

In his speech to the Craftworkers in the Faubourg St. Antoine, Marx says to them: "you experience exploitation [and, one might add, discipline] on your bodies, in your flesh – and everyday, everyday.' What does he mean by this? Many would argue that this may have been true in the early days of industrialization, but things have changed. Have new workplace ailments developed (e.g. carpal tunnel syndrome that doesn't seem to have become a ubiquitous workplace injury until the advent of computers)?? Why are there so many lawsuits about unsafe work conditions, workplace injuries, hazardous products, etc.???

Is technology efficient? Is technology emancipating? Is technology neutral, that is: is there only one most efficient way of developing a technology to perform a given task? Are there other possible definitions of 'efficiency' other than the current one of 'maximum output per minimum input'?

Marx's brief phrase, 'epidemics of overproduction' is arguably the most powerful criticism of capitalism. But some would argue that periodic crises are the price we must pay for our well-being in 'normal' times. What do you think?

Will there always be bosses and workers?

*The Communist Manifesto* ends by telling workers that they have nothing to lose but their chains and calls for workers of all countries to unite. Many argue that Marx put too much emphasis on class and completely neglected the crucial matter of national identity and nationalism. Is the nation more important than class?

In the film Proudhon says to Marx: 'Don't be like Martin Luther who, after destroying Catholic dogma, built an equally intolerant religion'. Some not only consider the former Soviet Union to be that 'equally intolerant religion', but also insist that the Soviet Union was the realization of Marx's ideas. How do you think Marx would have reacted if he had been alive and able to witness the history of the Soviet Union?



## THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

### *Friday Film Fest Series*



### Der junge Karl Marx

By Raoul Peck

November 16, 2018

• 6:30 PM •

Film, Food & Discussion

The German Society of PA

611 Spring Garden St.

215-627-2332

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## Der junge Karl Marx (The Young Karl Marx) (2017)

Director: Raoul Peck  
Production: Nicolas Blanc  
Rémi Grellety  
Robert Guédiguian  
Screenplay: Pascal Bonitzer  
Raoul Peck  
Music: Alexei Aigui  
Camera: Kolja Brandt  
Editor: Frédérique Broos  
Distribution: Diaphana Films  
Length: 118 minutes  
Cast:

**August Diehl** as Karl Marx  
**Stefan Konarske** as Friedrich Engels  
**Vicky Krieps** as Jenny von Westphalen  
**Olivier Gourmet** as Pierre Proudhon  
**Hannah Steele** as Mary Burns  
**Eric Godon** as The foreman  
**Alexander Scheer** as Wilhelm Weitling



### Commentary by Joe Fracchia – Professor Emeritus of History, Clark Honors College, University of Oregon/Eugene

The conjuncture of three key historical developments in the period of Karl Marx's lifetime (1818-83) went into the making of his 'materialist conception of history' (often misleadingly referred to as 'Marxism', about which Marx himself once explained 'All that I know is that I am not a Marxist'). These three elements, in order of Marx's acquaintance with them, are: German idealist philosophy, liberal-democratic revolution, and the advent of industrial capitalism. Raoul Peck's film does an excellent job of situating Marx's personal life in the historical context, of showing how Marx's life and thinking were framed by these historical developments, and how he developed his ideas in response. Here, a brief look at those circumstances, how they framed Marx's life, and how he responded to them.

Karl Marx was born in 1818, in the wake of the 26-year period (1789-1815) in which French Revolution and its Napoleonic aftermath dominated Europe and resounded world-wide. He was the son of a non-religious Jew named Herschel Marx who, in order to avoid anti-Semitic prejudices that would hinder his law practice, converted to Christianity and became Heinrich Marx (while remaining equally non-religious). Heinrich Marx was a liberal advocate of a constitution and the rule of law in an area ruled by the absolutist King of

Prussia (see below). Although Heinrich wanted him to study law, Karl was more interested in philosophy. And after a year at the University of Bonn, he transferred to the University of Berlin. There Marx turned his back on the law and immersed himself in the 'idealist' philosophy of Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel et al. that dominated the intellectual atmosphere of Berlin.

It is unfortunately impossible to provide a brief summary of German idealist philosophy. And I imagine that to those unfamiliar with it, many of the philosophical references in the film would be a bit confusing. So rather than offer a summary of German idealism, let me suggest a few main themes that profoundly influenced Marx, some of which he adopted, others he altered by giving them a 'historical-materialist' foundation. The main tenets of idealist philosophy are: that history is the march toward freedom defined essentially in terms established in liberal-democratic constitutions (right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness), but with the addition that freedom must be universal, not limited to any particular class or group; that ideas are the driving force of history; and with the spread of the universal ideals of the French Revolution, the ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, the realm of freedom and the end of history are in sight, for once freedom becomes universal, history can progress no further (idealists never considered the possibility that history could regress).

The French Revolution was actually the third liberal-democratic revolution against the monarchies that ruled by royal and often arbitrary decree rather than by law. It was preceded by the Glorious Revolution in England in 1688, and the anti-colonial revolution of the American colonies against England, and followed by similar revolutions throughout Europe and around the world. The English and American revolutions overthrew the arbitrary rule of absolute monarchies and founded a new form of government in which government officials and their decisions are subject to the rule of laws that are made by representatives elected by majority vote of the 'citizens'. Citizenship however was a rather limited affair; in England, it was limited to male property holders, which meant that some ten percent of the population could cast votes and hold political office. In the new U.S., as is well known, the suffrage in federal elections was restricted to white, male adults; and as is less known, each of the 13 states originally had a property qualification for the right to vote in state elections or hold state office. In this regard, the French Revolution initially went much farther. It not only overthrew the monarchy and established a liberal-democratic order based on the rule of laws made by elected representatives, but it also backed up its call for *liberté, égalité, fraternité* with a demand for universal male suffrage with no property requirement. This goal was only realized for a brief period, but what was crucial (and in this the idealists were perhaps correct) is that once the call for universal freedom, including universal citizenship and (adult) suffrage, was sounded, it could not be

silenced. And one way to look at the period from these three revolutions up through today is as a steady battle to make reality conform to the ideal, that is: to realize equality before the law with the guarantee that no one would be deprived of citizenship because of race, religion, sexual preference – or ownership of property, lack thereof, and poverty.

Here, as explanation and transition to a discussion of the effect of emerging industrial capitalism and the study of economics on Marx's development, it is necessary to pause and clarify terms by addressing the economic assumptions behind definitions of rights and freedoms, specifically: what is meant by 'liberal' and 'liberal democracy'? Since the property qualification for the suffrage was eliminated in all states by the 1820s, we in the U.S. are not accustomed to the notion that political rights once had economic prerequisites (which is different from the contemporary situation in which all have equal power in formal terms, but in reality, money talks—see the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision). If we consider the etymology of the term 'liberty', we find that it is intimately associated with property: owning property of the kind that enables one to make a living on one's own without having to depend on, that is, to work for another for one's livelihood meant that one had liberty. And 'liberalism' in its earliest form (England after 1688) advocated a political order in which the government was essentially the private property of the propertied class: only those with enough property to be at liberty were able to participate in the political process, to vote and hold political office; and the purpose of government was to protect liberty, that is, also: property. This meant that the vast majority who did not own the property to guarantee their liberty were excluded from voting and holding political office. In the U.S. constitution, the property qualification for political participation was eliminated – possibly because of respect, probably because of fear that the non-propertied veterans who fought and won the revolutionary war would drive the revolution further if deprived of political participation. But fundamental to the U.S. and all liberal democratic constitutions is the right to own property and the guarantee that, without the consent of the governed, the government cannot infringe on private property (whether by seizure or taxation). And this has become the norm among contemporary liberal democracies: the defining characteristic of liberal democracy is the right, but not the guarantee, of property ownership.

The lengths to which governments would go to protect private property rights are evident in the film's first scenes which show poor peasants being slaughtered for 'stealing' property by gathering wood to heat their homes. As he later reflected, Marx's journalistic coverage of the government's vicious response to wood 'theft' put him 'in the embarrassing position of having to take part in discussions of material matters – which taught him that constitutions and laws that guarantee freedom are necessary, but not enough: they may give people the right to pursue life, liberty, and happiness, but that is no easy matter for those without the economic wherewithal that would enable them to

do so. As is evident in the film, life for the propertyless wage-laboring class was spent just trying to make a living, to survive – and left little time to pursue happiness.

In the film, Marx responds to Proudhon's assertion that 'property is theft' which he pointed question: 'But what kind of property?'. As should be clear from the foregoing, and as is commonplace today, one might own property in the form of one's house, but though perfectly adequate for living, it is not sufficient for making a living. Marx referred to this kind of property as 'personal private property'. He was not concerned with this kind of property though some 'Marxists' thought that it too should be outlawed. Marx's concern was with *capitalist* private property: private ownership of the means of production. And the class of people that monopolize the means of production, the *bourgeoisie*, are in the position of being able, and *needing*, to hire laborers to use those the means of production. Without labor, nothing gets produced. And those who sell their labor on these means of production owned by others are those who have no access to the means of production that would allow them to make a living, no means of subsistence, other than through selling their labor-power in return for wages.

Wage-labor is neither new, nor something particularly desired. In the Hebrew Bible, Job, having lost his wife, children, and fortune and been stricken with boils, compares his situation to that of a 'day laborer'. But as Marx came to realize with the help of Engels, the place of wage-labor in industrial capitalism is historically unique. In his graphic description of *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Engels chronicled the life of wage-workers in the early years of industrial capitalism was (to paraphrase Thomas Hobbes) 'short, nasty, brutish and poor'. This portrait had profoundly affected Marx in two ways. First, it aroused a deep sympathy for and understanding of those who had no escape from such a life – which he so powerfully formulated in his speech to the Craftworkers with his comment that workers experience the exploitation embedded in the capital-wage labor relation each and every day *on their bodies*. And, it made him heed Engels's advice to read the economists in order to buttress his philosophical commitment to truth and his political commitment to democracy with an understanding of the economic sources of exploitation and oppression and the economic prerequisites of freedom. And this new understanding of the political and economic forces shaping his contemporary world convinced him that private ownership of the means of production in a competitive market economy would have to be eliminated if humanity were to attain the freedom it deserves.

The last scenes of the film are of Marx and Engels working feverishly to finish writing *The Communist Manifesto* – with the Bible one of the two most-read



Karl Marx

documents in human history, and a document all the more astonishing considering that they wrote it a few weeks. While the first line finds all epochs in history characterized by a class struggle between the haves and have-nots, the oppressors and the oppressed, the first section explains why that cycle of eternal recurrence can be broken. And to understand why, it is necessary to



Friedrich Engels

pay careful attention to what they write about the bourgeoisie; for the first few pages praise the bourgeoisie for the 'most revolutionary role' it has played in history: "[The bourgeoisie] has been the first to show what man's activity can bring about'; 'during its rule of scarce one hundred years, [it] has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than all preceding generations together'. For Marx and Engels this vast increase in productivity means that history has reached a point where no one need hunger, where there is potentially enough to go around for everyone. The problem, however, is the private expropriation of profits that maintains the vast inequality

between the owners of the means of production and the wage-laborers who work them.

Capitalism, Marx argued, is self-destructive. Cutthroat competition for profits drives each firm to produce ever more goods in hopes of underselling competitors. But overproduction saturates the market and leads to economic crises in which 'there breaks out an epidemic that, in all earlier epoch, would have seemed an absurdity – *the epidemic of overproduction*'. Economic crises had historically been crises of too *little*, caused by crop failures and famine. Now, amid the immense wealth produced by capitalist industry, we have crises of too much – in response to which, and while people are starving, businesses destroy goods to decrease supply and increase prices, and governments provide subsidies to farmers to refrain from planting crops. In these economic crises and ensuing epidemics of hunger amid too much lies the opportunity for workers to seize the means of production and arrange the production and distribution of goods through democratic control of the workplace by workers – and to socio-economic and political order which allows people reap the benefits of the labor they provide and in which all have not just the right, but the reality of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

### ***The Young Karl Marx: Themes for Discussion and Reflection***

Can freedom be defined in solely political and legal terms, in terms of the *right* to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, but no guarantee. This might be fine if the game were not rigged, but although individuals might get out of poverty and actually have life, liberty and able to pursue happiness, is the capitalist economic order, as Marx suggests, one of 'institutionalized losers'—is it, as

he says, a 'false dream' to think it possible 'to improve a system that naturally produces poverty'

In the film Marx says 'I want to fight with a sledgehammer', but he spent most of his life with pen in hand. He criticized philosophers for only having interpreted the world and insisted what is needed is to change the world. But he spent most of his life sitting at a desk – which he justified by saying that 'Nothing can be done without a positive theory, without offering the workers a constructive doctrine'. Was he being overly academic, exaggerating the importance of not only of his own work, but of intellectual work in general?

In the film, Engels's father responds to Marx critique of hiring child labor with: "if I don't hire children I'll go bankrupt." Yet, in 1863, Josiah Wedgwood and 26 other owners of large pottery firms in England petitioned Parliament to pass a law limiting their employment of child labor – a petition to which Marx approvingly refers in *Capital*. Why do you think Wedgwood and others made this petition?

When Engels's father was told of a machine damaged when a girl fell asleep on the job and got her fingers caught in and cut off by the machine, he responded: 'repairing machines is expensive'. Was he simply greedy and heartless?

Why is it that factory owners and CEOs, whose profits and incomes are soaring, so vehemently resist raises for workers? Have you ever calculated the pre-tax annual income for one making minimum wage and wondered how one might live on that?

What is the source of economic value? During the 2012 election campaign, Mitt Romney divided the population into the 'makers' and the 'takers' – which, amusingly, is the same kind of division that we find in Marx's work. How can they essentially make the same division, but define each group so differently. What assumptions does each make? Which do you think is right?

Marx insists that profit = exploitation. How does he make this equation? Do you agree?

There are several allusions in the film to a term we often hear today, namely: 'wage slave'. Is this just an exaggerated metaphor? Is there any way in which it is an appropriate description?

Why is it that those factory owners, CEOs, etc. who prefer a constitutional democracy to monarchy or dictatorship act like monarchs or dictators (e.g. Engels senior) within the workplace? Are they justified in doing so? How does such subjection to such autocratic rule affect working people?

Under what conditions does labor become a commodity? How did it come about that most people in today's world sell their labor (whether for a 'wage' or for a 'salary')???