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## *The Young Karl Marx: a Film for Our Time?*



*Still from "The Young Marx."*

I've been waiting for this film since I first heard about it a year or so ago. Forget your preconceived notions, cold war paranoia or the USSR. This movie takes place in the 1840s, long before any of the later revolutions or rise of socialist governments. This film might better have been called "Young Marx & Engels." I'm glad to see attention paid to Frederick Engels, a brilliant thinker and a clear writer. Where Marx was a historian, number-crunching economist and systems analyst, Engels was possibly the first modern sociologist. Both researched and described in detail the inner workings, successes and

basic problems with the then new economic system of capitalism. Both were also keenly aware of the oppression and the alienation from basic humanity of those driven off the land and into dangerous and monotonous factory work which impoverished workers spiritually as well as economically while enriching and empowering a rising class of manufacturers and later, paper shuffling, parasitic market gamblers.

This film was produced by Raoul Peck who also brilliantly produced. “I Am Not Your Negro” based on James Baldwin’s unfinished manuscripts regarding the civil rights struggle. About “The Young Marx,” Peck states,

The project was initiated more than 10 years ago, at almost the same time as I started I Am Not Your Negro. For me, it was my responsibility as a filmmaker, with what I have seen happening around me, with the world today. This is a film about the evolution of ideas – not only of ideas, but of those specific ideas of Marx and Engels. And showing the contradictions of the socialist movement itself at its birth, explaining scientific socialism to a wider public, in contrast to populism, to mysticism, to utopianism. When I say that I wanted to stick to the reality, that means not to do the usual biopic, but rather to tell the story of what happened. We didn’t want to go to the books that summarize what Marxism is. We’re going to go to the correspondence, the same way I did for [James] Baldwin, using his words – in this case using the correspondence between Marx, Engels, Jenny and their friends. Eighty percent of the material is from that correspondence. It was very important to show the actual relationship, the partnership of Marx and Engels as it took shape.

I find Peck’s efforts and goals admirable, though in seeing the film I felt there were some shortcomings. It seemed more of a drama-driven biopic than I would have liked, but then that is what theatergoers want. Given my own philosophical bent, I was hoping for more in-depth conversations between the characters regarding the meat of the concepts at hand. Though there were snippets, I found it inadequate, as most viewers have little or no familiarity with these concepts and are likely to miss them. There are attempts to show that Marx raised the socialist struggle beyond utopianism but they are insufficient, references to Engel’s book “The Condition of the Working Class in England” aside, in showing the scientific basis related to the analysis of capitalism beyond the emotional reaction to conditions. In this regard, while this film is hardly a crash course in Marxism, it will hopefully inspire interest and further reading. I would suggest Marx’s essays, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon,” “The Civil War in France” and, of course, “Capital.”

Though Marx's interactions with and criticism of the French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon are important, there were not, in my opinion, sufficient descriptions of the concepts of the labor-basis of value and of profits derived from the surplus value created, or of the nature of private property as opposed to personal property. Private property in this context refers to factories, mines and mills where value is produced socially by many with profits hoarded by a few owners. I would also like to have seen more on the alienation and dehumanization of the industrial productive model under the near serfdom of this system.

I was glad to see the emphasis on Engels but the attempt to humanize and to dramatize, sadly took precedent over the meat of Marx & Engels' message & achievements. The film begins with the image of poor people scavenging for wood, being unmercifully attacked and slaughtered by land owners. This was based on historic reality in Germany at the time. It proceeds to Marx getting fired from the Rheinische Zeitung newspaper in Cologne, as it is getting raided by police. This is the run-up to the failed German revolution of 1848 from which many Germans emigrated to our own country. Marx moves to Brussels.

The film proceeds to the Ermen & Engels cotton mill in Manchester England, owned by the father of Frederick Engels. This is an accurate portrayal in which angry workers, some fingerless from injuries on the job, are cruelly confronted for daring to complain by his father. A beautiful rebellious woman played by Hannah Steele is fired. The younger Engels, witnessing the terrible conditions sympathizes with the employees. He goes to the slums where workers live to learn more and proceeds to write his famous aforementioned book. He marries the rebellious woman who continues to play an important role in the process of philosophical development, as does Jenny Marx. Another great book by Engels that I highly recommend, not mentioned in this film, is "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State."

There is a satisfying scene where Engels introduces Marx to a London industrialist and friend of his father. This becomes a critical conversation regarding the use of child labor in the mills and the nature of competition, labor costs and profits. The disapproval Engels gets from his industrialist father over his writing and association with Marx is an ongoing theme as are political and economic difficulties suffered by Marx and his wife Jenny as they are pushed from country to country with a growing family.

The threats Engels faces down and the exiles and arrests Marx and other socialist thinkers face reflects the fear of the moneyed ruling class even today. As the Paris Commune and the initial response and invasion of the early USSR demonstrate, nothing has the power

to unite erstwhile enemies than the notion that they are not necessary – that people can govern ourselves without them. This has remained true of the corporate ruling class. We have continued to see anti-socialist demonization and the crushing of populist regimes ever since. As an old labor song says, “you ain’t done nothin’ if you ain’t been called a red.”

Marx finally settles in London where he and Engels join a utopian socialist group called “The League of the Just” whose motto is “All Men are Brothers.” They take it over, changing it to the “Communist League” with the new motto “Workers of All Countries Unite.” Much of the rest of the film has to do with the writing of the famous Communist Manifesto. It is here is where more essential concepts come through.

The great achievement of Marx and Engels that doesn’t come through adequately in this film is their contribution in moving socialism from utopian idealism and anarchist thought to scientific method, based on solid analysis of economics, history and social reality. This is applied philosophy in the public interest — a tool never meant to be a dogma. It is about the nature of work, of property and of society with the goal of returning us to productive work that feeds our spiritual needs and of sharing in the gains of our common labor rather than being disposable serfs working for a pittance to further enrich a few billionaires. It is about our gaining democratic ownership of the workplace and of society. It has always been at root, about building participatory democracy – a humane society where everyone is able to fulfill their potential. This comes through to a degree, but it could have been clearer.

This film takes place in the 1840s and we live today in a very different world, but the beast that is capitalism has not changed its spots. Much of the description of capitalism in the original Manifesto remains accurate today. Capital indeed has knocked down national barriers, becoming in essence a country of its own without borders. The wealthiest today are connected inseparably in global knots of commerce and entangled offshore accounts while most of us continue to work our lives away with little if any real control or democratic voice. We are slaves to mortgages, rents, utilities, bosses and the debt we accrue just to survive – if we are lucky. The parliaments and congresses of capitalist countries can still be described as they were in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, acting as the unofficial board of directors of major industries.

The film ends by connecting to our time with flashes of modern struggles like Occupy, World Bank protests and others with the background of Bob Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone.” At first I thought Communist anthem “The International” would have been more

appropriate but in truth, without an understanding of the system in which we live, without a knowledge of the historic and continuing struggles of working people, without an understanding of class, of militant solidarity and organization – without the tool of Marxist analysis, we are all, each and every one of us, on our own, with no direction home, a complete unknown — like a rolling stone.

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