

2023-03-22

## Ghosting Karl Marx. Hidden Agendas of a Muzio Gambit



[Flickr user: Jon's Pics](#)

Karl Marx's grave, Highgate, London

by Dr. Bernd-Peter Lange

### The Marx that nobody Read

In a recent film directed by the Haitian director Raoul Peck, *The Young Karl Marx*, the eponymous hero appears as, among other better known pursuits, a genius on the chess board. In two of the scenes set in pubs he triumphantly checkmates Friedrich Engels and clinches a victory over his political rival, the Anarchist Bakunin by decisively pinning one of his opponent's pieces.

Neither of these games in the film relies on documentary evidence. However, there are two notations of chess notations that Marx has been credited with for a long time, one an impressive win in a Muzio gambit against the contemporary problemist Heinrich Meyer, the other one a mating attack against the famous Prussian master Gustav Neumann, both around 1870. The notations of these games have been republished frequently in Russian journals from 1926 and 1938, respectively, but also in other countries, even though doubts on their authenticity have accompanied their publication throughout. In recent articles in chess journals, these doubts have peaked in definitive refutations of the involvement of Marx in the two games he has been credited with, albeit without much of an impact on the conservation of the view of the

philosopher as chess prodigy.

In the debate about the Muzio gambit, two competing discourses have been in operation. One of them, based on the attribution of the game to Marx since some early Soviet publications, had a distinctly hagiographic function, especially in the Stalinist period of the USSR and later in Communist countries. The later critical line attacks Marx's iconic status in chess, often also his general reputation in a rhetorical residue of the Cold War. What, strangely, both discursive lines have in common, is the absence of any precise reference to the original source of the Muzio gambit between Marks [Marx?] and Meyer. The notation they both obviously rely on is the one in Tassilo Heydebrand von der Lasa's fifth edition of the famous and universally influential *Handbuch des Schachspiels* (1874).<sup>[11]</sup> There it is listed as one of four thematic notations of that classical opening.

Neither the Russian quotations of the Muzio notation nor the refutations of Marx's role in that game succeed in delving back to von der Lasa's own source in the 1871 edition of the *London Gentleman's Journal*.<sup>[12]</sup> In that journal - a nightmare to locate precisely for librarians - it is easy to see that in reality it was M[ark] Marks, and not Karl Marx, who played the famous Muzio gambit (and a few much less brilliant ones) against Meyer in one of two thematic series devoted to that opening. If the opposed traditions of dealing with the 1871 Muzio gambit, and also of the notable mating position in the position reached in the other game against Neumann, could so consistently dispense with finding the root source of their controversy, other issues beyond chess seem to be involved in the debate. Otherwise the matter would be of very limited chess interest. It looks as if Marx were a revenant of a brilliant chess player after the errors of any practical proof of his record had been demonstrated. As Derrida has it, revenants are a common spectral species.<sup>[13]</sup> So perhaps is Marx in his various revivals at different times of his posthumous impact.

The game attributed to Marx for such a long time was the result of a highly selective reception. It is the third game in a small series of three Muzio gambits played by Heinrich Meyer (from Hanover), the editor of the chess section of the *Gentleman's Journal*, against an opponent whose name is given as "Mr. M. Marks".<sup>[14]</sup> Earlier in another monthly issue of the same publication, Marks is represented for February 1871 with another Muzio gambit sequence against a Mr. Riola, and others of his games are recorded around this period.<sup>[15]</sup> For the preceding decade, there are records of the same gambit in similar series of games between more elevated masters like Anderssen playing Zukertort at Wrocław in 1865. It was one of Meyer's initiatives to sustain chess interest among the readers of the *Gentleman's Journal*.<sup>[16]</sup> The magazine's publication run seems to have been small anyway, which might account for its rare complete presence in today's libraries and its limited digital versions.

The choice of the Mr. M. Marks vs. Meyer game in chess journalism around Karl Marx was definitely a choice of the only game amenable for any eulogistic purpose. In the first game of the Muzio gambit series whose last game ends with the famous win ascribed to the philosopher, played in London on 31<sup>st</sup> May, 1871,<sup>[17]</sup> Mr. Marks opening with the white pieces loses quickly after choosing Bc3 on his tenth move:

```
/* Brettbreite an Viewport anpassen */ var breite = window.innerWidth; /* linken und rechten Rand  
einbeziehen */ breite = breite - 20; /* Brettkoordinaten einbeziehen, wenn sie angezeigt werden */ if ('1'  
== '1') { breite = breite - 15; } var pSize = 40; if((pSize*8) > breite) { switch (true) { case (breite  
Elemente der Seite suchen und onchange zuweisen */ window.onload = function() { // Select-Array mit
```

```
allen Selectelementen erstellen var arrSel = document.getElementsByTagName("select"); // Select-Array
durchlaufen for(var i=0; i < arrSel.length) { switch (true) { case (arrSel[i].type === "checkbox"): // Elemente der Seite suchen und onchange
zuweisen */ window.onload = function() { // Select-Array mit allen Selectelementen erstellen var arrSel =
document.getElementsByTagName("select"); // Select-Array durchlaufen for(var i=0; i
```