

Marx on Suicide: New insights on human relations

by Charles Herr

MARX ON SUICIDE, edited by Eric Plaut and Kevin Anderson (Northwestern University Press, \$14.95), is a marvelous little book. It includes a new translation of Marx's little-known 1846 text on suicide. Marx's text is partly his own words and partly his heavily edited translation of French police official Jacques Peuchet's account of suicides in Paris, mainly by women. The volume also contains introductions by Anderson and Plaut as well as original source material in French and German.

I believe that the topic of suicide was really incidental to Marx's deepest interest, which was freedom, the social conditions that promote or stifle human freedom, and the consequences of the suppression of freedom, in this instance, the extreme consequence of suicide. In addition, I believe that Marx, in translating and commenting upon Peuchet's memoirs, was moved by the latter's compassionate and nonjudgmental description of the people—primarily women—who were driven to suicide by their social circumstances.

I do not believe we need to postulate any morbid preoccupation with suicide per se to explain Marx's interest in the topic. In the first place, I know of no evidence that Marx was depressed at the time he translated and wrote this piece. This brief piece is all, to my knowledge, that Marx wrote about the subject of suicide, and in many respects it is not very different from the piece he wrote for the NEW YORK DAILY TRIBUNE on Jan. 28, 1853 on capital punishment, in which he asked, "Now, if crimes observed on a great scale thus show, in their amount and their classification, the regularity of physical phenomena...is there not a necessity for deeply reflecting upon an alteration of the system that breeds these crimes, instead of glorifying the hangman who executes a lot of criminals to make room only for the supply of new ones?"

SOCIAL CONDITIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Marx was concerned about the alteration of a system that either drove people to suicide or sent them to the gallows. In particular, Marx was explicitly concerned with the social conditions and the social relationships that transform human beings into the property of others, that make them into things. On one case reported by Peuchet Marx comments:

"The unfortunate woman was condemned to unbearable slavery and M. de M. exercised his slaveholding rights, supported by the civil code and the right of property. These were based on social conditions which deem love to be unrelated to the spontaneous feelings of the lovers, but which permit the jealous husband to fetter his wife in chains, like a miser with his hoard of gold, for she is but a part of his inventory" (pp. 57-58).

We need only think of the increasing awareness today of the brutal ways that submission is enforced through domestic violence to recognize the contemporariness of this observation.

Marx's interest in the character of the relationship of man to woman and what it tells us about the stage that human development has reached runs throughout his work, as Anderson documents in his introduction, from the 1844 ECONOMIC AND PHILOSOPHIC MANUSCRIPTS conomic and Philosophical Manuscripts to the ETHNOLOGICAL NOTEBOOKS written just before his death. He was also interested in what happens to human beings when they become commodities, mere bearers of labor power, to be bought and used to accumulate capital and then discarded when they no longer serve this purpose.

ALIENATION IN BOURGEOIS SOCIETY

Certainly, a central concern of Marx is the topic of alienation, the alienation of people from their own powers and themselves. Clearly, such alienation was a factor in the suicides described by Peuchet. It is extremely important to recall, however, that Marx was not only critical of capitalism because it alienated people from themselves, but also because it alienated them from others, from a genuine human community in which each member is, as Marx put it, "a really individual communal being" ("Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," in Bottomore, trans., KARL MARX: EARLY WRITINGS, p. 158).

Marx sharply critiqued the bourgeois concept of liberty as "the right to do everything which does not harm others." He writes, "The limits within which each individual can act without harming others are determined by law, just as the boundary between two fields is marked by a stake. It is the question of the liberty of man regarded as an isolated monad... [Liberty in this view] is not founded upon the relations between man and man, but rather upon the separation of man from man. It is the right of such separation. The right of the CIRCUMSCRIBED individual, withdrawn into himself."

"The right of property is, therefore, the right to enjoy one's fortune and to dispose of it as one will; without regard for other men and independently of society. It is the right of self-interest. This individual liberty, and its application, form the basis of civil society. It leads every man to see in other men, not the REALIZATION, but rather the LIMITATION of his own liberty."

With regard to the definition of equality in the 1795 French constitution, Marx writes: "It is only the equal right to liberty as defined above; namely that every man is equally regarded as a self-sufficient monad" ("On the Jewish Question," in Bottomore, pp. 24-25). In contrast to this bourgeois definition of freedom, Marx observed, "When communist artisans form associations, teaching and propaganda are their first aims. But their association itself creates a

new need-the need for society-and what appeared to be a means has become an end" ("Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," in Bottomore, p. 176).

PSYCHOLOGY AND HUMAN CHARACTER

Beyond this, I do not believe that an interest in psychological issues and human character was at all atypical for Marx. Freud had not yet created a dynamic psychology of the human being or developed the concept of the unconscious but, to quote Erich Fromm, "The volumes containing the unabridged correspondence between Marx and Engels show a capacity for penetrating analysis of unconscious motivation that would be a credit to any gifted psychoanalyst" (SOCIALIST HUMANISM p. 229). Marx had a great admiration for the works of Shakespeare and Balzac, precisely I believe because of their penetrating description of social character types.

Fromm cites Marx's son-in-law Paul Lafargue to the effect that "[Marx] admired Balzac so much that he wished to write a review of his great work LA COMEDIE HUMAINE as soon as he finished his book on economics. He considered Balzac not only as the historian of his time, but as the prophetic creator of characters which were still in embryo in the days of Louis Philippe and did not fully develop until after his death, under Napoleon III." Marx never wrote this review, because of his single-minded devotion to completing his work on economics, which, although only a step in his total research, did not permit him to develop these other interests. To give another example, in 1977 Saul Padover published an entire volume of 391 large pages of selections from Marx, ON HISTORY AND PEOPLE, which includes many psychologically penetrating observations on historical personalities.

I believe one of the best illustrations of Marx's incisive psychological insight is the comment that he inserted in Peuchet's work (without attribution!) in his text on suicide: "Those who are most cowardly, who are least capable of resistance themselves, become unyielding as soon as they can exert absolute parental authority. The abuse of that authority also serves as a cruel substitute for all of the submissiveness and dependency people in bourgeois society acquiesce in, willing or unwillingly" (pp. 53-54).

This is an absolutely brilliant description of the sadomasochistic character. It anticipates some of what Fromm writes about in the papers on criminology that Anderson draws attention to in his essay on the young Fromm's contribution to criminology (see Anderson and Quinney, eds., ERICH FROMM AND CRITICAL CRIMINOLOGY: BEYOND THE PUNITIVE SOCIETY (University of Illinois Press). Marx sees clearly that their sadistic punitiveness is rooted in the submission, in what Fromm calls the un-lived life, of the authoritarian character. Related to this is his or her hatred and envy of those who do not submit.

Marx also, in one or two brushstrokes, describes the way in which bourgeois society deprives practically all of its members (willingly or unwillingly) of the freedom to be fully themselves. Marx continued to believe throughout his life that capitalism distorted the human development of the bourgeoisie as well as the industrial workers, but, because their suffering was less intense, he believed they had less motivation than the workers to change the capitalist system that Marx believed to be dehumanizing for ALL its members.

I think this work by Marx would be worth bringing attention to for that one quotation on the sadomasochistic character type alone. Of course, there is much more, in particular about the concrete ways in which women are made into objects to be possessed, into property, in bourgeois (and more generally, patriarchal, male dominated) societies.

MARX'S PERSONALITY

I certainly do not wish to idolize Marx or to contribute to any cult of personality, something which Marx and Engels both explicitly eschewed. At the same time, I think that it is important to examine critically some of the ways in which I believe Marx has been pathologized.

For instance, consider how Plaut, one of the editors of *MARX ON SUICIDE*, describes Marx as angry. The real issue is what he was angry about and whether or not it was appropriate to be angry. He was angry because he cared passionately and was not indifferent. We should have more such angry people! I don't believe he was always angry and there are wonderful descriptions of how he could be patient and humorous, including with children who were attracted to his company. (Children tend to avoid angry, hostile people.) Wilhelm Liebknecht, Lafargue and Eleanor Marx are quite consistent in their picture of Marx in this regard.

I agree that Marx was aggressive when fighting opponents and could be intolerant, but interestingly, according to FREUD'S theory (which I do not, in fact, believe to be accurate), aggression toward others ought to diminish the aggression directed toward oneself-as in suicide. In any case, self-assertive aggression is not identical with destructiveness. In fact, it is the opposite of sadism, as Marx indicates so clearly in the quotation cited above.

Also, I believe that to portray Marx as only having a friendship with Engels is a major distortion. Marx's friendship with Engels is only the best known and for good reason: it is one of the most remarkable friendships in human history. Marx had close and creative friendships with Ludwig Kugelmann, Joseph Weydemeyer and Wilhelm Wolff. Lafargue and Liebknecht both describe rich relationships with Marx.

Liebknecht notes that there were "no bad photos of Marx," because Marx was never posing for the camera. He describes him as a deeply caring and committed man who found any physical abuse of women by their husbands intolerable. In short, Marx was simply and completely himself, an intense, passionate man, who loved what was alive and free and hated everything that stifled life and freedom. This delightful little work, I believe, is consistent with that life-long passion.