

The nature and consequence of Karl Marx's skin disease

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Summary

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None declared.

Karl Marx's ideas have been a major influence on twentieth century thought, and my interest in the man behind the ideas was provoked some years ago by Wheen's entertaining biography,¹ which revealed an extraordinary individual who developed his extraordinary ideas in the face of appalling poverty and illness. My interest deepened when I learned that one of Marx's two main diseases was dermatological; but as I read further, I became increasingly aware that published accounts were unreliable: the nature of Marx's illnesses had been assumed rather than established.

The first clinical study was published in 1933; it concluded that Marx suffered mainly from 'boils' and 'liver disease', and died from pulmonary tuberculosis.² Not surprisingly, most of the clinical ideas in this study now show their age; nevertheless, it remains the most comprehensive text available, and surprisingly, in view of the man's importance, nothing new has been added since.

The most recent study^{3,4} was published in 1999, at the same time as Wheen's biography. It arose from a doctoral investigation of Marx's ideas on money, and gives the episodes of illness, including the 'boils' and the frequent interruptions of work said to be caused by them, all in the form in which they were recorded in the published letters. Unfortunately, however, this study is not a critical clinical assessment or analysis of the material: the clinical descriptions and diagnoses offered in the correspondence are taken at their face value; and perhaps more seriously, the underlying mechanistic assumptions of the study owe little to contemporary clinical understanding, as is apparent from a summarizing paragraph:³

Marx's condition fits neatly into traditional Chinese medical diagnosis, which takes account of emotional as well as physical states. From this perspective Marx stole fire from the heavens and could not handle the energy. Marx's signs and symptoms are of classic liver/fire ones. The rambling

From an analysis of the original correspondence, it has been possible to establish that Karl Marx's incapacitating skin disease was hidradenitis suppurativa, not 'boils' as was universally assumed at the time and since; the psychological effect of this illness on the man and his work appears to have been considerable.

speech, insomnia, mental illness, hot head, boils and gastric fever, sore throat, infected mouth and so forth (described below) are consistent with excess heat/fire. In Chinese medicine fire comes from the liver; the headaches, distension in the right upper liver, red eyes and so on, aggravated in the spring, all contribute to that picture. It seems he was genetically disposed to this sort of illness, but his condition was definitely exacerbated by an unhealthy lifestyle, by smoking, drinking and overwork.

While, therefore, a full, critical analysis of Marx's various illnesses is long overdue, that has not been my intention; but I can, at least, report that what I have discovered from an examination of primary sources redefines his incapacitating skin disease, and provides a new diagnosis, different from what has been universally accepted, and one which has consequences for an understanding of the man and his work.

The illnesses

When I read Wheen's biography shortly after it was published in 1999, I doubted the 'liver disease', a diagnosis also assumed in all writings I have since found. Certainly, Marx often claimed to be 'suffering from inflammation of the liver' (letter to F. Lassalle, 16 January 1861), but his episodic pain is more suggestive of biliary colic. However, although in keeping with that, Marx also said he had been as yellow as a quince, I have found no mention of the itch or change in urine and stool colour¹⁻⁵ that could be expected with obstructive jaundice. Thus I can only conclude that the nature of Marx's universally assumed 'liver disease' remains to be established. By contrast, when I read the accounts of his skin disorder, the likelihood of a very different diagnosis from the universally accepted one of 'boils'¹⁻⁶ soon became apparent. To test this I returned to the original material in the 50

volumes of the *Marx/Engels Collected Works*⁷ (MECW) as the main primary source. I passed quickly over the technical, political and philosophical pages to the letters, and, unlike the alleged 'liver disease', what I found in the correspondence, especially between Marx, his wife Jenny, Engels and Kugelmann, answered my diagnostic questions about the skin condition and some of its consequences.

The skin disease

A search for illnesses in the correspondence sections of the MECW, volumes 38–46, revealed that although the skin lesions were called 'furuncles', 'boils' and 'carbuncles' by Marx, his wife and his physicians, they were too persistent, recurrent, destructive and site-specific for that diagnosis; my guess was that Marx had hidradenitis suppurativa. This recurrent infective condition arises from blockage of apocrine ducts opening into hair follicles, mostly in axillary, mammary, inguinal, perianal and genital skin.^{8–11} Although individual lesions may resemble boils, and are often misdiagnosed as such, certain associated clinical features make the correct diagnosis, and I found all of them in the original correspondence. For ease of identification in the MECW, each published letter is given a date, and initial of writer and recipient (Karl Marx, KM; Jenny Marx, JM; Friedrich Engels, FE; Ludwig Kugelmann, LK).

Duration and recurrence

The earliest written reference to the lesions I have found was 1862 (KM to LK 29 Nov 1864: 'I have been much afflicted... in the last 14 months by a recurrence of carbuncles') and the last was 1874 (KM to LK 19 Jan 1874), and there were only few periods of freedom between (e.g. KM to FE 2 Nov 1867: 'fresh ones are forever appearing'). But the reporting is patchy, partly depending on site and severity: e.g. 'carbuncular events' with embarrassing locations were disclosed only to FE (2 April 1867: 'on my posterior and near the penis') and LK was told of relapses mainly to excuse work delays (17 April 1868). But details of the skin problem were given to few others, and it is uncertain whether the many unspecified bouts of ill health mentioned by Marx before 1862 and after 1874 were recurrences. The same is true of the continuous itching, scratching and peeling 'between my testis and posterior' which Marx said he had had for 2 years before boils appeared. But while, therefore, the more than 12 years of repeated recurrences I found in the correspondence can only be the minimal disease duration, it is nevertheless diagnostically substantial.

Distribution

Persistent 'carbuncles' were noted repeatedly in the axillae, breasts, groins, perianal, genital (penis and scrotum) and suprapubic regions and inner thighs, favoured sites of hidradenitis suppurativa (e.g. KM to FE 7 Dec 1867: 'still have a carbuncle

on the left loin not far from the centre of propagation, as well as numerous furuncles'), and on scalp and face.

Description

Marx and his wife distinguished 'furuncles' from 'carbuncles' with multiple drainage 'pits' which took months to improve, and sometimes needed incision; there was often pain and malaise and one episode is said to have been life-threatening (JM to Liebknecht 24 Nov 1863). The descriptions are of chronic inflammation, discharge and induration followed by tissue destruction (KM to FE March 1868: 'the particularly obstinate and hard to obliterate mess under my left armpit'; 26 Nov 1869: 'the business under my arm is still a bother'; JM to LK 28 April 1871: 'the considerable areas where the CUTIS has been completely destroyed').

The recorded clinical features, with their prolonged recurrent course, site predilection and tissue destruction are not those of simple boils, but are characteristic of hidradenitis suppurativa; this diagnosis can now be made definitively.

Hidradenitis suppurativa also explains some of the other afflictions recorded in the correspondence, e.g. the crops of furuncles which occurred in the scalp, face and various other parts of the body (and which are part of the triad of follicular occlusion^{10,11}); the occurrence of joint pain with exacerbations of the disease (e.g. 6 April 1866) which has been attributed to an unrelated rheumatic disorder;^{3,4} the recurrent painful eye condition, whether from blepharitis or keratitis (e.g. KM to LE 13 February 1863: 'I've been **strictly** forbidden all reading, writing, or smoking. I had some kind of inflammation of the eye'). While these disorders could, of course, be independent, they all occur in hidradenitis and could as easily be its consequence.

Marx's physicians' various diagnoses of 'boils', 'furuncles' and 'carbuncles', and their contemporary treatment with arsenic, poultices and lancing, are not surprising: hidradenitis suppurativa was described, somewhat hesitantly, between 1854 and 1864⁸ in France; and unlike wine, intellectual property travelled poorly across the channel to where Marx spent most of his adult life: the first English publication was in 1933.⁹ Perhaps the reason Marx's skin disease has only now been diagnosed is that few physicians are familiar with hidradenitis suppurativa and even fewer dermatologists are familiar with Marx.

This new diagnosis has the importance of and beyond historical correctness: the skin is an organ of communication¹² and its disorders produce much psychological distress; it produces loathing and disgust, depression of self-image,^{12,13} mood and well-being. These aversive effects have been found to be particularly severe in patients with hidradenitis suppurativa,¹⁴ and there is much evidence of this in Marx's letters; in particular, Marx's hidradenitis contributed to his poverty and greatly reduced his 'self-esteem', as he told FE (24 Jan 1863). His loathing of the lesions ('curs', 'swine', 'Frankenstein' as he variously called them), and the alienation they produced is

apparent from the violent joy of his attack on them: KM to FE 20 Feb 1866: 'I took a sharp razor... and lanced the cur myself. The sang brûlé... leapt right up into the air'. The obvious mental consequence of Marx's hidradenitis gives a simpler and less tendentious explanation of his torment than 'Marx was squat and swarthy, a Jew tormented by self-loathing [whereas] Engels was tall and fair...'.¹

Could the mental effects of the often disastrous hidradenitis have influenced Marx's work? He constantly complained that 'the swine' affected his work output, but he was also aware of their effect on its quality: KM to FE 22 June 1867: 'the bourgeoisie will remember my carbuncles until their dying day'; Engels also noted a stylistic sharpness to Marx's writing during a relapse. An intriguing additional possibility is Marx's development of alienation, the literary use of which has been taken up by so many others. Marx flirted with alienation when he was refuting Hegel, but only developed it deeply as he wrote *Capital*, at the very time when his hidradenitis was at its worst. Could it be that the impairment of self-image and alienation provoked by his skin disease left its stylistic mark?

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