

West-Eastern Tragedies

On Mahdi Amel's Critique of *Orientalism*

ALBERTO TOSCANO

"Is the Heart for the East and Reason for the West?" faults Edward Said for obscuring the crux of Marx's journalistic reflections on British rule in India, namely "the question of revolution, and its necessity, as a precondition for humanity's liberation in Asia."¹ Amel's contention should be reckoned with in any serious confrontation with the presence of Orientalism or Eurocentrism in Marx's own thought and writing.² In this note, however, I would like to explore a minor moment in Amel's critical dissection of *Orientalism*—the weight accorded to Marx's quotation from Goethe's *West-Eastern Diwan* in his much-dissected *New York Daily Tribune* article. For Amel, Said engaged in a rhetorical sleight of hand by reversing the relation of priority between (Marx's) text and (Goethe's) citation. My own view, summarily stated, is that both Amel and Said could be faulted for choosing not to tarry with the specific imaginary of revolution encapsulated in Marx's appropriation of the verses from the *Diwan*, an imaginary that I would term *tragic*.

Amel provides the premises but not the full argument for such a vision by dwelling on the bifurcation, in Said's critical gloss on Marx, between a rational apologia for the revolutionary necessity of British imperialism, on the one hand, and a sympathy for the Indian lifeways destroyed in the process, on the other. For Amel, underlying Said's position in *Orientalism* is the idea that

Marx's mind could champion reason—that is to say, rational, systematic knowledge, resulting in the disavowal of individuality, whereby the negation of Marx's individuality results in the negation of precollective individuality, thereby abolishing all individual emotions, feelings, and senses. Marx's thought, in turn, constructs an *epistemological obstacle* between itself and Asia—his knowledge object—that prevents him from making

existential contact with it. Marx therefore slips into the preestablished rational language, which is the language of the collective, or Orientalist discourse in its official formation.³

Amel is right to underscore not just the doubtful distinction between head and heart that Said ascribes to Marx but the way this is linked to a problematic dichotomy between historical collectivity and “pre-official” individuality. Amel strives to correct Said’s neglect of the centrality of revolution in Marx by stressing the incompatible and classed logics of social change advanced in “The British Rule in India” (the *Tribune* article from June 10, 1853) and *Orientalism*:

In Marx’s interpretation, England is the “unconscious tool of history,” located within an objective movement where history proceeds according to its dialectical materialist logic—outside, if not against, human consciousness and will. Whereas . . . in Said’s interpretation, England is History’s Master, located within an intentional movement where history proceeds according to its ideological logic, which is the logic of Orientalist, and colonial, consciousness. (“ItH,” 493)

Simply bracketing out the problem of consciousness and indeed that of feeling while trusting in the epistemic uniqueness of a dialectical materialist logic does not, however, do full justice to the dialectical perception (or indeed the shifts and ambivalences) in Marx’s journalistic writings on India, nor to his conceptualization of social change in non-Western societies more broadly. To better articulate this problem, it is useful to expand our scope beyond the contentious passage from Marx’s article of June 10, 1853, to consider his use of Goethe’s poetry as well as some of his other articles on India.

As Siegbert Praver notes in his magisterial study of Marx’s citational and rhetorical practice, the same quotation from Goethe’s *Diwan* is redeployed two years later in another article by Marx, this time written for the *Neue-Oder Zeitung*, on the hyper-exploitation of the English working class at the hands of manufacturing capitalists.⁴ Marx notes that soon enough “a whole generation of workmen would have forfeited 50 per cent of their physical strength, spiritual development and vitality,” and he proceeds to put Goethe’s words in the hypocritical mouth of the Manchester school of economic thought, which, while lamenting British deaths in Crimea, “will answer our misgivings with the words: [why] should this distress distress us, since it increases our pleasures?”⁵ This refunctioning of the *Diwan* should make one wary of Said’s hasty conclusion that the citation operates as a kind of lexicographical censorship device, tamping down Marx’s human sympathies for the Indian victims of empire.

It is the ineradicable ambiguity of Goethe’s passage that allows it to be mouthed both by the royal-progressive “we” of the 1853 article and by the

Manchester apologists of the 1855 piece, making it the bearer not of a compartmentalization of human suffering from historical movement but of their “tragic” entanglement. Kevin Anderson, in noting that the citation is indeed “far from transparent,” also usefully traces its implicit presence in a passage from *Capital*, volume 1, about the brutalization of proletarian bodies in the process of valorization: “Capital therefore takes no account of the health and the length of life of the worker, unless society forces it to do so. Its answer to the outcry about the physical and mental degradation, the premature death, the torture of over-work, is this: Should that pain trouble us, since it increases our pleasure (profit)?”⁶ We could, of course, also note how Goethe himself has been interpreted as the poet par excellence of the “tragedy of development,” who, in *Faust*, part 2, dramatizes the modern axiom “to spare nothing and no one, to overleap all boundaries: not only the boundary between land and sea, not only traditional moral limits on the exploitation of labor, but even the primary human dualism of day and night. All natural and human barriers fall before the rush of production and construction,” a process that “even as it transforms a wasteland into a thriving physical and social space, recreates the wasteland inside the developer himself.”⁷

The dynamic and contradictory identity of development and waste is of course at the heart of Marx’s diagnosis of capitalism, and it is a leitmotif in the whole sequence of articles on India. His July 22, 1853 article, “The Future Results of British Rule in India”—which in many ways intensifies the view of India as a society without history impelled to make its own those aspects of political and industrial modernity cynically imposed by imperialism (railways, army, property)—marks an even more forthright articulation of the profound negativity that pervades the very notion of progress in Marx. Effectively equating “Eastern” and “Western” tragedies—“Timur” and “Faust”—Marx writes,

All the English bourgeoisie may be forced to do will neither emancipate nor materially mend the social condition of the mass of the people, depending not only on the development of the productive powers, but on their appropriation by the people. But what they will not fail to do is to lay down the material premises for both. Has the bourgeoisie ever done more? Has it ever effected a progress without dragging individuals and people through blood and dirt, through misery and degradation?⁸

Within this horizon, bourgeois revolutions, including colonial and imperial ones, are always marked by an unconscious and unconscionable brutality, as well as by the cynicism of self-interest that generates the conditions (but *only* the conditions) of future emancipation as its unintended consequence. As Marx concludes,

Bourgeois industry and commerce create these material conditions of a new world in the same way as geological revolutions have created the surface of the earth. When a great social revolution shall have mastered the results of the bourgeois epoch, the market of the world and the modern powers of production, and subjected them to the common control of the most advanced peoples, then only will human progress cease to resemble that hideous, pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain.⁹

All non- or prerevolutionary progress is thus a tragic spectacle; all of it conflicts with and overthrows our feelings, not to mention much of our reason. If anything, the “other scene” of the colonies, where “torture form[s] an organic institution of [the British Empire’s] financial policy”¹⁰ crudely illuminates the operations of the bourgeois norm in the center: “The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked.”¹¹ As V. G. Kiernan observed: “Emotionally at any rate, British India supplied [Marx] with a magnified illustration of man’s inhumanity to man in class society. Increasing misery there may have helped to convince him that the masses at home too were doomed irrevocably under capitalism to grow poorer.”¹² A further dimension of tragedy is then introduced by the Indian Rebellion of 1857, in the way that the much-decried violence of anticolonial insurgents is revealed as the fated return of imperial barbarity. As Marx declares in the article “The Indian Revolt,” from September 4, 1857:

The outrages committed by the revolted Sepoys in India are indeed appalling, hideous, ineffable—such as one is prepared to meet only in wars of insurrection, of nationalities, of races, and above all of religion; in one word, such as respectable England used to applaud when perpetrated by the Vendéans on the “Blues,” by the Spanish guerrillas on the infidel Frenchmen, by Servians on their German and Hungarian neighbors, by Croats on Viennese rebels, by Cavaignac’s Garde Mobile or Bonaparte’s Decembrists on the sons and daughters of proletarian France. However infamous the conduct of the Sepoys, it is only the reflex, in a concentrated form, of England’s own conduct in India, not only during the epoch of the foundation of her Eastern Empire, but even during the last ten years of a long-settled rule. . . . There is something in human history like retribution: and it is a rule of historical retribution that its instrument be forged not by the offended, but by the offender himself.¹³

In his well-known retort to Said, which shares several critical features with Mahdi Amel’s, as well as with the critique articulated by the Syrian intellectual Sadik Jalal al-‘Azm,¹⁴ Aijaz Ahmed captured the dramatic character of Marx’s vision of the nexus between colonial dispossession and the future of revolution. What Said dismissed as a “Romantic redemptive project” was better grasped as an “enraged

language of *tragedy*—a sense of colossal disruption and irretrievable loss, a moral dilemma wherein neither the old nor the new can be wholly affirmed, a recognition that the sufferer was at once decent and flawed, . . . that something good might yet come of this merciless history.”¹⁵ The experiential, temporal, and geographic unevenness that marks the very idea of an anticolonial revolution as a *double transition* of sorts makes it a privileged ground for a reinvention of the tragic—a matter not lost on revolutionary anticolonial intellectuals such as Aimé Césaire, C. L. R. James, and Frantz Fanon (all authors of tragic theories as well as tragic dramas), nor on contemporary theorists like David Scott or Jeremy Matthew Glick.¹⁶ Notwithstanding Said’s generative dialogues with György Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, and Raymond Williams—all of them in distinctive ways explorers of a specifically Marxist language of tragedy—his own “adamantine misconception of dialectics”¹⁷ arguably impeded a recognition of the tragic as what serves to prize dialectical thought away from the synthetic pleasures of redemption and reconciliation.

If Said thereby misses the revolutionary core of Marx’s reflections on the “East,” Amel doesn’t sufficiently explore their tragic tenor. Tragedy, too, is a “unity of struggle,”¹⁸ to use Amel’s expression—a torn, unresolved unity and an ineluctably *politicized* antagonism—all the more so when the historical necessity of structural change is borne by warring (colonial and anticolonial) agents and forces, themselves more often than not afflicted by internal scissions and disunities. Said once observed: “If the arguments going on within twentieth century Marxism have had any meaning, it is this: as much as any discourse, Marxism is in need of systematic decoding, demystifying [and] rigorous clarification.”¹⁹ It is perhaps unfortunate that he was at times less than generous about such labors of self-clarification among his own Marxist contemporaries, whether because he deemed them incorrigibly dogmatic (in the Arab “East”) or academically depoliticized (in the US “West”), thereby failing to engage with the likes of Amel, especially when it came to theorizing the specificity of colonialism and imperialism as modes of violent capital accumulation.²⁰ Centering, in and beyond Marx’s own writings, the tragic dimensions of imperial dispossession, anticolonial revolutions, and protracted processes of decolonization—in all their fractured geographies and uneven temporalities—could be a way to recover a Marxism that breaks with “a homogenizing and incorporating world historical scheme that assimilate[s] non-synchronous developments, histories, cultures, and peoples to it.” Such a break would enable forms of “investigative open analysis [that are] *against* the grain, deconstructive, utopian,” translating in the final analysis into

a clarified political and methodological commitment to the dismantling of systems of domination which since they are collectively maintained must, to adopt and transform some of Gramsci’s phrases, be collectively fought, by mutual siege, war of maneuver, and war of position.²¹

Over four decades after *Orientalism* and over three after the death of Mahdi Amel, it is perhaps in the spirit of this call—as well as of a shared opposition to the dubious comforts of historicism—that a dialogue can take place between these two bodies of theory, one that lends an ear to anticolonial Marxism’s tragic overtones, its unreconciled and unfinished legacies.

ALBERTO TOSCANO is professor of critical theory and codirector of the Centre for Philosophy and Critical Thought at Goldsmiths, University of London, and visiting faculty at the Digital Democracies Institute in the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University. He is the author of *Cartographies of the Absolute* (2015, with Jeff Kinkle) and *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (2nd ed., 2017) and the coeditor of *The SAGE Handbook of Marxism* (2021). He is a member of the editorial board of *Historical Materialism* and series editor of the Italian List for Seagull Books.

Notes

1. The specter of a revolution of the East had already been raised by Marx and Engels, with regard to China, in 1850:
It is a gratifying fact that in eight years the calico bales of the English bourgeoisie have brought the oldest and least perturbable kingdom on earth to the eve of a social upheaval, which, in any event, is bound to have the most significant results for civilisation. When our European reactionaries, on their presently impending flight through Asia, finally come to the Great Wall of China, to the gates leading to the stronghold of arch-reaction and arch-conservatism, who knows if they may not read the following inscription upon them: RÉPUBLIQUE CHINOISE—LIBERTÉ, ÉGALITÉ, FRATERNITÉ. (Marx and Engels, “Review,” 266–67)
2. Fadi Bardawil has usefully described the conjuncture of Amel’s critique, observing the tensions and turnabouts of traveling theory in periods of counterrevolution: “At a point when Marxism was attacked by the purveyors of authenticity for its foreignness, Said’s critique, which repositioned Marx from the thinker of emancipation to one who is discursively complicit with Orientalists, could, to say the least, not be warmly received by cornered Arab Marxists” (*Revolution and Disenchantment*, 178).
3. Amel, “Is the Heart,” 495 (hereafter cited in text as “ItH”).
4. Praver, *Karl Marx and World Literature*, 248.
5. Marx, “[The Crisis in Trade and Industry],” 576.
6. Quoted in Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*, 19.
7. Berman, *All That Is Solid*, 64, 68. See also Toscano, “The Faust Variations.”
8. Marx, “Future Results,” 221.
9. Marx, “Future Results,” 222.
10. Marx, “The Indian Revolt,” 353. In an article written before “The Indian Revolt” but published after it, Marx had explored the ample evidence for this view, drawing on the parliamentary Blue Books and the 1855 Report of the Commission for the Investigation of Alleged Cases of Torture at Madras, which stated its “belief in the general existence of torture for revenue purposes” under British rule (quoted in Marx, “[Investigation of Tortures in India],” 336).

11. Marx, "Future Results," 221.
12. Kiernan, "Marx and India," 170. Kiernan curiously turns Marx's much-contested views on the absence of history from the Indian village into an argument for a nonlinear, punctuated, and rather pessimistic vision of historical materialism:

Marxists are accustomed to look on every system as containing inner contradictions, and as changing primarily in response to these tensions. Marx's writings on Asia reveal that he conceived of much, or most, of human history as escaping from any iron law of change into a timeless vegetative condition. It was the discontinuity, the jerkiness, of social evolution that impressed him, its lack of momentum, its habit of running down. Mankind was advancing only in sporadic rushes here or there, and Marx, who called on philosophy to change the world, gave his interest to these active sectors, or to the reasons that kept the others immobile. (183–84)
13. Marx, "The Indian Revolt," 353.
14. See Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment*, 174–86.
15. Ahmad, "Marx on India," 227–28.
16. See Toscano, "Politics in a Tragic Key."
17. Parry, "Edward Said," 106.
18. In "Is the Heart for the East," Amel writes that

the actual contradiction in Marx's text is established by a material antagonism between the stagnancy of traditional social structures that resist change, on the one hand, and the historical necessity of changing those very structures, on the other. This movement is precisely the dialectical movement of history. Furthermore, there is no reconciliation between two poles of contradiction; rather, there is a contradictory unity—that is, the unity of struggle ("ItH," 485)
19. Said, *The World, the Text*, 29.
20. On the missing "continents of the empirical and the conceptual" in Said's treatments of colonialism and imperialism, see Parry, "Edward Said"; on the "colonial mode of production" in Amel, see Bou Ali, "Mahdi Amel's Colonial Mode."
21. Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered," 210, 214–15. Said's article was originally published in the journal *Race and Class* in Autumn 1985.

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