

Book Review: Unusual Marx - On Suicide

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Karl Marx, Kevin Anderson and Eric Plaut (editors), and Gabrielle Edgcomb (translator), *Karl Marx on Suicide* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 147 pages, \$49.95 hardcover and \$14.95 paper.

Michael Löwy is co-author, with Robert Sayre, of *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity* (Duke University Press, 2001). He is Research Director in Sociology at the CNRS (National Center for Scientific Research) and is Guest Lecturer at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, both in Paris.

There is a rather unusual document among Marx's writings. It is titled, "Peuchet: vom Selbstmord" (*Gesellschaftspiegel*, zweiter Band, Heft VII, Elberfeld, Januar 1846), and it is composed of translated excerpts from Jacques Peuchet's *Du Suicide et de ses Causes* (a chapter from his memoirs). The book under review is an English translation of this document, combined with introductions by editors Kevin Anderson and Eric Plaut. As we shall see, this small and almost forgotten article by Marx is a precious contribution to a richer understanding of the evils of modern bourgeois society, of the suffering that its patriarchal family structure inflicts on women, and of the broad and universal scope of socialism.

Marx's article distinguishes itself in several respects, some of which are mentioned in the introductions:

It is not a piece written by Marx himself, but mainly composed of translated excerpts from another author (Peuchet). Marx used to fill notebooks with such excerpts, but he never published them.

The author chosen is neither an economist, nor a historian, nor a philosopher, not even a socialist, but a former head of the French police archives under the Restoration!

The excerpted work is not a scientific one, but a loose collection of "life incidents," anecdotes, and small stories, followed by some comments.

The subject matter of the article does not belong to what is usually considered to be the political or economic spheres, but has to do with private life, specifically suicide.

The main social issue discussed in connection with suicide is women's oppression in modern societies.

Each one of these traits is unusual in Marx's bibliography, but in combination, they make this piece unique. Considering its nature, it is even fair to ask to what extent it can be considered as belonging to Marx's writings at all. However, Marx left his imprint on the text in several ways: by his introduction, by the comments with which he peppered the piece, by his selection of the excerpts, and by the modifications introduced through the translations. And the main reason why the piece can be considered as expressing Marx's own views is that he introduced no distinction whatsoever between his own comments and the excerpts from Peuchet, so that the whole document appears as a

homogeneous piece of writing, signed by Karl Marx.

The first question one has to ask, is, of course, why Marx picked up Peuchet. What interested him in the piece? I'm afraid I cannot agree with the hypothesis suggested in 1992 by Philippe Bourrinet, the editor of the French edition of the article, and taken up by Kevin Anderson in his otherwise superb introduction, that the document is a veiled critique of the "true socialist" editors of the *Gesellschafts Spiegel*, such as Moses Hess. In fact, there is not a single word in the paper which may suggest such an orientation. True, Marx hails the superiority of French social thinkers, but he does not compare them to German but to English socialists. Moreover, he and Engels—the other editor of the *Gesellschafts Spiegel*—had excellent relations with Moses Hess during those years (1845–1846), and even asked him to cooperate in their common polemical endeavor against neo-Hegelian idealism, *The German Ideology*.

Part of the explanation is suggested by Marx himself in his introduction to the excerpts: the value of French social criticism against modern life conditions, and particularly against established property, family, and other private relations—in one word, private life. To use a modern expression, this is a social criticism based on the understanding that the private is political. Marx emphasized the interest of such critique when expressed in a literary or semi-literary form: novels and memoirs. His enthusiasm for Balzac is well known, as well as his assertion that he learned more about bourgeois society from his novels than from hundreds of economic treatises. Of course, Peuchet is no Balzac, but his memoirs certainly had a sort of literary quality: it is enough to recall that one of his stories inspired Alexander Dumas' celebrated *Count of Monte Cristo*.

In fact, what attracted Marx so much in Peuchet's chapter is not an "unconscious" interest in suicide—I must disagree with Eric Plaut's hypothesis, based on too little evidence—but his well known interest in radical social criticism of bourgeois society as an "un-natural" (Marx's own words in the introduction) form of life.

Suicide is, both for Marx and Peuchet, mainly significant as the symptom of a sick society, much in need of radical transformation. Modern society, writes Peuchet, quoting Rousseau, is a desert, inhabited by wild beasts. Each individual is isolated from the others, alone among millions, in a sort of mass solitude. [1] People are strangers to each other, and mutually hostile; in this society of struggle and merciless competition, of war of all against all, the only choice left for the individual is to become a victim or a hangman. This is the social context which explains desperation and suicide. The classification of the causes of suicide is a classification of the evils of modern bourgeois society—evils that cannot be suppressed (here it is Marx who speaks) without a radical refoundation of the social and economic structures.

This sort of ethical and social critique is obviously romantic. Peuchet's sympathy for Romanticism is documented not only by his reference to Rousseau, but also by his sharp indictment of the bourgeois philistine—whose soul is his business, and whose God is his commerce—who has nothing but contempt for the poor victims of suicide and the romantic poems of despair which they leave behind.

One should keep in mind that Romanticism is not only a literary school, but, as Marx himself often suggested, a cultural protest against modern capitalist civilization, in the name of an idealized past. While far from being a Romantic, Marx much admired the Romantic critics of bourgeois society—writers such as Balzac and Dickens, political thinkers such as Carlyle, economists such as Sismondi—and often incorporated their insights in his own writings. [2] Most of them, like Peuchet, were not socialists. But, as Marx argues in his introduction to the article, one does not have to be a socialist in order to criticize the prevailing order. Romantic tropes such as those present in the Peuchet excerpts—the inhuman and beastly nature of bourgeois society, the soulless bourgeois egoism and greed—are often present in Marx's early works, but here, in this piece, they take an

unusual character.

While mentioning the economic evils of capitalism which explain many of the suicides—low salaries, unemployment, misery—Peuchet emphasizes rather those forms of social injustice which are not directly economic, and which affect the private life of non-proletarian individuals.

Could it be that this is only Peuchet's viewpoint and not that of Marx? Not so! Marx, himself, in his introduction, sarcastically refers to the bourgeois philanthropists who believe—like Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss—that we live in the best of all possible worlds, and want to give some bread to the workers, "as if only workers suffer from present social conditions." In other words, for Marx/Peuchet, the critique of bourgeois society cannot be limited to the issue of economic exploitation, however important such exploitation is. Criticism has to take a broad social and ethical character, encompassing all of capitalism's deep and many-sided evil aspects. Capitalist society's inhuman character hurts individuals of various social origins.

Now—and here we come to the most interesting aspect of the essay—who are those non-proletarian victims, driven to desperation and suicide by bourgeois society? There is one social category which takes a central place both in the excerpts and Marx's commentaries: women.

This piece is, in fact, one of the most powerful indictments of women's oppression ever published under Marx's signature. Three of the four excerpted cases of suicide deal with women, victims of patriarchy, or, in the words of Peuchet/Marx, family tyranny, a form of arbitrary power which had not been overthrown by the French revolution. [3] Two of them were "bourgeois" females, and the third was of more popular origin (a tailor's daughter). But their fate was sealed by gender rather than by class.

The first case, the girl driven to suicide by her parents, illustrates the brutal patriarchal authority of the pater (and mater) familias—vehemently denounced by Marx in his comment, as the cowardly revenge of individuals usually forced to submission in bourgeois society, against those weaker than themselves.

The second example—the young woman from Martinique closed behind doors by her husband until she commits suicide—is by far the most important, both in its length, and in Marx's passionate comments. It appears, in his eyes, as paradigmatic of the absolute patriarchal power of men over their wives, and for their accompanying attitude of jealous private property owners. In Marx's indignant remarks, the tyrannical husband is compared to a slave driver. Thanks to social conditions that ignore true and free love, and to the patriarchal nature of both the Civil Code and property laws, the male oppressor was able to treat his wife like a miser treats his gold coffer—kept behind closed doors as a thing, an object, as "part of his inventory." Capitalist reification and patriarchal domination are associated by Marx in this radical indictment of modern bourgeois male-dominated family relations.

The third case deals with an issue that will become one of the main banners of the feminist movement after 1969: the right to abortion. It is about a young woman who became pregnant against the sacred rules of the patriarchal family and was driven to suicide by social hypocrisy, by reactionary ethics, and by bourgeois laws that forbid abortion.

In its treatment of these three case studies, the Marx/Peuchet essay—that is, both the selected excerpts and the comments of Marx the translator, inseparably (because not separated by Marx)—amounts to a passionate protest against patriarchy, the enslavement of women, including bourgeois women, and the oppressive nature of the bourgeois family. With few exceptions, there is nothing like it in Marx's later writings. [4]

Michael Löwy (Mar 01, 2002)

P.S.

* <https://monthlyreview.org/2002/03/01/unusual-marx/>

Footnotes

[1] For a brilliant Marxist essay on this issue in the works of French writers, see Robert Sayre, *Solitude in Society: A Sociological Study on French Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).

[2] On Marx and Romanticism, see Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

[3] Only one of the four suicide stories selected by Marx is a man—an unemployed ex-member of the Royal Guard.

[4] Such as, for instance, his article from 1858 on Lady Bulwer-Lytton, committed to an asylum by her patriarchal Tory husband (see K. Anderson's Introduction).