

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Lucia Pradella, *Globalization and the Critique of Political Economy: New Insights from Marx's Writings*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-415-74410-2 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-315-81316-5 (ebook)

It's not uncommon for Karl Marx to be championed as a visionary of globalisation, and, given the title of Lucia Pradella's book, you might think that this is her intent. Strictly speaking, it is not. *Globalisation and the Critique of Political Economy* does not really offer any new insight into "globalisation" per se. Rather, what it provides is a detailed account of the development of Marx's thought that yields fresh support for the claim that Marx was—from an early stage—aware of capitalism's inherently global reach and dynamism, and therefore of the need to develop an appropriate means of theorising capitalism and capitalist development as an already global yet differentiated totality. This argument does have implications for how Marx might be re-read within *and* outside of "Marxological" circles, and for how the relation between the domestic and the international ought to be conceptualised in general (Pradella here takes aim at international political economy as a discipline, in particular).

Pradella's overarching aim in the book is to refute two specific misperceptions of Marx: first, that he saw international capitalist development in linear, methodologically nation-centric terms; and second, that he harboured a Eurocentric worldview in which bourgeois civilization—and with it the permissive conditions for revolution—would permeate outwards from the West. With a commendable grasp of the classical political economy canon in general, and attention to detail in her treatment of Marx's notebooks in particular, Pradella makes a convincing case for Marx to be taken more seriously by non-Marxists who may have too casually dismissed him as another 19th century chauvinist.

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Furthermore, and unwittingly I would guess, Pradella also provides fresh textual support for reading Marx as the person to have first grasped the dynamics of uneven capitalist development (she prefers the Trotskyist notion of “uneven and combined development”—see below). For any *Antipode* reader interested in “historical-geographical materialism”, this book is perhaps a useful “underlabouring” companion to the late Neil Smith’s (1984) seminal work on the production of nature and space under capitalism—based as it is on manuscripts that Smith did not have access to or discuss specifically.

Pradella’s “new insights” come from her close reading of hitherto under-researched notebooks in a recently accessible section of the Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe (MEGA²) archive at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, and she claims to be the first scholar to have examined recently available notebooks in order to trace Marx’s thinking about the development of the world market in categorical-theoretical and concrete-historical terms. Focusing especially on the “London Notebooks”, dated 1850-53, Pradella seeks to “establish whether Marx’s project makes it possible to overcome the problems of methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism” (p.4). Specifically, this entails challenging the view “that Marx’s value theory was restricted to the British model conceived as a national economy and only applies to a ‘developed’ capitalist centre, considered in isolation from the rest of the world” (p.5),¹ and the view that Marx inherited from classical political economy and Hegel an ethnocentrist perspective on world development.² Pradella’s argument is that long before the 1860s Marx had been aware of the logical and historical primacy of the world market

1 Pradella attributes such a view to the likes of David Harvey (2003) and Gayatri Spivak (1999). I will leave open the questions of whether such an attribution is fair, or whether such views are widely held today.

2 A claim Pradella identifies most closely with Kevin Anderson (2010).

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and the international in capitalism, and that from as early as the 1850-53 period he was well on the way to honing a systematic understanding of capitalism as a globalising yet already differentiated totality—the turning point in this intellectual development being Marx’s work on Ricardo’s quantity theory of money. Further, there is textual evidence to suggest that Marx was therefore already aware of the pitfalls of methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism as he wrote extensive commentaries on contemporary international affairs and issues of colonialism and political upheavals abroad.

Pradella develops her argument over the course of five chapters. Chapter 1 covers the classics, tracing the development of political economy and the status of the international since the 17th century mercantilists and in key thinkers such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo. For Marx, she argues, Ricardo represented the pinnacle of bourgeois political economy in that he recognised that the world market is constituted by competitive and therefore antagonistic international relations, even if he did resort to blind faith in the harmonious virtues of comparative advantage in the last instance. In itself, this chapter offers little that is substantively new—although it would, I think, function as a useful introductory chapter for students coming to the classics for the first time. Chapter 2 turns to Hegel, who gave Marx a means of overcoming the failings of bourgeois political economy. The upshot of this chapter is that while Hegel recognised the centrality of labour and the limits to an international, expansive solution to the more deleterious antagonisms within capitalist societies, he nonetheless resorted to an idealistic justification for exploitative social relations and propounded a set of chauvinistic views as regards the necessity of colonialism. Taken together, then, these two chapters establish that Marx was already aware of key questions posed but left unanswered by classical political economy and Hegel by the time he was working in Paris from 1843, and that

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“Marx therefore investigated international relations from the start of his economic studies...even though he was unable to explain their antagonistic character” (p.69). Again, this much is hardly covering new ground,³ but these chapters—together with Chapter 3—do serve to set up the focus of the book on the manuscripts of the 1850s. Chapter 3 goes on to trace how Marx tussled with these questions during his studies in Paris, Brussels and Manchester (1843-48), and Pradella provides a careful reading of archived notebooks and publications such as *The German Ideology* to show that—while still limited and occasionally blighted by vulgar assertions about contemporaneous events (see below)—Marx necessarily began to depart from methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism as he worked out the fundamentals of his materialist conception of history, and his labour theory of value in particular.

Chapter 4 brings us to the crucial London Notebooks, drafted in 1850-53, focusing on Marx’s engagement with Ricardo’s quantity theory of money—a watershed moment:

In his London Notebooks Marx put in question some of the basic contradictions of classical political economy, starting from the contradiction between the labour theory of value and the theory of money. By rejecting the quantity theory of money, Marx could identify not only the historical primacy of the world market, as he had done already, but also its conceptual primacy. He thus laid the foundations for coherently developing the labour theory of value that, as discussed, is not abstractly national or international, but expresses processes of the internationalization of capital. Marx, in fact, could integrate into his concept

³ See, for example, Clarke (1988, 1991: chapters 2 and 3, 2003).

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of capital, on the one side, the processes of “primitive accumulation” leading to the concentration of world money then invested into production, and also, on the other side, the expansionist tendencies of industrial accumulation itself. (p.119).

Furthermore, the London Notebooks reveal that Marx’s awareness and analysis of international affairs further resulted in the distancing of his work from the methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism of his predecessors. In the wake of the Taiping Revolution in China, 1850-64, Pradella explains, “Marx changed his previous unidirectional view of international revolution, tracing a relation between proletarian struggle in the metropolis and anti-colonial movements in the colonies” (p.120); while in his analysis of the function of British colonialism in India, she finds evidence to contradict Edward Said’s allegation that Marx held to a belief in the ontological difference between East and West—his comments on the issue in the 1850s instead being a product of “political reflection on the material conditions for Indian liberation” (p.121).

The fifth and final substantive chapter presents further evidence to support Pradella’s argument that Marx’s earlier critique of the quantity theory of money laid the groundwork for the development of Marx’s later works, the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, and in the period 1857-63. In both these works, Pradella finds evidence to challenge “a predominant conviction that Marx’s starting point of analysis was a ‘domestic’ economy, which only in the last three books [of a six-book plan he outlined in this period] was to be ‘understood in its external relations to other capitalist (and non-capitalist) countries...’” (p.128, quoting Rosdolsky 1979: 27). Pradella’s claim, again based on a close textual reading of manuscripts produced in this period, is that the six-book plan was jettisoned around 1863 in favour *not* “of a *restriction* of the original plan...but rather a more

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systematic integration of the international sphere into the analysis of capital and a postponement of the investigation of the modifications to the economic categories belonging to that sphere” (p.128). Marx had already, by 1857, come to the realisation that “the world market is not a static sphere, but consists of the process of universalisation of capital” (p.130), and expressed his intent to analyse capitalism “as an organic system: the world market, as ‘a rich totality of determinations’, is both the point of departure as well as arrival” (p.131, quoting the 1857 Introduction to the *Grundrisse*). Yet, as this chapter shows, he still had good deal of thinking to do in terms of tracing the movement of so rich a totality, and in reconciling dialectical methodological rigour with his palpable awareness of concrete world developments (i.e. in reconciling theory and history).⁴ Pradella therefore takes the reader through successive manuscripts from the early 1860s, showing how Marx’s own research process led to the refinement of his ideas—and not without sometimes having to take several steps backwards in order to move forward. Ultimately, though, the critique of political economy really reached maturity in this period, as Pradella summarises in her Conclusion:

In developing his analysis of reproduction in the *1861-63 Manuscript*, Marx presupposed the system to be completely globalised. This point is crucial. If in the 1857 Introduction Marx had maintained that the real economic science emerged

⁴ For a similar discussion of Marx’s self-awareness of this problem—and an argument that many theorists from the Second International period have failed to recognise that there was such a problem or to grasp how Marx dealt with it in *Capital*—see Araghi (2003). Shilliam (2006) addresses similar issues to Araghi, and poses similar questions to Pradella, but focuses mostly on the development of—and limitations to—Marx’s thought prior to 1848.

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once it moved from the analysis of circulation to that of production, in fact, only by abstracting from circulation could he understand the system as a totality, and not as an aggregation of national units. On this basis Marx developed the theory of surplus value and profit, and delved into questions of the relation between foreign trade and the rate of profit, and of the modification of the law of value in the world market: two questions that he had raised since his Paris studies but he could now address on the basis of his articulated analysis of labour exploitation. (p.171-172)

My only real issue with the book concerns Pradella's apparent intent to use her argument not exclusively as a refutation of methodological and ethnocentric myths about Marx's critique of political economy, but furthermore as a vindication of Trotskyism—and the notions of “permanent revolution” and “uneven and combined development”. Throughout the book, the textual evidence that is used to such persuasive effect in refuting myths is also repeatedly *asserted* to be evidence of Marx's “own” theories of permanent revolution and uneven and combined development in particular, or his anti-imperialist sentiments in general.⁵ Yet, to my mind, such a correlation needs explaining rather than asserting—especially since ample controversy and debate is attached to these concepts.⁶ Moreover, such recourse to Trotskyist assertions on Pradella's part serves to detract from the broader

⁵ Pradella immediately correlates Marx's “own theories” with those of Hal Draper (1978). Draper was a founding member of the Socialist Workers' Party.

⁶ See, for example, the symposium on Day and Gaido's (2010) collection on permanent revolution in *Science & Society* (2013), or the discussion of uneven and combined development in Allinson and Anievas (2009).

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relevance of her own findings. The rich textual evidence she provides to explain the development of Marx's thought on the development of the world market as an always differentiated—i.e. unevenly developing—totality could, in further corroborating the arguments of a much broader range of Marxist scholarship,⁷ broaden its impact.

This aside, what *Globalization and the Critique of Political Economy* ultimately succeeds in arguing is that *Capital* should not so easily be interpreted as a work that seeks to make sense of capitalism on the basis of abstracting from the historical experience of its most developed concrete, national form (i.e. Britain). Neither should it be inferred from *Capital* that world capitalist development in general can be seen in unilinear, stagist, and replicative terms, emanating outwards from the West. Pradella's careful research attests to Marx's reflexive awareness of the limitations of attempts to analyse capitalism or bourgeois society on such a basis, as evinced in his research manuscripts on the likes of the physiocrats, Smith and Ricardo, dating back as far as the early 1840s. It is true that Marx took the best part of 20 years to reach a point where he could finally reconcile dialectical inquiry and totality (i.e. the world market) with concrete historical specificity by means of determinate abstraction proper (i.e. by deciphering capital as self-valorising value on the basis of the exploitation of labour). And it is true that his research sometimes hit dead-ends, and does indeed contain periodic evidence of vulgarity that Pradella herself concedes betrays Marx's (and Engels') theoretical immaturity at early junctures.⁸

7 Neil Smith (1984) immediately springs to mind—as do contributions made from within the “CSE” or “open Marxism” approach (see, for example, Bonefeld 2006, 2008).

8 For instance, when discussing the Slavic national question in the late 1840s (during which Engels refers to a “people without history”) (p.87-89). I do wonder whether some critics of Marx will be less willing to sympathetically dismiss such slippages as naiveties. Similarly, I fear that some readers will want to

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Yet Pradella does, I think, convincingly argue that it is also the case that any doubt about what *Capital* and the critique of political economy represents—insofar as some might identify textual evidence of methodological nationalism or Euro-/ethno-centrism and therefore dismiss Marx or his critique on such grounds—can be put to rest by means of close examination of his archived research manuscripts, in which one can trace the longer-term development of Marx’s reconciliation of categories such as world market, money, international trade, state, etc., on the one hand, with concrete world historical issues relating to British industrial development, colonialism, and revolutions outside the West, on the other. It took Marx some time, in other words, to work out how to reconcile theory and history, how to grasp the world market as a “rich totality of many determinations”, and how to present such an understanding in the form of his critique of political economy. But Marx got there in the end, and his *Capital* does indeed present the results of a research process that overcame the limits of methodological nationalism and Euro-/ethno-centrism that were so engrained in his predecessors.

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challenge Pradella’s philological insistence to properly situate potentially inflammatory discourses on, for instance, the “civilising tendency of capital” within a broader theoretical and textual context (see p.87, 140).

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