Mapping the Geography of Karl Marx’s Capital

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Abstract

Presented here is a geovisual reading of all three volumes of Karl Marx’s Capital. Marx’s seminal treatise on political economy is normally treated as a work of abstract conceptualization. However, Marx names hundreds of geographic locations in Capital, usually in a highly relational and dynamic fashion. It seemed to me there was enough geographic information contained in the volumes to produce a geovisually rich map, presenting the themes, places, and relationships in this text in a new and revealing way.

1 Why Map Capital?

In his widely influential, three-volume Capital (Volume 1: 1867; Volume 2: published posthumously in 1885; Volume 3: published posthumously in 1894), in which he articulates his philosophy of history and of political economy, Karl Marx refers to a significant number of real-world geographic locations and processes. My project here has begun with these questions: what are these locations and geographic processes; and how might they be mapped?

My reason for embarking on this project was an increasing sense that the volumes of Capital, in addition to laying out a set of literary, philosophical, and political economic abstractions, also report, reflect upon, and criticize a tangible historical form: the geography of capitalism. This geography, as explored and enumerated within Capital, has yet to be considered as a distinct topic in its own right, one whose precise articulation can, I believe, shed some new light both upon the argumentative logic of Capital and upon the 19th-century capitalist world as Marx saw it.

Of course, Marx’s ouvre extends far beyond the three volumes of Capital. But these volumes, along with the German Ideology and The Communist Manifesto, are the works best known for his articulation of abstract laws of material social process. Mapping the places named in Marx’s less abstract pieces of writing (such as his essays on British imperialism in India, the Civil War in France, the Irish revolts, etc.) would likely be of little interest to readers, since the geographic nature of these discussions is already explicit. By contrast, demonstrating the dependence of even Marx’s most abstract writing upon the geographic peculiarities of places and processes in the real world may be of considerable interest to readers accustomed to thinking of Marxist theory in non-geographic terms. For, while Marx’s abstract thinking is indeed deeply geographic, Marx never says this directly. Moreover, some of Marx’s language, when discussing how capitalism alters the social use of space, seems (however misleadingly) to suggest that he is in fact a totally non-geographic thinker. It is, perhaps, all too easy to take Marx’s well-known discussion of the capitalist ‘annihilation of space by time’ as an indication that, for Marx, space does not matter (Marx, 1973 [1857], p. 538). My intent is that a map portraying the wide array of actual geographies named and discussed in the volumes of Capital—geographies from which Marx was drawing many of his ideas—can provide a visually straightforward but informationally complex challenge to this non-spatial interpretation of Marxist theory.
Whether a project like this fits all so comfortably into an existing academic niche is a difficult question, perhaps revealing as much about those niches as it does about the project itself. The subfield of ‘Marxist geography’, exemplified by the work of such scholars as David Harvey, the late Neil Smith, and Doreen Massey, all of whom have used Marxist epistemology to theorize the complex, multi-scalar geographic development of capitalism from the 18th through late 20th centuries, would certainly seem to be a relevant discursive community here. And yet it is worth noting that most Marxist geographers are not cartographers, and do not use maps in their discussions of Marx’s texts (though some Marxist geographers do use maps when discussing outside case studies, to which they are applying Marxist theory). Generally speaking, Marxist geographers invoke Marx’s texts on political economy to better articulate certain core Marxist theoretical propositions, such as the labor theory of value, the hypothesized progress of history through revolutions in the mode of production, and the dialectical relationship between exploiter and exploited. These core propositions are spatial to be sure, but in many ways their strength is precisely their level of abstraction from the geographic specificity of the mid-19th-century world, for this level of abstraction usefully renders the propositions applicable to subsequent periods of capitalist history, with geographic configurations quite different than those during Marx’s time. In other words, from the standpoint of the researcher aiming to look at the 20th or early 21st centuries through a Marxist lens, there are very good reasons to prioritize Marx’s abstractions over his utilization of geographic specificity and example. What is lost, though, in this interpretative prioritization of abstraction over specificity—is a sense of Marx as a partially nonabstract, inductive thinker—indeed, a sense that when Marx was conducting his research for Capital in the reading chambers of London’s British Library, this effort must have entailed, in addition to much reading through great tomes on political economy and philosophy, much poring through maps and atlases to make sense of the geographic relationship between world events relevant to the development of the capitalist system.

In some ways a map of the geography in Capital fits more comfortably in the more literary-analytical disciplines, where scholars like Moretti (2005) have advocated the use of maps, graphs, and other visual diagrams to cast new light on texts whose analysis has, until now, occurred almost entirely through expository writing. Moretti explores numerous ways to visualize literary texts: by diagramming the structural relationship, or ‘plot’, within them; by looking at old maps of the places mentioned within novels; by charting or graphing the physical production of the texts (that is to say, by looking at the geography of literature in addition to the geography in literature); and by graphing social transitions coincident with a text’s production or with its narrative events. One mapping study of Moretti, entitled ‘The protagonists of Parisian novels, and the objects of their desire’ (Moretti, 2005, p. 55), shares in common many of the fundamental characteristics of my own map of the geography in Marx’s Capital. For, it is an attempt to identify a set of spatial patterns by mapping the places named in a body of writing onto a single cartographic field.

2 Mapping Capital

The three volumes of Capital contain over 300 geographic references. Many of these in fact share a passage with one or two other geographic references, as Marx often writes relationally—that is, with greater interest in the relationship between places than in one place or another. My cartographic aim was to project as many of these passages as possible onto a single map (with an eye toward turning this map into a poster), and to locate these passages at their point of geographic reference, or in the case of relational passages, along lines connecting the relevant places.

Fitting all the text onto a limited field turned out to be more an art than a science. Marx discusses certain places in the temperate zones, such as England, Germany, and the USA, with great frequency, while mentioning places such as Africa, the Arctic, and South America, far less. Anticipating this potential difficulty, I chose a Mercator projection of the world map, well-known (and controversial) for its inflation of the area of Europe and other temperate climates relative to the equatorial zones.
The political arguments for and against the use of this projection seemed to me to cancel each other out, to be trumped by more pragmatic cartographic considerations. The projection’s inherent Eurocentricism misses an opportunity to critique the uneven flows of capitalism; but on the other hand, Marx himself, at least during the writing of Capital, was quite Eurocentric in his outlook.

In mapping Marx’s relational passages, I at first considered employing a political economic symbolism—for instance, distinguishing passages concerning commodity flows from passages concerning labor migration. I ultimately rejected this approach for two reasons. One, I found that for the most part Marx’s geo-relational passages do not split themselves into distinct political economic categories all so easily. This may be due to the general thrust of Marx’s argument in Capital, which attempts to expose the contrived, manipulated nature of capitalist political economy’s epistemological divisions. Two, I found that I simply had too many connecting lines on my hands. My main goal quickly became making sure that each of these lines was easily readable by the human eye. Thus, opting for the geovisual model found on many subway maps, I gave each line its own color.

I did decide to treat one type of relational information differently than the rest. Most passages in Capital relating one place to another imply a certain historical simultaneity, or contemporaneousness, in this connection. Take, for instance, the following passage from Volume I:

In our own times, the slight and transient fall in the value of gold compared with silver, which was a consequence of the Indo-Chinese demand for silver, produced on a far more extended scale in France the same phenomena, export of silver, and its expulsion from circulation by gold. (Marx, 2003 [1867], p. 99)

This passage concerns a process, the fall in the value of gold, involving two places, France and Indo-China, more or less simultaneously. This simultaneity may have been broken up and manipulated by complex rhythms in transportation and turnover time (the subject of Volume II of Capital), but is a historical simultaneity nonetheless. On the map, I plotted such simultaneities through use of a simple line.

In contrast, the following passage conveys a different kind of geographic relationship between two places:

The needlemaker of the Nuremberg Guild was the cornerstone on which the English needle manufacture was raised. But while in Nuremberg that single artificer performed a series of perhaps 20 operations one after another, in England it was not long before there were 20 needlemakers side by side, each performing one alone of those 20 operations, and in consequence of further experience, each of those 20 operations was again split up, isolated, and made the exclusive function of a separate workman. (Marx, 2003 [1867], p. 319)

Here Marx is articulating a more gradual, one-way, historical-geographic transition: the movement of the ‘cutting edge’ of industrial production from Germany to England. I marked passages like this with long, transparent triangles, originating from the point of relative obsolescence (here Nuremburg) and pointing toward the point of relative developmental advance (here England).

3 Patterns on the Map

On the map resulting from this project, many of the patterns that emerged are relatively simple: for instance, the contrast between the crowded jumble of block quotes in Europe and the more barren regions, like sub-Saharan Africa and South America; or, the swoop of lines, in effect the map’s visual ‘trunk’, connecting England to India and to East Asia. These patterns are very straightforward—predictable, even—but lend the map much of its immediate visual force, clarifying in graphic form what is only intimated through writing (see Figure 1).

However, subtler and perhaps surprising patterns emerged as well. For instance, on this map only two relational lines run between non-European places. One leads from the USA to Africa, and the other is internal to the East Indies (Indonesian or Malay)
archipelago. Both of these lines concern the flow of slave labor. Marx is generally unwilling to discuss simultaneous relationships between non-European places. For instance, trade relations between the USA and Japan go unmentioned in *Capital*. But he makes an exception for these two connections, which concern slave-based production. This would seem to shed light upon Marx’s understanding of how the geographic essentials of labor exploitation in the 19th century operated.

Another pattern on the *Capital* map concerns the non-European places Marx refers to with frequency. These are the USA, India, and Russia. On the map, the cluster of block quotes around each of these regions gives some sense of their demonstrative role in *Capital*. Thus, the USA interests Marx as a field of experimentation, in which the logic of capitalist production is realized at a larger and less inhibited scale. India interests Marx as a case study within colonialism. Russia interests Marx as a site of non-capitalist modes of production.

The spatial patterns within Europe, the map’s busiest area, are also quite striking and in some cases surprising. Marx’s discussion of England often swirls around London (only just beginning to eclipse Liverpool and Manchester in commercial and industrial importance when *Capital* was being written), a literary tendency I attempted to capture in the layout of the London-related block quotes. Northwest Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium are all thick with quotes, while France is surprisingly barren. In fact, in the whole of France only two cities are named, Paris and Avignon—fewer than the total in tiny Switzerland! Certainly, Marx was not ignorant of events in France. But Marx mostly looked to France as a valuable case study in complex
class formation and revolutionary socio-political processes—themes which mostly go unremarked upon in the pages of Capital, a treatise more focused on mapping out the logic of capitalism.

The map also highlights the relative absence of Eastern Europe from Marx’s geographic purview in Capital. The Ottoman Empire is named only once, Austria-Hungary is not mentioned at all, and Poland is mentioned only with reference to the assumed transience of Polish Jews. One might speculate what these geographic absences say about Marx’s own thinking. Perhaps, writing Capital in London, he had limited access to materials about certain parts of the world or perhaps a seemingly backward political configuration, like the Hapsburg Empire, did not strike Marx as terribly interesting or important for the purposes of understanding the ‘laws of motion’ within capitalism. Perhaps he doubted the receptiveness of Eastern European and Ottoman audiences. Whatever the true cause of the map’s unevenness, I hope the cartographic presentation will provoke readers into asking themselves questions about Marx’s seminal text they might not otherwise have asked.

4 Conclusion: Mapping Marx and Radical Cartography

The map that has resulted from this project is, in many ways, a conservative piece of cartography. The projection is Eurocentric. Many of the more radical concepts in Marx, such as the labor composition of value, are given little treatment on the map, simply because Marx does not always link these concepts up to specific places. Nonetheless, I believe this map is also radical in the sense of enabling readers to look at a text—one which is, surely, already radical in its methodological and theoretical tenets—in a new way, that scopes out the extent of this text’s direct use and exploration of geographic places and processes. To this end, it is my hope that this map will be useful to people interested in the histories of specific places and curious as to how, if at all, these places might have factored into Marx’s own thinking.

We might wonder whether other prominent philosophical or political economic texts might lend themselves to this type of geovisual text analysis. Immanuel Kant’s lectures on geography during the late 18th century, and Friedrich Ratzel’s Anthropogeographie (1885–88) may be promising candidates for such analysis, as both treatises mirror the tendency of Capital to weave together conceptual abstraction with a rich body of concrete geographic examples. How might ‘world maps’ of these other texts look as compared with the map presented here, and what might this contrast serve to reveal about the distinct worldviews of these thinkers?

References