

# 1 The Limits of Theory

## **Introduction**

By merely identifying class struggle, Marx did not distinguish himself from a hoard of earlier historians. By attaching the existence of classes to particular phases of production throughout history, however, he did something unique: he proposed that the antagonism between the relations of production was what propelled history from one epoch (or historical phase of production) to another. The interaction of thesis and antithesis produced a new form following evolutionary science. Yet Balibar conceded that the science of history was a problematic idea because Marx had not always been perfectly explicit about his conception of history.<sup>1</sup>

Marxists serially underperform on the impact of nationalism and its decolonizing implications on dialectical process out East. The narcissistic allure of Eurocentrism and the historiographical deficit of good writing on quasi-colonial China are, of course, one and the same thing. Yet the impetus, provided by racist belief in the superiority of Western industrialism, for the installation

of an unbridled industrialist-capitalist mode of production in China was weak when compared to its dominance in other spheres of British colonial influence. This lack of colonial self-assurance had big, and largely underrated, implications for how race and antithetical positions on Home Rule informed colonial practices in the Eastern Empire.

If we are to make sense of twenty-first-century East Asia, we must resist the mordant temptation to refer to the modes of production from the mindset of European colonial progress. Aggressive nationalist conceptions coursing around British East Asian colonies especially, after the early 1840s, made the social relations of production indescribably complex. Overseas colonial dependencies could produce their own relations of production in a manner that sternly contested their negative racial characterization by the local British administrations. Enactment of purely metropolitan measures became quite unlikely abroad. The European blind spot caused by assumed superiority of their economic system was not, as Young recognized, a universal problem for post-war Marxists: “Sometimes Althusser seems to imply that different histories may range through different modes of production, at other times it appears that they are specific to each, an effect of the overdetermination of the social formation”.<sup>2</sup> Historical development, then, could take the form of petit bourgeois accretion of capital produced by cottages and workshops, or trade in a scarce commodity, as much of it was rule of the middle class produced by fortunate co-location of water and paddlewheels, or coal and steam engines.

I made a bold claim in the preface; one that makes European conceptions of their influence on historical progress of the East

less an issue of comparison or conceptual narcissism than the chafing and struggle between rival economic systems. Western and local modes of production made a compact not to stray into each other's domain that was expressed in hybrid institutional arrangements in colonial outposts which, themselves, were the way for colonial rulers to slow down historical progress, by numbing subaltern agony or misdirecting bourgeois nationalism away from a path to decolonization.

Althusser was rather indifferent to Third World struggles and especially so when they did not comply faithfully to a Western Marxist expectation of the working class taking a central role as the only truly revolutionary class.<sup>3</sup> Thus, those who felt empathy for the wretched of the earth were, in Althusser's lexicon, guilty of historicism, racial romanticism, or humanist sympathies. They played for postcolonial compensation born of guilt rather than a major revision of ownership derived from historical process. By not willing on class warfare, or revolution culminating in epoch-producing political change, the romantics preferred revelling in exceptionalism to verifying dialectical materialism.

Questioning how historical materialism operated does not make one less of a Marxist. In my case, I argue that the opposition of indigenous and colonial initiatives was stymied by colonial property policy on Far Eastern shores. Bartolovich suggested the need for an overhaul of Marxist theory when she contended that: "Marxism has viewed modernity and capitalism as inextricably bound up with each other", but that a new formulation of historical progress is needed that "counters the idealist and dematerializing tendencies" of this most central of

Marxist assumptions.<sup>4</sup> Chibber's recent contribution breathed new life into the European conception of historical materialism as an explanation for the rise of the bourgeoisie in India to take the mantle of independent government. According to him, "the theories generated by the European experience" do not have to be "overhauled or jettisoned but simply modified".<sup>5</sup> Although his reading has provoked much heated debate in the subaltern academy, its significance has been to put historical process back at the centre of postcolonial studies in a way we have not seen for many years.

Throughout the possessions of coastal China, and other British divots of the Far East, local modes of production and distribution were not torn out root and branch by the dominant clench of imperial capital. Colonials enjoyed superior rights in spheres of influence but rarely did they attain political hegemony or hold sway economically outside of their monopolies. Arrighi contended that "European expansion into Asia did not bring the Sinocentric tribute-trade system to an end ... it simply influenced its inner dynamics".<sup>6</sup> Reduced to the politics of a single colony, namely Hong Kong, Chiu made it clear that the local colonial government was quite capable of producing political "equilibrium" despite "a very intricate political situation" via "administrative absorption" of local elites.<sup>7</sup>

In Chiu's view, dialectical tussles were not fought on an uncontested British ground but on the stage of economically savvy Chinese subjects who participated in "elite consensual government" if Home Rule was not in prospect.<sup>8</sup> After 1947, however, despite over a century of economic competition within colonies answered by statutory dialectic busting, the stability

that had been manufactured in their possessions out East looked vulnerable. In the end, the British colonial administrations of East Asia proved to be “bean curd tigers” in Mao’s memorable phrase.<sup>9</sup> Why they had declined in the space of a century had more than a little to do with their inability to conquer and remould the pre-existing economic models encountered in the Far East. This has implications for how much of the historical progress of the Chinese colonies colonialism can be given credit for.

The classical Marxian schema has it that the mode of production of slavery, serfdom, or wage labour produced social divisions and social relations of production under which a master, nobleman, or employer respectively took ascendant positions. Marx observed that the capitalist production system reproduced itself not only through property in commodities and surplus value but also by “producing and externalising the social relation between the capitalist and the wage-earner”.<sup>10</sup>

An historical materialist account of the Far East could admit colonial government alternation between neutralization of nationalist movements and capitulation to them as a way to preserve the relations of production in the favour of foreign investment in the last instance. Marx foresaw that the tenacity of the pre-capitalist mode in China and the impossibility of the British garrisoning the mainland would eventually, in times of serious strife, make the colonial grasp very shaky indeed. Most foreigners had abandoned their livelihoods and property in China by 1947 and by 1949 the British toehold in Hong Kong was all that was left of a litany of concessions that once punctuated the Chinese littoral.

Althusserian theory needs to be rewritten in the case of quasi-colonial China, and the Far East generally, most particularly on topics such as the influence of race on dialectical process, but also in regard to civilization and credit where it is due for the economic advancement in the Asian colonies. Unless this is done, little sense at all can be made of the British colonial administrations offering subaltern rent control and petit bourgeois land improvement opportunities to so-called “subject races” in their Chinese colonies. The replicated policy of rent control, as I suggested in the preface, is prime territory for theorizing because, as a dialectical inhibitor aimed at the subaltern quarter, it was a compensative way for the delegates of the metropole to help keep as many extractive colonial enterprises in the imperial fold as possible.

This chapter is divided into four parts. I observe in the second part that nationalist political tensions in British colonies prompted use of a purposeful policy mechanism by the British. In the third part, I lay down the argument framework about the competing social and political forces between which British self-preservation pivoted in their East Asian possessions. Lastly, I deal with a few of the obvious challenges from Chinese history to a thesis of relative autonomy in a colonial context. In the first part it is necessary to discuss how far the dialectical model received by Althusser can take us, having regard to how the enactments of race and nationalism by colonial subjects forced British administrations to recognize the constitutional exceptionalism of the Far East in the way that dialectical interactions occurred.

## **Althusser, Historical Progress, and Modernity**

Althusser was not voluminous in his writings on colonialism. His pessimistic prescription for dialectical materialism can however be transposed abroad to the contexts of the British Far East. Although aware of Lenin's and Luxemburg's ideas about imperialism being driven by excess capital deployment, his views added little to the post-1859 position of Marx. Althusser's primary positions were: (1) study of the colonial relations of production would offer little more insight than the ones viewed at home, and (2) unless former colonies conquered their "historicist humanism", little more than "reformism and opportunism"<sup>11</sup> would come of their struggles. He and his coterie were too occupied with the problems of post-war Europe, and reinterpreting its recent history through a dialectical lens, to turn their minds incisively to the failing British Empire. Yet Althusser was no colonial apologist, despite his beloved French Communist Party's reluctance to take a decisive stand against the Algerian war.

A few words in Althusser's autobiography reveal his anti-imperialism had an unlikely origin: his investment banker father. Monsieur Althusser was a Great War veteran and a man of naturally few words who followed ever more senior appointments in the bank from Algiers to Marseilles to Lyon, and eventually, Paris. His son recalled an incident when General Juin, the French Resident General of Morocco, threatened in 1951 to make suspected nationalist sympathizer Sultan Mohammed V "eat straw".<sup>12</sup> Mons. Althusser was expected to cheer on this comment like all loyal French in the North African

commercial community. Instead he stayed silent and, in his son's account, "it did not go unnoticed".<sup>13</sup>

In two other historical accounts, Juin's comment was attributed to his successor in the Moroccan residency, General Guillaume who took over in 1952.<sup>14</sup> It is not important who uttered the words, for both men were cut from quite the same Colon cloth. The "straw-eating" moment reveals the colonialism known to Althusser in French Algeria was two-sided. On one side was implacable urban welfarism. On the other side was government violence and repression. This was symbolized by what Kelly termed the "political apartheid" of offering French citizenship only to those Arabs and Berbers who renounced their Muslim faith.<sup>15</sup> The least the colony's commercial mainstays could do, including men such as Althusser's father, was cheer loudly at the moment Arab humiliation was suggested.

Accepting that the social relations of production reflects its modes, I also suggest that a satisfactory reading of the Far Eastern colonies cannot, nevertheless, refer only to class or look to an emerging bourgeoisie as evidence for historical progress. Those who have interpreted and applied Althusser's ideas in a colonial context can be taken to have underestimated the role of race in the production of historical progress and as a proxy for independent nationhood. Race was a driver of how colonial jurisdictions managed history, not a subcategory. Colonial administrations in China were obsessed with countering by law the broad-church racial claims of bourgeois nationalism by shoring up subaltern support through rent control, and inoculating those bourgeois who were vulnerable to nationalist infection by offering them preferential land improvement



opportunities, conferring on them an aura of white constructivism without quite allowing them to become legally white.

But it is not only on the question of race that the position of Althusser needs to be re-evaluated. The exceptional economic and social conditions of China—a desperate, white-knuckled economic wrestle between the “old” world and the “new”—raised questions about the constitutional success of all imperial powers in China. Also challenged were the conceptions that Europeans alone brought modernity and historical progress to Old Cathay, or that they would always handpick their successors from among local subscribers to a bourgeois-compradorial code.

Despite Althusser’s pied-noir origins, he could never be counted among those secretly hoping to retain Algeria as a *département de la République*. His own life’s colonial context made him acutely aware of the contradiction posed by France lording it over her overseas possessions. His loyalty to the French Communist Party strongly implied, however, maintaining the status quo in Indo-China and keeping Algeria firmly in the French fold. As a child, he thought the parlous and isolated situation of various African heads of state banished to Algiers from other French colonies “doubtless my first lesson in politics”.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, he was not greatly interested in making the colonial problem his philosophical focus, other than to write metaphorically of the great continent of history and its need to be liberated from its illegitimate occupants. Instead, he preferred his imagined, songful reveries with the French provincial working class in the pub after the wheat had been harvested and

threshed. Despite his upbringing as the son of a bank manager in a colony of the French empire, it produced no sentimentality in his view of social relations of landlord and tenant or capitalist and wage earner.

An essential idea in *Reading Capital* was to show how analysis of the relations of production, when it abandons class, becomes lost in the study of “human relations” or “inter-subjective relations”.<sup>17</sup> Yet race was never regarded as inter-subjectivity by those who experienced racism. Race was more than class taken to the absurd level of skin tone; it was constitutive of colonial relations of production. In China, Han racialism animated indigenous nationalism in each of its communist, warlordist, and KMT variants. Whether Chinese nationalism aimed at nationalization of industry or ejection of all monopolist foreigners, or their sufferance until their lack of utility became plain and they could be brushed aside, nationalism was a coherent plan for decolonization, no matter the shade of ideological belief one subscribed to. Robert Young saw Althusser’s failure to visit the Latin Quarter of Paris in 1968 as a reason for his remote, rather white, and crusty approaches to colonialism.<sup>18</sup> I would say he would also have benefited greatly from a visit to Chinatown for a bracing dose of anti-Maoist diaspora perspective.

The Maoism in Althusser’s thinking was submerged but influential. In *Reading Capital* he admitted to reading Mao’s 1937 text on contradiction, but plays it down by a subsequent discussion of symptomatic reading.<sup>19</sup> Mao made plenty of references in his writings to domestic bourgeois reactionaries and even singled out “the aggressive forces of U.S. imperialism