

Raoul Peck's *The Young Karl Marx*

By Peter Schwarz
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There are periods when knowledge of nature and society undergoes a quantum leap within a short time. In the natural sciences, the names of Galileo, Darwin and Einstein are associated with such revolutions; in the social sciences, it is the names of Marx and Engels.

Within the space of a few years, the two men accomplished an unprecedented revolution of ideas. They broke with German idealism and placed the understanding of society on a materialistic basis. They discovered the class struggle as the driving force of history and developed socialism from a utopia into a science.

The full significance of this colossal achievement became clear only with the passage of time. Marxism laid the theoretical foundation for the first mass party of the working class, German Social Democracy led by August Bebel, and the first victorious proletarian revolution, the October Revolution in Russia 100 years ago.

While Stalinism destroyed the Soviet Union, Marxism is more relevant today than ever before. The global financial crisis, outrageous levels of social inequality, growing militarism, and the rise to prominence of extreme right-wing figures such as Donald Trump in the US—all of this has prompted many to turn to Marx to find a way out of the impasse of capitalism. Even Marx's opponents are forced to take his insights seriously once again.

The Haitian-born director Raoul Peck has set himself the task of presenting the formative years of Marxism in a film. He is well aware of the timeliness of his theme. "At a time when the world is in a state of emergency due to the financial crisis, Karl Marx is experiencing unexpected interest," he writes in a contribution to the film. More than 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was now possible "to return to Karl Marx's contribution to science without feelings of guilt." The task of the film, he explained, is "to discover the real contribution of this scientific and political thinker."

The collaboration between Marx and Engels

The Young Karl Marx focuses on a strictly limited period. It begins with the prohibition, in March 1843, of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, which Marx led as editor, and concludes with the writing of the *Communist Manifesto* at the end of 1847. These are the years during which Marx and Engels broke with the petty bourgeois democrats and laid the theoretical foundations for the modern, socialist workers movement.

The film portrays the events of these years in strictly chronological order, focusing on the close collaboration between Marx and Engels. It also gives attention to the contributions of Marx's wife, Jenny von Westphalen, and Engels' wife Mary Burns, an Irish worker. This focus on Marx and Engels constitutes the strength of the film. Peck vividly shows how the two inspire one another and develop a close personal friendship.

Peck, who became acquainted with Marxism as a student in the West Berlin of the 1970s, refrains from any attempt to construct a contrast between the "romantic" and "covert idealist" Marx and the materialist Engels, as was usual among "Western Marxist" circles of the time. The film repeatedly identifies Marx as a "great materialist" and expounds the revolutionary basis of the friendship between Marx and Engels: their determination not to reconcile themselves with the existing conditions of

exploitation and the half-heartedness of the petty-bourgeois democrats.

The very first scene portrays a brutal massacre of poor people gathering dead wood in a forest, a punishable offence according to the law of that time. An article by Marx from the *Rheinische Zeitung* is quoted: "The people sees the punishment, but it does not see the crime. And because it sees no crime where there is punishment, you should fear it, because it will take revenge."

The prohibition of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, which was constantly obliged to make concessions to the Prussian censorship, leads to a fierce dispute between Marx and the young Hegelians, who blame Marx's strident polemics for the ban.

Marx replies: "All you think about is hair-splitting over words. You write vague literary reviews and vague summaries of vague political ideas. You Young Hegelians and freethinkers, as you call yourselves looking for approval, continue to enjoy yourselves! I have become tired of fighting with pinpricks. I have become tired of hypocrisy. We are banned. Be it!"

Marx himself wrote 16 years later about his development at that time: "In the year 1842-43, as editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, I first found myself in the embarrassing position of having to discuss what is known as material interests. The deliberations of the Rhenish Landtag on forest thefts and the division of landed property ... caused me in the first instance to turn my attention to economic questions."

Marx objected to the "echo of French socialism and communism, slightly tinged by philosophy" that was "noticeable in the *Rheinische Zeitung*," calling it "dilettantism." His previous studies, however, did not allow him "to express any opinion on the content of the French theories." That is why "when the publishers of the *Rheinische Zeitung* conceived the illusion that by a more compliant policy on the part of the paper it might be possible to secure the abrogation of the death sentence passed upon it, I eagerly grasped the opportunity to withdraw from the public stage to my study."

One of the main focal points of the film is Engels' experience in England with his father's textile business in Manchester—where Engels works as a clerk—and the terrible living quarters of the working class. Engels could access the workers' quarters, thanks to his girlfriend Mary Burns—but not without receiving a bloody nose in the process. Here he assembles the material for his book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, which appears in 1845.

This work is not only a "terrible charge against capitalism and the bourgeoisie," Lenin later comments. "Engels was the *first* to say that the proletariat is *not only* a suffering class; that it is, in fact, the disgraceful economic condition of the proletariat that drives it irresistibly forward and compels it to fight for its ultimate emancipation. And the fighting proletariat *will help itself*."

The film shows quite correctly that it was Engels who pointed out to Marx the importance of the writings of the classical English economists. His article, "Outline of a Critique of National Economy," published by Engels at the beginning of their collaboration in the *German-French Yearbooks*, anticipated many of the ideas Marx later developed more thoroughly in *Capital*.

In a later scene—one of the most amusing in the film—Engels, Marx and Mary Burns encounter an employer friend of Engels senior in a London club. The entrepreneur, who employs children at his factory, stoutly maintains that night shifts do not affect their health. “You mean, they do not affect your health,” Mary Burns replies to the stunned employer.

Raoul Peck has selected German actors for the main roles in the film, a Franco-German-Belgian co-production. August Diehl is a convincing Marx, combining perspicacity and wit with authority. Stefan Konarske plays a charming Engels, who is perhaps a touch too ingratiating.

Vicky Krieps is a very credible Jenny Marx, who abandoned her aristocratic upbringing to share the fate of an emigrant and become the wife of a revolutionary—and did not regret it for a moment. Hannah Steele plays Mary Burns as a rebellious and independent Irish woman, though it is not authenticated that she became acquainted with Engels as a ringleader of rebellious workers at the factory of Engels senior, as the film implies.

The supporting roles are also filled well. Olivier Gourmet presents a somewhat pedantic Proudhon, and Alexander Scheer a clumsy Weitling, giving speeches in florid phrases.

Political conflicts

Marx and Engels developed their historical materialist outlook on the eve of the bourgeois revolution, which swept across Europe in 1848, through fierce polemics with representatives of tendencies articulating the interests of bourgeois and middle-class layers, as well as conservative artisans.

The film gives much space to these disputes. In the course of the film we are introduced to, among many others, the young Hegelians Max Stirner and Bruno Bauer, the editor of the *German-French Yearbooks* Arnold Ruge, the French socialist Pierre Proudhon, the True Socialists Moses Hess and Karl Grün, and the utopian Wilhelm Weitling.

Although the dialogues are largely based on original sources, it is often difficult to understand what the disputes are about. One reason is the drama of the action. The film tries to portray the life of its protagonists—both are not yet 30—in all their aspects: love, birth, debauchery, material misery, conflicts with parents, etc. Peck said his intention was to put Marx, the “bearded old man,” aside and to revive “the exploits of this fabulous trio ... in an explosive Europe under the thumb of censorship and on the eve of the bourgeois-democratic revolution.”

As a result, the political content of the disputes often remains obscure. Before the viewer has grappled with one topic, the film moves on to the next scene. Here, a somewhat slower pace would have been desirable. It’s worth watching the movie twice.

The reduction of processes that developed over a protracted period to a single event creates problems as well. Dramatically, this may be justified, but it trivializes the film.

In real life, Marx and Engels got to know one another over a prolonged period. Engels had already met Marx in Cologne when Marx was still in charge of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, and Engels also wrote for the newspaper. Their first meeting in Cologne was cool because Marx had already broken with the Young Hegelians, while Engels still supported them. Nevertheless, prior to commencing their lifelong friendship in Paris, they had already known and appreciated the work of each other.

In the film, however, (apart from an accidental meeting in Berlin) Marx and Engels meet each other in the Paris apartment of Arnold Ruge, begin by verbally abusing one another, then seek to outdo themselves with mutual compliments and finally seal their friendship with a game of chess and much alcohol—all in one day. This appears artificial and lacks credibility.

The following scene is even more trivial. The drunken pair stagger along the streets of Paris, Marx throws up in the gutter, and then slurs:

“You know, I think I’ve understood something. The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.” This is the most embarrassing scene in the entire movie.

In fact, Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach*, of which number 11 is cited here, represented a tremendous advance in the elaboration of the historical-materialist outlook. Tackling the idealism of Hegel and the Young Hegelians, Marx and Engels had turned to the materialism of Ludwig Feuerbach. His materialism, however, was passive and contemplative because, as Marx put it, he did “not grasp the significance of ‘revolutionary,’ of ‘practical-critical,’ activity.”

The issue for Marx was not to counterpose changing the world to its interpretation and to promote some sort of blind activism, as this scene suggests. Rather, Marx emphasized that the world can only be properly understood by incorporating human practice. That then provides the basis for consciously changing it.

The League of the Just

The last third of the film deals with the activities of Marx and Engels in the League of the Just. It shows that even at that time they worked intensively to establish an international party of the working class. In Brussels, they founded the Communist Correspondence Committee, which was able to establish links with a number of countries. In the beginning of 1847, they then joined the ranks of the League of the Just, which had been founded in 1836 by German workers and tailors forced into exile. The League propagated political and social revolution, and had offshoots in several countries.

Marx and Engels worked on basing the practice of the League on a properly thought out, scientific program. This required a rigorous struggle against various petty bourgeois tendencies, which exercised considerable influence on the League. The film reconstructs the political struggles that raged in the League with great intensity. Here, too, the heated arguments sometimes distract from the content of the issues disputed.

Marx’s confrontation with Proudhon is dealt with in a number of scenes. Early in the film, Karl and Jenny Marx attend a banquet in Paris at which the celebrated middle-class socialist and forerunner of anarchism speaks. Marx criticises his famous phrase “property is theft,” which, as Jenny mockingly remarks “is travelling in circles.” If property is theft, then what is theft, the misappropriation of property?

Nevertheless, relations with Proudhon remain friendly. However, when Proudhon publishes his work, *The Philosophy of Poverty*, in 1846, Marx responds with *The Poverty of Philosophy*. The book tears Proudhon’s theories apart and answers them with the first systematic presentation of historical materialism.

Much time in the film is also given to the polemics with Wilhelm Weitling, a tailor who had played a leading role in establishing the League of the Just. Weitling defended communist ideas, which he sought to realize with utopian methods. Marx and Engels try to convince him that the working class needs a scientific theory and cannot content itself with a propaganda based exclusively on morals and feelings.

In the end, there is an open break. After Weitling proclaims at a meeting that “a hundred thousand armed proletarians, with the help of forty thousand criminals” are sufficient “to end the tyranny of the bourgeoisie,” Marx retorts: “To seek to mobilise workers without offering them a doctrine that is constructive is a dishonest and arrogant game with an inspired prophet on the one side and speechless and feeble-minded people on the other.”

The deeply offended Weitling points to thousands of letters, “which prove to me that my modest work is of greater weight for the cause than parlour room doctrines, far removed from the suffering people.” Marx roars back angrily: “Ignorance has not helped anyone, never.”

Finally, Weitling leaves the room saying, “I will be the first victim of the guillotine. Then it’s your turn. Then your friends’. And finally, you’ll

cut off your own neck. Critique devours everything that exists. And when nothing is left, it devours itself.”

This scene is ambiguous. It can be interpreted as a critique of Marx’s struggle for programmatic and theoretical clarity. Peck, as is clear from his film, has nothing in common with those who make Marxism responsible for the crimes of Stalinism. However, in a comment on the film, he also expressed his mistrust of “all dogmas, including ‘Marxism’” —without specifying what he means by “Marxism” in quotation marks.

It is also striking that the film ends—to the music of a Bob Dylan song—with a rapid sequence of images of catastrophes, key events, political figures and protests of the past 100 years. It features images of Che Guevara, Patrice Lumumba and the Occupy movement, but not of Lenin and Trotsky and the October Revolution. In this way, Peck glorifies precisely the type of petty-bourgeois politics that Marx, as the film vividly shows, entirely rejected.

Raoul Peck was born in Haiti, grew up in Zaire (Congo), the United States and France, and studied in Berlin. Politically, he was always closer to anti-imperialist nationalist movements than to revolutionary Marxism. Two of his best-known films deal with Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of independent Congo, whose murder by the CIA Peck experienced as a child. Peck was minister of culture in Haiti from 1996 to 1997.

Peck’s co-author, Pascal Bonitzer, has a long history in the French “left” cinema. He played a prominent role in the film journal *Cahiers du Cinema*, at a time when it was undergoing a Maoist, post-structuralist phase in the early 1970s.

It must be assumed, therefore, that some of the film’s weaknesses are not only the result of the difficulty of adequately portraying complex theoretical discussions within a two-hour film, but also of certain reservations on the part of the filmmakers about Marxism.

This does not affect, however, the conclusion of the film. Marx and Engels experience a huge success when the League of the Just is transformed into the Communist League in 1847 and changes its central slogan from “All human beings are brothers” to “Proletarians of all countries, unite.” The second congress of the Communist League, attended by representatives from 30 branches from seven countries, including the US, then commissions Marx and Engels to write its program, the *Communist Manifesto*.

The film ends with Marx, Engels and Jenny working intensively on the *Communist Manifesto*, reading aloud paragraphs from this outstanding historic document.

If the film, despite its weaknesses, encourages young people to study Marxism, it will fulfill an important task.

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