

On His Birthday, Let's Celebrate the Old Man Karl Marx, Jacobin, 05 May 2021.

by Nicolas Allen

Karl Marx's work during his final years of life, between 1881 and 1883, is one of the least developed areas in Marx studies. This neglect is partially due to the fact that Marx's infirmities in his final years kept him from sustaining his regular writing activity — there are virtually no published works from the period.

Absent the milestones that marked Marx's earlier work, from his early philosophical writings to his later studies of political economy, Marx's biographers have long regarded his final years as a minor chapter marked by declining health and dwindling intellectual capacities.

However, there is a growing body of research that suggests this is not the full story, and that Marx's final years might actually be a gold mine filled with new insights into his thought. Largely contained in letters, notebooks, and other "marginalia," Marx's late writings portray a man who, far from the received stories of decline, continued to wrestle with his own ideas about capitalism as a global mode of production. As suggested by his late research into so-called "primitive societies," the nineteenth-century Russian agrarian commune, and the "national question" in European colonies, Marx's writings from the period actually reveal a mind turning over the real-world implications and complexities of his own thought, particularly as they concerned the expansion of capitalism beyond European borders.

Marx's late thought is the subject of Marcello Musto's recently published *The Last Years of Karl Marx*. There, Musto masterfully weaves together rich biographical detail and a sophisticated engagement with Marx's mature, oftentimes self-questioning writing.

Jacobin contributing editor Nicolas Allen spoke with Musto about the complexities of studying Marx's final years of life, and about why some of Marx's late doubts and misgivings are in fact more useful for us today than some of his more confident early assertions.

NA: The "late Marx" that you write about, roughly covering the final three years of his life in the 1880s, is often treated as an afterthought for Marxists and Marx scholars. Apart from the fact that Marx didn't publish any major works in his final years, why do you think the period has received considerably less attention?

MM: All the intellectual biographies of Marx published to this day have paid very little attention to the last decade of his life, usually devoting no more than a few pages to his activity after the winding up of the International Working Men's Association in 1872. Not by chance, these scholars nearly always use the generic title "the last decade" for these (very short) parts of their books. While this limited interest is understandable for scholars like Franz Mehring (1846–1919), Karl Vorländer (1860–1928), and David Riazanov (1870–1938), who wrote their biographies of Marx between two world wars and could only focus on a limited number of unpublished manuscripts, for those who came after that turbulent age, the matter is more complex.

Two of Marx's best-known writings — the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and *The German Ideology* (1845–46), both very far from being completed — were published in 1932 and started to circulate only in the second half of the 1940s. As World War II gave way to a sense of profound anguish resulting from the barbarities of Nazism, in a climate where philosophies like existentialism gained popularity, the theme of the condition of the individual in society acquired great prominence and created perfect conditions for a growing interest in Marx's philosophical ideas, such as alienation and species-being. The biographies of Marx published in this period, just like most of the scholarly volumes that came out from academia, reflected this zeitgeist and gave undue weight to his youthful writings. Many of the books that claimed to introduce the readers to Marx's thought as a whole, in the 1960s and in the 1970s, were mostly focused on the period 1843–48, when Marx, at the time of the publication of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), was only thirty years old.

In this context, it was not only that the last decade of Marx's life was treated as an afterthought, but *Capital* itself was relegated to a secondary position. The liberal sociologist Raymond Aron perfectly described this attitude in the book *D'une Sainte Famille à l'autre: Essais sur les marxismes imaginaires* (1969), where he mocked the Parisian Marxists who passed cursorily over *Capital*, his masterpiece and the fruit of many years' work, published in 1867, and remained captivated by the obscurity and incompleteness of the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844.

We can say that the myth of the "Young Marx" — fed also by Louis Althusser and by those who argued that Marx's youth could not be considered part of Marxism — has been one of the main misunderstandings in the history of Marx studies. Marx did not publish any works that he would consider "major" in the first half of the 1840s. For example, one must read Marx's addresses and resolutions for the International Working Men's Association if we want to understand his political thought, not the journal articles of 1844 that appeared in the *German-French Yearbook*. And even if we analyze his incomplete manuscripts, the *Grundrisse* (1857–58) or the *Theories of Surplus-Value* (1862–63), these were much more significant for him than the critique of neo-Hegelianism in Germany, "abandoned to the gnawing criticism of the mice" in 1846. The trend of overemphasizing his early writings has not changed much since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The more recent biographies — despite the publication of new manuscripts in the Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe (MEGA), the

historical-critical edition of the complete works of Marx and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) — overlook this period just like before.

Another reason for this neglect is the high complexity of most of the studies conducted by Marx in the final phase of his life. To write about the young student of the Hegelian Left is much easier than trying to get on top of the intricate tangle of multilingual manuscripts and intellectual interests of the early 1880s, and this may have hindered a more rigorous understanding of the important gains achieved by Marx. Wrongly thinking that he had given up the idea of continuing his work and representing the last ten years of his life as “a slow agony,” too many biographers and scholars of Marx have failed to look more deeply into what he actually did during that period.

NA: In the recent film *Miss Marx*, there’s a scene immediately after Marx’s funeral that shows Friedrich Engels and Eleanor, Marx’s youngest daughter, sifting through papers and manuscripts in Marx’s study. Engels inspects one paper and makes a remark about Marx’s late interest in differential equations and mathematics. The *Last Years of Karl Marx* seems to give the impression that, in his final years, Marx’s range of interests was particularly broad. Was there any guiding thread holding together this preoccupation with such diverse topics as anthropology, mathematics, ancient history, and gender?

MM: Shortly before his death, Marx asked his daughter Eleanor to remind Engels to “do something” with his unfinished manuscripts. As it is well known, for the twelve years that he survived Marx, Engels undertook the herculean task of sending to print the volumes II and III of *Capital* on which his friend had worked continuously from the mid-1860s to 1881 but had failed to complete. Other texts written by Engels himself after Marx passed away in 1883 were indirectly fulfilling his will and were strictly related to the investigations he had conducted during the last years of his life. For example, the *Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) was called by its author “the execution of a bequest” and was inspired by Marx’s research in anthropology, in particular by the passages that he copied, in 1881, from Lewis Henry Morgan’s *Ancient Society* (1877) and by the comments he added to the summaries of this book.

There is not just one guiding thread in Marx’s final years of research. Some of his studies simply arose from recent scientific discoveries on which he wished to remain up to date, or from political events that he considered significant. Marx had already learned before that the general level of emancipation in a society depended on the level of women’s emancipation, but the anthropological studies conducted in the 1880s gave him the opportunity to analyze gender oppression in greater depth. Marx spent much less time on ecological issues than in the previous two decades, but on the other hand, he once again immersed himself in historical themes. Between autumn 1879 and summer 1880, he filled a notebook entitled *Notes on Indian History* (664–1858), and between autumn 1881 and winter 1882, he worked intensively on the so-called *Chronological Extracts*, an annotated year-by-year timeline of 550 pages written in an even smaller handwriting than usual.

These included summaries of world events, from the first century BC to the Thirty Years' War in 1648, summarizing their causes and salient features.

It is possible that Marx wanted to test whether his conceptions were well founded in the light of major political, military, economic, and technological developments in the past. In any case, one must keep in mind that, when Marx undertook this work, he was well aware that his frail state of health prevented him from making a final attempt to complete Volume II of Capital. His hope was to make all the necessary corrections to prepare a third German revised edition of Volume I, but in the end, he did not even have the strength to do that.

I would not say that the research he conducted in his final years was wider than usual, however. Perhaps the breadth of his investigations is more evident in this period because they were not conducted in parallel to the writing of any books or significant preparatory manuscripts. But the several thousands of pages of excerpts made by Marx in eight languages, since he was a university student, from works of philosophy, art, history, religion, politics, law, literature, history, political economy, international relations, technology, mathematics, physiology, geology, mineralogy, agronomy, anthropology, chemistry, and physics, testify to his perpetual hunger for knowledge in a very large variety of disciplines. What may be surprising is that Marx was unable to give up this habit even when his physical strength waned considerably. His intellectual curiosity, along with his self-critical spirit, won out over a more focused and "judicious" management of his work.

But these ideas about "what Marx should have done" are usually the fruit of the twisted wish of those who would have liked him to be an individual who did nothing but write Capital — not even to defend himself from the political controversies in which he was embroiled. Even if he once defined himself as "a machine, condemned to devour books and then throw them, in a changed form, on the dunghill of history," Marx was a human being. His interest in mathematics and differential calculus, for example, started as an intellectual stimulus in his search for a method of social analysis, but became a ludic space, a refuge at moments of great personal difficulty, "an occupation to maintain the quietness of mind," as he used to say to Engels.

NA: To the extent that there have been studies of Marx's late writings, they tend to focus on his research into non-European societies. By recognizing as he does that there are paths to development besides the "Western model," is it fair to say, as some claim, that this was Marx turning over a new leaf, i.e., a "non-Eurocentric" Marx? Or is it more accurate to say that this was Marx's admission that his work was never intended to be applied without first attending to the concrete reality of different historical societies?

MM: The first and preeminent key to understand the wider variety of geographical interests in Marx's research, during the last decade of his life, lies in his plan to provide a more ample account of the dynamics of the capitalist mode of production on a global scale. England had been the main field of observation of Capital, Volume I; after its

publication, he wanted to expand the socioeconomic investigations for the two volumes of Capital that remained to be written. It was for this reason that he decided to learn Russian in 1870 and was then constantly demanding books and statistics on Russia and the United States. He believed that the analysis of the economic transformations of these countries would have been very useful for an understanding of the possible forms in which capitalism may develop in different periods and contexts. This crucial element is underestimated in the secondary literature on the nowadays trendy subject of "Marx and Eurocentrism."

Another key question for Marx's research into non-European societies was whether capitalism was a necessary prerequisite for the birth of communist society and at which level it had to develop internationally. The more pronounced multilinear conception that Marx assumed in his final years led him to look more attentively at the historical specificities and unevenness of economic and political development in different countries and social contexts. Marx became highly skeptical about the transfer of interpretive categories between completely different historical and geographical contexts and, as he wrote, also realized that "events of striking similarity, taking place in different historical contexts, lead to totally disparate results." This approach certainly increased the difficulties he faced in the already bumpy course of completing the unfinished volumes of Capital and contributed to the slow acceptance that his major work would remain incomplete. But it certainly opened up new revolutionary hopes.

Contrary to what some authors naively believe, Marx did not suddenly discover that he had been Eurocentric and devote his attention to new subjects of study because he felt the need to correct his political views. He had always been a "citizen of the world," as he used to call himself, and had constantly tried to analyze economic and social changes in their global implications. As it has been already argued, like any other thinker of his level, Marx was aware of the superiority of modern Europe over the other continents of the world, in terms of industrial production and social organization, but he never considered this contingent fact a necessary or permanent factor. And, of course, he was always a fiery enemy of colonialism. These considerations are all too obvious to anyone who has read Marx.

NA: One of the central chapters of *The Last Years of Karl Marx* deals with Marx's relationship with Russia. As you show, Marx engaged in a very intense dialogue with different parts of the Russian left, specifically around their reception of the first volume of Capital. What were the main points of those debates?

MM: For many years, Marx had identified Russia as one of the main obstacles to working-class emancipation. He emphasized several times that its sluggish economic development and its despotic political regime helped to make the tsarist empire the advance post of counterrevolution. But in his final years, he began to look rather differently at Russia. He recognized some possible conditions for a major social transformation after the abolition of serfdom in 1861. Russia seemed to Marx more likely to produce a revolution than

Britain, where capitalism had created the proportionately largest number of factory workers in the world, but where the labor movement, enjoying better living conditions partly based on colonial exploitation, had grown weaker and undergone the negative influence of trade union reformism.

The dialogues engaged by Marx with Russian revolutionaries were both intellectual and political. In the first half of the 1870s, he acquired familiarity with the principal critical literature on Russian society and devoted special attention to the work of the socialist philosopher Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828–1889). He believed that a given social phenomenon that had reached a high level of development in the most advanced nations could spread very swiftly among other peoples and rise from a lower level straight to a higher one, passing over the intermediate moments. This gave Marx much food for thought in reconsidering his materialistic conception of history. For a long time, he had been aware that the schema of linear progression through the Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production, which he had drawn in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), was completely inadequate for an understanding of the movement of history, and that it was indeed advisable to steer clear of any philosophy of history. He could no longer conceive the succession of modes of production in the course of history as a fixed sequence of predefined stages.

Marx also took the opportunity to discuss with militants of various revolutionary tendencies in Russia. He highly regarded the down-to-earth character of the political activity of Russian populism — which at the time was a left-wing, anti-capitalist movement — particularly because it did not resort to senseless ultrarevolutionary flourishes or to counterproductive generalizations. Marx assessed the relevance of the socialist organizations existing in Russia by their pragmatic character, not by declaration of loyalty to his own theories. In fact, he observed that it was often those who claimed to be “Marxists” who were the most doctrinaire. His exposure to the theories and the political activity of Russian Populists — as with the Paris Communards a decade earlier — helped him to be more flexible in analyzing the irruption of revolutionary events and the subjective forces that shaped them. It brought him closer to a true internationalism on a global scale.

The central theme of the dialogues and exchanges that Marx had with many figures of the Russian left was the very complex issue of the development of capitalism, which had crucial political and theoretical implications. The difficulty of this discussion is also evidenced by Marx’s final choice not to send an insightful letter in which he had criticized some misinterpretations of *Capital* to the journal *Otechestvennye Zapiski*, or to respond to Vera Zasulich’s “life and death question” about the future of the rural commune (the *obshchina*) with only a short, cautious missive, and not with a lengthier text that he had passionately written and rewritten through three preparatory drafts.

NA: Marx’s correspondence with Russian socialist Vera Zasulich is the subject of a lot of interest today. There, Marx suggested that the Russian rural commune could

potentially appropriate the latest advances of capitalist society — technology, particularly — without having to undergo the social upheavals that were so destructive for the Western European peasantry. Can you explain in a little more detail the thinking that informed Marx’s conclusions?

MM: By a fortuitous coincidence, Zasluch’s letter reached Marx just as his interest in archaic forms of community, already deepened in 1879 through the study of the work of the sociologist Maksim Kovalevsky, was leading him to pay closer attention to the most recent discoveries made by anthropologists of his time. Theory and practice led him to the same place. Drawing on ideas suggested by the anthropologist Morgan, he wrote that capitalism could be replaced by a higher form of the archaic collective production.

This ambiguous statement requires at least two clarifications. First, thanks to what he had learned from Chernyshevsky, Marx argued that Russia could not slavishly repeat all the historical stages of England and other West European countries. In principle, the socialist transformation of the obshchina could happen without a necessary passage through capitalism. But this does not mean that Marx changed his critical judgment of the rural commune in Russia, or that he believed that countries where capitalism was still underdeveloped were closer to revolution than others with a more advanced productive development. He did not suddenly become convinced that the archaic rural communes were a more advanced locus of emancipation for the individual than the social relations existing under capitalism.

Second, his analysis of the possible progressive transformation of the obshchina was not meant to be elevated into a more general model. It was a specific analysis of a particular collective production at a precise historical moment. In other words, Marx revealed the theoretical flexibility and lack of schematism that many Marxists after him failed to demonstrate. At the end of his life, Marx revealed an ever greater theoretical openness, which enabled him to consider other possible roads to socialism that he had never before taken seriously or had previously regarded as unattainable.

Marx’s doubting was replaced by a conviction that capitalism was an inescapable stage for economic development in every country and historical condition. The new interest that reemerges today for the considerations that Marx never sent to Zasluch, and for other similar ideas expressed more clearly in his final years, lies in a conception of postcapitalist society that is poles apart from the equation of socialism with the productive forces — a conception involving nationalist overtones and sympathy with colonialism, which asserted itself within the Second International and social democratic parties. Marx’s ideas also differ profoundly from the supposedly “scientific method” of social analysis preponderant in the Soviet Union and its satellites.

NA: Even though Marx’s health struggles are well known, it’s still painful to read the final chapter of *The Last Years of Karl Marx*, where you chronicle his deteriorating condition. Intellectual biographies of Marx rightly point out that a full appreciation of Marx needs to connect his life and political activities with his body of thought; but

what about this later period, when Marx was largely inactive due to infirmities? As someone writing an intellectual biography, how do you approach that period?

MM: One of the best scholars of Marx ever, Maximilien Rubel (1905–1996), author of the book *Karl Marx: essai de biographie intellectuelle* (1957), argued that, to be able to write about Marx, one must be a bit of a philosopher, a bit of a historian, a bit of an economist, and a bit of a sociologist at the same time. I would add that, by writing the biography of Marx, one learns a lot about medicine, too. Marx dealt during his entire mature life with a number of health issues. The longest of them was a nasty infection of the skin that accompanied him during the entire writing of *Capital* and manifested itself in abscesses and serious, debilitating boils on various parts of the body. It was for this reason that, when Marx finished his magnum opus, he wrote: "I hope the bourgeoisie will remember my carbuncles until their dying day!"

The last two years of his life were particularly hard. Marx suffered a terrible grief for the loss of his wife and eldest daughter, and he had a chronic bronchitis that developed often into a severe pleurisy. He struggled, in vain, to find the climate that would provide the best conditions for him to get better, and he traveled, all alone, in England, France, and even Algeria, where he embarked on a lengthy period of complicated treatment. The most interesting aspect of this part of Marx's biography is the sagacity, always accompanied by self-irony, that he demonstrated to deal with the frailty of his body. The letters that he wrote to his daughters and to Engels, when he felt that it was close to the end of the road, make more evident his most intimate side. They reveal the importance of what he called "the microscopic world," starting with the vital passion that he had for his grandchildren. They include the considerations of a man who has gone through a long and intense existence and has come to evaluate all aspects of it.

Biographers must recount the sufferings of the private sphere, especially when they are relevant to better understand the difficulties underlying the writing of a book, or the reasons why a manuscript remained unfinished. But they must also know where to stop, and must avoid taking an indiscreet look into exclusively private affairs.

NA: So much of Marx's late thought is contained in letters and notebooks. Should we accord these writings the same status as his more accomplished writings? When you argue that Marx's writing is "essentially incomplete," do you have something like this in mind?

MM: *Capital* remained unfinished because of the grinding poverty in which Marx lived for two decades and because of his constant ill health connected to daily worries. Needless to say, the task he had set himself — to understand the capitalist mode of production in its ideal average and to describe its general tendencies of development — was extraordinarily difficult to achieve. But *Capital* was not the only project that remained incomplete. Marx's merciless self-criticism increased the difficulties of more than one of his undertakings, and the large amount of time that he spent on many projects he wanted to publish was due to the extreme rigor to which he subjected all his thinking.

When Marx was young, he was known among his university friends for his meticulousness. There are stories that depict him as somebody who refused to write a sentence if he was unable to prove it in ten different ways. This is why the most prolific young scholar in the Hegelian Left still published less than many of the others. Marx's belief that his information was insufficient, and his judgments immature, prevented him from publishing writings that remained in the form of outlines or fragments. But this is also why his notes are extremely useful and should be considered an integral part of his oeuvre. Many of his ceaseless labors had extraordinary theoretical consequences for the future.

This does not mean that his incomplete texts can be given the same weight of those that were published. I would distinguish five types of writings: published works, their preparatory manuscripts, journalistic articles, letters, and notebooks of excerpts. But distinctions must also be made within these categories. Some of Marx's published texts should not be regarded as his final word on the issues at hand. For example, the Manifesto of the Communist Party was considered by Engels and Marx as a historical document from their youth and not as the definitive text in which their main political conceptions were stated. Or it must be kept in mind that political propaganda writings and scientific writings are often not combinable.

Unfortunately, these kinds of errors are very frequent in the secondary literature on Marx. Not to mention the absence of the chronological dimension in many reconstructions of his thought. The texts from the 1840s cannot be quoted indiscriminately alongside those from the 1860s and 1870s, since they do not carry equal weight of scientific knowledge and political experience. Some manuscripts were written by Marx only for himself, while others were actual preparatory materials for books to be published. Some were revised and often updated by Marx, while others were abandoned by him without the possibility of updating them (in this category, there is Volume III of Capital). Some journalistic articles contain considerations that can be considered as a completion of Marx's works. Others, however, were written quickly in order to raise money to pay the rent. Some letters include Marx's authentic views on the issues discussed. Others contain only a softened version, because they were addressed to people outside Marx's circle, with whom it was sometimes necessary to express himself diplomatically.

For all these reasons, it is clear that a good knowledge of Marx's life is indispensable for a correct understanding of his ideas. Finally, there are the more than two hundred notebooks containing summaries (and sometimes commentaries) of all the most important books read by Marx during the long time span from 1838 to 1882. They are essential for an understanding of the genesis of his theory and of those elements he was unable to develop as he would have wished.

The ideas conceived by Marx during the last years of his life were collected mainly within these notebooks. They are certainly very difficult to read, but they give us access to a very precious treasure: not only the research Marx completed before his death, but also the

questions he asked himself. Some of his doubts may be more useful to us today than some of his certainties.