

The Practical Marx

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1979

FE Note: The following article, an attempt to come to grips with the implications of Karl Marx's everyday life by long-time FE contributor John Zerzan, has stirred considerable controversy among those of us presently working on the paper and necessitates, we feel, a few brief introductory observations.

For some time, the issue of confluence (or lack of it) between the ideas we espouse and the activities of our daily lives has occupied a position of central importance with many of us. In addition to our desires to live lives as coherent as possible with our principles, we have been concerned with the obvious link between the ways in which we relate to others and the world around us and the kind of vision of a liberated existence which we embrace. Thus we see the importance of John's article in the fact that it makes explicit the connection between the way in which Marx lived, the theories that his life produced and the way in which those theories have found application in the world. For those of us who see a continuum from Marx to Lenin to Stalin, it cannot be coincidental that a man who operated in so authoritarian and manipulative a manner in his own political life should produce a body of theory so rife with ideas of the domination of nature and the secondary (or even dispensable) status of individuals in relation to the greater "forces of history," which places so much faith in the power of the state and which has been successfully used to justify some of the bloodiest totalitarian regimes the world has ever seen.

The limits of the appropriateness of such a methodology as John's, however, have hardly been the subject of unanimous agreement among those of us who read the article for this issue.

One of us felt, for instance, that an at best sketchy analysis of Marx's child-rearing habits lent little to an understanding of his work and could ultimately become no more than an excuse for throwing out his ideas (as it has been for many years among right-wing critics of Marxism). Moreover, though this is not a charge we would ever lay at John's feet, we've all had enough bad experiences with ultra-left moralists writing "police reports" on our activities to be at the very least skeptical of the greater implications of his methodology, since it is not difficult to make a case for the present-day "peer-group tyranny" of socialist societies like China's as being the logical extreme of this kind of scrutiny of personal lives (at what point does the insistence on moral/ethical consistency become the demand for ideological conformity?).

For most of us the issue is far from resolved and inclusion of the article will probably raise more questions than it answers. In some sense, Marx is almost the "ideal" subject for such an article, since his extraordinary impact on the world has made him a "world-historical" figure regardless of his intentions or ours, and as a result, all of the information that Zerzan cites about his life is readily available

to anyone interested, having had wide currency in radical circles for many years. But what if someone, having read the article, insists on having the same kind of intimate knowledge of John Zerzan's personal life on which to base their judgment of his ideas? Or ours?

One further note: most of us felt that certain of John's contentions about Marx's private life, in particular the impact of his activities on the lives (and deaths) of his wife and children, required at least more serious substantiation than appears in the present article; John was more than willing to provide this and it was only a last-minute mix-up from our end of the postal system that prevented this from happening.

Karl Marx is always approached as so many thoughts, so many words. What connection is there between lived choices—one's willful lifetime—and the presentation of one's ideas?

Marx in his dealings with family and associates, his immediate relations to contemporary politics and to survival, the practical pattern and decisions of a life: this is perhaps worth a look. Despite my rejection of basic conceptions he formulated, I aim not at character assassination in lieu of tackling those ideas, but as a reminder to myself and others that our many compromises and accommodations with a grisly world are the real field of our effort to break free, more so than stating our ideas.

It is in disregarding abstractions for a moment that we see our actual equality, in the prosaic courses of our common nightmare. A brief sketch of the "everyday" Marx, introducing the relationship between his private and public lives as a point of entry may serve to underline this.

By 1843 Marx had become a husband and father, roles predating that of Great Thinker. In this capacity, he was to see three of his six children die, essentially of privation. Guido in 1850, Francesca in 1852, and Edgar in 1855 perished not because of poverty itself, so much as from his desire to maintain bourgeois appearances. David McLellan's *Marx: His Life and Thought*, generally accepted as the definitive biography, makes this point repeatedly.

Despite the fairly constant domestic deficiencies, Marx employed Helene Demuth as maid from 1845 until his death in 1883, and a second servant was added as of 1857. Beyond any question of credibility, it was Demuth who bore Marx's illegitimate son Frederick in 1851. To save Marx from scandal, and "a difficult domestic conflict" according to Louis Freyberger, Engels accepted paternity of the child.



"Don't you understand, Colossus? We're your FRIENDS!"

From the end of the 1840's onward, the Marx household lived in London and endured a long cycle of hardship which quickly dissipated the physical and emotional resources of Jenny Marx. The weight of the conflicting pressures involved in being Mrs. Marx was a direct cause of her steadily failing health, as were the deaths of the three children in the '50s. By July 1858 Marx was accurate in conceding to Engels that "My wife's nerves are quite ruined..."

In fact, her spirit had been destroyed by 1856 when she gave birth to a stillborn infant, her seventh pregnancy. Toward the end of that year she spoke of the “misery” of financial disasters, of having no money for Christmas festivities, as she completed copying out work on Marx’s *The Critique of Political Economy*.

Despite several inheritances, the begging letters to Engels remained virtually non-stop; by 1860 at the latest, Jenny’s once very handsome appearance had been turned to gray hair, bad teeth, and obesity. It was in that year that small pox, contracted after transcribing the very lengthy and trivial Herr Vogt diatribe, left her deaf and pockmarked.

As secretary to Marx and under the steady strain of creditors, caused pre-eminently by the priority of maintaining appearances, Jenny’s life was extremely difficult. Marx to Engels, 1862: “In order to preserve a certain facade, my wife had to take to the pawnbroker’s everything that was not actually nailed down.”

The mid-’60s saw money spent on private lessons for the eldest of the three daughters and tuition at a “ladies seminary” or finishing school, as Marx escaped the bill-collectors by spending his days at the British Museum. He admitted in 1866, in a letter to his future son-in-law, Paul Lafargue, that his wife’s “life had been wrecked.”

“Women Need To Be Controlled”

Dealing with nervous breakdowns and chronic chest ailments, Jenny was harried by ever-present household debt. One partial solution was to withhold a small part of her weekly allowance in order to deal with their arrears, the extent of which she tended to hide from Marx. In July 1869 the Great Man exploded upon learning of this frugal effort; to Engels he wrote, “When I asked why, she replied that she was frightened

to come out with the vast total (owed). Women plainly always need to be controlled!”

Speaking of Engels, we may turn from Marx the “family man” to a fairly chronological treatment of Marx in his immediate connections with contemporary politics. It may be noted here that Engels, his closest friend, was, from 1838 on, a representative of the firm of Engels and Ermen; in fact, throughout the 1850s and ’60s he was a full-time capitalist in Manchester. Thus his *Condition of the Working Class in England* was the fruit of a practical businessman, a man of precisely that class responsible for the terrible misery he so clearly chronicled.

By 1846 Marx and Engels had written *The German Ideology*, which made a definitive break with the Young Hegelians and contains the full and mature ideas of the materialist concept of the progress of history. Along with this tome were the practical activities in politics, also by now receiving their characteristic stamp. In terms of his Communist Correspondence Committee and its propaganda work, Marx (also in 1846) stated: “There can be no talk at present of achieving communism; the bourgeoisie must first come to the helm.” In June of the same year

he sent instructions to supporters to act “jesuitically,” to not have “any tiresome moral scruples” about acting for bourgeois hegemony.

The inexorable laws of capitalist development, necessarily involving the sacrifice of generations of “insufficiently developed” proletarians, would bring capital to its full plenitude—and the workers to the depths of enslavement. Thus in 1847, following a congress of professional economists in Brussels to which he was invited, Marx publicly noted the disastrous effect of free trade upon the working class, and embraced this development. In a subsequent newspaper article, he likewise found colonialism, with its course of misery and death to be, on the whole, a good thing: like the development of capitalism itself, inevitable and progressive, working toward eventual revolution.

Unprepared for Revolutionary Upheavals

In 1847 the Communist League was formed in London, and at its second Congress later in the year Marx and Engels were given the task of drafting its manifesto. Despite a few ringing anti-capitalist phrases in its general opening sections, the concrete demands by way of conclusions are gradualist, collaborationist, and highly statist (e.g. for an inheritance tax, graduated income tax, centralization of credit and communications). Ignoring the incessant fight waged since the mid-18th century and culminating with the Luddites, and unprepared for the revolutionary upheavals that were to shake Europe in less than a year, the *Communist Manifesto* sees, again, only an “insufficiently developed” proletariat.

From this policy document arises one of the essential tactical mysteries of Marx, that of the concomitant rise of both capitalism and the proletariat. The development of capital is clearly portrayed as the accumulation of human misery, degradation and brutality, but along with it grows, by this process itself, a working class steadily more “centralized, united, disciplined, and organized.” How is it that from the extreme depths of physical and cultural oppression issues anything but a steadily more robotized, powerless, de-individualized proletariat? In fact, the history of revolts and militance of the 19th and 20th centuries shows that the majority do not come from those most herd-like and deprived, but from those least disciplined and with something to lose.

In April of 1848, Marx went to Germany with the *Manifesto* plus the utterly reformist “Demands of the Communist Party in Germany.” The “Demands,” also by Marx and Engels, were constituent of a bourgeois revolution, not a socialist one, appealing to many of the elements that directly fought the March outbreak of the revolution. Considering Marx’ position as vice-president of the non-radical Democratic Association in Brussels during the previous year, and, naturally, his support of a prerequisite bourgeois ascendancy, he quickly came into conflict with the revolutionary events of 1848 and with much of the Communist League.

Marx helped found a Democratic Society in Cologne, which ran candidates for the Frankfurt Parliament, and he vigorously opposed any League support for armed intervention in support of the revolutionaries. Using the opportunist rationale of not wanting to see the workers become “isolated,” he went so far as to use his “discretionary powers,” as a League official, to dissolve it in May as too radical, an embarrassment to his support of bourgeois elements.

With the League out of the way, Marx concentrated his 1848 activities in Germany on support for the Democratic Society and his dictatorial editorship of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*. In both capacities he pursued a “united front” policy, in which working people would be aligned with all other “democratic forces” against the remnants of feudalism. Of course, this arrangement would afford the workers no autonomy, no freedom of movement; it chose to see no revolutionary possibilities residing with them. As editor of the NRZ, Marx gave advice to Camphausen, businessman head of the provisional government following the defeat of the proletarian upsurge. And further, astounding as it sounds, he supported the Democratic Society’s newspaper despite the fact that it condemned the June 1848 insurrection of the Paris proletariat. As politician and newspaper editor, Marx was increasingly criticized for his consistent refusal to deal with the specific situation or interests of the working class.

Wars As The Spark Of Revolution

By the fall of 1848, the public activities of Marx began to take on a somewhat more activist, pro-worker coloration, as the risings of the workers resumed in Germany. By December, however, disturbances were on the wane, and the volatile year in Germany appeared to be ending with no decisive revolutionary consequences. Now it was, and only now, that Marx in his paper declared that the working class would have to depend on itself, and not upon the bourgeoisie for a revolution. But because it was rather clearly too late for this, the source of revolution would have to come, he divined, from a foreign external shock: namely, war between France and England, preceded by a renewed French proletarian uprising. Thus at the beginning of 1849, Marx saw in a Franco-British war the social revolution, just as in early 1848 he had located it in war between Prussia and Russia. This was not to be the last time, by the way, that Marx saw in the slaughter of national wars the spark of revolution; the worker-as-subject again fails to occur to Marx, that they could act—and did act—on their own initiatives without first having to be sacrificed, by the generation, as factory slaves or cannon fodder.

There were radicals who had seen the openings to revolution in 1848, and who were shocked by the deterministic conservatism of Marx. Louis Gottschalk, for example, attacked him for positing the choice for the working class as between bourgeois or feudal rule; “what of revolution?” he demanded. And so although Marx supported bourgeois candidates in the February (1849) elections, by April the Communist League (which he had abolished) had been re-founded without him, effectively forcing him to leave the moderate Democratic Association. By May, with its week of street fighting in Dresden, revolts in the Ruhr, and extensive insurgency in Baden, events—as well as the reactions of the German radical community—continued to leave Marx far behind. Thus in that month, he closed down the *NRZ* with a defiant—and manifestly absurd—editorial claiming that the paper had been revolutionary and openly so throughout 1848 and 1849.

Marx in London

By 1850 Marx had joined other German refugees in London, upon the close of the insurrectionary upheavals on the continent of the previous two years. Under pressure from the left, as noted above, he now came out in favor of an independently organized German proletariat and a highly centralized state for the (increasingly centralized) working class to seize and make its own. Despite the ill-will caused by his anything-but-radical activities in Germany, Marx was allowed to rejoin the Communist League and eventually resumed his dominance therein. In London, he found support among the Chartists and other elements devoted to electoral reform and trade unionism, shunning the many radical German refugees whom he often branded as “agitators” and “assassins.” This behavior gained him the support of a majority of those present in London and enabled him to triumph over those in the League who had called him a “reactionary” for the minimalism of the *Manifesto* and for his disdain of a revolutionary practice in Germany.

But from the early '50s Marx had begun to spend most of his time in studies at the British Museum, where he could ponder the course of world revolution away from the noisome hubbub of his precarious household. From this time, he quickly jettisoned the relative radicality of his new-found militance and foresaw a general prosperity ahead, hence no prospects for revolution. The coincidence of economic crisis with proletarian revolt is, of course, mocked by the real history of our world. From the Luddites to the Commune, France in 1968 to the multitude of struggles opening on the last quarter of the 20th century, insurrection has been its own master; the great fluctuations of unemployment or inflation have often served, on the contrary, to deflect class struggles to the lower, survivalist plane rather than to fuel social revolution. The Great Depression of the 1930s brought a diminished vision, for example, perhaps characterized by German National Socialism and its cousin, the American New Deal, nothing approaching the destruction of capitalism. (The Spanish Revolution, bright light of the '30s, had nothing to do with the Depression gripping the industrialized nations.) Marx's overriding concern with externalities—principally economic crises, of course—was a trademark of his practical as well as theoretical approach; it obviously reflects his slight regard for the subjectivity of the majority of people for their potential autonomy, imagination and power.

Correct Bourgeois Lifestyle

The distancing from actual social struggles of his day is seemingly closely linked with the correct bourgeois life he led. In terms of his livelihood, one is surprised by the gap between his concrete activities and his reputation as revolutionary theorist. From 1852 into the 1860s, he was “one of the most highly valued” and “best paid” columnists of the N.Y. Daily Tribune, according to its editor. In fact, one hundred and sixty-five of his articles were used as editorials by this not quite-revolutionary metropolitan daily, which could account for the fact that Marx requested in 1855 that his subsequent pieces be printed anonymously. But if he wanted not to appear as the voice of a huge bourgeois paper, he wanted still more—as we have seen in his family role—to appear a gentlemen. It was “to avoid a scandal” that he felt compelled to pay the printer’s bill in 1859 for the reformist *Das Volk* newspaper in London. In 1862 he told Engels of his wish to engage in some kind of business: “Grey, dear friend, is all theory and only business is green. Unfortunately, I have come too late to this insight.” Though he declined the offers, Marx received, in 1865 and 1867, two invitations which are noteworthy for the mere fact that they would have been extended to him at all:

The first, via a messenger from Bismarck, to “put his great talents to the service of the German people,” the second, to write financial articles, from the Prussian Government’s official journal. In 1866 he claimed to have made four hundred pounds by speculating in American funds, and his good advice to Engels on how to play the Stock Market is well authenticated.

1874 saw Marx and two partners wrangle in court over ownership of a patent to a new engraving device, intending to exploit the rights and reap large profits. To these striking suggestions of ruling-class mentality must be added the behavior of Marx toward his children, the three daughters who grew to maturity under his thoroughly Victorian authority. In 1866 he insisted on economic guarantees for Paul LaFarque’s future, criticizing his lack of “diligence,” and lecturing him in the most prudish terms regarding his intentions toward Laura, who was almost twenty-one. Reminding LaFarque that he and Laura were not yet engaged, and if they were to become so, that it would constitute a “long-term affair”, he went on to express very puritanical structures: “To my mind, true love expresses itself in the lover’s restraint, modest bearing, even diffidence toward the adored one, and certainly not in unconstrained passion and manifestations of premature familiarity.”

In 1868 he opposed the taking of a job by Jenny, who was then twenty-two; later he forbade Eleanor from seeing Lissagaray, a Commune who happened to have defended single-handedly the last barricade in Paris.

International Workingman’s Association

Turning back to politics, the economic crisis Marx avidly awaited in the ‘50s had come and gone in 1857, awakening no revolutionary activity. But by 1863 and the Polish insurrection of that year, unrest was in the air—providing the background for the formation of the international Workingman’s Association. Marx put aside his work on *Capital* and was most active in the affairs of the International from its London inception in September, 1864. Odger, President of the Council of all London Trades Unions, and Cramer, Secretary of the Mason’s Union, called the inaugural meeting, and Wheeler and Dell, two other British union officials, formally proposed an international organization. Marx was elected to the executive committee (soon to be called the General Council), and at its first business meeting was instrumental in establishing Odger and Cramer as President and Secretary of the International. Thus from the start Marx’s allies were union bureaucrats, and his policy approach was a completely reformist one with “plain speaking” as to radical aims disallowed. One of the first acts of the General Council was the sending of Marx’s spirited, fraternal greetings to Abraham Lincoln, that “single-minded son of the working class.” Other early activities by Marx included the formation, as part of the International, of the Reform League dedicated to manhood suffrage. He boasted to Engels that this achievement—is our doing,” and was equally enthusiastic when the National Reform League, sole surviving Chartist organization, applied for membership. This latter proved too much even for the faithful Engels, who for some time after refused to even serve as correspondent to the International for Manchester, where he was still a full-time capitalist. During this practice of embracing every shade of English gradualism, principally by promoting the membership of London trade unions, he penned his famous “the proletariat is revolutionary or it is nothing” line, in a letter to the German socialist Ferdinand Lassalle.

Lasalle and his General Union of German Workers (ADAV) harbored transparently serious illusions about the state; namely that Bismarck was capable of genuinely socialist policies as Chancellor of Prussia. Yet Marx in 1866 agreed to run for the presidency of the ADAV in the hopes of incorporating it into the International. At the same time, he wrote (to a cousin of Engels): “the adherence of the ADAV will only be of use at the beginning, against our opponents here. Later the whole institution of this Union, which rests on a false basis, must be destroyed.”

Volumes could be written, and possibly have, on the manipulations of Marx within the International, the maneuverings of places, dates, and lengths of meetings, for example, in the service of securing and centralizing his authority. To the case of the ADAV could be added, among a multitude of others, his cultivation of the wealthy bourgeois Lefort, so as to keep his wholly non-radical faction within the organization. By 1867 his dedicated machinations were felt to have reaped their reward; to Engels he wrote, “we (i.e. you and I) have this powerful machine in our hands.” War Progressive and Inevitable

Also, in 1867 he availed himself publicly once more of one of his favorite notions, that a war between Prussia and Russia would prove both progressive and inevitable. Such a war would involve the German proletariat versus despotic Eastern barbarism and would thus be salutary for the prospects of European revolution. This perennial “war games” type of mentality somehow manages to equate victims, set in motion precisely as chattels of the state, with proletarian subjects acting for themselves; it would seem to parallel the substitution of trade union officials for workers, the hallmark of his preferred strategy as bureaucrat of the International. Marx naturally ridiculed anyone—such as his future son-in-law, LaFargue—for suggesting that the proper role of revolutionaries did not lie in such a crass game of weighing competing nationalisms. And in 1868 when the Belgian delegation to the International’s Brussels Congress proposed the response of a general strike to war, Marx dismissed the idea as a “stupidity,” owing to the “underdeveloped” status of the working class.

The weaknesses and contradictions of the adherents of Proudhon and Bakunin are irrelevant here, but we may observe 1869 as the high-water mark of the influence of Marx, due to the approaching decline of the Proudhonists and the infancy of Bakunin’s impact in that year. With mid-1870 and the Napoleon III-engineered Franco-Prussian War, we see once more the pre-occupation with “progressive” vs. “non-progressive” military exploits of governments. Marx to Engels: “The French need a drubbing. if the Prussians are victorious then the centralization of the working class ... the superiority of the Germans over the French in the world arena would mean at the same time the superiority of our theory over Proudhon’s and so on.”

By July 1870, in an Address endorsed by the international’s General Council, Marx added to this outlook a warning: “If the German working class allow the present war to lose its strictly defensive character and degenerate into a war against the French people, victory or defeat will prove alike disastrous.” Thus the butchery of French workers is fine and good—but only up to a point. This height of cynical calculation appears almost too incredible—and after the Belgians and others were loudly denounced for imagining that the proletariat could be a factor for themselves, in any case. How now could the “German working class” (Prussian army) decide how far to carry out the orders of the Prussian ruling class—and if they could, why not “instruct” them to simply ignore any and all of these class orders?

This kind of public statement by Marx, so devoid of revolutionary content, was naturally received with popularity by the bourgeois press. In fact, none other than the patron saint of British private property, John Stuart Mill, sent a message of congratulations to the International for its wise and moderate Address.

When the war Napoleon III had begun turned out as a Prussian victory, by the end of summer 1870, Marx protested, predictably, that Germany had dropped its approved “defensive” posture and was now an aggressor demanding annexation of the Alsace-Lorraine provinces. The defeat of France brought the fall of Louis Napoleon and his Second Empire, and a provisional Republican government was formed. Marx decided that the aims of the International were now two-fold: to secure the recognition of the new, Republican regime by England, and to prevent any revolutionary outbreak by the French workers.

His policy advised that “any attempt to upset the new government in the present crisis, when the (Prussian) army is almost knocking at the doors of Paris, would be a desperate folly.” This shabby, anti-revolutionary strategy was publicly promoted quite vigorously—until the Commune itself made a most rude and “unscientific” mockery of it in short order.

Paris Commune

Well-known, of course, is Marx's negative reception to the rising of the Parisians; it is over-generous to say that he was merely pessimistic about the future of the Commune. Days after the successful insurrection began he failed to applaud its audacity, and satisfied himself with grumbling that "it had no chance for success." Though he finally recognized the fact of the Commune (and was thereby forced to revise his reformist ideas regarding proletarian use of existing state machinery), his lack of sympathy is amply reflected by the fact that throughout the Commune's two-month existence, the General Council of the International, spoke not a single word about it.

It often escapes notice when an analysis or tribute is delivered well after the living struggle is safely living no longer. The masterful polemicizing about the triumphs of the Commune and Civil War in France constitute an obituary, in just the same way that Class Struggles in France did so at a similarly safe distance from the events he failed to support at the time of revolutionary Paris, 1848.

After a very brief period—again like his public attitude just after the 1848 through 1849 outbreaks in Europe—of stated optimism as to proletarian successes in general, Marx returned to his more usual colors. He denied the support of the International to the scattered summer 1871 uprisings in Italy, Russia, and Spain—countries mainly susceptible to the doctrines of anarchy, by the way. September witnessed the last meeting of the International before the Marx faction effectively disbanded it, rather than accept its domination by more radical elements such as the Bakuninists, in the following year. The bourgeois gradualism of Marx was much in evidence at the fall 1871 London Conference, then, as exemplified by such remarks as: "To get workers into parliament is equivalent to a victory over the governments, but one must choose the right man."

Between the demise of the International and his own death in 1883, Marx lived in a style that varied little from that of previous decades. Shunning the Communard refugees, by and large, as he had shunned the radical Germans in the '50's after their exile following 1848 through 1849—Marx kept company with men like Maxim Kovalevsky, a non-socialist Russian aristocrat, the well-to-do Dr. Kugelmann, the businessman Max Oppenheim, H.M. Hyndman, a very wealthy social democrat, and, of course, the now-retired capitalist, Engels.

With such a circle as his choice of friends, it is not surprising that he continued to see little radical capacity in the workers, just as he had always failed to see it. In 1874, he wrote, "The general situation of Europe is such that it moves to a general European war. We must go through this war before we can think of any decisive external effectiveness of the European working class." Looking, as ever, to externalities—and of course to the "immutable laws of history"—he contributes to the legacy of the millions of World War 1 dead, sacrificed by the capitulation of the Marxist parties to the support of war in 1914.

Refusing throughout his lifetime to see the possibilities of real class struggle, to understand the reality of the living negation of capitalism, Marx actively and concretely worked for the progress and fullness of capitalist development, which prescribed that generations would have to be sacrificed to it. I think that the above observations of his real life are important and typical ones, and suggest a consistency between that life and his body of ideas. The task of moving the exploration along to encompass the "distinctly theoretical" part of Marx, is expressly beyond the scope of this effort; possibly, however, the preceding will throw at least indirect light on the more "disembodied" Marx.

Related: See *Fifth Estate* #393, Spring 2015 (anti-Marx theme)

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