



## Another Marx: Early Manuscripts to the International

Marcello Musto, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Bloomsbury, 2018, 272 pp., \$35.95)

Carl Grey Martin

To cite this article: Carl Grey Martin (2020): Another Marx: Early Manuscripts to the International, *Socialism and Democracy*, DOI: [10.1080/08854300.2020.1816415](https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300.2020.1816415)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300.2020.1816415>



Published online: 13 Oct 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 6



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Book Review

Marcello Musto, *Another Marx: Early Manuscripts to the International*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Bloomsbury, 2018, 272 pp., \$35.95)

Any author of a book on Marx at the time of the second centenary (1818–2018) should know to provide some justification for it. Perhaps anticipating a crowded field, Gareth Stedman Jones arrived early with *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (2016), to be followed by competitors including Michael Hienrich's first of a three-volume biography, and the equally hefty study by Sven-Eric Liedman. Marcello Musto offers something different in his equally well-timed *Another Marx: Early Manuscripts to the International*, at just 248 pages excluding bibliography and index. The subject matter of Marx's life and works makes any reasonably good retelling hard to resist, but for those determined, like Marx himself, to pursue not knowledge itself but its application toward class mobilization and social transformation, a minimalist approach has practical value. *Another Marx* feels informed by this larger duty. Thriftily organized rather than exhaustive, it serves as a solid introduction for the newcomer as well as a "philological" (6) handbook for the aficionado.

If one central rationale guides Musto, it is *not* fundamentally that an inevitable combination of "research advances" and "changed political conditions" (4) has produced new insight about Marx. Rather, close consideration of his drafts and other texts relegated to "minority" status reveals Marx's consistent method – itself based on close reading. Some two hundred notebooks, including treasuries of excerpts copied from authors (admired and hated alike), "constitute his critical theoretical workshop, indicating the complex itinerary he followed in the development of his thought and the sources on which he drew in working out his own ideas" (3). *Complexity*, not rigidity. Marx read omnivorously and paid his debts to his sources. So, to reduce Musto's book to one discovery, it is that a holistic, sequential examination of the textual corpus allows us to see that *other* Marx: "The most painstaking thinker, never satisfied with the results he has produced" – and not that posthumous, institutionalized figurehead for "dyed-in-the-wool doctrinarism" (4).

On this point, let's return to one of those competitors, Stedman Jones (hereafter GSJ). His book's subtitle *Greatness and Illusion* invites us to place it in the subgenre of critical biography, and indeed the

tome asks much more time and attention of us than Musto's in order to solicit something close to repudiation. To this end the pejorative *illusion* seems to have three main referents: first, the illusions under which Marx himself fell as theorist and political prognosticator with little influence "beyond a small group of radical intellectuals"; second, the illusions under which objective assessors of Marx's oeuvre and legacy operate, especially concerning the coherence of the unfinished project called *Capital*; and third, the illusion under which Marx's followers worked by presuming in him "a thinker of merciless consistency with a commanding vision of the future."<sup>1</sup> Defensive SPD-driven mythology, writes GSJ, led to "an increasing inflation in Marx's reputation... about the scale and significance of Marx's achievement, while areas in which his writings or activities had failed to meet these mythical requirements were glossed over or hidden" (3).

Yet nothing of this willed ignorance (or of what Luxemburg called in *Reform or Revolution* the revisionists' "involuntary esteem for Marx") can redound to the dishonor of Marx himself. Most of the puffing-up done to him by the Social Democratic Party of Germany, Musto shows, missed what is integral to Marx's method, his lasting ideas, or their utility for building communism. Among other things, "the SPD treated the literary legacy of Marx and Engels with the utmost negligence," not "bother[ing] to compile a list of the writings, or even methodically to collect their voluminous correspondence that was such a valuable source of clarification, sometimes even expansion, of their thought" (3). As remedy, Musto concludes his introduction with a four-page, three-column chronology of all Marx's writings, which acts like a roadmap to what follows. Just as important, and even more directly relevant to Musto's project, those texts that were "glossed over or hidden" turn out to show us a better, not a worse, Marx. They are hardly skeletons in closets.

They do, however, suggest a mind in constant, almost dizzying, motion.

Throughout his life, to the vexation of his allies (Engels chiefly), Marx generally "felt the need to continue his studies before trying to give a finished form to the drafts he had written" (50). These hesitations jeopardized (or sank) some book projects, especially during the 1850s, when the gargantuan sketch known as the *Grundrisse* bogged down. Marx's account in an 1858 letter to Ferdinand Lassalle is representative:

---

1. Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (Belknap Press: Cambridge, MA, 2016), 229 and 5. Hereafter cited by page parenthetically.

Now I want to tell you how my Economics is getting on. The work is written. I have in fact had the final text in hand for some months. But the thing is proceeding very slowly, because no sooner does one set about finally disposing of subjects that have been the main object of years of study, than they start revealing new aspects and demand to be thought out further. (108)

This self-critical, accretive approach would also worsen the fracas of the satirical *Herr Vogt* (1860). Widely considered “a notable waste of time and energy” (124), for Musto it is a text that could be judged so not primarily on its own merits but rather in relation to the delays that it brought to the delivery of *Capital 1*. Just as important, Musto notes, the belabored writing of *Vogt* anticipates the literary qualities of the *magnum opus* itself. In *Vogt* Marx demonstrated not only a rich intertextuality but also, complementarily, his hatred for “the intrinsic vulgarity and lack of quality in his adversaries’ works” (125) and his desire to show them how effective polemic should be done. Such qualities would resurface in *Capital*’s thorough, mocking demolition of the chief bourgeois ideologues who self-servingly twist logic and displace their moral failings onto their victims.

An astounding fact about Marx to put beside his sheer output (*Capital 1* alone constitutes an epic aesthetic realization) was his compulsion to compose carefully, grounding his ideas in the most current scholarship, and laying down a knowledge “infrastructure” whenever needed. Put together, they indicate a man of incredible intellectual ambition, curiosity, and talent who consistently checked his own progress; took the wind of political events (writing on them when necessary); thoroughly read and acknowledged his opponents; and learned/relearned when the task demanded it (all qualities that Eleanor Marx emphasized in an 1898 *Die Neue Zeit* essay). Musto provides many examples, beginning with Marx’s self-directed studies outside of his prescribed coursework as an undergraduate in Berlin. Later, Marx motivated himself to refresh his algebra as accessory to his political economy, and to teach himself Russian in the 1870s so that he could follow cultural and geopolitical currents there.

Marx’s single-mindedness – conditioned by chronic physical illness, endless scrounging for a paltry income, and other domestic turmoil – was, therefore, uniquely dialectical. He did not easily *relinquish* ideas: he tested them, adapting them substantially when necessary – as, for example, in his major revisions (especially on value theory) to *Capital 1* for the first French edition of 1872. GSJ, by contrast, emphasizes what he considers Marx’s stubborn clinging – especially after 1848 – to his own macroeconomic categories (i.e., proletariat/bourgeois), a kind of conceptual inertia that, for GSJ, hampered Marx’s evaluation

of events, leading to an underappreciation of, for example, the English working class's participatory desire for suffrage rather than systemic contestation. But as Musto explores in his chapter on the International – to which Marx devoted “eight years of intense activity” (230) and important texts like the two “Addresses on the Franco-Prussian War” – the British unions' reformist push toward social legitimation meant no less than a rejection of “anticapitalism” (189).

Nevertheless, Marx criticized even these tendencies from a position of engagement, not solipsism. The final phase of his intellectual life (which both Musto and GSJ use as codas) provides a useful example. The matter was the legacy of the Russian *obshchina* as an alternative to the privatization–industrialization–re-expropriation sequence for building communal social relations. “With his usual flexibility and lack of schematism” (243), explains Musto, Marx did not automatically reduce such “archaic” formations to steps in a teleology: he thought that here as elsewhere a specific combination of “political will and a favourable set of historical circumstances” conditioned “the survival and radical transformation of the *obshchina*” (246). In his less generous “Epilogue” GSJ largely strikes this all away, pointing out that the scholarship on which Marx relied on the subject would be discredited, his thought experiments, moreover, ignored by the Second International. But Marx's intellect, and achievement, were not *predictive* (let alone “prophetic”). Marx looked widely at the world, and deeply – beyond the manifest to the latent, which an altered or totally unexpected context might quickly reveal, refract, or electrify.

© 2020 Carl Grey Martin  
Norwich University, Northfield, VT, USA  
cmartin7@norwich.edu  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300.2020.1816415>