

Marx's Late Writings

*[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 people today than some of his more confident early assertions. Excerpts:]*

Nicolas Allen: 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?

Marcello Musto: 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. 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.

There is a growing body of research that suggests Marx's final years might be a gold mine filled with new insights into his thought.

One 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 one wants to understand his political thought, not the journal articles of 1844 that appeared in the German-French Yearbook. And even if one analyses 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 overemphasising his early writings has not changed much since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

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 emphasised 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 recognised 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 labour 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 ultra-revolutionary flourishes or to counterproductive generalisations. Marx assessed the relevance of the socialist organisations 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 analysing the irruption of revolutionary events and the subjective forces that shaped them. It brought him closer to a true internationalism on a global scale.

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, Zasulich’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 judgement 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.

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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 Zasulich, 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 : So much of Marx's late thought is contained in letters and notebooks. Should one 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.

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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. This does not mean that his incomplete texts can be given the same weight of those that were published. 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.

[About the author: Marcello Musto is the author of Another Marx: Early Manuscripts to the International (2018) and The Last Years of Karl Marx: An Intellectual Biography (2020). Among his edited books is The Marx Revival: Key Concepts and New Interpretations (2020). His writings are available here.

About the Interviewer: Nicolas Allen is a Jacobin contributing editor and the managing editor at Jacobin America Latina.]

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