

According to its most recent Academic Plan, York University aims to “cultivate the critical intellect” and to foster “A community of faculty, students, staff, alumni and volunteers committed to academic freedom . . . [and] social justice.” As one of Canada’s leading universities, York seeks to advance “global citizenship through its open-minded and engaged approach to teaching, scholarship and research, and community outreach.” It embraces “global perspectives and differences in cultures, people and thinking.”

Additionally, York is “committed to the pursuit of social justice and equity issues to continuously challenge and transform society’s understanding and existing norms through civic, scientific and cultural actions.” It seeks to “help prepare educated, engaged citizens committed to democratic values; and contributing to the public good and solving critical societal problems.”<sup>i</sup>

A notable facet of York’s critical and socially-engaged academic tradition is engagement with Marxism and the Marxist tradition in its various forms.<sup>ii</sup> This holds true for several faculty and a wide array of academic departments and research centres. In line with York’s overall approach, the Marxism that guides research and that is studied is distinctly multi- and inter-disciplinary.

Marxism recognizes that capitalism is a global system with certain identifiable tendencies (and counterforces) that produce distinct effects on the economy, politics, culture, and the environment, with both a degree of commonality in the formation of states and social relations across time and regions, but also with a temporal and spatial distinctiveness that begs for comparative and individual case studies. Marxism also accepts that capitalism’s exploitative character, reinforced by relations of social oppression, will always prompt overt and covert struggle of the producing classes supported by their political organizations, including parties, unions, factory committees, councils and social movements. While Marxism advances these general propositions that require investigation, capitalism as a class system concretely functions in differentiated forms and unevenly in processes of accumulation and developments across time periods, world regions and the extent to which subordinate classes engage in social conflict and mount political and social alternatives.

One of the most important regions reshaping the geometry of the world economy and state system in our contemporary times is Asia. With half the world’s population and its increasing economic weight in an evolving multipolar world, Asia as a continent accounts for by far the largest share of the world’s GDP (with the People’s Republic of China the largest single country in output on a purchasing power parity basis of comparison, with Japan and India also in the top group). Many believe that the twenty-first century belongs to Asia.

Marxism (as a world outlook or perspective) and Asia (as a world region) intersect in interesting ways. Although Marxism was born in Europe, it has had enormous impacts in Asia in terms of political developments, intellectual formations, and academic research, much that is relevant to Marxist theory and Marxism-influenced practice is still being played out in Asia today. Asia is long-known for its rich national theoretical traditions in Marxist thought as in India, China, Japan, Korea and many other countries.

Asia’s history itself is an exciting subject of historical-materialist research. Asia has been subjected to imperial-colonial subjugation that is economic and political. It is also cultural in terms of the ways in which Asia has been seen: as backward, static, and so forth, within colonialist discourses.<sup>iii</sup> Asia also has a rich history of anti-colonial, anti-imperialist resistance and struggle. A historical-materialist understandings of Asia is needed as a corrective to historical stereotypes and the lack of understanding

of contemporary politics, but also to learn general lessons from its anti-imperialist struggles that are relevant to the building of an alternate equalizing—rather than polarizing—world order. Such an understanding suggests the possibilities for the producing classes in Asia working with those of Europe, Africa and Americas, in a democratic framework for the development of the global community. Within the global capitalist economy, the countries of Asia are undergoing profound changes in terms of political economy, politics, consciousness and ecology, producing complex patterns of uneven and combined development. This is occurring both within their vast rural peripheries of agrarian production and peasant classes and within their urban spaces with growing and dynamic manufacturing and service production with huge new working classes being formed. As a consequence, Asia is a region with increasingly complex political systems, where all zones are internationalizing culturally, economically and politically, if at differentiated speeds.

Taken as a whole, Asia is now the single biggest producer of manufacturing goods but also in terms of various segments of the service sector (notably in high-tech production) and “new agriculture” (or luxury farm goods). All these activities are increasingly based in wage labour. Indeed, Asia has by far the largest concentration of the world proletariat among all world regions. Asia is known not only for anti-imperialist struggles, but also for struggles for democratic freedoms and land rights (anti-feudal struggles), and for decolonization, peasant, labour and communist movements, all of many unique histories, strengths and experiences.

Asia is one of the major world regions where various currents of Marxism have, with varying degrees of success, formed political parties whose ideological practice has been situated within Marxism. Asia has a rich history of practical experiences of states influenced by Marxism such as those in China, India, Vietnam and others. The first democratically elected communist government of the world was in Asia (in India’s Kerala state). These practical experiences (as well as national traditions of Marxist thought) provide valuable empirical terrain and intellectual fodder for critical Marxist reflections on the development and forms that capitalism has taken in Asia as well as an incredible range of attempts to form non-capitalist social and political alternatives through states, parties, administrative planning, cooperatives, alternate financing, and so forth.

China is, arguably, the most important country from the standpoint of the intersection between Marxism and Asia. Since the Revolution, China has experienced a massive development of productive forces manifested in a high economic growth rate, almost from the outset and especially over the last four to five decades. Chinese workers constitute the largest national component of the world proletariat. Chinese workers and peasants continue to demonstrate political leadership, develop new class practices, and take-on new workplace struggles. This is paralleled by a growing interest in Marxism; all the major universities have centres of Marxist research.

China still has a very large public sector and state planning, military and administrative capacities created in the aftermath of the Revolution in 1949; its social security system remains one of the largest and most complex in the world outside of the advanced countries; the One Belt, One Road Initiative is a major international infrastructural project spanning Asia; and its “developmental-humanitarian” interventions are increasingly important in the less developed world. China’s economic connections to, and political tensions with, with the United States and other Western powers, and growing capitalist markets, alongside constraints on academic and political freedoms, underscore the complex transition in class and political terms that China is undergoing. This world-historical transition is a major theoretical and practical challenge to understanding current political economic developments in Asia and for Marxist studies in Asia and the rest of the world.

India is another country in Asia where profound changes are occurring. India's capitalist economy is growing rapidly and with it the size of the proletariat often living in deplorable conditions. The largest strike in human history took place in India in 2016 with 150 to 180 million workers participating. India has failed to make a dent in alleviating poverty in the way that China has. But as in China, income and wealth inequality is rising in India, and with it the gap between economic inequality and political "equality" as well. In part as a reaction to the economic crisis and the relative weakness of the socialist Left in India, fascistic and fundamentalist forces are claiming and increasingly prominent place in India, and indeed across the sub-continent. There is an on-going attack on political equality and on democratic rights, including of religious minorities, lower castes and women.

The territorial-demographic giants of China and India are hardly exhaustive of important political developments in other Asian countries. Political changes occurring in Nepal, export-oriented industrial development and immiserization in Bangladesh, internal conflicts in Pakistan, uneven economic and political changes within South East Asia, workers' movements in South Korea, and the on-going economic stagnation in Japan, are among the processes that make Asia a crucial laboratory for Marxist research, and for research agendas and academic debates that are relevant, and indeed central, to other parts of the world.

As Marxist studies and Asia intersect as interestingly and complexly as they do, it is important to develop our intellectual capacity, in terms of both theoretical and empirical research, to understand that intersection. Marxist Studies in a Global and Asian Perspective (MSGAP), will, with the support of the York Centre for Asian Research, be a central place to organize a large part of Marxist intellectual activity—especially events, knowledge mobilization and research. The initiative's aim is to bring together Marxists at York (and at other nearby institutions) who work on Asia and Marxists who work on other parts of the world within a common framework. The initiative organizes events related to Marxism that relate to the following questions and themes:

1. How does the Marxist approach to Asia have implications for understanding other parts of the world, including Canada, the United States and Western Europe as well as the developing world outside of Asia?
2. How does the Marxist approach to world regions *outside* of Asia shape our understanding of Asia or Asia's relation with other parts of the world?
3. In what ways do the differing assessments of the changes taking place in Asia, and especially, in China, affect—divide—the socialist and progressive movements in North America and Western Europe?
4. What can we learn from the various national and regional traditions of Marxism in Asia and other parts of the world?
5. How can Marxism allow us to compare the various national and regional approaches to Asia's economic and foreign policy, economic development, neoliberalism, gender and ethnic relations, religions, income and wealth inequality, climate change and so on?
6. York University represents one of the largest concentrations of academic scholars who use Marxism to study the world and to make practical interventions. These scholars—faculty members and graduate students (and interested upper-level undergraduate students)—are well-placed to launch a multi-disciplinary program centred in the various theoretical and regional forms of Marxist studies. York's scholars have linkages to numerous nodes of Marxist research around the world, such as SOAS in London, the Uno Studies Network in Japan, and many others. York faculty has important linkages (editorial, research networks, and publications) with critical and Marxist journals around the world, including: *Critical Asian Studies*, *Science &*

*Society, Socialist Register, Studies in Political Economy, Socialist Studies, Class, Race and Corporate Power, Dialectical Anthropology, Marxism21, Canadian Dimension, and Historical Materialism.* Beginning from such a rich intellectual base, a research program in Marxist studies at York, with the university's critical and social justice-oriented intellectual tradition, as singled out in York's Academic plan for 2015–20, is strongly positioned to advance a critical understanding of the rapidly shifting geo-politics and economics of the world and the prospects for developing a more democratic and egalitarian politics in Asia and the world.

---

<sup>i</sup> *University Academic Plan 2015–20* at <http://secretariat.info.yorku.ca/files/UAP-2015-2016-Final.pdf>.

<sup>ii</sup> Marxism can be seen to have four main components: philosophy, social theory (historical materialism), political economy, and political practice. Marxist research draws upon the philosophy of dialectics and materialism (and modern critical realism) and focuses on the social relations of commodity production and circulation and the social reproduction of conditions of life. In this, Marxism searches for the generative mechanisms that underlie the functioning of society's economic, political and cultural spheres, metabolic relations between society and nature, and society's spatial/territorial organization, and the study of the specific social forms that these human practices and institutions take. This perspective is necessarily comparative and internationalist in outlook; the significance of social processes in any single country are always seen in relation to, and intertwined with, developments occurring across the world-market and state system. Marxism's intellectual approach to the understanding of the world underlies its political commitment to achieving a new social order, one that is without exploitation and oppression, a world that is humane, egalitarian, democratic in every sphere, and ecologically.

<sup>iii</sup> Colonial-orientalist anthropology and sociology has often contrasted Asia to Europe, treating the former as backward, static, and lacking internal dynamics requiring an external intervention to force new relations, and the latter as progressive and dynamic as part of an ideological justification for historical colonial and imperial exploitation and for today to justify the continued domination of Western influence over international institutions.