

Achin Chakraborty · Anjan Chakrabarti ·  
Byasdeb Dasgupta · Samita Sen *Editors*

# 'Capital' in the East

Reflections on Marx

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*Editors*

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# Introduction

The first volume of Karl Marx's book 'Capital: A Critique of Political Economy' was published in 1867, the only volume to be published in his lifetime. The subsequent two volumes of *Capital* were put together after Marx's death from the manuscripts that he left behind. The working-class movement and progressive intellectuals throughout the world considered these volumes to be the most important guide to understand the ills of capitalism, the origin of the working class and the materiality of exploitation of the workers. As the process of capital rapidly moved across the globe, so did with it the book *Capital*. It was translated worldwide in numerous languages and is often regarded as one of the most important books in the last two centuries. There is not a corner in the world which has not been touched by ideas and movements derived from or drawing inspiration from Marx generally and *Capital* in particular. In the last three decades, as socialism collapsed and neoliberal capitalism spread to various corners of the globe, *Capital* became a redundant treatise for many. Its analysis was held outdated, fit for only intellectual consumption and curiosity.

In postcolonial countries, *Capital* became superfluous for other reasons too. As developmentalism overwhelmed the national agenda of these countries, they competed with each other in inviting foreign capital. The process of capital, no matter what its forms, became a welcome guest, indeed much sought after. A more predatory capital, with the active help of the state, challenged the existing framework of labour rights, constructed at both national and international levels and defanged anti-capitalist struggles. As global capitalism gradually showed a tendency of shifting its centre to the East, *Capital* lost its earlier salience for post-colonial social thought.

It was the world's economic crisis following the financial crisis of 2008 and the recognition that the process and forms of capital required both understanding and reformation that brought *Capital* back into fashion. It now receives close and serious attention from critical theorists, social scientists and progressive movements. Indeed, the analyses of *Capital* have acquired a new urgency today. Even in the popular media and newspapers, we see a resonance of its perceived relevance and find attempts to draw out the contemporary relevance of many of its arguments.

In the developing world, the drive for developmentalism, expansion of market, financialisation, rampant privatisation, agrarian distress, displacement and involuntary migration, and boundless exploitation of natural and human resources have stoked what some have called ‘southern insurgencies’. In this milieu, *Capital* has once again grabbed attention. Yet we have to enquire, what does this return to attention signify? What are the new questions demanding attention? Can these questions be addressed within the analytic and political spirit with which *Capital* was written? What are the old questions brought to life in the contemporary time, with which Marx himself had struggled? We may cite as an example the relation of rent with surplus and accumulation. Marx treated this question at length in *Capital*; it is a question of enormous significance once again in the twenty-first century. Given the current intensity of exploitation and newer modes of accumulation and labour forms, how do we characterise the capitalism we are facing today? What is the nature of this, our capitalism? How do we understand its historic social formation? If we were to emulate Marx, how would we undertake today a ‘critique of political economy’, of which *Capital* remains, even after 150 years of its publication, a model? Should we read *Capital*, Vol 1, as if it stands alone? Or should we read it in conjunction with Volumes II and III, as some influential Marxist thinkers like Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff now suggest. What are the different fault lines, such as gender, caste, race, religion, along which capitalism functions and moves forward today? Are these the fault lines along which the wage form of work is modified, according to the needs of capitalism? Similarly, what are the institutions, such as family, household or global regulating agencies, that play a determining role not only in consumption but also in the reproduction of labour power in today’s capitalism? What about the other non-capitalist means of organisation of surplus, actually and possibly, that continue to proliferate in the era of neoliberal globalisation when capital has been at its most expansive in recent history. These are some of the issues addressed in the various chapters of this book.

*Capital* demands our attention at another level. This book explicitly poses the problem of multilinearity. During Marx’s own lifetime, he said that Russia, India and many other non-Western societies may take different paths. We can understand the proposition of differing paths in two distinct ways. First, even within global capitalism, postcolonial countries may present different experiences of capitalism with their own strategies for negotiating, bypassing, resisting and/or transforming capitalism. After all, *Capital* points us towards the close relation between the genesis of industrial capitalism in Europe and colonialism. It is not coincidental that the reference to colonialism comes immediately after the account of primitive accumulation. Thus, the analysis of commodity described as the cell-form of capitalism is in juxtaposition with an account of the historic genesis of capitalism as a global system.

Colonialism acquires greater significance if we consider the arguments about the reproduction of capital made in *Capital*. It is Rosa Luxemburg’s *The Accumulation of Capital* that drew attention to the critical role played by the outside in the genesis of capitalism. She pointed out that the outside was a fundamental condition of accumulation. In the development of capitalism in Europe, colonialism constituted

the non-capitalist (or pre-capitalist) outside which enabled accumulation and realization of surplus value. In a different context, Antonio Gramsci in the three volumes of *Prison Notebooks* (more are being translated presently) invoked the problem of outside from within modern national formation. Specifically, he distilled out the so-called national formation of Italian Risorgimento as an instance of ‘revolution without revolution’, the creation of a ‘bastard’ unity that excluded the toiling masses, agrarian peasants in the South and industrial proletariat in the North. In contrast to the nationalist narrative, Gramsci unpacked Risorgimento as a colonial articulation of the southern peasant subaltern with capitalist Northern Italy that was produced through a racial discourse that rendered southerners as inferior. His reading explodes the myth of national integration and compels us to, in a somewhat psychoanalytical sense, rethink the presence of outside in a dyadic form in the hegemonic order—racialised, pathological, devalued other as the foregrounded outside (from the perspective of the centre—Risorgimento; what is to be cited) and the foreclosed space-perspective-life worlds of the real outside (again, from the perspective of the centre—Risorgimento; what must never be cited). While the hegemonic order circumscribes politics within its acknowledged space, Gramsci’s revolutionary counter-hegemonic politics (which, in his case, appeared as an attempt of alternative form of nation-building extending to a new international order) emphasised on the return of the foreclosed outside, i.e. the space, perspective and praxis of the toiling masses. Both Luxemburg and Gramsci have bequeathed for us precious historical lessons and insights into how the contradictions and conflicts between capital and labour, between capitalism and its outside that are developed in Marx’s *Capital*, find fruition through the category of the outside, within and beyond nation. With the collapse of the legitimacy of Soviet socialism, the theoretical task of bringing alive these historical lessons and insights and moulding their functions in transformative politics has once again restarted. Almost all writers in this book are acutely aware of this responsibility, i.e., of the need for handholding of the critique of capitalist process and counter-hegemonic politics, even as they might be emphasising the former or the latter in their respective essays. And, some essays explicitly respond to certain questions that concern the outside.

If a non-capitalist outside is essential for capitalist accumulation, how does capital negotiate with its outside? There have been many attempts in recent years to revisit the question of primitive accumulation. The enormously influential work of David Harvey points to continuities in processes of primitive accumulation rather than a one-time historical transformation. Is primitive accumulation a continual process? In this age of globalisation, how do we connect the notion of a non-capitalist outside with the theory of ongoing primitive accumulation?

In the aftermath of the collapse of Soviet-style socialism, the failure of global capitalism following the 2008 economic crash and doubts over the authenticity of Chinese socialism, there have been some urgent reconsiderations for thinkers and activists in mooted a postcapitalist politics of economic reconstruction. This reconsideration was driven by an imagination to bypass these failures. The point is to be noted though that there has been a long tradition of postcapitalist politics of economic reconstruction in the East, including in India. This is not surprising since

in most postcolonial societies, there remain multiple temporalities and diverse economies. The Gramscian and Luxemburgian dissonant and fragmented reality is fully alive there, albeit in different and newer forms. The capitalist sector resides cheek by jowl with a host of non-capitalist sectors or even economies. In such a situation, how do we envisage alternatives to mainstream capitalist trajectories that appear set in stone as they unfolded historically in the developed west and moved to the rest of the world? Does the existence (and continued reproduction) of non-capitalist organisations of surplus open up (at all) the possibility of reconstructing alternative economies and communities? Given the failures of top-down ‘socialist’ systems, this discussion/task of building socialism from below through postcapitalist praxis can no longer be put aside. How does one look at *Capital* in relation to the outside—spatially, perspective-wise and politically? Does this review then change our view of the Inside itself, i.e. the architecture of capital, its location, constitution and work? What new light does it shed on possibilities (and/or probabilities) of postcapitalist transformation of our futures?

This brings us to another important point about this book. We have here a juxtaposition of analytic strategies and narrative devices. The preface to *Capital* makes a distinction between inquiry and exposition. We have followed in the path of combining the two. Is this the way forward? Is this the way in which clarification and self-clarification may be continued?

Finally, locations and perspectives matter in how *Capital* is received and deployed. The contribution of this volume is not simply in the issues that have been covered, but that *Capital* has been interrogated from the location and perspective of the East. To present this proposition is to invoke the relevance and recognition of difference in the reading of canonical texts. Historical differences matter, both in production of knowledge and in objects of analysis, concepts, modes of articulation and politics. Louis Althusser claimed in his essay *On Marx and Freud* that in a necessarily conflictual reality, one cannot see everything from everywhere; in fact, one cannot. Indubitably, we do not each see from our different locations the same thing similarly. Many essays in this book remain sensitive to difference in one form or another and indeed show how and why it matters, theoretically and politically. By asking the questions we have highlighted earlier in this introduction and many others, they explore the distinctiveness in various receptions of *Capital* in the East. These many receptions are different from that in the west, but ‘east’ and ‘west’ are not homogeneous blocks on the question of reception of *Capital* or its consequence for politics. These are not inert questions. The difference in reception shapes outcomes and consequences. There are varieties and divergences in the political response to *Capital* within the East that also need to be marked and have been flagged in this volume. Notably, in this book, we have addressed the existence of divergences and the complexity involved in the task of translating *Capital* and other works of Marx, especially in relation to the historical context and political gradients within which that task was undertaken. This is a crucial area to ponder because it had a profound impact on which issues came to be foregrounded by Marxism, and whether and how far the politics proposed through Marxism could and may flourish in the East. In some cases, as revealed in some of the essays, the complexity of



translation, with its underlying political context and drive, is shown to have changed the character of what signifies as Marxism. In others, this is shown to have shaped brand new questions and areas for Marxism in general to contend with.

No matter how one looks at it, the point remains that the readings of Marx in and from the East did not and do not always fall in line with the dominant strands of reading in the west (if such can be posited in the singular). The contributions to this volume have been sensitive to this tension-ridden history in the space of Marxism. Many essays bring into the forefront some of the demoted and suppressed aspects of *Capital*, the tensions and frictions they provoke, which renders necessary a recasting of extant readings and interpretations of *Capital*. The book is about the reception of *Capital* in the East. It is also about reading, interpreting and developing the issues connected to *Capital* from the East. From another angle, *Capital in the East: Reflections on Marx* is a connecting bridge between the insights of a rich tradition developed in the past and new avenues of interpretations and conceptualisations going into the twenty-first century.

Taking into consideration these thrusts and angles, this volume is tentatively organised into four broad sections for the convenience of readers: (i) Reception of Capital in the East (Jon Solomon dealing with China, Rajarshi Dasgupta with Bengal, Bertil Lintner with Southeast Asia and Gavin Walker with Japan); (ii) Value, Commodity and Forms of Capital (Pranab Kanti Basu dealing with commodity fetishism, Satyaki Roy with value flow and power under global production network, and Byasdeb Dasgupta with finance capital); (iii) Population and Rent in Capital (Ranabir Samaddar revisiting the question of theory of population in *Capital*, Rajesh Bhattacharyaa with an anti-capitalocentric reading of primitive accumulation and surplus population and Iman Mitra revisiting and rethinking rent); and (iv) Borders of Capital and Rethinking Politics (Samita Sen dealing with gender, Anjan Chakrabarti and Anup Dhar with a dialogue between Marx and Gandhi on non-violent socialism, and Manas Bhowmik and Achin Chakraborty delving into workers' cooperative and postcapitalist politics). This rough and broad setting does not mean that in all cases the papers restrict their analyses in line with the thrust of their respective sections. Rather, almost all the papers intersect and overlap across various sections in highlighting this or that aspect, at times reinforcing their respective views and at other times challenging one another. Alongside, they move between inquiry and exposition, translation and history, historical and conceptual, conceptual and political. In bringing together this cornucopia, we hope that the book will showcase the richness of the tradition of reading and interrogating *Capital* from and in the East, and in the process open up new territories of thought and politics for the future.

Achin Chakraborty  
Anjan Chakrabarti  
Byasdeb Dasgupta  
Samita Sen

# Contents

## Reception of Capital in the East

<b>Sinicized Marxism as a Symptom of the Postcolonial Condition: Arif Dirlik, Mao Zedong, Xu Guangwei, and the Modern Regime of Translation</b> .....	3
---	---

Jon Solomon

<b>Capital in Bangla: Postcolonial Translation of Marx</b> .....	27
--	----

Rajarshi Dasgupta

<b>Communism and Capital: Marxists Literature in Southeast Asia</b> .....	39
---	----

Bertil Lintner

<b>The Homeland(s) of Marxism: Labor Power, Race, and Nation After <i>Capital</i></b> .....	47
---	----

Gavin Walker

## Value, Commodity and Forms of Capital

<b>Marx and the Enigma of Commodity</b> .....	71
---	----

Pranab Kanti Basu

<b>Global Production Network: The New Template of Power and Profit in the Regime of <i>Empire</i></b> .....	87
---	----

Satyaki Roy

<b>Finance Capital in Marxian Perspective</b> .....	103
---	-----

Byasdeb Dasgupta

## Population and Rent in Capital

<b>Is There a Theory of Population in <i>Capital</i>?</b> .....	115
---	-----

Ranabir Samaddar

**Primitive Accumulation and Surplus Population:  
A Critique of Capitalocentrism in Marxian Theory** ..... 137  
Rajesh Bhattacharya

**Marx’s Theory of Rent: A ‘Speculative’ Reading** ..... 153  
Iman Mitra

**Borders of Capital and Rethinking Transformation**

**The Problem of Reproduction: Waged and Unwaged  
Domestic Work** ..... 173  
Samita Sen

**Non-violent Socialism: Marx and Gandhi in Dialogue** ..... 195  
Anjan Chakrabarti and Anup Dhar

**Class Processes and Cooperatives** ..... 221  
Manas R. Bhowmik and Achin Chakraborty

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# **Reception of Capital in the East**

# Sinicized Marxism as a Symptom of the Postcolonial Condition: Arif Dirlik, Mao Zedong, Xu Guangwei, and the Modern Regime of Translation



Jon Solomon

**Abstract** Interrogating Chinese Marxism's encounter with the approach and translation of *Das Kapital* and Marx, this essay aims to construct a genealogy of Sinification in relation to the concept of postcolonial condition. The condition that we have in mind is precisely the link between the process of valorization and the index of anthropological difference, in which two parallel operations of translation (our word for context-specific ontogenesis) occur: The first is the translation from use value and social value to exchange value, while the second is the translation of social difference, always in a process of becoming, into taxonomies of specific (or species) difference. Our goal is to understand the postcolonial condition in light of the modern regime of translation and to understand how the regimes of accumulation are related to the apparatus of area and anthropological difference that characterizes the postcolonial world, while at the same time accounting for and learning from the extraordinary forms of experimentation occurring in Chinese Marxism today, as in the past.

**Keywords** Translation · Nationalism · Postcolonialism · Causality · Mao Zedong · Arif Dirlik · Louis Althusser · Ranabir Samaddar · Peter Button

## The Institution of Sinicized Marxist Studies and Maoist Thought

### *The Institutional Context of Contemporary Sinicized Marxism Studies*

As the People's Republic of China nears the end of a third decade of breakneck growth since 1990, catapulting the nation into the position of the world's largest economy, one is not surprised to discover the enthusiasm with which an increasing proportion of university-based intellectuals in China have turned their attention to the Communist Party Of China (CCP)'s official policy of "socialism with Chinese

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characteristics.” Casual online searches, perusal of databases, and the occasional anecdotal evidence suggest that there has been a veritable explosion of intellectual work within China devoted to the historical, political, social, cultural, and economic dimensions of the party-state policy and related issues.

Undoubtedly, the frenetic level of growth in the national economy has been mirrored in the realm of intellectual production. Part of the reason for this parallel is related to the Chinese government’s fabled appetite for infrastructural projects. The number of universities in China has more than doubled since 1999, when the government launched a program massively to expand university attendance. In the midst of this infrastructural expansion, many new departments and programs have been created. On December 3, 2005, the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council together with the Ministry of Education jointly promulgated the “Notice About Adjusting and Expanding the Primary Level Discipline of Marxist Theory and Its Sub-fields,” which officially established the basis for “Sinicized Marxism Studies” as a subfield of the Primary Discipline of Marxist Theory. An indication of the rapid growth of this new subfield can be gleaned anecdotally from news reports of the *National Conference for the Establishment of Academic Norms for the Field of Sinicized Marxism Studies*, an academic conference jointly organized by several top universities in Beijing in December 2016, that gathered representatives from over 50 institutes of “Sinicized Marxism Studies” from universities around the nation (Renminwang 2016). So that means at least 50 new institutes in the space of a decade.

As an institutional formation, these new programs are clearly modeled on the North American precedent of “studies institutes” (such as women’s studies, animal studies, and Asian-American studies) that have mushroomed since the 1960s following the phenomenon known as the “democratization of the university” that occurred in North American higher education. Like their North American counterparts, these new programs are essentially pluridisciplinary in nature. Needless to say, similar work continues to come from older conventional disciplines such as economics, Marxism–Leninism institutes, and sociology. Yet I think that the specificity of the new discipline is not too difficult to map out. In *Competing Economic Paradigms in China: The Co-Evolution of Economic Events, Economic Theory and Economics Education, 1976–2016*, Steven Mark Cohn describes in detail the process by which Marxist economics were gradually superseded by neoclassical economics. While tracking this history with Cohn, I remind myself to keep an eye on a separate, parallel intellectual development: The past several decades have also seen a remarkable explosion of interest, both inside academia and in society-at-large, in so-called *guoxue* studies—nativist or national culture studies. Gaining unprecedented symbolic and material status, national culture studies today enjoy an institutional position in China—including new university programs and institutes, Web sites, and news organizations—that is unlike anything seen since 1949, if not since the birth of the modern Chinese university at the end of the nineteenth century—a time when the relational field of discourse, discipline, and institution was quite different from today’s configuration. While there are many other factors that go into the intellectual and institutional milieu in which Sinicized Marxism Studies coalesce, the synergy among neoclassical economics, management studies, and nativist stud-

ies palimpsestically grafted over Marxist studies not only defines, in my estimation, the exclusions and presuppositions that constitute the formation of the field, but also reveals the extent to which the relation between the “global” and the “local” is played out within Sinicized Marxism Studies specifically within the terms of neoclassical economics, representing the global, and national culture studies, representing the local. The mapping of the epistemological onto the geopolitical that characterizes this staging must be understood within the horizon of the postcolonial condition during the era of neoliberalism.

### *Mao Zedong’s “Sinification” of Marxism*

The notion of the Sinification of Marxism enjoys a rich historical usage (see Liu 2017 for a comprehensive and thought-provoking account) that dates back to a talk by Mao Zedong from December 1938. In relation to Mao’s understanding of Sinification, there are basically two opposing currents of thought that dominate Chinese studies conducted in non-Chinese language media outside of the People’s Republic of China. The first, represented by Stuart Schram and Nick Knight, essentially holds the notion that both “Marxism” and “Chinese” are known quantities. For these authors, Sinification is a completely transparent and unproblematic term. It is merely enough to show that Mao employs a traditional turn of phrase, or stresses the adaptation of Marxism to Chinese particularities, to justify the use of the word Sinification without any need to consider the extremely unstable position of the modern nation-state within the colonial–imperial modernity and its highly problematic relation to capitalist regimes of accumulation. A second current, represented by Arif Dirlik and Rebecca Karl, is highly suspicious of this approach. As Rebecca Karl succinctly summarizes: “Mao Zedong Thought is also usually said to be a ‘Sinification’ of Marxism, or the making of Marxism Chinese. This formulation is inadequate, however, as it takes Marxism as a unified dogma and considers Chinese as a settled cultural predisposition. Marxism was (and continues to be) a much-contested matter, and, in the 1930s, ‘Chinese’ was the subject of intense struggle. It is more appropriate to see Mao Zedong Thought as the product of Mao’s simultaneous interpretation of Chinese history and China’s present through Marxist categories and the interpretation of Marxist categories through the specific historical situation of China. This mutual interpretation is the motivating dialectic of Mao’s theory and revolutionary practice” (Karl 2010, 53). Although Karl does not make the citation explicit, she is undoubtedly referencing or echoing “Mao Zedong” and “Chinese Marxism,” Dirlik’s landmark essay from 1996 that highlighted the problem of “mutual interpretation” in the context of intense struggle over the forms of political and social organization.

### *Immanent Causality: Assessing Arif Dirlik's Althusserianism*

The most promising aspect of Dirlik's approach to Mao lies in his characterization of an Althusserian moment where the theory of structural, or immanent, causality and overdetermination is put into practice. Referring to one of Mao's central theoretical texts, "On Contradiction," Dirlik writes: "'On Contradiction' depicts a world (and a mode of grasping it) in which not 'things' but relationships are the central data... These relationships do not coexist haphazardly, but constitute a totality structured by their many interactions, a totality that is nevertheless in a constant state of transformation" (Dirlik 1996, 131). As both Karl and Dirlik (but not Knight and Schram) recognize, the central challenge for understanding the "Sinification of Marxism" hinges upon the extent to which both of the terms, "China" and "Marxism," are understood not as static entities that either precede their historic encounter (as teleological cause) or follow from a larger story of universalization (mechanistic effect), but rather as temporal potentialities continuously individuated out of social relations. Informed by a processual ontology situated in the context of political struggle, the entities such as "Marxism" and "Chinese" that simultaneously operate as both cause and effect are considered to be, according to an Althusserian vocabulary, *overdetermined*. The question of causality, in other words, cannot be handled in a mechanistic or teleological way.

It is worth underlining in passing the significance of the Althusserian intervention into the problem of causality for our understanding of the colonial-imperial modernity. A certain *regime of causality* not only defines the essence of colonial governmentality, but also crucially instantiates the disciplines of knowledge tasked with managing all the forms of knowledge inherited from the past that might be seen as "abnormal deviations" due to "national character." A superior understanding of the epistemological laws of causality in tandem with a more powerful application or deployment of that understanding (in the form of colonial science) is both a justification for the legitimacy of colonial governmentality and one of its main ideological forms. With this observation in mind, we might reflect on the implications for a comparison between Mao and Althusser, particularly with regard to the former's emphasis on the priority of praxis, which leads Dirlik to conclude—in my estimation somewhat hastily—that Mao's "notion of causation, therefore, remains less theorized than Althusser's" (Dirlik 1996, 136). This reflection is not designed to privilege the revolutionary over the university professor, but rather to help us pinpoint the exact locus of praxis and theory, in relation to Dirlik's reading of Mao, beyond Dirlik.

The principal reason we must entertain the "Dirlik beyond Dirlik" gesture boils down to this: Dirlik's bold attempt to situate Mao's "Sinification" of Marxism firmly in the practices of structural causality and overdetermination is hobbled by the stubbornly residual force of the given characteristic of modern scholarly study of China. It appears notably in the guise of something that Dirlik calls "Chinese society itself" (Dirlik 1996, 124). Asserting that an entity called Chinese society "remained the locus of its own history" throughout the transition to a modern nation-state, Dirlik struggles to reconcile this "locus" with the "displacement" and "relocation" of that

same society into the global. The Althusserian (or Maoist) echo in Dirlik's conclusion that "Our conception of China (as well as the Chinese conception of self) is of necessity 'overdetermined'" (Dirlik 1996, 124) is muffled by the unexamined presuppositions that lie behind the pronominal invocation of *our* conception. Unavoidably, the implication is that not just "Chinese society," but also the putative totality of "the West," is simply given. This is the moment where Dirlik's text nods at Sinification as a social relationship. Yet, as is characteristic of Chinese studies in general, there is a confusion between the social and the epistemological. In its reinstatement of the phenomenological givenness of a self-other dichotomy in the separate fields of both knowledge and experience, the formula advanced by Dirlik merely heightens the mystery surrounding the drama of overdetermination. Worse yet, the confusion is compounded by a displacement from the social to the epistemological. Even though it is said to be "overdetermined," the social, or practical, quality of the self-other relationship is articulated, in a wholly transparent and unproblematic way, to the completely heterogeneous register of the epistemological. The self-other relationship is no longer a practical matter of sociality, but a matter of representation in the field of knowledge. Displaced to the epistemological–representational level, the self-other relationship manifestly falls outside the loop of the processual, relational ontology at the heart of Dirlik's Althusserian methodological concerns.

One way to bring Dirlik's approach back to the fecund promise of immanent causality he first discovered might be found in Dirlik's seminal observation that Sinification, as understood by Mao, was *primarily a practice of translation*. Since translation is a key theme in my approach to the postcolonial problem denoted by the Sinification of Marxism, I would like to be allowed to highlight its importance beyond the illustrative metaphorical significance ascribed to it by Dirlik. Even though Dirlik claims at the outset of his essay that "One of Mao's greatest strengths as a leader was his ability to translate Marxist concepts into a Chinese idiom" (Dirlik 1996, 120), this translational ability is never elevated to the level of a theoretical concern on a par with the notions of structural causality and overdetermination that Dirlik otherwise grants theoretical authority. As Dirlik argues "that Mao's Marxism represents a local or vernacular version of a universal Marxism" (Dirlik 1996, 123), he is less sensitive than I would like to the complicity, in addition to opposition, between the universal and the particular. More importantly, Dirlik never takes the problem of language and translation as a question of *both* social praxis *and* theoretical praxis. Throughout Dirlik's essay, translation thus remains trapped in the straitjacket of a usage that is at once either too metaphorical or else too empirical. The operation that Dirlik variously describes as "rephras[ing] it [Marxism] in a Chinese vernacular" (Dirlik 1996, 123 and 128), or "rephras[ing] in a national voice" (Dirlik 1996, 125), or a "Marxism...spoken in a vernacular voice by a Chinese subject who expressed through Marxism local, specifically Chinese, concerns" (Dirlik 1996, 128) is never actually theorized. Instead, Dirlik uncritically relies on the framework of universalism and particularism augmented by the spatial metaphors of transfer, displacement, relocation, filtering, and adaptation that have been the hallmark of the modern regime of translation throughout the colonial–imperial modernity. Nowhere is translation taken into account in the understanding of the vast transformations occurring since

the beginning of the twentieth century in the practice and definition of the “Chinese vernacular.” In other words, the role of translation in the highly theoretical operations required to manage the transition from an empire to a modern nation-state—including the creation of a national language and the representation of a national people—is simply not accounted for. Dirlik’s dualism is ultimately a disappointing refutation of Schram and Knight’s substantialism.

### *Translation and the Two Maos*

For this reason, Dirlik’s emphasis on the role of translation as a social praxis in Mao’s theoretical formulation of Marxism deserves elaboration. The key lies in our understanding of translation as a social practice that demands a corresponding understanding of theory as a social praxis, too. Let us take our cue from Dirlik. The importance of translation was first discovered, Dirlik asserts, by Chinese revolutionaries in the midst of practical struggle that forced them to traverse a kind of *internal frontier* between urban and rural space. (In our view, a more accurate description of the spatial geography being negotiated would emphasize the difference in terms of incommensurable spaces of in-betweenness: the in-between space of the extraterritorial, financial center (Shanghai) versus the in-between space of the small-scale local city (Yanan) that has continually been a flash point for social ferment since the nineteenth century):

The revolutionaries themselves were outsiders to this agrarian social situation (and, therefore, in contradiction to it) and had to maneuver with great care in order not antagonize the population and jeopardize their own existence. Therefore, they could not translate the multifaceted conflicts they encountered readily into *their* theoretical categories, but rather had to recognize these conflicts as irreducible features of the social situation in which to articulate theory. This is what raised the question of the language of revolution at the most fundamental level (Dirlik 1996, 130).

Here, we find a metaphorical conception of translation that sees it as the negotiation of social difference and exteriority at a linguistic level. Translation is mapped onto spatiality in terms of the static, pre-constituted frontier. A bit later, Dirlik reminds us that, “the first calls for translating Marxism into the language of the masses coincided with the appearance of a guerilla strategy of revolution (and not by Mao but by others in the Party)” (Dirlik 1996, 141). Translation in this instance is no longer simply a metaphor for the negotiation of social difference, but rather a key element of guerilla strategy against a fascist state apparatus. Dirlik’s brilliant formulations suffer from a couple of serious limitations that must be removed in order to fully reap the benefits of their insight.

First, it is essential to understand that the “language of the masses” was not a given entity, but itself a site of intense struggle. Qu Qiubai, one of the founders of the CCP and its chairman before Mao, had been busy in the early 1930s (before his assassination at the hands of the fascists in 1935) developing a theory of national language that would not be based on intervention by a central state, as had been the

case in the nation-building projects animated by capitalist regimes, but rather would rely on a non-centralized, non-standardized notion of the *common*. Qu's name for this language was, tellingly, the "Common Language" (*putonghua* 普通话)—which he critically pitted against the term "national language" which he attributed to a capital–state nexus. Significantly, translation played a key role in the development of this non-national, Common Language, with regard to what Qu somewhat simplistically viewed as either external or internal sociolinguistic differences. In other words, translation, not sovereignty, would be the model of the society to which Qu's Common Language would correspond. This particular point was fundamentally at odds with Mao's investment in the model of sovereign power (and causal relations),<sup>1</sup> exemplified by his call, "Who are our enemies? Who are our friends? This is a question of the first importance for the revolution," in the famous speech, "Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society," from 1926 that subsequently became the first lines of the canonical post-revolutionary text, *Selected Works of Chairman Mao*.

Second, the notion of translation as an element of revolutionary struggle really means that the negotiation of social difference is at the heart of the revolutionary enterprise. Needless to say, the kinds of social difference at stake here go well beyond the linguistic in a narrow sense. If Mao's thought, as Alain Badiou has asserted, is characterized by its penchant for an open-ended infinity of struggle (Davidson 2016; Badiou 2018, 111), we might, based on that notion, advance the concept of *infinite*

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<sup>1</sup>For a failed analysis that focuses exclusively on the sovereigntist aspect of Maoism with respect to translation (as an exclusively linguistico-literary operation), see Guo (2017). The proposal advanced by Guo, namely that Maoism should be seen as a "political dialectics" of "translation as vaccination," is not without interest, but the author has not taken the time to consider seriously either what dialectics means in relation to translation or the extent to which the immunitarian logic is a general problem of modernity (Esposito 2011; Brossat 2003). Guo could be forgiven for some of these oversights in light of the fact that Ning Wang, considered by many inside China an authority on postmodern theory, utterly failed to see the connection between translation and the Hegelian dialectic elaborated around the word *relevant* by Jacques Derrida in a well-known essay, "What is a relevant translation?" (published in English in *Critical Inquiry* in 2001), that had been translated, poorly, into Chinese. Since *Writing and Difference* (1967), Derrida had commented at length across several works on using the French verb *relever* to translate the Hegelian term *aufheben* (often rendered into English as to sublimate). Wang's apparent ignorance of this translational context leads to a comic interaction with the French philosopher during the latter's visit to Beijing, described by Wang in a footnote (Wang 2009, 69): "Within China there are some scholars, such as Cai Xinle, who have translated the title [of Derrida's essay] as 'shenme shi xiangguande fanyi [what is related translation?]'." Of course, translation from the English word 'relevant' includes the meaning 'to be related to,' yet we should be aware when it comes to Derrida, a great scholar adept at word play, that a single word invariably bears different meanings. In autumn of 2001, after having read this essay, I saw Derrida in Beijing and inquired in person whether "relevant" in this case did not mean "closest to the original," or "best," or "most pointed to" [in English in the original]? Laughing, he said that this was exactly so. Clearly, the primary meaning of the word is "appropriate [*qiadangde*]," while "to be related to [*xianguande*]" is only secondary. In this regard, readers may consult Cai Xinle's monograph, *Xianguan de xianguan: Delida 'xianguande' fanyi sixiang ji qita* [Related to being related: Derrida's philosophy of "related" translation and other concepts] (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 2007), as well as the Chinese translation of this [Derrida's] essay in Chen Yongguo, ed., *Fanyi yu houxiandaixing* [Translation and postmodernity] (Zhongguo Renmin Daxue Chubanshe, 2005). The object of Derrida's mirth is as ambivalent as his irreproachable tactfulness allows.

*translation* or *permanent translation* (to paraphrase the lovely formula proposed by Rada Ivekovic; cf. Ivekovic 2002) as the quintessential form of ideological struggle and revolutionary love.

Mao's "Sinification" of Marxism would thus be caught between the social praxis of infinite translation and the juridical model, or theory, of sovereign power. Hence, the assertion that Mao places praxis above theory needs to be re-evaluated in light of those places in Mao's discourse where a juridical model of social relations based on the sovereign distinction between friends and enemies eclipses the open-ended, horizontal plane of social relations based on the indeterminate infinity of translation. The sovereigntist in Mao betrays a praxis-first approach, revealing instead a version of Mao that is deeply, thoroughly *theoretical* in the sense of ideology: The strong form of theory in colonial-imperial modernity invariably resides in the social forms of the given, such as the anthropological difference codified in the nation-state, that legitimate and naturalize capitalist accumulation. *Nothing is more theoretical, in the final analysis, than the organization and naturalization of class reproduction as a common sense, quotidian reality via the institutions of the nation-state.* To summarize, then, "the Sinification of Marxism" is an ideologically ambivalent formula. At a general level, it is a mystification of social struggles in the (post)colonial condition that takes the form of the given, usually national or civilizational difference. It can, however, with some effort, be mobilized toward a revolutionary praxis of permanent translation. As Mao says in his "Sinification" speech from 1938, "organization and struggle are the only solution."

What Mao's theory of revolutionary praxis as translation (and of translation as a revolutionary social praxis) hints at, thus, is a grasp of the way in which *translation is not simply an operation that one applies to social objects in order to establish equivalence in the face of difference (the template of exchange value), but is rather the heart of subjective formation, the constitutive operation without which individuals—including collective individuals—cannot coalesce.* Translation is not simply the process of bringing Marxism into the idiom of the Chinese masses, nor is it simply a means of transferring immaterial goods across pre-defined borders. It is rather an integral element in the performative composition of the masses, the bearers of both knowledge and labor power, and the border, without which the masses would inevitably become nothing but a form of the given—commodified labor power—readily available for enclosure and value capture by the bordering operations of the capital-state nexus.

Nevertheless, the tension internal to Maoism that we noted above set a precedent difficult to overcome. The opposition between translation as a juridical, logistical project and translation as a *poietic* practice of articulating discontinuity is no longer in play. Today, that historical blind spot in Maoism has been amplified a thousand-fold under General Secretary Xi Jinping, justifying the subsumption of the forms of the past into a capitalist regime of accumulation. Under Xi, "Sinification" has become a general state policy, extended to multiple domains, notably to religion,<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>In April 2016, Xi chaired a National Religious Work Conference held in Beijing, possibly the first time a general secretary attended such a meeting since Jiang Zemin did so in 2001 (Batke 2017, 1),

suggesting its transformation into a general imperative. The end result, of course, is a consolidation of the opposition between the West and the rest that is a central ideologeme of the colonial–imperial modernity—a consolidation, or metastasization, in other words, of the postcolonial condition.

I should hasten to add in my discussion of translation that I understand it not as a form of transfer or transposition between cultural individuals that preexist the translational encounter (i.e., we object to the notion of cultural translation), but rather as a moment of praxis when indeterminacy is mobilized in the service of individuation. Translation names the ontological primacy of relationship over individualization. Translation is thus precisely the form of praxis that corresponds to a theory of structural causality, i.e., a theory of social relationships in a constant state of transformation characterized at the epistemological level by ideological overdetermination. One might even hazard the maxim that a theory of structural causality bereft of a praxis of translation is a fundamental betrayal of the ideological critique at which it aims. From this perspective, Mao's greatest contribution to revolutionary thought might one day be seen as the realization that praxis is translation, while translation is a social praxis, and the praxis of translation demands intervention into the ideological struggles around theory and state apparatuses.

### *The Sinification of Marxism as an Apparatus of Translation*

Providing an intellectual infrastructure spanning both the linguistic and the institutional aspects of discursive formation, Sinification is today variously the name for new degree-conferring graduate programs established over the past several decades in Chinese universities, an official policy and theoretical line authorized and promoted by the Chinese Communist Party that begins with socialism (“Socialism with Chinese characteristics”) but has crept into multiple policy domains (including notably religious affairs and the governance of minority populations), and a general taxonomy of knowledge production grounded in national character, now reformulated into the anthropological notion of “linguistic context” introduced into China through Hong Kong since the 1990s. Comprised of various practices and institutions, Sinification might best be thought of as an *apparatus of translation* that produces subjective effects through the *spatialization of translational practice into an interface or border* between the putative exteriority of “Marxism” and the ostensible interiority of a “Chinese linguistic context.”

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at which the policy of “Sinification of religion” was formally adopted. If, as Bai Xin suggests (Bai 2019), the current policy of the Sinification of Xinjiang (a border province with a large, ethnically diverse, and predominantly Muslim indigenous population) is matched by a corresponding effort to “Xinjiang-ify” the rest of China (through applying the surveillance regime developed in Xinjiang to the Chinese population as a whole), it reminds us that Sinification has always been associated with a process of self-ethnicization required by the nation-state. In that sense, *Sinification is the name for a durable biopolitics of population engineering that is integral to the postcolonial condition “in” China.*



In an attempt to sketch a genealogy of Sinification specifically in regard to Marxism, my attention is initially drawn to the way in which linguistic difference is mapped onto disciplinary differences that are then further mapped over to geopolitical differences. Putting Sinification in relation to an apparatus of translation, I place great significance on the way in which it runs parallel to Cohn's suggestion, backed by a reference to translation in Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, that the recent transition in China from Marxist economics to neoclassical economics can be re-framed in terms of a linguistic paradigm: "Another way of describing the paradigm shift in Chinese economics is to characterize it as a linguistic shift" (Cohn 2017, 250). Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the linguistic paradigm analyzed by Cohn is its implicit relation, through a cartography of differences, to translation. Expanding on the notion of the linguistic function of neoclassical economics, Cohn introduces a fascinating series of connections:

To a large extent, the spread of neoclassical economics in China reflected its role as the *lingua franca* for formal discussions of world markets and the global capitalist system. Neoclassical economics was the language of the World Bank and IMF...Even those who did not 'formally' speak this language (such as most journalists) used the basic grammar and vocabulary of neoclassical economics to communicate about the economy...Hence, neoclassical economic discourse came to assume the appearance of a 'natural language,' that is, an 'objective' description of the economy, unmediated by a point of view. (Cohn 2017, 39).

Cohn runs his readers through a series of connections that look like this: neoclassical economics = language in its systematic aspect = the global = a world capitalist system. The series established by these successive equivalences links disciplinary knowledge to imperial spatial cartography, political economy, and finally language. Cohn's observations could be prolonged and enriched by incorporating Sandro Mezzadra's perspective on the fundamental importance of exchange value as a dominant model of translation and social relations under capitalist regimes of accumulation and labor population management (Mezzadra 2007). As Mezzadra reminds us, "Capital as translation addresses (interpellates) its subjects, at a very abstract level, prescribing forms of subjectivity that can be translated into the language of value" (Mezzadra 2007). As a *lingua franca* of discussions among institutional professionals about world markets, neoclassical economics can be seen thus in relation to the apparatus of general translation, described by Mezzadra, that converts labor into labor power and social needs into exchange value. This conversion is based on an exclusion of the materiality of translation and the labor of translation. The exclusion of materiality concerns all those aspects that are lost when translation is reduced to logistical transfer. Linguistically speaking, this view of translation excludes grammar, assumed to be part of the "code" that can be distinguished from the "message" it bears. Under the modern regime of translation, the fictive division between code and message provides support for an informational approach to communication. Only the message needs to be translated, not those elements such as grammar that constitute the putative systematicity of language and supposedly enable the transfer of information without affecting its content. This approach tries to hide the irresolvable problems of indeterminacy of meaning that become most visible in translation, con-