

New Political Science

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cnps20

The Last Years of Karl Marx: An Intellectual Biography

by Marcello Musto, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2020, 194 pp., $22.00 (softcover), ISBN: 978-1-5036-1252-5

Paul Blackledge

To cite this article: Paul Blackledge (2023): ***The Last Years of Karl Marx: An Intellectual Biography***, New Political Science, DOI: 10.1080/07393148.2023.2205292

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2023.2205292

Published online: 05 May 2023.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 2

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=cnps20

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

BOOK REVIEW

The Last Years of Karl Marx: An Intellectual Biography, by Marcello Musto, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2020, 194 pp., $22.00 (softcover), ISBN: 978-1-5036-1252-5

Marx, or so Marcello Musto argues in this useful study of his work during the last years of his life, has been ill served within the academy. It is not simply that the textbooks continue to reproduce a ridiculous image of Marxism as a form of economic determinism and class reductionism, it is also that even amongst more serious Marx scholars the rebuttal of these charges tends to be made through one-sided reference to his early writings.

The scholarly appeal of Marx's early writings is obvious enough. One of the joys of teaching Marx includes witnessing students, previously fed a diet of the textbook caricature of his work, respond to the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844. Without denying the power of this manoeuvre, Musto aims to show that, right up until his death, Marx continued to develop his ideas in a manner that shatters any attempt to dismiss his mature work as a crude variant of materialism.

Insofar as Musto details the power of Marx's research from the last years of his life, he helps overturn the caricatured distinction between a (good) young Marx against a (bad) mature Marx. The key text whose interrogation forms the core of Musto's book is Marx's famous response to Vera Zasulich's 1881 request for his thoughts on Russia's peasant communes. The actual reply sent to Zasulich amounted to only a page in volume twenty-four of the *Collected Works*. However, the brevity of this letter should in no way be interpreted as indicating Marx's lack of interest in the subject. He had penned three earlier and significantly more substantial drafts of this letter over the previous three weeks, and the ideas contained in these letters had roots in a decade-long research project into Russian history, sociology and politics. In fact, so serious had Marx taken this research on this subject that he attempted to master the Russian language in the 1870s, according to his wife Jenny, "as if it was a matter of life and death."

Marx's response to Zasulich is doubly interesting because in it he makes direct reference to the claim, made in the preface to the first edition of *Capital*, that "the country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future." While this passage would seem to suggest that, for Marx, Russia would follow were Britain led, in his letter to Zasulich, he wrote that "the analysis in *Capital* … provides no reasons for or against the Russian commune" because the claims made in *Capital* relate only to those West European countries in which capital accumulation had already begun, and not to states which had yet to start down that path.

A number of commentators have claimed that this argument evidences Marx's shift from a unilinear to a multilinear model of historical development.[1] As against these writers, Musto seems to agree with those theorists who have stressed that Marx, in his most mature writings, deepened rather than broke with the approach taken in *Capital*: thus he writes that the replies to Zasulich "show no glimpse of the dramatic break with his former positions that some scholars have detected" (69).

Nevertheless, Musto prevaricates on this point. Despite believing there was no "dramatic break" in Marx's thought, he argues that in the last decade of his life Marx had become

[1]I draw on my survey of this literature in Blackledge, *Reflections on the Marxist Theory of History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 29–32.

aware that the claim, made in the 1859 preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, that history has moved through "the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production" was "completely inadequate" (100). Now if this statement is true, it would seem to imply that Marx's letters to Zasulich did mark a "dramatic break" with his former unilinear position. As it happens, I think Musto is right to claim that there was no dramatic break in Marx's thought towards the end of his life because he is wrong to dismiss the 1859 schema as completely inadequate.

The apparent paradox between the 1859 preface and the reply to Zasulich can be resolved once we accept, with Eric Hobsbawm, that the stages outlined by Marx in the former text are best understood as suggesting a logical progression towards growing human individualisation rather than a simple unilinear model of actual historical progress. Indeed, it would seem perverse to ascribe a unilinear model of social evolution to Marx in 1859 given that only eighteen months earlier he had, in the *Grundrisse*, detailed a wide variety of pre-capitalist economic formations alongside a multiplicity of paths taken through human history.

Readers of the *Grundrisse* will find it difficult to accept Musto's claim that Marx's thought became "more flexible" as he grew older (76). Marx's historical and political writings evidence that he had always been an eminently flexible thinker, and he had always insisted on rooting theoretical generalisations in detailed empirical work. It was not for nothing that Engels complained to Marx that "as long as you still have a book before you that you consider important, you do not get down to writing."

Rather than show that Marx moved from a less to a more flexible framework as he grew older, the evidence presented by Musto in this book points to a much more interesting process: as is implied both by Engels's comments above and by the methodological introduction to the *Grundrisse*, Marx viewed all his works as provisional points on the road to increasingly concrete analyses rooted in hard, detailed research.

Musto is to be congratulated for adding to our awareness of Marx's continued deepening of his understanding of the world right up until his death, and we can heartily agree with him that we continue to have much to learn from Marx. Perhaps the chief lesson for us comes from the 1872 Preface to *Capital* where he wrote: "There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits." Marx continued this climb right up to his death, and we could do worse than follow his lead.

Paul Blackledge
Shanxi University, Taiyuan, Shanxi Province, China
p.blackledge@aol.com

© 2023 Paul Blackledge
https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2023.2205292
Check for updates