthodoxy, that precapitalist class societies were uniformly “feudal.” Not only was he keeping away from such notions, as he had in the *Grundrisse* two decades earlier, but he was also explicitly attacking those who maintained the “feudal” interpretation. As Harstick writes concerning this passage: “Marx argues for a differentiated examination of Asian and European history and he aims his argument . . . above all against simply carrying over concepts of social structure drawn from the Western European model into Indian or Asian social relations” (1977, 13).

Despite their differences, Marx’s friend Kovalevsky—here unlike Lubbock, Maine, and Sewell, but like Morgan—also admired communal property and clan societies. In addition, the young Russian ethnologist shared much of Marx’s hostility toward colonialism, here unlike even Morgan, who was silent on the matter. This became clear in the third section of Marx’s notes on Kovalevsky on India, which focuses on the period of British colonialism up through the 1857–58 Sepoy Uprising. Marx begins with a detailed treatment of Cornwallis’s “permanent settlement” of 1793, which made the *zemindars*, formerly hereditary tax farmers for the Mughal Empire, into landlords. The *zemindars* therefore gained unrestricted capitalist-style ownership over the areas they had formerly only taxed, including the right to evict those who were now their tenants, the *ryots*, and the right to pass down these new acquisitions to their heirs. As he incorporates some excerpts from Sewell’s aforementioned *Analytical*
History of India directly into his notes on Kovalevsky, Marx adds phrases such as “the scoundrel” to describe Cornwallis (Marx [1879] 1975, 385; Sewell 1870, 153). According to Sewell, one of the latter’s opponents “spoke strenuously in Council [of the East India Company] against the wholesale destruction of Indian customs,” a statement Marx incorporates into his notes (Marx [1879] 1975, 385; Sewell 1870, 153). But he does not incorporate Sewell’s condescending description of “humbled and spiritless Hindus” accepting these changes passively (Sewell 1870, 153). Calling the British colonialists “dogs,” ‘asses,” “oxen,” “blockheads,” and the like, Marx describes a “general hatred of the English government” ([1879] 1975, 390–92, passim). As in 1853, he also links the situation of the ryot to that of the Irish peasant: “England and Ireland combined. Beautiful!” (Marx [1879] 1975, 390).

Kovalevsky discerned the continuation of communal forms in the villages, underneath the new capitalist structure. Marx records the following on this issue, inserting the italicized passage about social “atoms”:

Under this system, the government has nothing to do with the totality of the communal possessors of a given village, but with hereditary users of individual parcels, whose rights cease by not paying tax punctually. Yet between these atoms certain connections continue to exist, distantly reminiscent of the earlier communal village landowning groups. (Marx [1879] 1975, 388; original emphasis)

This extremely important passage suggests a link between Marx’s notes on India and his 1877–82 writings on Russia, discussed below. If these communal “connections” endured in India, might they not also, as in Russia, serve as points of resistance to capital?

Near the end of this discussion of the impact of British colonial rule on the communal village, Marx makes a swipe at Maine, whom he accuses of bias:

The English Indian officials and the publicists supported upon these, as Sir H. Maine, etc., describe the decline of common property in the Punjab as the mere result,—in spite of the loving English treatment of the archaic form,—of economic progress, whereas they themselves are the chief bearers (active) of the same—to their own danger. (Marx [1879] 1975, 394; original emphasis)

In this very interesting passage, Marx certainly shows hostility to colonialism and capitalism, and a degree of sympathy for communal social forms. But with
the phrase “to their own danger,” he also suggests that it was not so much the preservation of these forms as their forceful breakup in the name of “economic progress” that could unleash new social forces dangerous to British rule. The older communal forms may not have been revolutionary in and of themselves, but they could become a “danger” to the social order as they collided with capitalist modernity.

Marx probably made his sixteen thousand-word notes on Phear’s *The Aryan Village in India and Ceylon* in 1881, the year after it was published.²⁹ Phear had served as a colonial judge in India and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) during the 1860s and 1870s, and his book is a detailed description of village life in Bengal and Ceylon. Although Marx mainly records Phear’s data, his occasional comments are illuminating. Phear expresses some sympathy for the plight of impoverished Indian villagers, but without sharing Marx’s view of this as part of a stark economic polarization in which the local dominant classes and the British colonialists became rich at the villagers’ expense. This is shown in a parenthetical remark Marx inserts into one of Phear’s sentences: “Extreme poverty of by far the largest portion, i.e. the bulk of the population of Bengal (the richest part of India!” (Marx [1880–82] 1974, 249).

At one point, Marx records a passage from Phear on conflicts between the *ryots* and the *zemindars*, referring also to the *mandal*, the elected village head:

**Affray of the Zamindar’s people on the Mandal** (headman of the village). . . The new Zamindar takes measures for enhancing rents of his *ryots*; was successful at obtaining . . . increased rates from several *ryots*, but the *mandal of the village*, whose example most influential, sturdily held out and led the opposition. Against him the zamindar sent his retainers, with the view of capturing him and carrying him off. (p. 118, 119) Ended with the murder of a couple of people, but the *mandal* won. (p. 119, 120) Another case where the *ryots* against the *mandal* because took much the side of the zamindar in certain matters; therefore resolve in “committee” that he should be *punished and warned*, a few “charged” with thrashing him. (whereby he died) (Marx [1880–82] 1974, 261; original emphasis)

The above passage suggests a degree of class solidarity and resistance on the part of the *ryots*. Marx’s selections for his notes give proportionally greater prominence to these issues than Phear’s original.

Marx supplemented these anthropological studies with a chronology of Indian political and military history in his notes on Sewell’s *Analytical*
History of India, made in 1879, in the same notebook as those on Kovalevsky on India. Robert Sewell, a colonial official who wrote his Analytical History while still in his mid-twenties, went on to publish some significant historical and archaeological works on southern India. Marx’s notes on Sewell stretched to forty-two thousand words, written mainly in German, but with some passages in English. In fact, the notes on Sewell and the more anthropological ones on Kovalevsky are interspersed in Marx’s handwritten notebook. If the Kovalevsky notes suggest that Marx by now believed that Indian society had a history, those on Sewell seem to suggest that a second problematic feature of the 1853 India writings was falling aside: the notion that India had always responded passively to outside conquest. This is because Marx’s notes emphasize the contingent character of the Muslim and British conquests, rather than, as in 1853, the ineluctable march of large historical forces.

Although Marx made some significant comments in his own words in his notes on Sewell, these are not very frequent. Nonetheless, a close study of his notes in relation to Sewell’s text offers some important indications of his evolving perspectives on India. In many cases, Marx emphasized passages that had subordinate importance in Sewell’s narrative. Thus, the central thrust of his notes is often different from the work of the author from which they were drawn.

For example, while Sewell gave little attention to the period preceding the Muslim conquests, Marx emphasized this material in his notes. The following clipped passage from Sewell includes in the first sentence two words of his own, “most interesting”:

Kingdom of Magadha was a most interesting one. Its Buddhist kings wielded extensive power; they belonged for many years to the Kshatriya caste, until one of the Sudra caste—the fourth and lowest of Manu’s four castes—named Chandragupta—called Sandracottus by the Greeks—murdered the King and made himself sovereign; he lived in Alexander the Great’s time. Later we find three more Sudra dynasties, which ended with one Andhra in 436 A.D. (Marx [1879–80] 1960, 54; Marx’s emphasis)

Marx’s phrase “most interesting” may have expressed his surprise at the relative porosity of caste lines. If so, the passage may indicate an alteration of his 1853 view of caste as an insurmountable barrier that undermined social cohesion in the face of foreign invasion.

Similarly, Marx fails to incorporate into his notes a statement from Sewell with which he would likely have agreed in 1853: “The real history of India
commences . . . with the invasions of the Arabs” (Sewell 1870, 10). Moreover, where Sewell tends to identify with India’s Muslim conquerors, no doubt seeing the British as following their footsteps, Marx often skips over passages where Sewell praises these early conquerors.

In addition, Marx emphasizes passages where Sewell refers to Hindu resistance, while also excising parts of Sewell’s text that show Hindu warriors or rulers in a more negative light. For example, Marx records passages such as the following from Sewell, emphasizing how the Hindu Maratha forces had put Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb on the defensive at the end of his reign, this before the British had gained much of a foothold in India:

1704. . . . In the last four years of his life whole government disorganized; Marathas began to recover their forts and gather strength; a terrible famine exhausted the provisions for troops and drained the treasury; soldiers mutinous over want of pay; hard pressed by the Marathas, Aurangzeb retreated in great confusion to Ahmadnagar, fell ill. (Marx [1879–80] 1960)\(^3\)

At another point, Marx substitutes the word “clan ancestor [Stammvater]” for Sewell’s “sovereign” in recording a description of the Maratha leadership (Marx [1879–80] 1960, 80; Sewell 1870, 122).\(^3\) This indicates a conceptual link between these notes on Sewell and his more anthropological ones, highlighting the notion that the Marathas, who formed the most important locus of Indian resistance to both the Mughals and the British, were organized on a clan basis.

Marx also devotes considerable attention to the fact that by the late fourteenth century, just before Timur’s invasion and sacking of Delhi, the Delhi sultans had begun to encounter strong resistance. Below, I have italicized Marx’s insertions into passages from Sewell:

1351: With break-up of the Delhi Kingdom of Muhammad Tughlak, various new states came into being. About 1398 (at the time of Timur’s invasion), the whole of India free from Mohammedan domination, except a few miles around Delhi. (Marx [1879–80] 1960, 25)\(^3\)

He proceeds to record six examples of kingdoms that had asserted themselves, also writing the word “Hindu” repeatedly in the left-hand margin of his notebook.\(^3\)

Marx does something similar in a parenthetical comment within a passage he records from Sewell concerning events fifty years later:
In 1452, the Rajah of Jaunpur laid siege to Delhi, which led to war that lasted for 26 years (this is important; it shows that the native Indian princes had become powerful enough against the old Moslem rule) and ended in total defeat of the Rajah and annexation of Jaunpur to Delhi. (Marx [1879–80] 1960, 23; original emphasis)  

In this instance, Marx’s parenthetical insert alters the tone of Sewell’s text considerably, emphasizing the lengthy resistance on the part of the “native Indian princes,” rather than their eventual defeat. Again, these passages indicate a shift from his 1853 view of Indian passivity in the face of conquest.

None of the above is meant to suggest that Marx’s notes on India are anti-Muslim, for on numerous occasions, he notes the considerable contributions of Muslims to Indian culture and society. At one point, he writes of Mughal Emperor Akbar, “He made Delhi into the greatest and finest city then existing in the world” (Marx [1879–80] 1960, 33), here giving a summary that was more forthright than that of Sewell, who had written of Akbar’s Delhi, “The city must at this period have been one of the largest and handsomest in the world” (Sewell 1870, 54; emphasis added). Marx portrays Akbar in a more secular light than Sewell, characterizing him as “indifferent in religious matters, therefore tolerant,” whereas the British historian writes: “In religious matters Akbar was tolerant and impartial” (Marx [1879–80] 1960, 32; Sewell 1870, 52).

Marx devotes the bulk of the notes on Sewell to the period of British ascendancy, where he stresses its contingent character, and the many instances where British power in India hung by a thread. He frequently terms the British “blockheads” or “dogs,” whom he sometimes describes as terribly frightened in the face of Indian resistance. Throughout these notes, Marx shows a pronounced sympathy for the Marathas, while occasionally expressing disdain for their warlordism.

Unsurprisingly, Marx often ridicules or excises from his notes passages from Sewell portraying the British conquest of India as a heroic fight against Asiatic barbarism. This is seen in how he excerpts Sewell’s account of the death by suffocation in 1756 of over a hundred British captives imprisoned by a Mughal official, in what came to be known as the “Black Hole of Calcutta.” At this juncture, Marx does not incorporate into his notes phrases from Sewell characterizing this as “one of the most horrible tragedies in the history of the world,” and so forth. Instead, he writes of “the Black Hole of Calcutta; over which the English hypocrites have been making so much sham scandal to this day” (Marx [1879–80] 1960, 65; see also Sewell 1870, 95).
Additionally, Marx takes note of how British colonialism, by introducing a most rapacious form of capitalism, had transformed ancient forms of landed property into unrestricted private property that could be acquired by money-lenders and financiers. Marx takes down the following passage from Sewell, also adding some material of his own (placed in italics below). In the late eighteenth century, Muhammad Ali, a Mughal official and a libertine and reveller and debauchee of the worst kind, borrowed large sums from private individuals, whom he repaid by assigning to them the revenues of considerable tracts of land. The lenders (alias English swindler usurers) found this “very advantageous”; it established the “vermin” at once in the position of large landowners and enabled them to amass immense fortunes by oppressing the ryots; hence tyranny—the most unscrupulous—towards the native peasants of these upstart European (i.e. English) zemindars! (Marx [1879–80] 1960, 90)

Marx holds the English state under reformer William Pitt responsible for these developments in India.

Marx again and again singles out resistance to the British, showing sympathy for the various Maratha, Mughal, Afghan, and Sikh forces arrayed against them. At the same time, he often indicates ways in which these forces cut themselves off from possible supporters through banditry or brutality, all the while showing an utter contempt for those Indian leaders who aligned with the British. Even after the Maratha clans were finally vanquished, he still calls attention to new challenges to the British in the Northwest, from the Sikhs and the Afghans.

The British invaded Afghanistan, only to suffer a crushing defeat in 1842, with a loss of fifteen thousand soldiers and civilians as they attempted a retreat through the mountain passes. Marx records a passage from Sewell describing one point of that retreat, inserting the derisive appellation “British dogs”: “The natives shot the ‘British dogs’ dead from the heights above, hundreds fell thus until the end of the pass was cleared, where only 500–600 starving and wounded men were left to continue their retreat. They too were slaughtered like sheep during their struggling march to the frontier” (Marx [1879–80] 1960, 136 [Marx’s emphasis]; see also Sewell 1870, 240). Marx also focuses on how, in the subsequent campaigns to retake Afghanistan and the regions in between, the British on more than one occasion plundered the cities they had conquered.

Marx covers the 1857–58 Sepoy Uprising in great detail, usually leaving aside Sewell’s fulsome descriptions of Indian atrocities, and concentrating
instead on British ones. His clipped excerpts tended to place the rebels in a more favorable light than Sewell’s text. This is seen in the following excerpt on the situation in May 1857, which Marx amends with phrases of his own, here italicized:

Rebellion spread throughout Hindustan; in 20 different places simultaneously, sepoy risings and murder of the English; chief scenes: Agra, Bareili, Moradabad. Sindhia loyal to the “English dogs,” not so his “troopers”; Rajah of Patiala—for shame!—sent large body of soldiers in aid of the English!

At Mainpuri (North-West Provinces), a young brute of a lieutenant, one De Kantzow, saved the treasury and fort. (Marx [1879–80] 1960, 149)

Even rebel leader Nana Sahib’s massacre of several hundred European civilians and soldiers at Cawnpore (Kanpur) evokes little sympathy from Marx, who makes rather clipped excerpts on this from Sewell, excising over-wrought language like “fiendish” and “treacherous demons,” as well as the British historian’s statement that “the horrors that revealed themselves are almost without parallel in history” (Marx [1879–80] 1960, 149–50; Sewell 1870, 268–70). At several points, Marx also replaces Sewell’s term “mutineers” with “insurgents.” The notes on Sewell suggest that Marx’s sympathy for the Sepoy Uprising had only increased since his Tribune articles on these same events during the late 1850s.

**Colonialism in Indonesia, Algeria, and Latin America**

The notes on India contain some discussion of Islam, given the fact that that region, which comprised during the nineteenth century what are today the nations Pakistan and Bangladesh, as well as India, contained one of the world’s largest Muslim populations (even though it was a minority, compared to the Hindus). Marx also took extensive notes on two predominantly Muslim societies, Indonesia (Java) and Algeria, colonized by the Netherlands and France, respectively.

Marx’s notes on J. W. B. Money’s *Java; or, How to Manage a Colony, Showing a Practical Solution of the Questions Now Affecting British India* (1861), concentrated on the social organization of the traditional Javanese village. Money, a British barrister born in India, visited the Dutch colony of Java during
1858, at the height of the Sepoy Uprising. His book is an unabashed panegyric to Dutch colonial rule. In Java, the Dutch had retained more of the precolonial system than had the British in India, where the Cornwallis Settlement had unleashed market forces that severely disrupted the traditional communal village. The Dutch extracted a surplus from above while allowing many aspects of traditional land tenure patterns, political organization, and communal village culture to persist. After Marx’s death, Engels appears to have read Money’s book, but it is unclear if he read Marx’s notes as well, composed 1880–81. In a letter to Karl Kautsky of February 16, 1884, Engels views the solidity of Dutch rule as an example of a conservative “state socialism” that, “as in India and Russia” at the time, was grounded in “primitive communism” at the village level (MECW 47, 102–3). Engels’s remarks were of course related to Money’s core thesis concerning the stability of Dutch versus British colonial rule.

This was exactly what Marx tended to ignore in his notes on Money, however, as he concentrated instead on Money’s data. Marx makes no directly critical comments on the vantage point of this rather superficial chronicler of life in Java, with the exception of an exclamation point next to a passage where Money extolled the Dutch policy of keeping modern education away from the villages. With a careful sense of objectivity, he leaves aside the most dubious parts of Money’s account, while still managing to turn to his own use a book which was at that time one of the few detailed accounts of life in colonial Java by an outside observer.

Marx turned to Algeria in another part of his notes on Kovalevsky, in which he took up communal forms in both the precolonial and colonial periods. In these relatively brief seven thousand–word excerpts, he began by noting the strength of communal property in the Maghreb region. Although a considerable amount of private property in land came into existence under the Ottomans, the majority of the land in Algeria remained communal property in the hands of clans and extended families.

In the nineteenth century, French colonizers sought to change this situation, but encountered stubborn resistance. Marx singles out the role of the 1873 French National Assembly in these efforts to dismantle communal property, quoting the following from Kovalevsky, with a parenthetical remark of his own in the first sentence:

*The formation of private landownership* (in the eyes of the French bourgeois) as the necessary condition of all progress in the political and social sphere. The further *maintenance of communal property*, “as a form that supports communist tendencies in people’s minds” (*Debates of the*
National Assembly, 1873) is dangerous both for the colony and for the homeland; the distribution of clan holdings is encouraged, even prescribed, first as a means of weakening subjugated tribes that are ever standing under impulsion to revolt, second, as the only way toward a further transfer of landownership from the hands of the natives into those of the colonists. (Marx [1879] 1975, 405; Marx’s emphasis)

Thus, like Maine, the French legislators saw a link between indigenous communal property and the contemporary socialist movement, in that both formed major obstacles to the consolidation of bourgeois property relations, “both for the colony and the homeland.”

Marx lashes out again at the French National Assembly, emphasizing that these were the so-called Rurals. “Rurals” and “assembly of shame” were derisive appellations by the French Left referring to the National Assembly at Versailles. They blamed it for having legitimated the repression of a modern communal form, the Paris Commune of 1871. Marx expresses his outrage by inserting into his excerpts several passages, italicized below, that sharpen Kovalevsky’s already critical description of the Assembly:

1873. Hence the first concern of the Assembly of Rurals of 1873 was to hit upon more effective measures for stealing the land of the Arabs. [[The debates in this assembly of shame concerning the project “On the Introduction of Private Property” in Algeria seek to hide the villainy under the cloak of the so-called eternal, inalterable laws of political economy. (224) In these debates the “Rurals” are unanimous on the goal: destruction of collective property. The debate turns only around the method, how to bring it about.]] (Marx [1879] 1975, 410)

Here again, Marx is drawing a connection between those who suppressed a modern “commune” set up by the workers of Paris and those who were seizing indigenous communal landholdings in Algeria. A bit later, Marx incorporates into his excerpts Kovalevsky’s mention of fear on the part of the French of an anticolonial clan-based uprising. They believed this could be avoided “by tearing away the Arabs from their natural bond to the soil to break the last strength of the clan unions thus being dissolved, and thereby, any danger of rebellion (229)” (Marx [1879] 1975, 412; Marx’s emphasis).

In yet another part of his notes on Kovalevsky, Marx takes up a much earlier form of colonialism, that of Spain in the New World, while also examining
communal forms in pre-Columbian Latin America and the Caribbean. These relatively brief notes comprise some 7,500 words, written mainly in German, with some passages in Russian and Spanish. Marx begins by recording material from Kovalevsky on the transition from a herd-like existence, to clans, and to families in Native American societies. Bending Kovalevsky’s text slightly in order to present the shift from clan to familial production as prior to the related changes in property forms, he writes: “With the formation of private families individual property also emerges and only movable at the outset” (Harstick 1977, 19). Marx also incorporated text from Kovalevsky stressing the virtual absence of private property among some nomadic societies in the Americas.

Additionally, Marx focused Kovalevsky’s discussion of the transition to agriculture, according to which clans settled permanently on land that they usually took by force. In Mexico, reported Kovalevsky, clan-based urban communities held land in common as *calpulli*, with their occupants termed *calli*. The land could not be sold or inherited on an individual basis. A group’s ability to cultivate the land became an increasingly important factor in determining possession, thus leading to unequal shares. The *calli* closely guarded their possessory rights, strictly excluding non-clan members.

According to Kovalevsky, at another stage overlords from conquering groups like the Aztecs or the Incas used similar communal associations to administer empires. Excerpting Kovalevsky, Marx writes that “the rural population continued as before to own the land communally, but had to, at the same time, give up a part of its real income as payments in kind for the benefit of their rulers” (Harstick 1977, 28). This, he adds, recording another passage from the Russian ethnologist, prepared the way for “the development of the large landed estates” and created the potential for the dissolution of communal landownershi, a process “accelerated by the arrival of the Spaniards” (28).

Marx’s excerpts on the next period, early Spanish colonialism, expand only occasionally on Kovalevsky’s own words, probably because Kovalevsky’s attack on colonialism, always present in *Communal Property*, was utterly unequivocal here. Here is a representative passage, as recorded by Marx, with his inserts italicized:

"The original Spanish policy of extermination of the redmen. (47) After *pillage of the gold etc. that they found, the [Amer]indians are condemned to work in the mines*. (48) With the decline of the value of gold and silver, the Spanish turn to agriculture, make the [Amer]indians into slaves in order to cultivate land for them. (1.c.)" (Harstick 1977, 29)
Under this *repartimientos* system, the indigenous caciques or clan leaders had to furnish the Spaniards with people to be used in agricultural labor. Marx records passages on the extreme brutality of this system, where the Amerindians were hunted down if not enough were supplied up by the caciques.

Soon, under pressure from elements of the Church, the Spanish state moved to curtail the outright enslavement of the native population, as seen in this excerpt from Kovalevsky that Marx incorporates into his notes. Even here, at a point where he supports the clergy, Marx cannot resist a bit of irony toward them, inserting the word “fuss” into this excerpt from Kovalevsky:

> Hence the *fuss on the part of the monks of the Order of St. Jacob* against the enslavement of the [Amer]indians. *Hence, 1531,* bull from Pope Paul III declaring [Amer]indians “human beings” and therefore “free from slavery.” The *Royal Council for the West Indies,* established 1524, half of which consisted of the heads of the highest clergy, declared itself for the freedom of the [Amer]indians. Charles V (Law of May 21, 1542) accordingly prohibited that: “no person, whether engaged in war or not, can take, apprehend, occupy, sell, exchange any Indian as a slave, nor possess him as such”; likewise, the *Law of October 26, 1546* prohibits the sale of [Amer]indians into slavery etc. (Harstick 1977, 30; Marx’s emphasis)

Marx then touches on the resistance to this law by the colonists and the law’s eventual enforcement. It did not lead to an actual decrease in New World slavery, however, as seen in the following passage he incorporates from Kovalevsky, inserting a pejorative phrase about the colonists, here italicized: “Resistance by the Spanish colonists against this law. (1. c.) *Fight with the latter dogs* by Las Casas, Don Juan Zumaraga and other Catholic bishops. (54) Hence the Negro slave trade as ‘surrogate’ for the gentlemen colonists” (30). Thus, the bishops’ reforms led in the end to an increase in the African slave trade, which became the prime source of labor for the plantations of the New World.

The brutal *repartimientos* system for the Amerindians is now replaced by the *encomiendas* system. It created a sort of serfdom, in which formally free subjects living in communal villages were subject to taxes in kind and in labor, all administered by local Spanish *encomienderos.* Typically, these taxes were supposed to support one *encomiendero* and one priest per village. The new system had many paternalistic features, including requirements that the *encomienderos* were to protect the Amerindians, assist in their Christianization, and so forth. The *encomienderos* had the right to remove village elders if payments fell into arrears, something that severely undermined the communal
system. While encomienderos could also be removed and banished for failing to fulfill their end of the bargain, the enforcement of all of these regulations was left to the Spanish colonists, something that causes Marx to exclaim: “Worthy this of the statesmen Carlos I (Charles V) and Philip II” (Harstick 1977, 32). The exactions under the encomiendas system became so severe that many Amerindians fled, or committed suicide. While the Amerindians technically owned the land through their village communes, this applied only to land actually under cultivation, which gave openings to Spaniards wishing to annex portions of it by getting it declared wasteland. These and other legal maneuvers deprived the Amerindians of much of their prime agricultural land.

Marx continues his summary and excerpts, now moving into the transition to capitalist private property, here adding a parenthetical remark in the first sentence rendering Kovalevsky’s anthropological categories more precise:

This dissolution of consanguinity (real or fictitious) led in some locations to the formation of small-scale landed property out of the earlier communal allotments; this in turn passed little by little into the hands of capital-owning Europeans—under the pressure of taxes from the encomenderos and the system first permitted by the Spanish of lending money at interest—Zurita says: “under the indigenous leaders the [Amer]indians did not know usury.” (Harstick 1977, 36; original emphasis)

This sparked new, destructive conflicts within and among village communes and clans, which further eroded the power and rights of the Amerindians.

Marx ends his notes on Kovalevsky on Latin America with the following excerpt, into which he inserts a few words (italicized below):

The survival—in large measure—of the rural commune is due on one hand to the [Amer]indians’ preference for this type of property in land, as the one best corresponding to their level of culture; on the other hand, the lack of colonial legislation [[in contrast to the English East Indies]] of regulations that would give the members of the clans the possibility of selling the allotments belonging to them. (Harstick 1977, 38)

Marx’s qualifier “in large measure” undercuts somewhat Kovalevsky’s stress on the dissolution of these communal forms. Marx’s bracketed insert about India suggests that communal forms remained stronger in Latin America than in India, probably because India had been colonized in a later period by an
advanced capitalist power, Britain, which actively tried to create individual private property in the villages.

Here and elsewhere in the 1879–82 notebooks on non-Western and precapitalist societies, Marx was concerned with the persistence of communal forms, even into his own century, in this case after more than three centuries of colonial rule. Such considerations formed a crucial backdrop to what follows directly below, his embrace of Russia’s rural commune of the 1880s as a potential source of resistance to capital.

RUSSIA: COMMUNAL FORMS AS THE “POINT OF DEPARTURE FOR A COMMUNIST DEVELOPMENT”

Many of the major themes discussed in this book reach their culmination in Marx’s late writings on Russia during the years 1877 to 1882. First, it is here that Marx seems to move furthest away from the implicitly unilinear model of development espoused in The Communist Manifesto. Second, Marx poses more explicitly here than elsewhere the possibility that noncapitalist societies might move directly to socialism on the basis of their indigenous communal forms, without first passing through the stage of capitalism. This came with an important proviso, however, expressed by Marx and Engels in their preface to the 1882 Russian edition of the Manifesto: these new types of revolutions could succeed only if they were able to link up with incipient working-class revolutions in the industrially developed West.

Like the other texts discussed in this chapter, Marx’s late writings on Russia included excerpt notebooks with occasional commentary in his own words. These were quite substantial. In 1875 and 1876, after having studied the Russian language for a few years, he began a lengthy set of notes from Russian sources on that country’s social and political development since 1861. He continued to cover Russia in other notes through the 1880s. Among these were two texts that will appear in MEGA² IV/27: a brief study of Russian agriculture and longer notes on Nikolai Kostomarov’s Historical Monographs, the latter focusing on Stenka Razin’s Cossack revolt during the late seventeenth century.

But Marx’s late writings on Russia were not limited to excerpt notebooks, where his own voice was necessarily somewhat muted. They also included letters, drafts, and one published text, the aforementioned preface to The Communist Manifesto. Most of these writings connected communal forms, at least in Russia, to the prospects for revolution in his own time. Although these non-notebook materials on Russia are not very lengthy, about thirty pages of text
in the best-known edition (Shanin 1983a), they illustrate the conclusions Marx was drawing from his studies of communal forms in Russia. At a broader level, they constitute a window into how Marx may have intended to develop the material in the 1879–82 excerpt notebooks on a variety of non-Western societies.

As mentioned earlier, Marx’s renewal of interest in Russia was stimulated by the 1872 translation of Capital into Russian. This was its first non-German edition, and a surprisingly wide discussion followed, considering the fact that this society at the eastern edge of Europe had yet to be seriously impacted by capitalism (Resis 1970, White 1996). In the afterword to the second German edition of 1873, Marx contrasts what he sees as the ideological response by the “mealy-mouthed babblers of German vulgar economics” to the serious reviews the “excellent Russian translation” was receiving (Capital I, 99). In agricultural Russia, the political opposition was dominated by the Populists, who advocated an agrarian revolution that would avoid capitalism and develop Russia along different lines from the West.

In 1877, Marx drafted a response to an article on Capital that the sociologist and Populist leader Nikolai Mikhailovsky had published earlier that year in the Russian journal Otechestvennye Zapiski (Notes of the Fatherland). Mikhailovsky was sympathetic to Marx; in fact, his article took the form of a response to a harsh critique of Capital by another Russian, Yuli Zhukovsky. What seemed to distress Marx was that in defending him, Mikhailovsky had ascribed to him a unilinear theory of human history, linked to a theory of development wherein other societies were destined to follow England into capitalism. Mikhailovsky writes:

In the sixth chapter of Capital is a section entitled “So-Called Primitive Accumulation.” Here, Marx has in view a historical sketch of the first steps of the capitalist process of production, but he gives us something much bigger, a whole philosophical-historical theory. This theory is of great interest in general and especially great interest for us Russians. ([1877] 1911, 167–68)

Marx may also have been troubled by Mikhailovsky’s open reservations concerning dialectics:

If you take from Capital the heavy, clumsy, and unnecessary covering of Hegelian dialectic, then independently from the other virtues of this work we will see in it material excellently worked out for the solution of the general question of the relation of forms to the material conditions
of their existence, as well as an excellent formulation of the question in a particular sphere. (186)

Marx’s draft reply to Otechestvennye Zapiski focused especially on Mikhailovskiy’s first point about Capital having been grounded in “a whole philosophical-historical theory.”

In his letter, Marx recounts that Russian affairs had occupied him greatly during the 1870s: “In order to reach an informed judgment on Russia’s economic development, I learned Russian and then for many years studied official and other publications relating to the question” (Shanin 1983a, 135). Marx writes, here for the first time, although without acknowledging that his position had changed, that he was open to the Populist Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s argument about skipping the stage of capitalism in order to move toward socialism by another pathway: “I have come to the conclusion that if Russia continues along the pathway she has followed since 1861, she will lose the finest chance ever offered by history to a people and undergo all the fateful vicissitudes of the capitalist regime” (135). As an indication of just how tentative his argument was, Marx stated it negatively, emphasizing how the penetration of capitalist institutions into the village communes after the 1861 liberation of the serfs was rapidly closing off the alternative outlined by Chernyshevsky and other Populists.

Marx denies that he had attempted to sketch the future of Russia and other non-Western societies in Capital: “The chapter on primitive accumulation claims no more than to trace the path by which, in Western Europe, the capitalist economic order emerged from the womb of the feudal economic order” (Shanin 1983a, 135). To support this assertion, he cites the 1872–75 French edition, where, as discussed in the previous chapter, he had altered the text in the direction of a more multilinear perspective, writing regarding the “expropriation of the agricultural producer”: “It has been accomplished in a radical manner only in England. . . . But all the countries of Western Europe are going through the same development” (Shanin 1983a, 135; see also Marx [1872–75] 1985b, 169).

Marx makes only a brief and implicit answer on a second point in Mikhailovskiy’s review, the strictures concerning “the heavy lid of Hegelian dialectics.” In this regard, Marx refers to a passage near the end of the discussion of primitive accumulation in Capital, where he writes that the historical tendency of capitalist production “is said to consist in the fact that it ‘begets its own negation with the inexorability of a natural process’; that it has itself created the elements of a new economic order” (Shanin 1983a, 135; see also Capital I,
Here, in the book’s conclusion, capital was to be “negated” by the revolt of labor, a process Marx characterizes as “the negation of the negation”:

The capitalist mode of appropriation, conforming to the capitalist mode of production, constitutes the first negation of that individual private property that is only the corollary of independent and individual labor. But capitalist production itself begets, with the inevitability of a natural process, its own negation. This is the negation of the negation. It does not re-establish the individual private property of the worker, but his individual property on the basis of the achievements of the capitalist era: namely cooperation and the possession in common of all the means of production, including the soil. (Marx [1872–75] 1985b, 207, emphasis added)

Anti-Hegelians have often complained about Marx’s use of the core Hegelian concept of negation of negation at this crucial juncture, with some claiming he had dogmatically tried to prove his economic laws via Hegelian syllogisms. In his draft letter of 1877, Marx responds: “I furnish no proof at this point, for the good reason that this statement merely summarizes in brief the long expositions given previously in the chapters on capitalist production” (Shanin 1983a, 135). Thus, his recourse to Hegelian language at this juncture was not intended as a proof, but as a methodological indication informing the reader that his overall presentation of capitalist production and its eventual collapse was grounded in Hegelian dialectics, even though he had developed his discussion without any explicit reference to Hegel. Dialectics fit into Capital, he seemed to claim, not because he had imposed it on reality, but because reality was itself dialectical.

A third point in the letter to Otechestvennye Zapiski concerned a comparative historical reference. Marx writes that “if Russia is tending to become a capitalist nation like the nations of Western Europe,” then and only then, (1) it would have to expropriate its peasantry and make them into unattached proletarians, and (2) be otherwise “brought into the fold of the capitalist regime,” after which it would come under its “pitiless laws” (Shanin 1983a, 136). At this point, he gives an example of a trajectory of development similar to the primitive accumulation of capital, but which did not end in capitalism. This was ancient Rome:

At various points in Capital, I have alluded to the fate that befell the plebeians of ancient Rome. They were originally free peasants, each tilling his own plot on his own behalf. In the course of Roman history they were
expropriated. The same movement that divorced them from their means of production and subsistence involved the formation not only of large landed property but also of big money capitals. Thus one fine morning there were, on the one side, free men stripped of everything but their labor-power, and on the other, in order to exploit their labor, owners of all the acquired wealth. What happened? The Roman proletarians became, not wage-laborers, but an idle “mob” more abject than those who used to be called poor whites of the southern United States; and what unfolded [se déploya] alongside them was not a capitalist but a slave mode of production. (136)

Although he draws parallels between ancient Rome and the American South, the emphasis runs in another direction, toward the radical differences between Roman and modern capitalist social forms.

Marx’s main point was that he had not, as Mikhailovsky had argued, developed “a whole philosophical-historical theory” of society, generalizable for all times and places:

Thus events of striking similarity, taking place in different historical contexts, led to totally disparate results. By studying each of these developments separately, one may easily discover the key to this phenomenon, but this will never be attained with the master key [avec le passe-partout] of a general historico-philosophical theory, whose supreme virtue consists in being suprahistorical. (Shanin 1983a, 136)

Mikhailovsky, he complains, “insists on transforming my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historico-philosophical theory of the general course fatally imposed on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they find themselves placed” (136).

Thus, Marx was denying (1) that he had created a unilinear theory of history, (2) that he worked with a deterministic model of social development, or (3) that Russia in particular was bound to evolve in the manner of Western capitalism. To some extent, these arguments were new, but they grew out of the moves toward a more multilinear framework that Marx had been making ever since the Grundrisse.  

Given the general level at which Marx argued these points, it is likely that he intended these qualifications to apply not only to Russia but also to India and the other contemporary non-Western, nonindustrialized societies that he was studying during this period. India, like Russia, had communal forms in its
villages, which led Krader to write of Marx’s “positing of the alternatives open to the Indian and Russian rural collective institutions” (1974, 29). Indonesia, Algeria, and Latin America, also covered in the 1879–82 notebooks, had rural communal forms. Through colonialism, these societies had all been impacted by capitalism more directly than Russia. Nonetheless, one could surmise that Marx was interested in their possible anticapitalist development, somewhat along the lines that he was beginning to sketch for Russia.

The 1877 letter to Otechestvennye Zapiski stressed Marx’s multilinear standpoint, but did not analyze Russian society any more than had Capital, volume I. In his March 1881 drafts of a letter to the Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich, however, Marx began to sketch what a Russian pathway of social development might look like within the multilinear perspective put forth in the 1877 letter and the French edition of Capital. David Smith shows what was at stake here for Russia, whose social structure was for Marx part of the Asian social forms: “Marx’s stress on the unique curve of ‘Asiatic’ development not only helps us to distinguish Marx’s conception from the Procrustean theory of fixed evolutionary stages which masqueraded as ‘Marxist materialism’ for so many years, but also enables us to see that Marx’s concept of postcapitalist society was just as multilinear as his conception of the past” (1995, 113). In a letter of February 16, 1881, Zasulich, who described herself as a member of Russia’s “socialist party,” asked Marx whether “the rural commune, freed of exorbitant tax demands, payment to the nobility and arbitrary administration, is capable of developing in a socialist direction,” or whether “the commune is destined to perish” and Russian socialists needed to wait for capitalist development, the rise of a proletariat, and so forth (Shanin 1983a, 98). Marx’s Russian followers held the latter view, she added, referring specifically to debates in journals like Otechestvennye Zapiski. Zasulich requested a reply from Marx that could be translated into Russian and published.

In his reply, dated March 8, 1881, Marx again cites the passage from the French edition of Capital that bracketed the discussion of primitive accumulation to Western Europe, before concluding: “The ‘historical inevitability’ [fatalité] of this course is therefore explicitly restricted to the countries of Western Europe” (Shanin 1983a, 124). In Western Europe, he adds, the transition from feudal to capitalist property was “the transformation of one form of private property into another form of private property,” but capitalist development would require that Russian peasants “on the contrary, transform their communal property into private property” (124). Therefore, Capital was agnostic on the question of Russia’s future. He ends his letter with a few tentative remarks about Russia:
The special study I have made of it . . . has convinced me that the commune is the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia. But in order that it might function as such, the deleterious influences assailing it from all sides must first be eliminated and then it must be assured the normal conditions for a spontaneous development. (124)

As in 1877, Marx was arguing that alternate pathways of development might be possible for Russia. He based his judgment in large part upon the marked differences between the social structure of the Russian village, with its communal social forms, and the medieval village of Western Europe. Moreover, he was “convinced . . . that the commune is the fulcrum for a social regeneration in Russia” (Marx in Shanin 1983a, 124).

In the much more substantial preparatory drafts of his letter, Marx covered these points in more depth, as well as other ones left out of his actual reply to Zasulich. He discusses the particularities of Russia’s situation as a large country at Europe’s edge: “Russia does not live in isolation from the modern world; nor has she fallen prey, like the East Indies, to a foreign conqueror” (Shanin 1983a, 106). Therefore, it might be possible to combine Russia’s ancient communal forms with modern technology, this in a less exploitative manner than under capitalism.

At this point, it needs to be underlined that Marx was proposing not an autarky but a new synthesis of the archaic and the modern, one that took advantage of the highest achievements of capitalist modernity:

Thanks to the unique combination of circumstances in Russia, the rural commune, already established on a national scale, may gradually shake off its primitive characteristics and directly develop as an element of collective production on a national scale. Precisely because it is contemporaneous with capitalist production, the rural commune may appropriate for itself all the positive achievements and this without undergoing its frightful vicissitudes . . . . Should the Russian admirers of the capitalist system deny that such a development is theoretically possible, then I would ask them the following question: Did Russia have to undergo a long Western-style incubation of mechanical industry before it could make use of machinery, steamships, railways, etc.? Let them also explain how the Russians managed to introduce, in the twinkling of an eye, that whole machinery of exchange (banks, credit companies, etc.), which was the work of centuries in the West. (Shanin 1983a, 105–6)
The stress above was on the contradictory and dialectical character of social development, as against any unilinear determinism. At an objective level, the very existence of Western capitalist modernity meant that Russia’s rural commune could draw upon its achievements. At a subjective level, this created a vastly different situation than that faced by popular movements in earlier precapitalist societies.

A second theme in the drafts, not present in the letter Marx actually sent to Zasulich, concerned the relationship of his excerpt notebooks on anthropology and on India to these reflections on Russia. He alluded, for example, to Morgan’s notion that in the future, Western civilization would revive archaic communism in a higher form. Marx also stressed the persistence of communal forms across many centuries. “Recent research,” he writes,

has advanced enough in order to affirm (1) that the primitive communities had incomparably greater vitality than the Semitic, Greek, Roman, etc. societies, and, a fortiori,56 that of the modern capitalist societies; (2) that the causes of their decline lie in economic conditions that prevented them from passing beyond a certain level of development, this in historical contexts not at all analogous with the present-day Russian commune. (Shanin 1983a, 107)

Marx also notes the anticommmunal bias of some of the new research, again attacking Maine:

One has to be on guard when reading the histories of primitive communities written by bourgeois authors. They do not even shrink from falsehoods. Sir Henry Maine, for example, who was an enthusiastic collaborator of the English government in carrying out its violent destruction of the Indian communes, hypocritically assures us that all of the government’s noble efforts to maintain the communes succumbed to the spontaneous power of economic laws! (Shanin 1983a, 107)

Beneath this anticommmunal ideological bias, as well as the real destruction carried out through the imposition of English-style private property on the Indian village, one could, Marx also argued, find evidence of the persistence of these communal forms.

Probably basing himself on his notes on Kovalevsky, Marx created a more general typology of communal forms across various societies. The earliest
form, basing itself on the clan, involved not only communal distribution of land, but also “probably the land itself was worked by groups, in common” (Shanin 1983a, 118). These early communes were based upon real or fictitious consanguinity, in a clan structure: “One cannot join unless one is a natural or adopted relative” (119). At a later stage, this archaic form transitioned into the rural commune, which was based upon residency rather than kinship. It was this later form, Marx holds, that exhibits such great “natural vitality” (118). Here, “the arable land, inalienable and common property, is periodically divided among the members of the rural commune” (119).

The later “rural commune” contained an important dualism. Communal landownership held it together, Marx writes, “while at the same time, the house and yard as an individual family preserve, together with small-plot farming and private appropriation of its fruits, gave scope to an individuality incompatible with the organism of the most primitive communities” (Shanin 1983a, 120). While it constituted a source of this social form’s vitality and longevity, eventually this dualism “could turn into a seed of disintegration” for the rural commune (120). Small-scale private landownership, which could be expanded, constituted one factor. Even more fundamental was the shift in labor relations that arose within this mode of production, however:

But the key factor was fragmented labor as the source of private appropriation. It gave rise to the accumulation of movable goods, such as livestock, money, and sometimes even slaves or serfs. Such movable property, not subject to communal control, open to individual exchange with plenty of scope for trickery and chance, weighed ever more heavily upon the entire rural economy. This was what dissolved primitive economic and social equality. (120)

Such disintegration was by no means inevitable, however.

This second theme in the drafts centered on features common to Russia’s rural communes and those in other times and places. To be sure, Marx had not worked out a theory of social development or revolution for Russia, let alone the often-colonized lands in Asia, Africa, or Latin America. Moreover, he explicitly contrasts politically independent Russia with colonized India: “Russia does not live in isolation from the modern world; nor has she fallen prey, like the East Indies, to a foreign conqueror” (Shanin 1983a, 106). This contrast was not absolute, but relative, however, for there were also many commonalities, chief among them the presence of rural communes in the villages of these two large agrarian societies. This meant that in India as in Russia, the development
of modern capitalist private property would of necessity involve a transition not from quasi-private feudal peasant property, but from communal property.

Recall that in the 1877 draft and these writings of 1881, Marx restricted the laws of primitive accumulation in *Capital* to the lands of Western Europe, not to those lands and their colonies. At this historical juncture, did Marx place India and other non-Western societies outside the logic of capitalist modernity, at least to some extent?

When Marx’s historical typology of communal forms in the 1881 drafts is placed alongside his 1879 notes on Sewell and Kovalevsky on India, another question arises, that of India’s communal forms as potential sites of resistance to colonialism and to capital. The notes on Kovalevsky suggested that communal forms in colonized India and Algeria, as well as Latin America, still possessed some vitality, albeit not as much as Marx was ascribing to those in Russia. Recall that Marx added a passage (here italicized) to an excerpt from Kovalevsky on this point with regard to post-Cornwallis India: “Yet between these atoms certain connections continue to exist, distantly reminiscent of the earlier communal village landowning groups” (Marx [1879] 1975, 388; original emphasis). Recall also that Marx’s notes on Sewell highlighted the continuous resistance of the Indian people to their conquerors, Muslim and British, notes he interspersed with those on Kovalevsky, which centered on those very communal forms.

A third theme in the drafts for the letter to Zasulich concerned the prospects for revolution in Russia and the form that revolution might assume. Here, Marx weighed the Russian communal form’s strengths against the threats it faced from capital and the state. While the Russian communes possessed a certain vitality, they were also isolated in villages scattered across “the country’s huge expanse,” with the “central despotism” of the state towering over them (Shanin 1983a, 103). But although the existing state fostered their isolation, this “could easily be overcome once the government fetters have been cast off” (103). This could not happen without a revolution, however: “Thus, only a general uprising can break the isolation of the ‘rural commune,’ the lack of connection between the different communes, in short, its existence as a localized microcosm that denies it the historical initiative” (112).

Such a revolution would not be easy to achieve, as time was running out for the rural commune: “What threatens the life of the Russian commune is neither an historical inevitability nor a theory; it is oppression by the state and exploitation by capitalist intruders made powerful, at the expense of the peasants, by this same state” (Shanin 1983a, 104–5). At an international level, however, other objective factors operated in a more positive direction: “the contemporaneity of Western production, which dominates the world market,
enables Russia to incorporate into the commune all the positive achievements of the capitalist system, without passing under its humiliating tribute [fourches caudines]” (110). Moreover, the isolation of the communes could be alleviated through a greater democratization, removing the centralized state as an overlord: “All that is necessary is to replace the volost, a government institution, with a peasant assembly chosen by the communes themselves—an economic and administrative body serving their own interests” (111). This would parallel the process already taking place in the West, where the capitalist system found itself, “both in Western Europe and the United States, in conflict with the working masses, with science, and with the very productive forces it engenders—in short, in a crisis that will end through its own elimination, through the return of modern societies to a higher form of an ‘archaic’ type of collective ownership and production” (111).

It is important to note that here, for the first time in his late writings on Russia, Marx was referring to a major external subjective factor, the presence in Western Europe and North America of a self-conscious, organized working class movement. Alongside the objective achievements of capitalist modernity, this subjective factor would also be able to impact Russia.

What would be the character of the Russian revolution and how would it affect that society’s future development?

To save the Russian commune, a Russian revolution is needed. Moreover, the Russian government and the “new pillars of society” are doing their utmost to prepare the masses for such a catastrophe. If the revolution takes place at an opportune moment, if it concentrates all its forces to ensure the free unfolding [essor libre] of the rural commune, the latter will soon develop itself as a regenerating element of Russian society and as an element of superiority over those countries enslaved by the capitalist regime. (Shanin 1983a, 116–17)

This was a clear enough statement concerning Russia’s indigenous revolutionary potential. But even such a ringing endorsement of the possibility of a peasant-based, noncapitalist social order should not be seen as an argument for a freestanding Russian socialism, for as shown elsewhere in the drafts of the letter to Zasulich, Marx held that such a new system could arise only in the context of a wider social transformation involving the Western working classes.

The last part of Marx’s late writings on Russia was a preface, coauthored by Engels, to the 1882 second Russian edition of *The Communist Manifesto*. 
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It was also Marx’s last publication before his death in March 1883. Drafted in German and dated January 21, 1882, it was translated into Russian and published almost immediately in *Narodnya Volya* (People’s Will), a Populist journal, and again later that year in a new translation of the *Manifesto* by Georgi Plekhanov. Marx and Engels begin their preface by noting that neither Russia nor the United States figured very much in the original edition, and not at all in the section on communist movements. They then develop a brief analysis of the growing crisis in the United States due to the squeezing out of the small independent farmer by capital. As to Russia, they note the rise of a serious revolutionary movement at a time when the rest of Europe was relatively quiescent: “Russia forms the vanguard [Vorhut] of revolutionary action in Europe” (Shanin 1983a, 139).

What form would a Russian revolution take? Marx and Engels weigh the revolutionary possibilities within the communal form of the Russian village, with its *obshchina* or *mir*.

Can the Russian *obshchina*, a form, albeit heavily eroded, of the primeval communal ownership of the land, pass directly into the higher, communist form of communal ownership? Or must it first go through the same process of dissolution that marks the West’s historical development? Today there is only one possible answer: If the Russian revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two complement each other, then Russia’s peasant communal landownership may serve as the point of departure for a communist development. (Shanin 1983a, 139)

Two points stand out here. (1) The final sentence clarifies a point to which Marx had alluded in the drafts of the letter to Zasulich: a Russian revolution based upon its agrarian communal forms would be a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for the development of a modern communism. What was also needed was help from an outside subjective factor, a revolution on the part of the Western working classes. Only this would allow the achievements of capitalist modernity to be shared with autocratic and technologically backward Russia, rather than employed to exploit it. Subjective factors could work in the other direction as well, however: A Russian revolution would not need to follow one in the West; in fact, it could be “the point of departure” for such an uprising. (2) Another point implicit in the drafts of the letter to Zasulich was also clarified here: a Russian revolution could lead to a “communist development.” Russia would not need to go through an independent capitalist
development to reap the fruits of modern socialism, provided that its revolution became the spark for a working class uprising in the more democratic and technologically developed world. This was a different and more radical claim than that he had made in the 1850s concerning a Chinese economic crisis sparking a European one and thus a revolution, or with regard to the Sepoy rebels in India as allies of the Western working classes. In the 1850s, he saw the national resistance movements in China and India as, at most, carrying the potential for a democratic transformation in those lands. In the 1870s, he saw an Irish national revolution, which would not have been communist in character, as a precondition for a communist transformation in Britain. In the late writings on Russia, however, he was arguing that a modern communist transformation was possible in an agrarian, technologically backward land like Russia, if it could ally itself with a revolution on the part of the Western working classes, and thus gain access on a cooperative basis to the fruits of Western modernity. 63

Did Marx discern similar possibilities in places like India as well, whose communal forms he was also studying in this period? He never addressed this question explicitly. In the Zasulich drafts, as we have seen, he sometimes stresses Russia’s uniqueness, at other times its commonalities with regard to India and other colonized non-Western societies. Nonetheless, I would argue, based on the preponderance of the evidence in the excerpt notebooks discussed in this chapter, that Marx did not intend to limit his new reflections about moving toward a communist revolution on the basis of indigenous communal forms to Russia alone.
In *Marx at the Margins*, Kevin Anderson uncovers a variety of extensive but neglected texts by the well-known political economist which cast what we thought we knew about his work in a startlingly different light. Analyzing a variety of Marx's writings, including journalistic work written for the *New York Tribune*, Anderson presents us with a Marx quite at odds with our conventional interpretations. Rather than providing us with an account of Marx as an exclusively class-based thinker, Anderson here offers a portrait of Marx for the twenty-first century: a global theorist whose social critique was sensitive to the varieties of human social and historical development, including not just class, but nationalism, race, and ethnicity, as well.

*Marx at the Margins* ultimately argues that alongside his overarching critique of capital, Marx created a theory of history that was multi-layered and not easily reduced to a single model of development or revolution. Through highly-informed readings on work ranging from Marx's unpublished 1879–82 notebooks to his passionate writings about the antislavery cause in the United States, this volume delivers a groundbreaking and canon-changing vision of Karl Marx that is sure to provoke lively debate in Marxist scholarship and beyond.

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“Anderson may just have provided the burgeoning Marx industry with another major focus for its research and debates. *Marx at the Margins* reveals a dimension of Marx that is very little known and even less understood. Anderson makes an overwhelming case for the importance of Marx's views on non-Western societies, ethnicity, nationalism, and race to our interpretations of his thinking over a wide range of topics. This is an incredibly innovative, interesting, and terribly important book that will greatly benefit any of its readers.”

BERTELL OLLMAN, New York University

“*Marx at the Margins* is a book of tremendous scope, packed with important scholarly contributions, including Anderson's highly original reading of Marx's theory of history. In this truly ground-breaking work, Kevin Anderson analyzes Marx's journalism and various unpublished writings on European colonialism and the developing countries for the first time, breaking the long-held stereotype that Marx was an incorrigible class and economic reductionist. Well-written in clear and accessible prose, *Marx at the Margins* proves that Marx is the sophisticated and original theorist of history some might not have ever expected him to be.”

DOUGLAS KELLNER, University of California, Los Angeles and author of *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity*