Marx’s Last Years Explored

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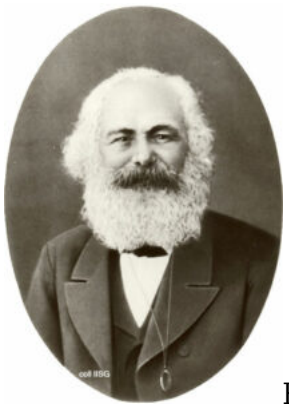

Karl Marx’s last years, when he famously failed to complete all the volumes of *Capital*, were for a long time viewed as a period of illness and even senescence, even though he was only 64 years old at his death in 1883. Since the 1980s, however, this period has received increasing attention, centering on two areas of intense contemporary concern: gender and the family, and Indigenous and village communities at the peripheries of capitalism.

The first of these issues was brought to light through *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, by Marx’s longtime collaborator Friedrich Engels. The book was published a year after Marx’s death on the basis of his notes on the Darwinian anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan. For better or worse, Engels’s book is still considered in many quarters to be the classic Marxist treatise on the subject. The second of these topics was known through Marx’s 1881 letter to Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich—and the lengthy notes he made at the time—on Russia’s communal villages as a possible source of resistance to capital and as a building block for a communist future. But few were aware of the full extent of Marx’s research on which these two texts, one of them not even written by Marx, were based.

After the publication by Lawrence Krader in the 1970s of Marx’s *Ethnological Notebooks* and other notebooks from his last years, interest in the late Marx slowly increased. A few feminist Marxists, like Raya Dunayevskaya and Adrienne Rich in the 1980s, and later Heather Brown, engaged Marx’s notes on gender and the family and found them more nuanced and complex than the perspectives of Engels, who tied gender oppression in reductive fashion to the rise of private property and the state. Others in the 1970s and 1980s, like Hans-Peter Harstick, Teodor Shanin and, again, Dunayevskaya—and later on David Norman Smith and this writer, among others—developed notions of the late Marx as a global, anti-colonial, and multilinear thinker. They did so based upon the notes on Russia that surrounded the Zasulich letter and a wide range of other unpublished notes on communal villages and Indigenous communities in South Asia, North Africa, and the Americas.

Marcello Musto’s intellectual biography enriches the discussion of the late Marx in an attempt to systematically examine the entirety of Marx’s theoretical and political concerns and projects during his last years, from roughly 1875 to 1883. The book departs somewhat from the usual focus of an intellectual biography in that it covers Marx’s illnesses and the toll he suffered from the death of his spouse and collaborator Jenny Marx in late 1881, and then that of his daughter Jenny Longuet in early 1883. But, as Musto constantly reminds us, Marx soldiered on with his scholarly and political projects until the very end. Thus, even after months of convalescence in Algeria and elsewhere in 1882 as ordered by physicians, a case of pleurisy, and other travails, Marx nonetheless resumed serious intellectual work in late 1882, only months before his death. This included notes on physics, ecology, and British imperialist designs on Egypt.

The book's title, specifying the years 1881–1883, is a bit misleading, but this is all to the good as it is hard to grasp Marx's very last years without looking at the late 1870s as well. The period 1879–1881 is the focus of the first and strongest chapter in the book, "New Research Horizons." Here, Musto recounts Marx's notes in his last years on a number of studies in the natural sciences, especially chemistry and mathematics. All of this research took place, he points out, during the same period in which Marx produced one of the key texts in the critique of political economy: his 1880 notes on the academic socialist economist Adolph Wagner, wherein he clarified his concept of value.

Not limiting himself to theoretical issues, Musto also takes up Marx on political matters, especially Ireland and India. In another blow to the notion of Marx's last years as ones of decline and inactivity, Musto details his intense involvement in the French socialist movement. Marx had a major influence on the program put forward in 1880 by the French Workers' Party, one of whose planks called for the "emancipation" of "all human beings without distinction of race or class" (cited on 45). Soon afterward, he also composed the questions for a lengthy "Enquête Ouvrière" ("A Workers' Inquiry"), also intended for French workers.

In this chapter, Musto also takes up Marx's notebooks on non-Western, colonial, and pre-capitalist societies during the years 1879–81. He begins with the 1879 notes on agrarian, communally oriented societies in precolonial and colonial Latin America, India, and Algeria. These notes were based on the work of a young Russian interlocutor of Marx during his last years: Maxim Kovalevsky's book on communal property. (By this time, Marx had become fluent in Russian, a language he began to learn around the time when, to his surprise, *Capital* was translated into Russian in 1872 and soon garnered far more attention than the book's German edition.) In his notes on Kovalevsky's book, Marx rejects the common (including among his later followers) "feudal" appellation for these societies in their precolonial phases, thus breaking away from the slavery-feudalism-capitalism schema he and Engels advanced in the 1840s in *The German Ideology*. (This may account for the fact that, unlike the notes on Wagner, those on Kovalevsky were never included in USSR-sponsored editions like the Marx-Engels *Collected Works*.) In addition, as Musto argues persuasively, Marx saw the future of these societies in a nondeterministic manner in "his refusal to believe that either Indian or Algerian society was destined to follow the same course of development as in Europe" (22).

As also recounted in an important part of this chapter, Marx pursued these interests further in what are usually termed the *Ethnological Notebooks* of 1880–81, his notes on Morgan, Henry Sumner Maine, and other anthropologists. In those on Morgan, Marx identifies with the U.S. anthropologist's critique of previous scholars who saw the family rather than the clan or gens as originative. In the latter, descent tended to be matrilineal and women to have exercised enormous social power, a phase that preceded the consolidation of the patriarchal family. At the same time, Musto is largely in accord with Dunayevskaya and Brown in showing Engels's treatment of these issues as overly schematic in its reduction of changes in gender relations to those in the economic sphere. However, while Morgan, Marx, and Engels devoted tremendous space to Indigenous American societies (especially the Iroquois of North America), more briefly comparing them to the Greeks and the Romans, Musto concentrates almost exclusively on the latter. This leaves aside what many, including this writer, have seen as the more emancipatory implications for the future of their accounts, albeit varying ones, of these First Peoples.

These kinds of issues come to the fore in a more focused way in chapter 2, "Controversy over Capitalism in Russia," the whole of which is devoted to Marx's 1881 letter to Vera Zasulich and other of his writings concerning agrarian Russia from 1877 to 1882. Here, Musto wrestles with a deep contradiction: on the one hand, Marx celebrated the development of the productive forces through capitalist industrialization, which involved uprooting those villages and creating a proletariat, as had occurred in Western Europe in what he termed primitive accumulation. On the other hand, he wrote in the 1880s that Russia might be able to build communism around its

communal villages without passing through capitalism and having to see its early form of communism uprooted. If the second possibility were true, then, as Marx wrote in 1877, his Russian defenders, like Nikolai Mikhailovsky, made a serious error by "transforming [my] historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historical-philosophical theory of the general course imposed upon all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they find themselves" (cited on 64). As a whole, Musto presents this issue with perspicacity, writing of "the thesis, falsely attributed to [Marx], that the bourgeois mode of production was everywhere an inevitability" (59) and finding an "ever greater theoretical openness" (69) in Marx's approach to these and other issues by his last years.

At the same time, Musto differs strongly with the main bent of Teodor Shanin's 1983 collection, *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, which saw the late writings on Russia as a sharp break with his earlier perspectives, as in the *Communist Manifesto*, where he had celebrated the expansion of capitalism eastward as a painful but necessary form of progress. In his brief 1881 reply to Zasulich, in the notes surrounding it, and in the 1882 preface to a new Russian edition of the *Manifesto*, Marx theorized about Russia's communal villages not as destined for absorption by a progressive capitalism, but as a possible social base of a progressive resistance to both capitalist encroachments and the tsarist autocracy. They could, if they mobilized, move toward the modern communism Marx envisioned, and they might be able to do so without passing through capitalism. This kind of thinking, Shanin's book suggests, explains why Marx counted many Russian Populists among his friends during his last years. However, contra Shanin, Marx did not envision an autarkic socialism in one country, even one as large as Russia. Instead, as he wrote in the 1882 preface to the *Manifesto*, success on the communist project in Russia would depend upon linkages to the Western labor movement in a wider revolution in which the Russian village might nonetheless be the spark, "the starting point for communist development" (cited on 71). At this juncture of the argument, Musto seems to bend Marx in the opposite direction from Shanin. Rather than a possible starting point for a serious revolution, the Russian villages instead become a mere bit player: "In [Marx's] view, sporadic rebellions or resistance struggles must not be confused with the establishment of a new social-economic order on a communist basis" (69). This too is a one-sided view.

All of this impinges on a larger question: whether Marx's studies in his final years of communal social relations in a number of agrarian or nomadic societies in South Asia, North Africa, and Indigenous America were linked to his Russia writings in the sense that he saw their precapitalist communal social forms also as possible loci of resistance to capital. Musto answers decisively in the negative, underlining the uniqueness of the Russian case and writing that Marx did not intend to create a "general model" out of these wider studies of communal social forms (69). But what about an inclination in that direction, rather than a model per se? Many commentators on the late Marx, including this writer, would not dismiss the possibility of a broader research and political project. In this view, Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks* and similar late writings were concerned not only with social and economic development but also with real possibilities of resistance and revolution against capital outside Western Europe. It was in this sense that Dunayevskaya saw a return on Marx's part to his 1850 concept of "Revolution in Permanenz." It was also notable that Marx turned his attention eastward and southward in search of allies after the Western labor movement was severely weakened in the wake of the repression of the Paris Commune and the breakup of the First International.

The rest of the book is more biographical, as it recounts Marx's mounting health problems, the terrible blow inflicted on him in late 1881 by Jenny's death, and other personal and family problems. Yet, as Musto recounts, it was after his wife Jenny's death that Marx completed a massive set of notes on European history, in the winter of 1881–1882. These notes, still unpublished, are slated to fill an entire volume of the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*, their collected works. Under doctor's

orders, Marx traveled to Algeria from February through May 1882 for convalescence, but the weather was cold and stormy, and the trip did not improve his recurrent bronchitis and other problems. While he apparently followed his physician's recommendation to avoid mental or physical strain, his letters from Algeria to family members show some keen and admiring descriptions of Arab society and culture. Still in weakened condition upon his return to London, by fall 1882 Marx was again engaging in research, as seen in his notes on physics, ecology, and Egypt. The notes on Egypt took up an October 1882 article on the impact of British imperialism, its financial pressures, and local despotism, at a time when Britain was moving to directly occupy Egypt in the wake of the Urabi nationalist revolt.

Given that Marx's health irrevocably deteriorated from late 1882 until his death in March 1883, his research notes on Egypt may have been his last. When one considers these very late research notes alongside the fact that Marx's last publication—dated January 1882—was the preface to the Russian edition of the *Manifesto* that conceptualized Russia's communal villages as a possible starting point for a European-wide communist revolution, it is no exaggeration to say that in his last years, Marx increasingly turned his attention eastward and southward, outside the areas of the world where the capitalist mode of production had penetrated most deeply.

Musto's study makes an invaluable contribution to our understanding of Marx in his last years, offering an angle from which to consider him that departs from the more usual focus on either the young Marx of alienation, dialectics, and humanism, or the "mature" Marx of the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. Moreover, since Musto, as a biographer, surveys the whole of Marx's intellectual and political projects during his last years, one gets for the first time a sense of how the various pieces fit together, or at least connected somehow.

This biographical focus also illustrates what some may consider a limitation of this study: that it is undertheorized. For example, the book never develops a real thesis or argument beyond the notion that Marx was an original thinker who worked in creative ways that have not been fully captured by the Marxist tradition or in previous biographies. But that would be a different book. As it stands, this study by Musto fills a huge gap in our understanding of Marx.