



The Unknown Paths of the Late Marx

Marcello Musto and Josefina L. Martínez | February 27, 2022

An interview with Marcello Musto about the last decade of Marx's life.



*Marcello Musto is Professor of Sociology at York University in Toronto. His most recent book is **The Last Years of Karl Marx: An Intellectual Biography**. He also published **Another Marx: Early Manuscripts to the International**, alongside numerous other books and anthologies. He has been called “arguably the greatest connoisseur of Marx’s life,” and his writings have been translated into 25 languages.*

Why do you think there has been a return to Marx’s work in the 21st century? Why do you focus on the last period of his life?

In the final years of his life, Marx elaborated on many questions that, while often underestimated or even ignored by scholars of his work, are critically important for the political agenda of our time. These include ecology, individual freedom in the economic and

political sphere, queer liberation, the critique of nationalism, and forms of collective property not controlled by the state.

In addition, Marx researched non-European societies and spoke out against the ravages of colonialism in no uncertain terms. It is incorrect to suggest otherwise. This is evident in Marx's unfinished manuscripts — recently published in the historical-critical edition of his complete works, the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA2) — in spite of the skepticism that is fashionable in certain academic quarters. Thus, 30 years after the end of the Soviet Union, it is possible to read a very different Marx than the dogmatic, economistic, and Eurocentric theorist who has been criticized for so many years by those who have not read his work or have only done so superficially.

Almost all the intellectual biographies of Marx published to date give excessive weight to his earlier writings. For a long time, the difficulty of accessing the scholarship he did in the last years of his life obstructed an understanding of his important achievements. All of Marx's biographers dedicated just a few pages to his activity after the dissolution of the International Workingmen's Association in 1872, and have almost always used the generic title "the final decade" to summarize this phase of his life, rather than delving into what he actually did. My book aims to contribute to filling that gap.

Looking at "the late Marx," what can we learn from his notebooks on pre-capitalist societies and his ethnological studies?

From 1881–82, Marx made remarkable theoretical progress in his studies of anthropology, pre-capitalist modes of production, non-Western societies, socialist revolution, and the material conception of history. He believed that the study of new political conflicts and new topics and geographical areas was fundamental for his critique of the capitalist system. This allowed him to be open to new national particularities and consider the possibility that the communist movement could develop in different ways than he had previously imagined.

The so-called *Ethnological Notebooks* (1881), which are a collection of annotated summaries of the book *Ancient Society* (1877) by the U.S. anthropologist Lewis H. Morgan, and of other texts on history and anthropology, represent one of the most significant investigations from the final period of his life. This work allowed Marx to acquire specific information about the social characteristics and institutions of the distant past, which had not been in his possession when he published *Capital* in 1867. Marx did not study anthropology out of mere intellectual curiosity, but rather with an absolutely theoretical-political intention. He wanted to reconstruct, on the basis of correct historical understanding, the sequence in which different modes of production had succeeded one another over time. This also served to give him more solid historical foundations for the possible communist transformation of society.

In pursuit of this objective, Marx devoted himself to the study of prehistory, the development of family ties, the condition of women, the origin of property relations, the community practices that existed in pre-capitalist societies, the formation and the nature of state power, and the role of the individual in society. Among his most thought-provoking ideas are his notes on the accumulation of wealth, in which he pointed out that "private property in

houses, lands, herds [is connected] with the monogamous family.” As had already been argued in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), this represented the starting point of history as the “history of class struggles.”

Marx also paid great attention to Morgan’s considerations on the emancipation of women. The U.S. anthropologist had asserted that ancient societies were more progressive than modern ones in their treatment of and behavior toward women. In Ancient Greece, the switch from female to male lines of descent was detrimental to the position and rights of women, and Morgan judged this social model very negatively. For the *author of Ancient Society*, the Greeks “remained essentially barbarian in their treatment of the female sex at the height of their civilization ... inferiority was inoculated as a principle, until it came to be accepted as a fact by the women themselves.” Thinking about the contrast with the myths of the classical world, Marx added a pointed comment in his *Ethnological Notebooks*: “But the situation of the goddesses on Olympus demonstrates nostalgia for the former more free & influential position of the females. Powerhungry Juno, the goddess of wisdom, springs from the head of Zeus.”

Perhaps the only well-known interest of the “late Marx” is the debate on the Russian rural commune. Is this an example of his dialectical, anti-teleological thinking?

From 1870 onwards, after having learned to read Russian, Marx began a serious study of the socio-economic changes taking place in Russia. This is how he encountered the work of Nikolay Chernyshevsky, the main figure of Russian “populism” (in the 19th century, the term had a leftist and anti-capitalist connotation). In studying Chernyshevsky’s work, Marx discovered original ideas about the possibility that, in some parts of the world, economic development could leap over the capitalist mode of production with all its terrible social consequences for the working class in Western Europe. Chernyshevsky wrote that not every social phenomenon necessarily has to pass through all the logical steps in the real life of all societies. Therefore, the positive characteristics of the Russian rural commune (*obshchina*) should be preserved, but they could only ensure the welfare of the peasant masses if they were inserted into a different productive context. The *obshchina* could only contribute to a new, incipient stage of social emancipation if it became the embryo of a new and radically different social organization. Without the scientific discoveries and technological innovations associated with the rise of capitalism, the *obshchina* would never be transformed into an experiment in truly modern agricultural cooperativism. On this basis, the populists had two goals for their program: to prevent the advance of capitalism in Russia and to utilize the emancipatory potential of the existing rural communes.

Although this is unknown to most Marx scholars, Chernyshevsky’s work was very useful for the author of *Capital*. When **Vera Zasulich asked him in 1881** whether the *obshchina* was destined to disappear or if it could be transformed into a socialist form of production, Marx had a very critical view of the process of transition from communal forms of the past to capitalism. For example, **referring to India**, he said that the only thing the British managed to do was to “to spoil indigenous agriculture and to swell the number and intensity of famines.”

In a similar vein, Marx did not believe that capitalism was a necessary stage for Russia. He did not think that the *obshchina* was destined to follow the same fate as similar communes in Western Europe in previous centuries, where the transition from a society based on communal property to a society based on private property had been more or less uniform. At the same time, Marx had not altered his critical assessment of the Russian rural communes. In his view, the importance of individual development and the development of social production in order to build a socialist society remained intact. For Marx, the archaic rural communes did not foster more advanced emancipation for the individual than did the social relations that existed within capitalism.

This debate has been interpreted in various ways. A “Third Worldist” reading of Marx, for example, has proposed that in his final years he broke with his earlier ideas and switched his revolutionary subject. What do you think of these readings?

In the drafts of his letter to Vera Zasulich, there are no indications of a dramatic break with Marx’s earlier positions, as certain scholars like Haruki Wada and Enrique Dussel have believed to detect. Nor can I support the view of authors who have proposed a “Third Worldist” reading of Marx, claiming that the revolutionary subjects are no longer the factory workers, but rather the masses of the countryside and the periphery.

In line with his theoretical principles, Marx did not suggest that Russia or other countries where capitalism was still underdeveloped would necessarily become the primary focus of a revolutionary upsurge. Nor did he think that nations with backwards capitalism were closer to the goal of socialism than those with more advanced development of productive forces. In his view, sporadic rebellions or resistance struggles should not be confused with the establishment of a new socio-economic order based on socialism. The possibility he had considered at a very particular moment in Russian history, when favorable conditions existed for a progressive transformation of the agrarian communes, could not be elevated to the status of a general model. Not in Algeria ruled by the French, nor in British India, for example, could these special conditions that Chernyshevsky had identified be observed. The Russia of the early 1880s could not be compared with what might come to pass in Lenin’s times. The new element in Marx’s thinking consisted in a growing theoretical openness, which enabled him to contemplate other possible paths to socialism that he had not previously considered or which he had seen as impossible.

Marx’s considerations about the future of the *obshchina* can be placed at the antipode of the belief that socialism can be equated to the productive forces — a conception marked by nationalist overtones and colonialist sympathies that was present in the Second International and the social democratic parties. Marx’s views also differed greatly from the supposedly “scientific method” of social analysis prevalent in 20th century Marxism-Leninism.

The absence of any rigid schematism and the ability to develop a flexible revolutionary theory — never separated from its historical context — is useful not only for understanding

Marx's thought, but also for recalibrating the compass of the political action of the forces of the contemporary transformative Left.

At the end of his life, when he was already quite ill, Marx traveled to Algeria. This episode is not well-known. What did Marx take away from the experience?

In a desperate attempt to treat his lung disease with a temperate climate, Marx arrived in Africa in February of 1882. He stayed in Algiers for 72 days — the only period of his life he spent outside Europe. Unfortunately, almost no biographer of Marx has paid particular attention to this trip.

His terrible health prevented Marx from gaining a thorough understanding of Algerian reality. He could not even complete his plan to study the characteristics of common property among the Arabs. He became interested in this subject in the course of his studies on agrarian property and pre-capitalist societies, which he had begun in 1879. At that time, he wrote that the individualization of land ownership, carried out during the entire period of French rule, had not only procured enormous economic benefits for the invaders, but also furthered the political objective of destroying the foundations of Algerian society.

Marx was greatly distressed by the fact that he was forced to abandon any kind of laborious intellectual activity. Despite his ailments, however, he was able to summarize interesting observations about European colonialism in letters he wrote from Algiers. He furiously attacked the violent abuses and repeated provocations by the French against every act of rebellion by the local population. He stressed that, in relation to the damage caused by the great powers throughout the history of colonial occupations, the British and the Dutch had been even worse.

To conclude: In his final years, Marx continued to polemicize with people who thought it was possible to democratize the capitalist state. What do you think about this?

At the end of his life, Marx returned to the study of the origin and function of the state. Studying the anthropologist Lewis H. Morgan and criticizing the British historian Henry Maine, Marx dedicated himself to analyzing the role the state played in the transitional stage of society “from barbarism to civilization,” while also looking at the relationship between the individual and the state. Marx's notes on the subject were in line with his most significant elaborations from the past. In the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843), Marx wrote that the French were correct in asserting that “In true democracy the *political state disappears*.” In *The Civil War in France*, published in 1871, he called state power the “public force organized for social enslavement” or the “engine of class despotism.”

Similarly, in the *Ethnological Notebooks* of 1881, Marx defined the state as a force for social servitude that prevents the full emancipation of the individual. Moreover, in these little-known studies, he insisted on the parasitic and transitory character of the state: “that the seeming supreme independent existence of the State is itself only seeming and that it is in all its forms an excrescence of society; just as its appearance itself arises only at a certain

stage of social development, it disappears again as soon as society has reached a stage not yet attained.”

These reflections seem far removed from our times, faced with the need for state intervention to mitigate the undisputed rule of the market. However, we must never forget that the socialist society theorized by Marx has nothing to do with the statism of so-called “really-existing socialisms” of the 20th century. Marx directed harsh criticism against those on the Left who wanted to govern by satisfying themselves with palliative corrections to the economic and social rules of liberalism. For this reason as well, Marx remains indispensable for all those who struggle to reconstruct an emancipatory alternative. His political critique of state communism and “socialism” that is compatible with liberalism is no less important than his economic critique of the capitalist mode of production.

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Translation: Nathaniel Flakin

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Marcello Musto



Josefina L. Martínez

Josefina is a historian from Madrid and an editor of our sister site in the Spanish State, [IzquierdaDiario.es](#).