



May 2022

Marcello Musto, *The Last Years of Karl Marx, 1881-1883: An Intellectual Biography*. Translated by Patrick Camiller. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020. ISBN 9781503612525.

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Recommended Citation

Sayers, Sean (2022) "Marcello Musto, *The Last Years of Karl Marx, 1881-1883: An Intellectual Biography*. Translated by Patrick Camiller. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020. ISBN 9781503612525.," *Emancipations: A Journal of Critical Social Analysis*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 10.
Available at: <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/emancipations/vol1/iss2/10>

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In the final years of his life, Marx suffered repeated attacks of bronchitis and other illnesses. On doctor's orders, he spent weeks on end convalescing by the sea, forbidden to exert himself. In the past, most biographers have passed over this period of Marx's life very briefly, treating it as barren and unproductive. They can be forgiven for doing so, they had little to go on. Marx published very little in these years, and only a few of his letters were known.

This situation has changed dramatically in recent years. A steady stream of archive material is becoming available with the regular appearance of new volumes of *Die Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA). This is a massive project to publish an "historical-critical" edition of all Marx and Engels' writings in their original languages, including not only their published works, but also all their letters, drafts and notes (with all their variations, crossings out, corrections, etc.) – indeed, everything they wrote, just as they wrote it.

This has been a very long time coming, some of this material dates back to the 1830s. The first attempt at such a publication was made soon after the Russian Revolution, by David Riazanov, the great Marx scholar and founder of the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow. He was removed from the project in 1931 (and he was executed after a brief show trial in 1938). Publication of the volumes of this first MEGA – MEGA¹ – was suspended after only 12 of the projected 42 volumes had appeared. The war against the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union then intervened and the project was abandoned. It was revived in a new and expanded form by Soviet and German scholars in the 1970s. The first volume of the second MEGA – MEGA² – appeared in 1975. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, responsibility for the project was transferred to a group of international scholars based in Amsterdam. 114 volumes are now planned (scaled back from the original 164), 52 volumes have appeared so far.

This new material is transforming our knowledge and understanding of some important aspects of Marx and Engels' lives and work. It has shed a flood of new light on the last two years of Marx's life, the subject of this book. Musto has used it to produce an exceptionally well researched picture of what was previously a little known period of Marx's work. The book was originally published in Italian in 2016.

Since then, it has been translated into seven other languages. Now, at last, it is available in a very readable English translation by Patrick Camiller.

As Musto observes, most previous intellectual biographies of Marx have focused disproportionately on his early years. Musto covers only the final two years of Marx's life, 1881-1883. Musto goes in detail through Marx's correspondence and his notebooks to construct a detailed picture of what Marx was reading, writing, thinking about and doing during this period. It is a fascinating and remarkably impressive story.

In 1881, Marx was not yet the "towering figure" (77) on the left that he was later to become. His work was familiar only to a small band of followers and was only just beginning to reach a wider audience. Only a few of the works by which he is now known had been published and widely circulated, most notably the *Communist Manifesto* and the first volume of *Capital*.

Finishing *Capital*

The main task facing Marx was to complete *Capital*. As Musto observes, there is no definitive edition even of Volume 1 of this work. It first appeared in German in 1867 with a second revised edition in 1873. Marx oversaw and contributed many further revisions and changes to the French translation, which appeared in instalments from 1872-1875. He planned to revise the book thoroughly for a third German edition incorporating these changes, but he was not able to complete this.

In the 1870s he was working on Volume 2, and he produced a couple of fairly full drafts, as well as more fragmentary drafts of Volume 3. In 1879, however, because of repeated illness, his doctor ordered him to shorten his working day, and he did little further work on these manuscripts. They were edited and completed for publication by Engels after Marx's death, Volume 2 appearing in 1885, Volume 3 in 1894.

Musto sees no evidence for the widely canvassed view that Marx was unable to complete *Capital* because of contradictions and problems that he encountered for his views. Marx was a notoriously meticulous author, never happy to publish until he had taken account of the latest ideas and developments and incorporated them into his work.

Marx was in the habit of making notes on and copying out passages from the books that he was reading. With the publication of his notes in MEGA², we are now getting a very detailed record of this. He studied a remarkable range of topics. In this period, he read works on political economy, Russian society, collective property systems, anthropology, recent developments in the natural sciences (particularly chemistry and physics) and even mathematics. Some of this reading was connected with his work on *Capital*, some was research to further his understanding of the genesis of capitalism, and some simply to satisfy his insatiable intellectual curiosity and desire for knowledge.

He had long decided not to attempt to reply to or correct the many misinterpretations of his views that were in circulation, but in 1880 he read and wrote extensive critical comments on Adolph Wagner's *Manual of Political Economy* (1879).¹

He also kept up to date with many areas of the natural sciences, partly to find out about developments in organic chemistry relevant to agriculture that he was writing about in *Capital*, Volume 2, and partly from sheer interest. This extended even to mathematics. His study of mathematics had started in connection with economics but later acquired a life of its own. He said he thought about mathematics for "relaxation" (35). He was particularly intrigued by problems with the calculus and wrote numerous and lengthy notes on this topic.²

In the late 1870s, he read a number of works on anthropology. He studied with great attention Lewis Morgan's *Ancient Society* (1877), a pioneering work on American Indian tribal societies. He was particularly interested in the way Morgan showed that social relations change with the development of the productive forces. He was also concerned to refute the then influential view, put forward by Henry Maine, in his *Lectures on the Early History of Institutions*, 1875, and others, that the nuclear family was the original building block of society, and to demonstrate that it was a product of later development. Engels later made extensive use of these notes,

¹ Previously published as (Marx 1975).

² Previously published as (Marx 1983).

as he acknowledges, to write his account of the evolution of the family in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884).³

Developments in Russia

One of the main topics that occupied Marx's attention during this period were economic, social and political developments in Russia. Earlier in his life, Marx had regarded Russia as the main centre of reaction in Europe, but after the abolition of serfdom in 1861 it became clear that things were changing. In 1869, he taught himself to read Russian, and he began to read about developments in Russia in detail. By the final years of his life, he had studied Russian conditions very thoroughly and was in correspondence with a number of progressive Russian social thinkers.

The theory of historical development that Marx had put forward from the time he and Engels composed the writings that make up *The German Ideology* (1845-6), implied that a socialist society could come about only on the basis of a highly socialised system of production, of the sort that was being created by capitalism in Britain and other Western European countries. Although capitalism increased exploitation and misery, it also created the conditions for overcoming capitalism by transforming production from an individual to a social process. This was a fundamental aspect of Marx's theory of history, and he held to it throughout his work.

Whether and how these ideas applied to Russia was hotly debated in this period. Some maintained that the rural communes (*obshchina*) that still existed among the peasantry in Russia provided a basis of common ownership that would enable it to pass directly to socialism. Others argued that Russia would first have to go through a capitalist stage. Marx was often invoked in support of this latter position.

An influential writer who did so was N. K. Mikhailovsky. In November 1877, Marx had drafted a lengthy letter in reply to an article by him in a Russian periodical. In the end Marx did not send this letter, and it came to light only after his death. In it, Marx denied that he had put forward a universal theory of history, and insisted that

³ Extended extracts from Marx's original notes were published in (Marx 1974).

he never claimed that a capitalist phase of historical development was inevitable. He accused Mikhailovsky of transforming,

my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historico-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they are placed, in order to eventually attain this economic formation which, with a tremendous leap of the productive forces of social labour, assures the most integral development of every individual producer.⁴

The issue was raised again in 1881 when he received a letter from Vera Zasulich, a socialist activist, asking him to set out his views on whether the rural commune in Russia could provide the basis for socialism. He drew on the letter to Mikhailovich that he had drafted in composing his response. This occupied him for the best part of a month and went through four full drafts, before the final version was sent off at beginning of March.

Marx again insisted that his view that a stage of capitalist private property was inevitable applied only to Western Europe. Other paths were possible elsewhere. To understand real historical transformations, Marx insisted, it is essential to study individual phenomena separately. There is no “all-purpose formula of a general historico-philosophical theory”.⁵

Some have seized on Marx’s comments to argue that Marx entirely altered his views about the transition to socialism as a result of his studies of Russia in his final years. Musto sees no evidence of that. “The drafts of Marx’s letter to Zasulich show no glimpse of the dramatic break with his former positions that some scholars have detected.” (69)

Although Marx denies that he ever suggested that all societies must inevitably pass through a capitalist stage, he did believe that socialism could be based only on highly socialised forces of production. He didn’t rule out the possibility that Russia could make a transition to socialism without going through a capitalist stage, but he did not positively endorse this view. And he disassociated himself from those, like

⁴ MECW 24, 200. Marx and Engels works are cited from (Marx and Engels 1975), abbreviated as MECW.

⁵ MECW 24, 201.

Bakunin and Herzen, who did. Part of his hesitancy in responding to Zasulich was due to the care he took in expressing his views with precision.

In particular, he argued, since Russia was,

Contemporary with a higher culture; it is linked to a world market dominated by capitalist production. By appropriating the positive results of this mode of production, it is thus in a position to develop and transform the still archaic form of its rural commune, instead of destroying it.⁶

Just as Russia did not have “to pass through a long incubation period in the engineering industry ... in order to utilize machines, steam engines, railways, etc.” – so it might be possible to introduce immediately “the entire mechanism of exchange ... which it took the West centuries to devise” (67-8). Nevertheless, the rural commune was an archaic form, very different from socialism as he conceived of it, and Marx remained sceptical that it could provide a basis for socialist development on its own.

He returned to these questions in the Preface to the Second Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto* written jointly with Engels in 1882. Again, he maintained that socialist transformation of the *obshchina* was possible, but that would depend on favourable historical conditions. He remained doubtful that it could simply be adapted as a basis for socialism. Russia would be able to avoid a capitalist stage before it could create a socialist society only,

If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that two complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for communist development.⁷

Marx and Engels

The joint authorship of this Preface by Marx and Engels is a clear indication of their agreement on these questions. Musto, however, insists on emphasising their differences. He continually contrasts the “flexibility” of Marx’s thinking, with Engels’ “overly schematic” views (27). Engels is dismissed as a precursor of “Second

⁶ MECW 24, 362.

⁷ MECW 24, 426.

International” thinking that “produced a kind of fatalistic passivity, which ... weakened the social and political action of the proletariat”. (32) Marx, by contrast, “rejected the siren calls of a one-way historicism and preserved his own complex, flexible, and variegated conception.” (32)

All this has a comfortingly warm and fuzzy feel about it, but Marx’s importance as a thinker is not like this. It lies in his ability to comprehend particular conditions within the structure of a quite specific and definite over-arching theory.

Marx’s “life purpose”, we are told, was “to provide the worker’s movement with the theoretical basis to destroy capitalism” (11).

The idea that Marx was champing to be at the barricades misrepresents Marx’s character as it is revealed here. What comes out so strikingly from the picture that Musto draws is that Marx was driven, not so much by a restless activism, as by an insatiable intellectual curiosity and a desire for understanding and truth, often simply for its own sake. This is repeatedly demonstrated by the story that Musto tells, but when he comes to summarise Marx’s attitudes in general terms, particularly in contrast to Engels, he tends to forget this and resort to platitudes. His asides about Engels constitute an unfortunate descent into caricature and stereotyping. His denigration of Engels is unwarranted and seems designed mainly to praise Marx by comparison. It does nothing to enhance Musto’s picture of Marx and is the weakest aspect of the book. As my mother used to tell me, you can’t build yourself up by belittling your brother, and the same principle applies here.

Life and death

In the final chapter, Musto turns his attention increasingly to the domestic circumstances of Marx’s life. By 1881, Marx and his household – his wife Jenny, his youngest daughter Eleanor and their long-term servant Helene Demuth, together with three dogs – had moved from a spacious house at 1 Maitland Park Road in the Chalk Farm area of North London into a more modest terraced house further along the same road, 41 Maitland Park Road (both have now been demolished). The house was full of books. When he was younger and poorer, Marx had relied on the British Museum Library, which was within walking distance of his homes. In his later years, he began to acquire books of his own in many languages, often donated by admirers. Engels had by then retired from his job in Manchester and moved to an

altogether grander house at 122 Regent's Park Road, facing Primrose Hill, a 15 minute walk away. They saw each other regularly and corresponded frequently when either of them was out of London.

His wife, Jenny, was suffering from cancer of the liver. Her condition worsened in the summer of 1881, and she died in December, leaving Marx bereft. They had been together for almost 40 years. Marx's condition worsened. His doctor advised longer and more frequent visits to the coast to benefit from the sea air. He stayed for several weeks in Ventnor in the Isle of Wight. Then a trip further south for warmth and sun was recommended and in February 1882 he embarked on a journey to Algeria, stopping off on the way to visit his elder daughter, Jenny Longuet, and her family in Argenteuil, just outside Paris. This trip was not a success. When he got to Algeria, the weather was unseasonably cold and wet, and he suffered from a lack of intellectual stimulation. After ten weeks he cut short his stay, and moved to Monaco on the French Riviera, and then back to England, again via Argenteuil.

He was staying again in Ventnor when he received news that his eldest daughter, Jenny, had died of cancer. Marx was distraught. He returned to London. In the final months of his life, he was looked after by Eleanor, his youngest daughter, and their servant, Helene Demuth. He died peacefully sitting in the chair by his desk on March 24, 1883.

Musto combines a fascinating and detailed intellectual biography with an informative account of Marx's life in his final years. His book is exceptionally well researched. In a running commentary, much of it in footnotes, he provides a detailed account of the scholarly literature in all the main European languages on the topics he is discussing. He writes in a clear and pleasing style. His book makes a major contribution to our understanding Marx's life and work. It is highly recommended.

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