## MARX ON INDIA

## BY SUNITI KUMAR GHOSH

Marxists and others who have written in detail or just touched on what Marx said about India are almost unanimous in assuming that his writings of the 1850s on India, especially his statement that the British rule in India was fulfilling a double mission—a mission destructive as well as regenerating—were his last word on the subject. While some of them agree with the Marx of the 1850s, others disagree and criticize him. Among the former are R. Palme Dutt, A. R. Desai, V. G. Kiernan, and Shlomo Avineri; and among the latter are Samir Amin and M. Barratt Brown.<sup>1</sup>

It is true that in the 1840s and 1850s Marx and Engels pinned their hopes on free trade and the development of a world market as an instrument for ensuring the victory of capitalism everywhere. "But as the facts concerning colonialism accumulated," H. B. Davis correctly pointed out, "Marx's enthusiasm for capitalism as a transforming instrument cooled." As we shall see, Marx later abandoned his earlier view about the regenerating role of the rule of British capital in India. But this development of Marx's thought is usually ignored.

In 1853, when Marx wrote his articles on India for the New York Daily Tribune, he hailed the British rule in India as an "unconscious tool of history." He believed it was bringing about "a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia," which would rid that continent of the muck of all ages, however painful to its people the process might be. He hoped that

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English steam and free trade would, by pouring into India cheap products of the British factory industry, especially Lancashire textiles, tear apart the village communities with their "stagnatory" and "passive sort of existence" which formed the solid foundation of Oriental despotism, shatter the union between agriculture and industry and their self-sufficiency and isolation, and thus blow up "their economical basis." He formulated British capital's "double mission" theory—a mission destructive as well as regenerating. According to him, it was pulling down the fabric of "old Asiatic society" and laying "the material foundations of Western society in Asia." Hope then told a flattering tale, and Marx believed that the ruin and devastation caused by British colonial rule was a terrible but necessary price for "the only social revolution ever heard of in Asia."

Marx noted in 1853 that the chief features of precolonial Indian society were the following: (1) "the absence of private property in land," an idea which he and Engels owed to Bernier; (2) dependence on artificial irrigation which was in the East, as Engels said, "the first condition of agriculture" and which was "a matter either for the communes, the provinces, or the central government"; (3) a society consisting of "stereotype and disconnected atoms"-self-perpetuating village communities which "existed with a given scale of low conveniences, almost without intercourse with other villages, without the desires and efforts indispensable to social advance"; (4) "the domestic union of agricultural and manufacturing pursuits," the primeval marriage between the plow and the handloom and other tools of crafts workers and "an unalterable division of labor" (besides "possession in common of the land") as the basis of these self-sufficient and isolated village communities; (5) the customary obligations through which exchange of goods and services between the agricultural and industrial producers and the servants of the community took place, and the virtual absence of production for the market; (6) the existence of towns and cities that were no more than military camps "superimposed on the real economic structure"; and (7) its resistance to change: the village communities "transformed a self-developing social state into never changing natural destiny...."

Research into Indian history, especially the history of Mug-

hal India, undertaken since Marx wrote the above, has conclusively proved that the picture of precolonial Indian society that Marx drew in the 1850s depending on the reports of some high British officials is far from accurate. In passing we may note, first, that possession and use of the land was not common but individual. The individual peasant had the hereditary right of occupancy of his plot of land so long as he paid the land revenue. Private property in land was not wholly absent though cases of alienation of agricultural land were rather rare. Second, the village community was not a proprietary but an administrative unit. Third, it was no egalitarian society but one marked by sharp class differences. There was differentiation among the peasantry itself and even agricultural wage labor had appeared in places. Fourth, the village was not an autarchic isolated unit, though natural economy mostly prevailed. The land revenue was paid generally in cash and, as a result, one third to one half of the agricultural produce became commodities. In many regions, a portion of the rural products, of both the peasants and the artisans, such as high-grade food crops, cotton, silk, indigo, tobacco, saltpetre, cotton yarn, and textiles was market-oriented. In the urban area, petty commodity production was the main form of industrial organization and the putting-out system was prevalent. Artisans and others could be hired for wages. It was not uncommon in some regions for a merchant capitalist to employ several artisans to work under the same roof for wages. In some industries, such as shipbuilding, mining, iron and steel, silk and cloth printing, cotton textiles, sugar, and dyestuff, capitalist manufacture had emerged though in an embryonic form. There existed a large urban population and a big urban market. Trade between the urban areas and external commerce were considerable.4

It may also be noted that Marx's hopes about the regeneration of Indian society under the impact of colonial rule were mostly belied. After more study and investigation, he himself discarded in his later days most of the views he had held earlier, especially his theses about the revolutionary character of free trade and the "double mission" of British colonial rule.

Marx designated Indian society as the "Asiatic society" or the "Asiatic system" in articles written on India in 1853. Perhaps it was in the Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1859, published long afterwards under the title Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Okonomie, that he first used the expression "the Asiatic mode of production." In the sections of the Grundrisse that have been translated into English under the title Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations and in Capital, Vol. I, he described precolonial Indian society as the Asiatic mode. Among the characteristics of the Asiatic mode, he emphasized the existence of the village commune, absence of private property and communal ownership, and "a self-sustaining cycle of production, unity of agriculture and the handicrafts." Under such a system, cities were no more than "princely camps, superimposed on the real economic structure." According to Marx, Asiatic society, which provided the surest basis of Oriental despotism, was a preclass society or a class society of the most primitive form.<sup>5</sup> And as a society with little class differentiation, the inner contradictions that are the basis of change were absent and it had little capacity of its own for change or revolution.

But it seems that Marx was never sure about his concept of the Asiatic mode of production. Referring to India, he wrote as early as 1853: "As to the question of property, this is a very controversial one among the English writers on India. In the broken hill-country south of Krishna, property in land does seem to have existed." And, even in 1853, he noted "an internal dualism" in the village communities in India. He wrote that though the land belonged to the entire village community, and though in some of these communities "the lands of the village are cultivated in common, in most cases each occupant tills his own field." Besides, there was slavery and the caste system within them. Much later, contradicting partly his earlier view about the "possession in common of the land," he said, "no private property in land exists, although there is both private and common possession and use of land."

Speaking of the Russian community which he equated with the Asiatic system, he said:

I now come to the crux of the question. We cannot overlook the fact that the archaic type, to which the Russian commune belongs, conceals an internal dualism, which may under certain historic circumstances lead to its ruin. Property in land is communal, but each peasant cultivates and manages his plot on his own account, in a way recalling the small peasant of the West. Common ownership, divided petty cultivation: this combination which was useful in remoter periods, becomes dangerous in ours. On one hand mobile property, an element which plays an increasing part even in agriculture, gradually leads to differentiation of wealth among the members of the community, and therefore makes it possible for a conflict of interests to arise, particularly under the fiscal pressure of the state.<sup>9</sup>

Again, in the first draft of his reply to Vera Zasulich, he referred to this "dualism inherent in the 'land commune'," "which can become a source of disintegration with time." It is evident that at least in his later years, Marx maintained that it was not devoid of inner contradictions which are the main motive force of change. Avineri's glib assertions in his introduction to Karl Marx on Colonialism and Modernization, that Marx viewed oriental society as having "no internal mechanisms of change" (p. 11) thus betray his partial and incorrect understanding of Marx's writings.

The second thing to note is that in his drafts of the reply to Vera Zasulich Marx viewed the village community not as static and unchanging but as developing or disintegrating to give rise to a comparatively more advanced society. Even in the Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, he observed that the Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and bourgeois modes of production were "epochs marking progress in the economic development of society" (emphasis added). It is significant that this observation is preceded by what may be described as a summary of his doctrine of historical materialism, in which Marx stated that at a certain stage of the development of the material productive forces, a contradiction invariably arises between them and the existing relations of production, and this stage is followed by an epoch of social revolution.

In the second draft of his reply to Zasulich, Marx wrote in parentheses: "I observe by the way, that the form of communist property in Russia is the most modern form of the archaic type, which in turn has passed through a number of evolutionary changes." He added: "Just so the archaic formation of society reveals a number of different types, which characterize different and successive epochs." (p. 142, emphasis added) And in the

third draft he wrote: "Primitive communities are not all cut to a single pattern. On the contrary, taken together they form a series of social groupings, differing both in type and in age, and marking successive phases of development.... As the last phase of the primitive formation of society, the agricultural community is at the same time a transitional phase to the secondary formation, i.e., transition from society based on common property to society based on private property." (pp. 144-45, emphasis added) At about the same time he described the village commune in the "East Indies" (i.e., India) as the "last stage or the last period in the archaic formation."

Avineri, who affirms that according to Marx, "the dialectics of historical development are not operative in Asia," talks of the "paradox" that "the more penetrating Marx's analysis of Asian society is, the graver the difficulties it poses to the internal structure of Marx's philosophy of history." (pp. 11-12) The "paradox" lies rather in the imagination of Avineri, for the difficulties presented by Marx's earlier writings with their incorrect analysis of the precolonial Indian society, based on some contemporary writings, disappeared later. There is no conflict between what he said about oriental society in his later writings and his materialist dialectics.

Daniel Thorner rightly said: "In 1881 Marx simply leaves static Asiatic society out of the picture." Referring to the notes Marx made after 1867, Thorner observes that in these jottings Marx is silent on the Asiatic mode of production.<sup>12</sup>

It is significant that the third volume of Capital describes the mode of production in India and China that existed before the coming of the Europeans not as the Asiatic mode of production but as "pre-capitalistic, national modes of production." (p. 333) It is also significant that in Socialism: Utopian and Scientific Engels speaks of the exploited classes being kept forcibly by the state "in the condition of oppression corresponding with the given mode of production (slavery, serfdom, wagelabor)," but there is no mention of the Asiatic mode of production.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, in The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, which was based on notes that Marx had made,

Engels makes no mention of the Asiatic state, while he speaks of "the state of antiquity," "the feudal state," and "the modern representative state."

As Marx's theory of the Asiatic mode of production, of an unchanging Asiatic society, underwent a complete change, so did the rosy view of British rule in India which he had held earlier. More study and investigation convinced him that the rule of foreign capital had started a process of de-industrialization, transformed India's economy into an appendage of the economy of the metropolitan country, and doomed it to further backwardness. He noted:

By ruining handicraft production in other countries, machinery forcibly converts them into fields for the supply of its raw material. In this way East India was compelled to produce cotton, wool, hemp, jute, and indigo for Great Britain.... A new and international division of labor, a division suited to the requirements of the chief centers of modern industry springs up, and converts one part of the globe into a chiefly agricultural field of production, for supplying the other part which remains a chiefly industrial field.<sup>15</sup>

About the railways, the construction of which he had hailed in the early 1850s in *On Colonialism* as the catalyst of an industrial revolution in India (pp. 87-88), Marx later wrote: "Generally, the railways gave of course an immense impulse to the development of foreign commerce, but the commerce in countries which export principally *raw produce* increased the misery of the masses."<sup>16</sup>

According to Marx, the railways proved "very dismal for the real producer" and served, to use Irfan Habib's expression, "as the catalyst of complete colonialization." Marx wrote: "the production itself, I mean the special sort of produce, was changed according to its greater or minor suitableness for exportation..." That is, dragged into the orbit of capitalist world trade, with a great part of its productive forces destroyed or refashioned to suit the demands of industrial Britain, the economy of the country acquired a satellite character.

On the extent of the drain of wealth to Britain, one of the formidable obstacles to the capitalist development of India, Marx wrote:

What the English take from them [the Indians] annually in the form of rent, dividends for railways useless to the Hindus, pensions for military and civil servicemen, for Afganistan and other wars, etc., etc.—what they take from them without any equivalent and quite apart from what they appropriate to themselves annually within India—speaking only of the value of the commodities the Indians have gratuitously and annually to send over to England—it amounts to more than the total sum of income of the 60 millions of agricultural and industrial laborers of India! This is a bleeding process with a vengeance! 18

While in 1853 Marx had welcomed the zamindari and ryotwari systems of land settlement for introducing private property in land, as early as 1858 he described the "exclusive proprietary rights claimed by the talukdars and zamindars" as "an incubus on the real cultivators of the soil and the general improvement of the country." In 1881 he said: "To take the case of East India, for instance, no one with the exception of Sir H. Maine and others of the same stock, can be ignorant that there the extinction of the communal ownership of land was only an act of English vandalism which pushed the indigenous people not forward but backward."20

It is evident that Marx had outgrown his earlier optimism about the revolutionary role of British colonial rule. He came to hold that far from laying down the material premises of a capitalist society, colonial rule destroyed much of the existing productive forces, retarded the development of new ones, flung the country backward, and laid the basis of its underdevelopment. Instead of promoting the development of new productive forces, it tied India to the world market as a "chiefly agricultural field"; instead of the railways serving as the forerunner of modern industry, they proved to be a means of converting India into an agricultural appendage of Britain and a market for its industrial goods.

It is a pity that many writers consider Marx's early thesis about the "double mission" of the British rule in India as his final word on the subject. In his Introduction to Marx's articles on India R. Palme Dutt described them as "among the most fertile of his writings, and the starting point of modern thought on the questions covered." And he continued to cherish as an axiomatic truth the above discarded thesis of Marx even in

1970, when an edition of his *India Today*—the last one during his lifetime—appeared, and analyzed Indian society, its classes and struggles during the colonial era in the light of this thesis. His panegyric on early British rule (pp. 252-53) shows that in his faith in the "progressive" and "revolutionary" role of British rule he left the Marx of the 1850s far behind. He also excelled Marx when he dubbed the revolt of 1857 (which Marx described as "a national revolt") as "the last attempt of the decaying feudal forces, of the former rulers of the country, to turn back the tide of foreign domination." He added: "As has been already pointed out, the progressive forces [sic!] of the time, of the educated class, representing the nascent bourgeoisie, supported British rule against the Revolt." (p. 358)

A blatant apology for colonialism in the name of Marxism is provided by Avineri, who ignores Marx's later writings and the actual results of colonial rule. While accusing the "Maoists" of being "totally unaware" of Marx's writings on India and China, Avineri himself seems to be unaware that after more investigation and research Marx revised his views about the "regenerating" character, for instance, of the agrarian systems and the railways that the British introduced.

Avineri attributes to Marx the following thesis (p. 12):

Just as the horrors of industrialization are dialectically necessary for the triumph of communism, so the horrors of colonialism are dialectically necessary for the world revolution of the proletariat since without them the countries of Asia (and presumably also Africa) will not be able to emancipate themselves from their stagnant backwardness.

Avineri argues: "The direct corollary of this [the conflict between Marx's "European-oriented philosophy of history" and "the non-dialectical stagnant nature of the Asiatic mode of production"] would be that Marx would have to welcome European penetration in direct proportion to its intensity: the more direct the European control of any society in Asia, the greater the chances for the overhauling of its structure and its ultimate incorporation into bourgeois, and hence later into socialist, society." (p. 18) Curiously enough, Avineri ascribes to Marx and Engels the absurd view (which history has proved false) that there is no "possibility of national wars of liberation prior

to the proletarian revolution in Europe. (p. 20) He also asserts that Marx had no sympathy with the causes of the great Indian revolt of 1857-58 and with those who took part in it.

To take Avineri's last statement first: Marx, as we have seen, characterized the Indian revolt of 1857 as "a national revolt," and Engels called it a "great rebellion." "As to the talk about the apathy of the Hindus [i.e., Indians], or even their sympathy with British rule, it is all nonsense," said Marx, adding, "In view of such facts, dispassionate and thoughtful men may perhaps be led to ask whether a people are not justified in attempting to expel the foreign conquerers who have so abused their subjects." Marx described the Indian forces fighting to overthrow British rule as "the revolutionary league"; and he and Engels denounced the British rule and condemned the savagery of the British army in emphatic terms. "

Marx poured all his scorn on the native allies of the British. In the closing years of his life, he wrote: "Sindhia [the ruler of Gwalior] loyal to the 'English dogs,' not so his 'troopers'; Raja of Patiali—for shame!—sent large body of soldiers in aid of the English!" Again, he lashed out at those who supported the British: "Young Sindhia (English dog-man) driven out of Gwalior by his troops after hard fighting, fled for his life to Agra." He also used the choice epithet "English dog-man" for the king of Nepal, who was loyal to the British.<sup>24</sup>

At one stage during the progress of the war, Marx hoped that victory would belong to the Indians. In *The First Indian War of Independence* he wrote: "We may almost expect, during the following campaign, a rehearsal of the Afghanistan disasters." (p. 103) Is it so difficult to understand on which side Marx's sympathies lay?

As regards Avineri's theory, attributed to Marx, that national liberation wars in colonies and semi-colonies must follow, and cannot precede, the proletarian revolution in Europe, it should be pointed out that in "The Future Results of British Rule in India" (1853) Marx wrote that "the fruits of the new elements of society" would not be reaped by the Indians till the ruling classes in Great Britain were supplanted by the industrial proletariat or till the Indians themselves were "strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether." So Marx never held, as

Avineri would have us believe, that national liberation wars were to wait until proletarian revolutions had succeeded in Europe.

Speaking of Ireland, Britain's oldest colony, Marx wrote in 1867: "Everytime Ireland was just about to develop herself industrially, she was 'smashed down' and forced back into a mere 'agricultural country'." <sup>26</sup>

In 1869 Engels said, "Irish history shows what a misfortune it is for one nation to have subjugated another....<sup>27</sup> And in early 1870 he wrote, "The more I study the subject the clearer it is to me that Ireland has been stunted in its development by the English invasion and thrown centuries back."<sup>28</sup>

For a long time Marx had believed that "it would be possible to overthrow the Irish regime by English working class ascendancy," but he later changed his mind. "Deeper study has now convinced me of the opposite. The English working class will never accomplish anything until it has got rid of Ireland. The lever must be applied in Ireland." (emphasis added)<sup>29</sup> He said that what the Irish needed was (1) "self-government and independence from England"; (2) "an agrarian revolution"; and (3) "protective tariffs against England."<sup>30</sup>

Marx came to hold that not only the internal development of Ireland but the proletarian revolution in England depended on the national liberation of Ireland. He wrote that for the English workers "the national emancipation of Ireland is no question of abstract justice or humanitarian sentiment but the first condition of their own social emancipation."<sup>31</sup>

Earlier, Marx had hailed free trade in the hope that it would hasten the social revolution though "under the present conditions of society" it meant "freedom of capital." It was in this revolutionary sense that he had welcomed the destruction of India's rural industry by free trade, by the invasion of the products of Britain's factory industry, and the consequent ruin of village communities. But afterwards he was convinced that free trade destroyed the productive powers of the countries that were unable to protect themselves. He noted in *Capital*, Vol. I, that the European states "forcibly rooted out, in their dependent countries, all industry, as, e.g., England did with the Irish woolen manufacture." (p. 708) The only industry that

thrived in Ireland, observed Marx, was the coffin-making industry. That is why he came to hold that without protective tariffs against England there could be no internal development in Ireland.<sup>33</sup> His earlier view about the revolutionizing role of free trade underwent a sea-change, and in *Capital*, Vol. I, he wrote: "The system of protection was an artificial means of manufacturing manufacturers, of expropriating independent laborers, of capitalising the national means of production and subsistence, of forcibly abbreviating the transition from the medieval to the modern mode of production." (p. 708)

Avineri's thesis that "the countries of Asia (and presumably also Africa) will not be able to emancipate themselves from their stagnant backwardness" without experiencing the "horrors of colonialism" and that "the more direct the European control of any society in Asia, the greater the chances for the overthrowing of its structure and its ultimate incorporation into bourgeois, and hence later into socialist, society" may need no refutation. Yet we may refer in passing to the cases of Japan, China, and India to show how amazingly perverse Avineri's theses are. Of all countries of Asia and Africa, it was Japan which escaped the horrors of colonialism and semi-colonialism and had the chance of pursuing the path of independent capitalist development. So, unfettered by colonial rule, Japan transformed its precapitalist economic structure, emancipated itself from its "stagnant backwardness," and came to rival Western capitalist-imperialist powers and even to outdo some of them. China, on the other hand, was reduced to a semi-colony by several Western imperialist powers, Russia, and Japan, which perpetrated many horrors there. But their penetration was not as intense, their control over China's affairs not as direct, as British penetration into and control over India. This factor, which resulted in a scramble among the imperialist powers for hegemony over China, gave rise, besides other factors, to a favorable opportunity, as Mao observed, for making a revolution that overthrew the rule of the imperialists and their native allies and enabled China to take the socialist road.34 But in India. British penetration and control were most intense, direct, and of long duration. The result of it all is that even today Indian society can hardly be called bourgeois, that its economy is still

an appendage of the economy of imperialist countries, that its ruling classes play the role of subordinate junior partners of imperialism, and that India is one of the poorest countries that wallow in "stagnant backwardness."

Historical facts unmistakably prove that the weaker the penetration of an imperialist country into a country of Asia and Africa (and Latin America), the less difficult is the transition from the precapitalist to the capitalist or the socialist stage. On the other hand, the greater the penetration and the more direct the control, the more difficult is the transition. For the imperialist powers allied themselves with all the most backward and reactionary classes in the colony to fleece it, keep its people in bondage, and build a basic complementarity between the metropolitan economy and the economy of the colony—a complementarity which had a distorting effect on the latter, caused it to retrogress, and laid the basis of its underdevelopment. So what Avineri says in justification of the horrors of colonialism is in flagrant contradiction with facts.

Marx's later writings show that he came to hold the following views:

First, colonial rule, far from playing a revolutionary role, throws the people of the colony not forward but backward as it creates a lopsided economy which is tied as an appendage to the economy of the metropolitan country.

Second, the type of destruction of the old order which is a prerequisite for regeneration can be carried out by internal forces and not by external ones, such as the rule of foreign capital, which tend to preserve the old social structure in a modified form. Such destruction or social revolution depends on the people of the colony themselves.

Third, for such destruction, without which there can be no construction or regeneration, a colony must first win national independence. Self-government and independence are of primary necessity to a colony or semi-colony for any real progress of its people. Without smashing the colonial shackles, no colony can achieve regeneration.

## NOTES

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- 5. See Karl Marx, Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations, ed. with an Introduction by E. J. Hobsbawm (London, 1964), p. 34.
- 6. Marx to Engels, June 14, 1853, On Colonialism, p. 313; emphasis in the original.
- 7. Ibid, p. 312; emphasis added.
- 8. Karl Marx, Capital, Vol. III (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975 reprint), p. 791; emphasis added.
- 9. Second draft of Marx's reply to Vera Zasulich, March 8, 1881, in Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations, p. 143, emphasis added.
- 10. Marx and Engels, Selected Works [SW], Vol. 3 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), pp. 155-56.
- 11. First draft of Marx's reply to V. Zasulich, March 8, 1881, in SW, 3, p. 155; emphasis in the original.
- 12. Daniel Thorner, "Marx on India and the Asiatic Mode of Production," Contributions to Indian Sociology (Paris), 9 (December 1966), pp. 63, 66.
- 13. SW, 3, p. 147.
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- Marx to N. F. Danielson, April 10, 1879, in Marx and Engels, Selected Correspondence (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), p. 318: emphasis in the original.
- 17. Ibid; emphasis in the original.
- 18. Marx to N. F. Danielson, February 19, 1881, in ibid, p. 337; emphasis in the original.
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- Marx, "Brief an V. I. Sassulitsch, Dritter Entwurf," in Marx and Engels, Werke, 19 Bd., S.402; cited in Mori Kenzo, "Marx and 'Underdevelopment'," Annals of the Institute of Social Science (Tokyo University), No. 19, 1978, p. 50; emphasis added. Palme Dutt, ed., Marx, Articles on India, Introduction, p. 1.
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- 22. Ibid, pp. 68-9, 80; see also p. 155.
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- 28. Engels to Marx, January 19, 1870, in On Colonialism, p. 331.
- 29. Marx to Engels, December 10, 1869, in ibid, p. 329; emphasis in the original except where mentioned otherwise.
- 30. Marx to Engels, November 30, 1867, in ibid, p. 324; emphasis in the original.
- 31. Marx to S. Meyer and A. Vogt, April 9, 1870, in ibid, p. 335; emphasis in the original.
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- 33. Marx to Engels, November 30, 1867, in On Colonialism, p. 324.
- 34. Mao Tsetung, "Why is it that Red Political Power can exist in China?," SW, I (Peking, 1967), p. 65. See also Mao Tsetung, A Critique of Soviet Economics (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), p. 37.