

# Karl Marx Supported Arab Liberation

BY

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Late in life, Karl Marx had a brief encounter with the Arab world. Though he was never able to study the region in detail, Marx's writings confirm his support for Arab struggles against their colonial oppressors.

In the winter of 1882, during the last year of his life, Karl Marx had severe bronchitis, and his doctor recommended a period of rest in a warm place. Gibraltar was ruled out because Marx needed a passport to enter the territory, and as a stateless person, he was not in possession of one. The German Empire of Otto Von Bismarck was covered in snow and forbidden to him in any case. Italy was out of the question since, as Friedrich Engels put it, "the first proviso where convalescents are concerned is that there should be no harassment by the police."

Engels and Paul Lafargue, Marx's son-in-law, convinced the patient to head for Algiers. At the time, the capital of French Algeria enjoyed a reputation as a good destination to escape the rigors of the European winter. As Marx's daughter Eleanor Marx later recalled, what really pushed Marx into making this unusual trip was his number one goal: to complete *Capital*.

Marx crossed England and France by train and then the Mediterranean by boat. He lived in Algiers for seventy-two days, the only time in his life that he spent outside Europe. As the days passed, Marx's health did not improve, but his suffering was not only bodily. He was very lonely after the death of his wife and wrote to Engels that he was feeling "deep attacks of profound melancholy, like the great Don Quixote." Because of his deteriorating health, Marx also missed engaging in serious intellectual activity.

## The Introduction of Private Property

Due to a series of unfavorable events during his stay, Marx was never able to get to the bottom of Algerian social reality. Nor was it possible for him to study the characteristics of common ownership among the Arabs — a topic that had interested him greatly since a few years earlier.

Earlier, in 1879, Marx had copied, in one of his study notebooks, portions of Russian sociologist Maksim Kovalevsky's book, *Communal Landownership: Causes, Course and Consequences of its Decline*. The passages were dedicated to the importance of common ownership in Algeria before the arrival of the French colonizers, as well as to the changes that they introduced. From Kovalevsky, Marx copied down: "The formation of private landownership — in the eyes of French bourgeois — is a necessary condition for all progress in the political and social sphere." Further maintenance of communal property, "as a form which supports communist tendencies in the minds, is dangerous both for the colony and for the homeland."

Marx was also drawn to the following remarks of Kovalevsky: "the transfer of landownership from the hands of the natives into those of the colonists has been pursued by the French under all regimes. . . . The aim is ever the same: the destruction of the indigenous collective property and its transformation into an object of free purchase and sale, and by this means the final passage made easier into the hands of the French colonists."

Regarding legislation on Algeria proposed by the Left Republican Jules Warnier, Marx endorsed Kovalevsky's claim that its only purpose was "the expropriation of the soil of the native population by the European colonists and speculators." The effrontery of the French went as far as "direct robbery" or conversion into "government property" of all uncultivated land remaining in common for native use. This process was designed to produce another important result: the elimination of the danger of resistance by the local population.

Again, through Kovalevsky's words, Marx noted: "The foundation of private property and the settlement of European colonists among the Arab clans would become the most powerful means to accelerate the process of dissolution of the clan unions. . . . The expropriation of the Arabs intended by the law had two purposes: 1) to provide the French with as much land as possible, and 2) to tear away the Arabs from their natural bonds to the soil, to break the last strength of the clan unions thus being dissolved, and thereby any danger of rebellion."

Marx noted that this type of individualization of landownership had not only secured huge economic benefits for the invaders but also achieved a "political aim: to destroy the foundation of this society."

## Reflections on the Arab World

In February 1882, while Marx was in Algiers, an article appearing in a local daily documented the injustices of the newly crafted property system. As reported by *The News*, any French citizen at that time could acquire a concession of more than 100 hectares of Algerian land without even leaving France; they could also resell it to a native for 40,000 francs. On average, the *colons* sold every parcel of land they had bought for 20-30 francs at the price of 300 francs.

Owing to his ill health, Marx was unable to study this matter. However, in the sixteen surviving letters written by Marx (the others were lost), he made several interesting observations from the southern rim of the Mediterranean. The ones that really stand out are those dealing with social relations among Muslims.

Marx was profoundly struck by some characteristics of Arab society. For a "true Muslim," he commented, "such accidents, good or bad luck, do not distinguish Mahomet's children. Absolute equality in their social intercourse is not affected. On the contrary, only when corrupted, do they become aware of it. Their politicians justly consider this same feeling and practice of absolute equality as important. Nevertheless, they will go to rack and ruin without a revolutionary movement."

In his letters, Marx scornfully attacked the Europeans' violent abuses and constant provocations, decrying their "bare-faced arrogance and presumptuousness vis-à-vis the 'lesser breeds,' [and] grisly, Moloch-like obsession with atonement" regarding any act of rebellion. He also emphasized that, in the comparative history of colonial occupation, "the British and Dutch outdo the French."

In Algiers itself, Marx reported to Engels of a progressive judge, Fermé, who spoke to him of "a form of torture . . . to extract 'confessions' from Arabs, naturally done (like the English in India) by the police." He had reported to Marx that "when, for example, a murder is committed by an Arab gang, usually with robbery in view, and the actual miscreants are in the course of time duly apprehended, tried and executed, this is not regarded as sufficient atonement by the injured colonist family. They demand into the bargain the 'pulling in' of at least half a dozen innocent Arabs. . . . When a European colonist dwells among those who are considered the 'lesser breeds,' either as a settler or simply on business, he generally regards himself as even more inviolable than the king."

## Against the British Colonial Presence in Egypt

Similarly, a few months later, Marx did not pull any punches regarding the British presence in Egypt. The war of 1882, waged by British troops, ended the so-called Urabi revolt that had begun in 1879 and enabled the United Kingdom to establish a protectorate over Egypt. Marx was furious with progressives who proved incapable of maintaining an autonomous class position, warning that it was necessary for workers to resist the nationalist rhetoric of the state.

When Joseph Cowen, an MP and president of the Cooperative Congress — considered by Marx "the best of the English parliamentarians" — justified the British invasion of Egypt, Marx expressed his total disapproval. Naturally, he also railed against the British government: "Very nice! In fact, there could be no more blatant example of Christian hypocrisy than the 'conquest' of Egypt — a conquest amid peace!"

But he reserved special criticism for the "radical" Cowen. In a speech on January 8, 1883, in Newcastle, Cowen had expressed his admiration for the "heroic exploits" of the British and the "dazzle of our military parade;" nor could he "help smirking over the entrancing little prospect of all those fortified offensive positions between the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean and, into the bargain, an 'African-British Empire' from the Delta to the Cape."

It was, in Cowen's eyes, an "English style" empire, characterized by "responsibility" for the "home interest." In foreign policy, Marx concluded, Cowen was a typical example of "those poor British bourgeois, who groan as they assume more and more 'responsibilities' in the service of their historic mission, while vainly protesting against it."

## Eurocentric Marx?

Late in life, Marx engaged in probing investigations of societies outside Europe and expressed himself unambiguously against the ravages of colonialism. It is dishonest to suggest otherwise, despite how fashionable it has become in liberal academic quarters to "take Marx to task" for his Eurocentrism.

During his life, Marx closely followed the main events in international politics, and, as we can see from his writings and letters in the 1880s, he expressed firm opposition to British colonial oppression in India and Egypt, as well as to French

colonialism in Algeria. Marx was anything but Eurocentric, nor was he “fixated” only on class conflict, as many like to claim. Marx thought the study of new political conflicts and “peripheral” areas to be fundamental for his ongoing critique of the capitalist system. Most importantly, he always took the side of the oppressed against the oppressors.

#### CONTRIBUTORS

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