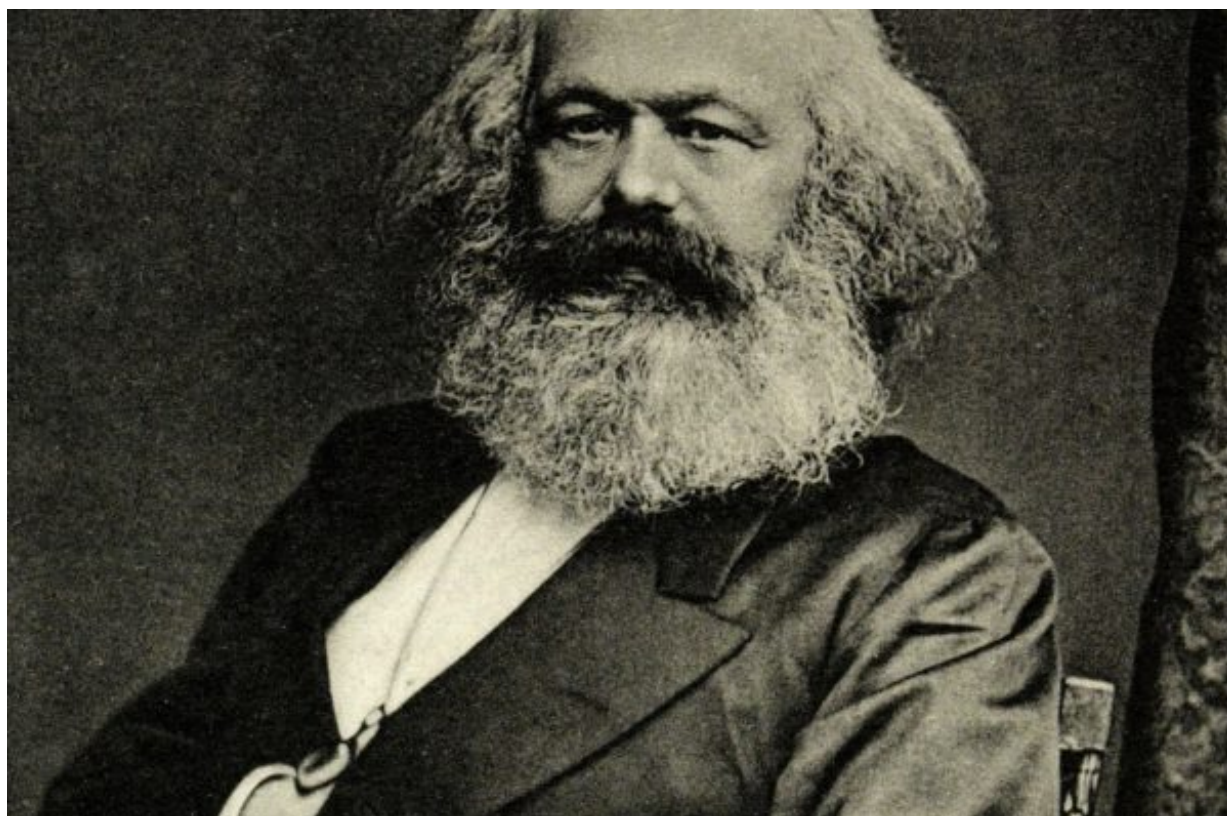


Marx Still Matters

 jacobinmag.com/2015/03/marx-biography-review-jonathan-sperber/



Does the world really need another Marx biography? As a fan of the man as thinker and (to some extent) as historical figure, normally my answer would always be “yes.” However, recent years have seen a spate of new Marx and Engels biographies that have been thorough and substantive on all aspects of their lives.

Tristram Hunt’s irreverent but sympathetic [biography](#) of Engels (*Marx’s General*, 2009); Francis Wheen’s fine [overview](#) of Marx’s life and thought (*Karl Marx*, 2000); Mary Gabriel’s brilliant [study](#) of the intersection of the private lives and public convictions of the whole Marx-Engels clan, including children and domestic servant (*Love and Capital*, 2011) — each have provided well-researched twenty-first century retrospectives on the lives of the great revolutionaries.

Add to that the biographies I would consider the standard classics from the previous generation — David McLellan’s *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought* (first edition 1973, now on the [fourth](#)) and J. D. Hunley’s underappreciated [study](#) of Friedrich Engels (*The Life and Thought of Friedrich Engels: A Reinterpretation*, 1991) — and it becomes a truly daunting task to add much new content to our view of either man.

Nonetheless, [Jonathan Sperber](#) has persevered, and while *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth Century Life* is not an overall success, it certainly has some merit of originality of approach.

Sperber’s speciality is nineteenth-century German history, especially of the various mid-century radical factions and figures around the 1848–49 revolution, and this shows. The subtitle puts his cards directly on the table, as does the introduction to the book: Sperber is convinced that Marx was fundamentally a figure of that period, never escaped the limitations of the mid-nineteenth-century worldview, and has very little to offer to anyone living in later times. This is the burden of his biography, quite contrary to virtually every other biographer (friendly or hostile), and Sperber throughout portrays all developments with an eye to making this case.

Unfortunately, the argument is simply not plausible, and it leads not just to an at times rather contemptuous treatment of the subject, but also to some very odd shifts of emphasis and context.

Sperber cannot be faulted, it should be noted, for striking inaccuracies of fact or historical detail. He only occasionally slips up (The Hague is not the capital of the Netherlands), and in some small respects he even manages to add more information and correct some previous biographers, such as Marx's relation to [Feuerbach](#) or in the supposed controversy of his marriage to Jenny von Westfalen.

One can see that Sperber is best at home in the Germany of the 1830s–1850s, and the sections of the book devoted to Marx's adventures in (Young) Hegelianism and away from it again, as well as Marx and Engels activities around 1848, leading to the birth of the *Communist Manifesto*, are the best of the book.

One of Sperber's justifications for the new biography is the "unprecedented access" to the new [MEGA2](#) scientific editions of Marx and Engels's collected works vaunted by the publishers, and likely some of the matters of biographical detail corrected in this biography are to be found there.

Much has been made in certain Marxological circles, especially German-speaking ones, of the great significance of the MEGA2 project and the wholly revised view of Marx's life-work it would present. But Sperber's biography can be taken as evidence to the contrary. Where Sperber varies from the established insider view in any major way, it is in matters of interpretation and opinion rather than of fact and chronology, and indeed very little by way of new theoretical or political advantage is gleaned from these archives in this work or others I have seen.

Those specific matters of interpretation and opinion that make this biography stand out, and not altogether in a positive way, relate to Sperber's insistence on Marx as a "nineteenth century life." There is of course nothing wrong with historicizing Marx; indeed, little sense can now be made of many of the allusions, jokes, references, claims, proposals, and polemics of his life without a fairly solid grasp of nineteenth-century politics (and economic thought), from Napoleon III to the "True Socialists."

But Sperber opens his work with a series of bold, unsupported assertions: that Marx's idea of the social revolution to come was essentially a rerun of the French Revolution's Jacobin moment; that **Marx's view of capitalism described only the capitalism of the early to mid-nineteenth century and that none of his crucial insights apply to the modern day**; that the bourgeoisie Marx by turns excoriated and exhorted has nothing to do at all with the capitalist or bourgeois class of today; and that Marx essentially foresaw nothing of lasting importance for the future.

"The view of Marx as a contemporary whose ideas are shaping the modern world has run its course," Sperber insists — a tall order indeed, not least when even now millions belong to political parties and movements invoking his name and several countries are ruled by those, rightly or not, claiming his inspiration.

Neither in his introduction nor in the work itself does Sperber find a real justification for this view. He rightly notes, of course, that Marx failed to observe many things that would become especially important in the twentieth century West: the rise of the "social movements," the enduring importance of nationalism, the Russian Revolution, or even the rise of neoclassical economics.

But this has been noted by many others; and they have also noted, as an ample secondary literature attests, that Marx and Engels did have at least *some* things to say on all these topics, and that often these few things have proven remarkably useful and enduring in the attempts of twentieth-century social science to grapple with these phenomena. Indeed, Sperber himself quotes the famed anthropologist Claude [Levi-Strauss](#), who — while by no means an orthodox Marxist — is cited stating, "I rarely broach a new sociological problem without first stimulating my thought by reading a few pages of the *18th Brumaire* . . ."

In the face of this, Sperber resorts to two strategies for sustaining his dismissal of Marx's posthumous relevance. Firstly, his book throughout treats Marx's political, theoretical, and organizational commitments and shifts in a remarkably psychologizing and subjectivist manner.

For Sperber, it seems every decision of Marx (or Engels) on whether to support this or that movement, or whether to participate in this or that organization, is largely determined by Marx's mood and illnesses at the time, by his personal relations with the characters involved, by whether he was poor or in a period of relative comfort, whether he thought to gain something by it, and so forth; in short, by any criterion except a serious commitment

on Marx and Engels's part to undertake what they claimed to undertake, a "scientific socialism" that — successful or not — had the ambition of both scientifically sustaining the possibility of a communist revolution and showing the way towards that revolution.

There is no doubt of course that both gentlemen went through several phases of thought in their lives, and that they were by no means always consistent or single-minded on every question, as Sperber aptly shows. But he overeggs the pudding by refusing to consider first whether an apparent arbitrariness or inconsistency over time could not be explained in theoretical or strategic terms, before simply assuming the decisiveness of personal quirks.

Marx and Engels were both men of great personal conflicts and of at times domineering attitudes, but this need not dominate our explanations any more than Darwin's work and his changes of view are best explained by his personal feelings about the peoples of Tierra del Fuego or about race relations.

Sperber's approach has the merit, to be sure, of not making the opposite mistake: unlike some biographers on the other end of the spectrum (not least politically), he does not assume beforehand to study Marx in "the unity of his thought," nor that any complete consistency of approach and "method" is to be found in Marx's work throughout his life.

It is a welcome reminder in some senses that the enduring problems of the Left — how to relate to certain nationalist movements, whether it is better to pursue communism in larger states or to support self-determination for minorities first, how to engage with gender and race questions, how to separate personal sectarianism from principled differences, how to approach elections, reform measures versus revolutionary adventures, etc. — were just as much problems Marx and Engels had trouble solving and had inconsistent views on. Indeed, more often than not all sides in these debates have been able to find quotes from the masters in their favor, which should be telling.

Also, despite his occasionally dismissive attitude toward the substance of Marx's thought, Sperber is fairly accurate in representing it. Even the section on Marx's economic thought, often a stumbling block for unwary biographers, is acceptable enough.

But this is mitigated by the second aspect of Sperber's historicizing strategy: in line with his own specializations, Marx's actual theoretical thought — especially that of the later period after the [US Civil War](#) — is treated in a very summarized way compared with the great attention to detail shown toward interpersonal relations among various more or less obscure Victorian radicals.

To be sure, the author has the requisite discussions of the views of the *Manifesto*, of Marx's efforts in *Capital*, his historical and journalistic writings, and so forth. But most of these are given a few pages of loose description at most, and generally with a focus on their significance for Marx's relations to existing radical movements and figures, rather than any serious discussion of their substance.

This approach fits with the notion that these theories are now mere historical curiosities, and that the main point of reading about Marx is the entertainment value of Victorian polemics (certainly not to be underestimated). But it can equally be accused of being a biased presentation that assumes what it needs to prove: that these theories have little to offer to today's world.

Something similar goes for Sperber's repeated emphasis on Marx's "accelerationist" support for free trade over protectionism — an interesting observation, no doubt, but one suspects only highlighted here because it looks odd compared to the views of most later Marxists. Whenever actual revolutionary theories are discussed, Sperber quickly dismisses them as being really about a Jacobin-type coup, a statement not anywhere substantiated and dismissed by virtually every specialist on Marx's revolutionary thought.

Sperber's historicizing allows him to avoid an overly retrospective reading and to give a more nuanced discussion of, for example, the claims about Marx's supposed anti-semitism and Marx's enduring, at times paranoid, hostility to Russia. But in this way it also effectively disappears the significance of works like the *Grundrisse*, *Theories of Surplus Value*, and Marx's notes on marginalism (which, contra Sperber, he was

aware of).

This approach portrays *Capital* as a merely scholarly, not very revolutionary post-Ricardian corrective (here and in the discussion of the “transformation problem,” Sperber seems to owe more to the followers of Italian economist Piero Sraffa rather than of Marx) and ignores how Marx also wrote it “to put a weapon in the hands of workers,” as Harry Cleaver phrased it.

All this forces Sperber to make a set of bizarre statements to dismiss *Capital*'s validity, such as the claim that the work did not foresee the existence of “services sector” employees — what of the pawnshops Marx regularly visited? — and that it failed to “take change over time into account.”

When Marx does in such works make statements pointing out revolutionary implications — such as his questionable claim that corporations were a capitalist embryo of the socialist future — this is presented by Sperber as an idea that some early French socialists also had, and therefore proof of the “backward-looking nature of Marx’s economic views.”

This kind of reading can damn any author, of course. Marx is said to have “fervently endorsed the actions” of the Narodniks, when a more fair portrayal would note he did indeed applaud the death of the czar but called their tactics a “specifically Russian and historically inevitable method about which there is no reason . . . to moralize for or against.”

One can doubt whether the nineteenth century was truly “more gentlemanly”; whether Marx “downplayed the importance of crises for the end of capitalism”; and whether Marx’s engagement with the German and international workers’ movements was “accidental” and “fortuitous.”

Sperber notes Marx’s growing interest in rural affairs and in the possibility of revolutions outside the industrialized world in the late period, but sees this as an oddity impossible to explain on the basis of Marx’s “long-held theories of social development.” Marx is thus given no credit for his shifting views: he is portrayed as backward looking and inconsistent where many others have seen an increasingly anti-Eurocentric and anthropologically engaged perspective (Marx’s anthropological interests appear not at all).

Similarly, Sperber observes that Marx had an interest in agricultural chemistry but views this as a marginal hobby. He notes neither the great prescience of Marx and Engels’s interest in agricultural transformation and ecological constraints, nor the importance of their comradely relations with Justus von Liebig, the nineteenth century’s greatest organic chemist.

A more theoretically engaged view might have noted the significance of these pastimes — not as proof of an inability to deal consistently with Malthus, as Sperber at one point suggests, but as important for the “abolition of the contradiction between town and country,” and indeed as empirical evidence that Malthus’ approach was not justified. But this may also be because Sperber indulges the usual fulminations against Engels, whom he accuses of having invented the image of Marx as a “scientific socialist” and who is to blame for all the “positivism” in his thought.

This is not to say the book will be of no interest to people familiar with Marx. There are some intriguing details, such as Marx’s love of chess and the influence of Eduard Gans on his early formation.

More significantly, Sperber’s book is good if one is mainly interested in Marx’s personal connections and relations to the various movements of ideas and politics of his time. Sperber has some useful things to say about the enduring ambiguity between what he (not very helpfully) calls positivism and Hegelian approaches in Marx and Engels’s thought, and he is also astute in relating the difficulties Marx and Engels had with the various claims of nationalist movements (although on the latter, Hal Draper probably offers a more politically aware treatment).


On the whole, however, his work is vitiated by an unwillingness to separate major and minor elements in Marx’s life. And its great failure is treating Marx as a figure who cannot be read through any lens that might imply theoretical relevance.

Sperber's irrelevance thesis is not plausible on its own terms. It is even less so in the face of the enduring vitality, despite considerable defeats and setbacks, of Marxist politics around the globe; the continuing appeal of Marxist political economy to many seeking to explain the crisis-ridden nature of capitalism; and the recurrent "returns of Marx" fearfully invoked by the liberal press every few years.

Marx's life and personality may have been a nineteenth-century one, but his ideas continue to make their mark on all spheres of twenty-first century thought, from revolutionary theory to social science. And that is surely all one can demand of a thinker from the past.

Karl Marx: a Nineteenth-Century Life by Jonathan Sperber

– review

 [theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/26/karl-marx-nineteenth-century-life-review](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/26/karl-marx-nineteenth-century-life-review)

Tristram
Hunt

26/06/2013

"Great passions, which, due to the closeness of their object, take the form of small habits, grow and once more reach their natural size through the magic effect of distance," wrote [Karl Marx](#) to his wife Jenny in 1856, as she journeyed from London to Trier. "My love of you, as soon as you are distant, appears as a giant ... the love, not of Feuerbach's human being, not of Moleschott's metabolism, not of the proletariat, but the love of the beloved, namely of you, makes the man once again into a man."



Typical Marx: Romantic, charismatic, cosmopolitan, and at once able to combine the workers' revolution with protestations of uxoriousness. But also disingenuous, since it was during one of these absences that Marx managed to impregnate the family maid, Helene Demuth. Such are the personal and intellectual complexities that [Jonathan Sperber](#) pursues through 600 pages of tightly argued text in this profoundly important biography of "The Moor".

In contrast to [Francis Wheen's raucous account](#) of Marx's life as hack, brigand and rascalion, Sperber places the history of ideas at the heart of his study. And it is a refreshingly anti-populist take. According to Sperber, not only is Marx's critique of capitalism of very limited applicability to the modern world, it was barely relevant when first published. Even in the 1860s his was the old world of Robespierre, Hegel, Adam Smith and the Spinning Jenny. Indeed, "Marx is more usefully understood as a backward-looking figure, who took the circumstances of the first half of the 19th century and projected them into the future, than as a sure footed and foresighted interpreter of historical trends."

This biography is first and foremost a "nineteenth-century life" and Sperber, whose previous works have focused on the Rhineland during the 1848 revolutions, successfully positions the young Marx within the bourgeois world of Trier, as it existed under Napoleonic and then Prussian rule. At every stage of this book there is a new insight into what is usually familiar Marx territory – the complicated relationship with his beloved father Heinrich; the family's tradition of Judaism; the relative poverty of Jenny's family. And, most important, the origins of Marx's lifelong disgust for the "society of orders", the authoritarian and absolutist monarchies of pre-revolutionary Germany peopled with aristocrats, bureaucrats and military officers.

Sperber plays down the role of the Young Hegelian Ludwig Feuerbach in shaping Marx's understanding of alienation, and plays up the previously under-represented impact of Eduard Gans and Bruno Bauer. Stressing Marx's time in both Berlin and Paris, he frames Marxian communism as an elemental response to the incredible productive forces unleashed by the industrial revolution.

What is certainly surprising is a new account of Marx's time in Cologne, when he edited a liberal newspaper. Rather than regarding this as an awkward but financially necessary period of sacrifice, Sperber reveals how fulsomely Marx supported the laissez-faire, pluralist politics of the Rhineland bourgeoisie: "the system of commercial liberty hastens the social revolution. It is solely in that revolutionary sense, gentlemen, that I vote in favour of free trade." This helps to explain that remarkable paean Marx and Engels offer up to the bourgeoisie at the start of *The Communist Manifesto* – the iconoclastic merchants transforming markets and destroying the old "society of orders".

Sperber's approach to the *Manifesto* is very much in the Cambridge tradition of political thought. His

contextualised critique extends to Marx's early attempts at communist ideology in *The Paris Manuscripts*, as well as the historical materialism of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

Yet none of these texts provided much materialism for Marx. "How right my mother was! 'If Karl had only made capital, instead of, etc!'" was supposedly one of Marx's favourite bon mots, but what was all too real was the desperate poverty that plagued him and Jenny. With meticulous accounting, Sperber shows just how powerfully "this money shit" vexed Marx's life – it killed his son Edgar and twisted his relationship with his mother, who wisely refused to allocate him the remnants of Heinrich's estate. Poverty undermined Marx's Victorian sense of manhood, entangled him in the vicious world of London's emigre politics, and even shaped the fury of his philosophy – with personal desperation pushing him towards a much more radical revolutionary tone in the aftermath of 1848.

Friedrich Engels was the self-described "second fiddle", who, along with some timely inheritances, saved the Marxes from total penury and allowed Karl the freedom to write *Das Kapital*. On the whole, Sperber is rather grudging about Engels – downplaying his philosophical contributions (particularly to *The Communist Manifesto*), blaming him for the endless feuds and splits that bedevilled their attempts to build a political party, and accusing him of wilfully misinterpreting Marx's legacy for the 20th century.

This is at the heart of the book: by the time Marx was fully codifying his political economy, Europe's intellectual currents had moved in a determinedly positivist direction. With varying degrees of success, Marx sought to accommodate his initial Hegelian presuppositions to this more scientific era, beginning with applying the dialectic to Darwinism. Engels, by contrast, "was always a positivist" and in the aftermath of Marx's death in 1883, "Engels's version of Marx's ideas tended to iron out Marx's own ambivalence about positivism, and to pass over his Hegelian criticism of the conceptual understanding of the natural sciences". This occurred at the same time as the development of a mass labour movement across Europe giving us, hey presto, "Marxism".

Its bible, of course, was *Das Kapital* – although few cadres actually bothered to read it. And Sperber again shows the relative anachronism of Marx's thinking by the 1870s. At its core was not an epic crisis of capitalism (there had been too many false dawns for that), but the question that David Ricardo and Adam Smith had been wrestling with since the late 1700s: the falling rate of profit. Marx tried desperately if vainly to offer an answer, but meanwhile the world was changing around him: industrial processes were reframing rates of surplus value; colonial markets were transforming the metropole's economics; the mid-Victorian boom meant a growing middle class; a new service sector was emerging ("from the whore to the Pope, there is a mass of such scum"); and marginal utility theory was stressing the market interaction of consumer preferences. Yet Marx was still wrestling with James Mill and Thomas Malthus.

It is a compelling and convincing account. And there is so much else besides, from Marx's investigations of antisemitism to his surprising affinity with British Toryism (in opposition to Russian czarism), to the medical condition behind his carbuncles, to his rather revisionist support for the gradualism of the English trade union movement. Sperber's understanding of Marx's personality is much deeper than that of other biographers – he was a tortured, bullish, emotional, obviously Anglo-German bourgeois figure.

But the failings of Sperber's approach are also apparent. Part of his ambition in placing Marx within his 19th-century milieu is to allow us to understand a man in his times, but also distance him from present controversies about globalisation and capitalism. Yet this risks a predominantly Atlanticist perspective. In the rest of the world, where capitalism is exhibiting exactly the same kind of energies it did in early-19th-century Britain, the relevance of Marx's critique retains its potency. In Mumbai and Shenzhen, Nairobi and Rio, Marx is surely more than just a staid Rhenish intellectual with no purchase on the present. Which is why, of course, we remain interested in his life – as brilliantly recounted in this work.

• Tristram Hunt's *The Frock-Coated Communist: The Revolutionary Life of Friedrich Engels* is published by Penguin.

Is Marx still relevant?

 theguardian.com/books/2013/may/16/karl-marx-ideas-resonate-today

Jonathan
Sperber

16/05/2013



Is [Karl Marx](#) still relevant? He lived in the 19th century, an era very different from our own, if also one in which many of the features of today's society were beginning to take shape. A consideration of the relevance of Marx's ideas in the early 21st century might start with separating their outdated elements from those capable of development in the present.

Among the former are concepts such as the labour theory of value, or the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, both deriving from the economic theories of [Adam Smith](#) and David Ricardo, and pertaining to a now very outdated version of capitalism, characterised by low rates of productivity increase and a large agricultural sector, under pressure from population growth. Marx's idea of human history as the inevitable progression of modes of production, from the "Asiatic mode" in the distant past to a communist future, seems like a relic of positivist theories of stages of history, more befitting the age of [Herbert Spencer](#) and Auguste Comte than the historical experiences of the 20th century.

And the ideas capable of development? Three come to mind.

One is the idea that intellectual conceptions and the political movements embodying them are closely tied to social structures and collective economic interests. Marx referred to the latter as the "base" and the former as the "superstructure"; one does not have to agree with this metaphor or with the priority it implies to see that it is a fruitful conception. He first developed this line of analysis to explain different forms of royalism in France during the 1840s, but contemporary politics, with its clash of strongly different political visions all too evidently tied to economic interests or to social groups can be understood in this way as well. The recent US presidential elections, with their rhetoric of the "1%" and the "47%" (the proportion of the population Mitt Romney claimed didn't pay taxes) are a good example, as is the debate about austerity politics in the UK and in the EU, phrased in terms of government debt, although really about which social groups will bear the costs of economic restructuring.

Second, ostensibly free and voluntary market exchanges contain within themselves elements of domination and exploitation. At the beginning of the age of industrialisation in Britain, these elements were very evident: starving handloom weavers and factory operatives toiling for 14 hours a day in stiflingly hot, dust-ridden textile mills. Today, such elements are subtler in more affluent countries – although they remain quite apparent in, say, Bangladesh – but in view of the results of three decades of public policy exalting market exchanges, and ignoring their negative consequences, we might want to take Marx's insight more seriously. He saw the remedy to the situation in violent revolution, followed by decades of civil and international warfare, leading to a utopian realm in which distinctions between individuals and society, and between society and the state, had been dissolved. Efforts to implement this vision in the 20th century, admittedly under circumstances quite different from those Marx envisaged, in the USSR, China or Cambodia, worked out very badly, at times genocidally so. More modest remedies include strong trade unions, generous social welfare programmes and effective regulation of the financial sector – although, in today's world, it sometimes seems as if these solutions are as

utopian as Marx's.

Finally, the understanding that a capitalist market economy was not an automatically self-regulating system; rather, it periodically entered periods of self-generated breakdown. Marx called these periods "crises"; today, we use a gentler term, "recessions". The most recent of these, beginning in 2007-08, deserves the older sobriquet, in view of its severity, persistence and global impact.

In *Das Kapital*, Marx offers a number of explanations for the recurrence of these crises. The most interesting comes from his time as a business and financial correspondent for the New York Tribune in the 1850s, then the world's largest newspaper. In discussing the crisis of 1857, generally regarded as the first worldwide recession, Marx focused on the policies of *Crédit Mobilier*, the world's first investment bank. He noted, appalled, that the bank's statutes allowed it to borrow up to 10 times its capital. It then used the funds to purchase shares or fund IPOs of French railroad and industrial corporations, greatly increasing output. But when no purchasers were found for the expanded production, the bank discovered that the stocks it had bought had fallen in value, making it difficult to repay its loans. Replace *Crédit Mobilier* with Lehman Brothers or the Anglo Irish Bank, and French railroad and industrial firms with Nevada or Irish real estate, and we have a fair picture of a major cause of the recent financial unpleasantness.

This is not to imply that Marx was the only thinker to question the automatic self-regulation of a capitalist economy, or even the most prescient. He was part of a dissenting economic tradition that begins with [Sismondi](#) and continues with some detours, through [John Maynard Keynes](#) and Hyman Minsky, to [Joseph Stiglitz](#) and [Paul Krugman](#). For specific policy suggestions, the more recent figures might be more helpful. But Marx's insights of the 19th century still offer interesting ways to think about the 21st.

Jonathan Sperber's *Karl Marx* is published by Norton.

The Real Karl Marx

 nybooks.com/articles/2013/05/09/real-karl-marx/

Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life

by Jonathan Sperber

Liveright, 648 pp., \$35.00

In many ways, Jonathan Sperber suggests, Marx was “a backward-looking figure,” whose vision of the future was modeled on conditions quite different from any that prevail today:

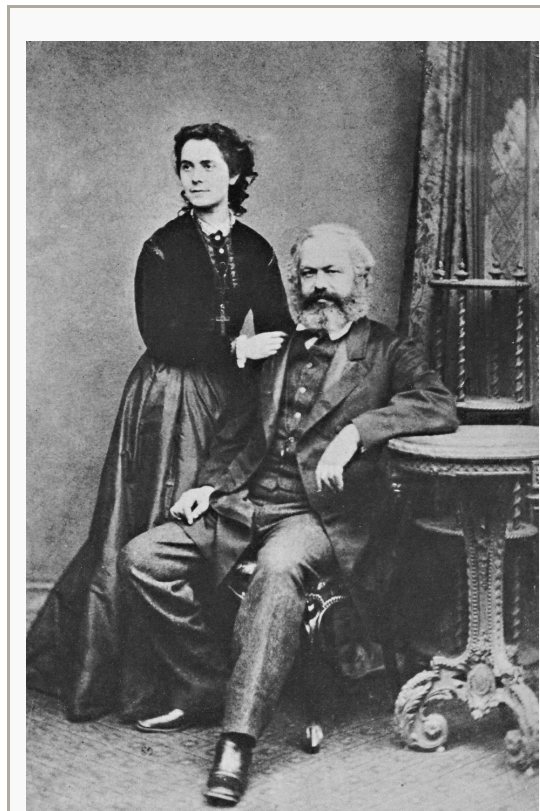
The view of Marx as a contemporary whose ideas are shaping the modern world has run its course and it is time for a new understanding of him as a figure of a past historical epoch, one increasingly distant from our own: the age of the French Revolution, of Hegel’s philosophy, of the early years of English industrialization and the political economy stemming from it.

Sperber’s aim is to present Marx as he actually was—a nineteenth-century thinker engaged with the ideas and events of his time. If you see Marx in this way, many of the disputes that raged around his legacy in the past century will seem unprofitable, even irrelevant. Claiming that Marx was in some way “intellectually responsible” for twentieth-century communism will appear thoroughly misguided; but so will the defense of Marx as a radical democrat, since both views “project back onto the nineteenth century controversies of later times.”

Certainly Marx understood crucial features of capitalism; but they were “those of the capitalism that existed in the early decades of the nineteenth century,” rather than the very different capitalism that exists at the start of the twenty-first century. Again, while he looked ahead to a new kind of human society that would come into being after capitalism had collapsed, Marx had no settled conception of what such a society would be like. Turning to him for a vision of our future, for Sperber, is as misconceived as blaming him for our past.

Using as one of his chief sources the newly available edition of the writings of Marx and Engels, commonly known by its German acronym the MEGA, Sperber constructs a picture of Marx’s politics that is instructively different from the one preserved in standard accounts. The positions Marx adopted were rarely dictated by any preexisting theoretical commitments regarding capitalism or communism. More often, they reflected his attitudes toward the ruling European powers and their conflicts, and the intrigues and rivalries in which he was involved as a political activist.

At times Marx’s hostility to Europe’s reactionary regimes led him to bizarre extremes. An ardent opponent of Russian autocracy who campaigned for a revolutionary war against Russia in 1848–1849, he was dismayed by Britain’s indecisive handling of the Crimean War. Denouncing the opposition to the war of leading British radicals, Marx went on to claim that Britain’s faltering foreign policies were due to the fact that the prime minister, Lord



Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde

Karl Marx and his daughter Jenny, a left-wing journalist and her father’s secretary, in 1869. ‘The cross she is wearing,’ Jonathan Sperber writes, ‘was not a sign of religious affiliation but the symbol of the Polish uprising of 1863.’

Palmerston, was a paid agent of the Russian tsar, one of a succession of traitors occupying positions of power in Britain for over a century—an accusation he reiterated over several years in a succession of newspaper articles reprinted by his daughter Eleanor as *The Secret Diplomatic History of the Eighteenth Century*.

Similarly, his struggle with his Russian rival Mikhail Bakunin for control of the International Working Men's Association (IWMA) reflected Marx's hatred of the Prussian monarchy and his suspicion that Bakunin was a pan-Slavist with secret links to the tsar more than his hostility to Bakunin's authoritarian brand of anarchism. It was such nineteenth-century passions and animosities rather than ideological collisions of the kind that are familiar from the cold war era that shaped Marx's life in politics.

Sperber's subtly revisionist view extends to what have been commonly held to be Marx's definitive ideological commitments. Today as throughout the twentieth century Marx is inseparable from the idea of communism, but he was not always wedded to it. Writing in the *Rhineland News* in 1842 in his very first piece after taking over as editor, Marx launched a sharp polemic against Germany's leading newspaper, the *Augsburg General News*, for publishing articles advocating communism. He did not base his assault on any arguments about communism's impracticality: it was the very idea that he attacked. Lamenting that "our once blossoming commercial cities are no longer flourishing," he declared that the spread of Communist ideas would "defeat our intelligence, conquer our sentiments," an insidious process with no obvious remedy. In contrast, any attempt to realize communism could easily be cut short by force of arms: "practical attempts [to introduce communism], even attempts en masse, can be answered with cannons." As Sperber writes, "The man who would write the *Communist Manifesto* just five years later was advocating the use of the army to suppress a communist workers' uprising!"

Nor was this an isolated anomaly. In a speech to the Cologne Democratic Society in August 1848, Marx rejected revolutionary dictatorship by a single class as "nonsense"—an opinion so strikingly at odds with the views Marx had expressed only six months earlier in the *Communist Manifesto* that later Marxist-Leninist editors of his speeches mistakenly refused to accept its authenticity—and over twenty years later, at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, Marx also dismissed any notion of a Paris Commune as "nonsense."

Marx the anti-Communist is an unfamiliar figure; but there were undoubtedly times when he shared the view of the liberals of his day and later, in which communism (assuming anything like it could be achieved) would be detrimental to human progress. This is only one example of a more general truth. Despite his own aspirations and the efforts of generations of his disciples from Engels onward, Marx's ideas never formed a unified system. One reason for this was the disjointed character of Marx's working life. Though we think of Marx as a theorist ensconced in the library of the British Museum, theorizing was only one of his avocations and rarely his primary activity:

Usually Marx's theoretical pursuits had to be crammed in beside far more time-consuming activities: émigré politics, journalism, the IWMA, evading creditors, and the serious or fatal illnesses that plagued his children and his wife, and, after the onset of his skin disease in 1863, Marx himself. All too often Marx's theoretical labors were interrupted for months at a time or reserved for odd hours late at night.

But if the conditions of Marx's life were hardly congenial to the continuous labor required for system-building, the eclectic quality of his thinking presented a greater obstacle. That he borrowed ideas from many sources is a scholarly commonplace. Where Sperber adds to the standard account of Marx's eclecticism is in probing the conflict between his continuing adherence to Hegel's belief that history has a built-in logic of development and the commitment to science that Marx acquired from the positivist movement.

In pointing to the formative intellectual role of positivism in the mid-nineteenth century Sperber shows himself to be a surefooted guide to the world of ideas in which Marx moved. Partly no doubt because it now seems in some respects embarrassingly reactionary, positivism has been neglected by intellectual historians. Yet it produced an enormously influential body of ideas. Originating with the French socialist Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825) but most fully developed by Auguste Comte (1798–1857), one of the founders of sociology, positivism promoted a

vision of the future that remains pervasive and powerful today. Asserting that science was the model for any kind of genuine knowledge, Comte looked forward to a time when traditional religions had disappeared, the social classes of the past had been superseded, and industrialism (a term coined by Saint-Simon) reorganized on a rational and harmonious basis—a transformation that would occur in a series of evolutionary stages similar to those that scientists found in the natural world.

Sperber tells us that Marx described Comte's philosophical system as "positivist shit"; but there were many parallels between Marx's view of society and history and those of the positivists:

For all the distance Marx kept from these [positivist] doctrines, his own image of progress through distinct stages of historical development and a twofold division of human history into an earlier, irrational era and a later, industrial and scientific one, contained distinctly positivist elements.

Astutely, Sperber perceives fundamental similarities between Marx's account of human development and that of Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), who (rather than Darwin) invented the expression "survival of the fittest" and used it to defend laissez-faire capitalism. Influenced by Comte, Spencer divided human societies into two types, "the 'militant' and the 'industrial,' with the former designating the entire pre-industrial, pre-scientific past, and the latter marking a new epoch in the history of the world."

Spencer's new world was an idealized version of early Victorian capitalism, while Marx's was supposed to come about only once capitalism had been overthrown; but the two thinkers were at one in expecting "a new scientific era, one fundamentally different from the human past." As Sperber concludes: "Today, a visitor to Highgate Cemetery in North London can see the graves of Karl Marx and Herbert Spencer standing face to face—for all the intellectual differences between the two men, not an entirely inappropriate juxtaposition."

It was not only his view of history as an evolutionary process culminating in a scientific civilization that Marx derived from the positivists. He also absorbed something of their theories of racial types. The fact that Marx took such theories seriously may seem surprising; but one must remember that many leading nineteenth-century thinkers—not least Herbert Spencer—were devotees of phrenology, and positivists had long believed that in order to be fully scientific, social thought must ultimately be based in physiology.

Comte had identified race (along with climate) as one of the physical determinants of social life, and Arthur de Gobineau's *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853–1855), a widely influential defense of innate racial hierarchies, was partly inspired by Comte's philosophy. Marx reacted to Gobineau's book with scorn, and showed no trace of any belief in racial superiority in his relations with his son-in-law Paul Lafargue, who was of African descent. (His chief objection to the marriage was that Lafargue lacked a reliable income.) At the same time Marx was not immune to the racist stereotypes of his day. His description of the German-Jewish socialist Ferdinand Lassalle, which Sperber describes as "an ugly outburst, even by the standards of the nineteenth century," illustrates this influence:

It is now completely clear to me, that, as proven by the shape of his head and the growth of his hair, he [Lassalle] stems from the Negroes who joined the march of Moses out of Egypt (if his mother or grandmother on his father's side did not mate with a nigger). Now this combination of Jewry and Germanism with the negroid basic substance must bring forth a peculiar product. The pushiness of this lad is also nigger-like.

Sperber comments that this passage demonstrates Marx's "non-racial understanding of Jews. The 'combination of Jewry and Germanism' that Marx saw in Lassalle was cultural and political," not biological. As Sperber goes on to show, however, Marx also referred to racial types in ways that suggested these types were grounded in biological lineages. Eulogizing the work of the French ethnographer and geologist Pierre Trémaux (1818–1895), whose book *Origin and Transformation of Man and Other Beings* he read in 1866, Marx praised Trémaux's

theory of the role of geology in animal and human evolution as being “much more important and much richer than Darwin” for providing a “natural basis” for nationality and showing that “the common Negro type is only the degenerate form of a much higher one.” With these observations, Sperber comments,

Marx seemed to be moving in the direction of a biological or geological explanation of differences in nationality—in any event, one connecting nationality to descent, explained in terms of natural science...another example of the influence on Marx of positivist ideas about the intellectual priority of the natural sciences.

Marx’s admiration for Darwin is well known. A common legend has it that Marx offered to dedicate *Capital* to Darwin. Sperber describes this as “a myth that has been repeatedly refuted but seems virtually ineradicable,” since it was Edward Aveling, the lover of Marx’s daughter Eleanor, who unsuccessfully approached Darwin for permission to dedicate a popular volume he had written on evolution. But there can be no doubt that Marx welcomed Darwin’s work, seeing it (as Sperber puts it) as “another intellectual blow struck in favor of materialism and atheism.”

Less well known are Marx’s deep differences with Darwin. If Marx viewed Trémaux’s work as “a very important improvement on Darwin,” it was because “progress, which in Darwin is purely accidental, is here necessary on the basis of the periods of development of the body of the earth.” Virtually every follower of Darwin at the time believed he had given a scientific demonstration of progress in nature; but though Darwin himself sometimes wavered on the point, that was never his fundamental view. Darwin’s theory of natural selection says nothing about any kind of betterment—as Darwin once noted, when judged from their own standpoint bees are an improvement on human beings—and it is testimony to Marx’s penetrating intelligence that, unlike the great majority of those who promoted the idea of evolution, he understood this absence of the idea of progress in Darwinism. Yet he was just as emotionally incapable as they were of accepting the contingent world that Darwin had uncovered.

As the late Leszek Kołakowski used to put it in conversation, “Marx was a German philosopher.” Marx’s interpretation of history derived not from science but from Hegel’s metaphysical account of the unfolding of spirit (*Geist*) in the world. Asserting the material basis of the realm of ideas, Marx famously turned Hegel’s philosophy on its head; but in the course of this reversal Hegel’s belief that history is essentially a process of rational evolution reappeared as Marx’s conception of a succession of progressive revolutionary transformations. This process might not be strictly inevitable; relapse into barbarism was a permanent possibility. But the full development of human powers was still for Marx the end point of history. What Marx and so many others wanted from the theory of evolution was an underpinning for their belief in progress toward a better world; but Darwin’s achievement was in showing how evolution operated without reference to any direction or end state. Refusing to accept Darwin’s discovery, Marx turned instead to Trémaux’s far-fetched and now deservedly forgotten theories.

Situating Marx fully in the nineteenth century for the first time, Sperber’s new life is likely to be definitive for many years to come. Written in prose that is lucid and graceful, the book is packed with biographical insights and memorable vignettes, skillfully woven together with a convincing picture of nineteenth-century Europe and probing commentary on Marx’s ideas. Marx’s relations with his parents and his Jewish heritage, his student years, his seven-year courtship and marriage to the daughter of a not very successful Prussian government official, and the long life of genteel poverty and bohemian disorder that ensued are vividly portrayed.

Sperber describes Marx’s several careers—in which, Sperber comments, he had more success as a radical journalist who founded a newspaper than in his efforts at organizing the working class—and he carefully analyzes his shifting intellectual and political attitudes. There can be no doubt that Sperber succeeds in presenting Marx as a complex and changeable figure immersed in a world far removed from our own. Whether this means that Marx’s thought is altogether irrelevant to the conflicts and controversies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is another matter.

Neither the claim that Marx’s ideas were partly responsible for the crimes of communism nor the belief that Marx

grasped aspects of capitalism that continue to be important today can be dismissed as easily as Sperber would like. Marx may have never intended anything resembling the totalitarian state that was created in the Soviet Union—indeed such a state might well have been literally inconceivable for him. Even so, the regime that emerged in Soviet Russia was a result of attempting to realize a recognizably Marxian vision. Marx did not hold to any single understanding of the new society he expected to emerge from the ruins of capitalism. As Sperber notes, “Late in his life, Marx replaced one utopian vision of the total abolition of alienated, divided labor with another, that of a humanity devoted to artistic and scholarly pursuits.” Yet Marx did believe that a different and incomparably better world could come into being once capitalism had been destroyed, basing his belief in the possibility of such a world on an incoherent mishmash of idealist philosophy, dubious evolutionary speculation, and a positivistic view of history.

Lenin followed in Marx’s footsteps in producing a new version of this faith. There is no reason to withdraw the claim, advanced by Kolakowski and others, that the deadly mix of metaphysical certainty and pseudoscience that Lenin imbibed from Marx had a vital part in producing Communist totalitarianism. Pursuing an unrealizable vision of a harmonious future after capitalism had collapsed, Marx’s Leninist followers created a repressive and inhuman society that itself collapsed, whereas capitalism—despite all its problems—continues to expand.

While Marx cannot escape being implicated in some of the last century’s worst crimes, it is also true that he illuminates some of our current dilemmas. Sperber finds nothing remarkable in the celebrated passage in the *Communist Manifesto* where Marx and Engels declared:

All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned and man is at last compelled to face, with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

The idea that this “assertion of ceaseless, kaleidoscopic change” anticipates the condition of late-twentieth-century and early-twenty-first-century capitalism, Sperber suggests, comes from a mistranslation of the original German, which could be more accurately rendered as:

Everything that firmly exists and all the elements of the society of orders evaporate, everything sacred is deconsecrated and men are finally compelled to regard their position in life and their mutual relations with sober eyes.

But while Sperber’s version is decidedly less elegant (as he admits), I can see no real difference in meaning between the two. However translated, the passage points to a central feature of capitalism—its inherent tendency to revolutionize society—that most economists and politicians of Marx’s time and later ignored or seriously underestimated.

The programs of “free market conservatives,” who aim to dismantle regulatory restraints on the workings of market forces while conserving or restoring traditional patterns of family life and social order, depend on the assumption that the impact of the market can be confined to the economy. Observing that free markets destroy and create forms of social life as they make and unmake products and industries, Marx showed that this assumption is badly mistaken. Contrary to what he expected, nationalism and religion have not faded away and there is no sign of their doing so in the foreseeable future; but when he perceived how capitalism was undermining bourgeois life, he grasped a vital truth.

This is not to say that Marx can offer any way out of our present economic difficulties. There is far more insight into the tendency of capitalism to suffer recurrent crises in the writings of John Maynard Keynes or a critical disciple of Keynes such as Hyman Minsky than in anything that Marx wrote. In its distance from any existing or realistically imaginable condition of society, “the communist idea” that has been resurrected by thinkers such as Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek is on a par with fantasies of the free market that have been revived on the right. The ideology promoted by the Austrian economist F.A. Hayek and his followers, in which capitalism is the winner

in a competition for survival among economic systems, has much in common with the ersatz version of evolution propagated by Herbert Spencer more than a century ago. Reciting long-exploded fallacies, these neo-Marxian and neoliberal theories serve only to illustrate the persisting power of ideas that promise a magical deliverance from human conflict.

The renewed popularity of Marx is an accident of history. If World War I had not occurred and caused the collapse of tsarism, if the Whites had prevailed in the Russian Civil War as Lenin at times feared they would and the Bolshevik leader had not been able to seize and retain his hold on power, or if any one of innumerable events had not happened as they did, Marx would now be a name most educated people struggled to remember. As it is we are left with Marx's errors and confusions. Marx understood the anarchic vitality of capitalism earlier and better than probably anyone else. But the vision of the future he imbibed from positivism, and shared with the other Victorian prophet he faces in Highgate Cemetery, in which industrial societies stand on the brink of a scientific civilization in which the religions and conflicts of the past will fade away, is rationally groundless—a myth that, like the idea that Marx wanted to dedicate his major work to Darwin, has been exploded many times but seems to be ineradicable.

No doubt the belief that humankind is evolving toward a more harmonious condition affords comfort to many; but we would be better prepared to deal with our conflicts if we could put Marx's view of history behind us, along with his nineteenth-century faith in the possibility of a society different from any that has ever existed.

The backward-looking prophet?

ISR isreview.org /issue/91/backward-looking-prophet

Review by Brooke
Horvath

In London, the Marxes were fond of picnicking on Hampstead Heath, where they bought beer and snails to complement the roast veal and fruit their servant Lenchen toted along in her basket. “Trudging back,” Jonathan Sperber informs us, “they sang folksongs” or “declaim[ed] from Shakespeare or Goethe’s Faust.” The advocate of violent revolution was, by nineteenth-century standards, an affectionate father, “determined that [his daughters] grow up to be proper young ladies, learning French and Italian.” He challenged others to duels, fathered the unmarried Lenchen’s son Freddy, and found in the economic crisis of 1857, a letter from his wife Jenny amusingly informs us, an escape from “the long period of gloom and depression in which [he] had been mired.” Suffering a host of maladies, including carbuncles that sometimes grew to the size of his fist, Marx was too ill to attend his wife’s funeral and spent much of his final year seeking a warm, dry climate to cure the tuberculosis that probably did him in, only to be met with unseasonably bad weather wherever he arrived. Freddy notwithstanding, Marx was, Sperber summarizes, “a proper and distinguished” if impecunious “bourgeois gentleman.” He was “patriarchal” and “prudish,” “cultured” and “respectable,” albeit laced with “bohemian work habits,” elements of freethinking, and, of course, the desire to see “all that is solid [melt] into air.”

I begin where I do because, in a recent review in *Harper’s*, Terry Eagleton faults Sperber for pushing Marx’s “work into the background in order to make room for the life” (an odd charge to level at a biography). I felt rather that, when not sending Lenchen off to the pawnshop or listening to the girls practice their piano, Sperber’s Marx seems to have done little beyond organize and agitate with his pen, talk shop with confederates, feud and scheme, mull and write. Interesting life details of the sort gathered above are too few; the life limned is for long stretches too lifeless. Although Eagleton is correct in observing that we care about Marx because of what he wrote, a biography implicitly promises not only to shed light on the work but also to bring us closer to the man himself quite apart from the words left us. Sperber does a much better job on the first task than on the second. Indeed, he seems to recognize this, suspending his chronological account to insert a late chapter on “the private man.” (He must have also felt a bit as does Eagleton, for two late chapters unpack Marx’s thinking as “theorist” and “economist.”)

If the life proves dull in the telling for those not exceedingly interested in the minutia of nineteenth-century radicalism and economic theory, Sperber does move with admirable thoroughness through the years of that life, carefully charting the evolution of Marx’s thinking through summaries and brief analyses of all the major texts, as well as many minor, often overlooked ones. Along the way, he provides helpful corrections of common misunderstandings: it is not true, for instance, that *On the Critique of Political Economy* met with little interest upon its publication in 1859, nor is it correct to think, as many do, that *The German Ideology* ever existed for Marx as “one intellectually consistent enterprise.”

Marx’s texts are here twice contextualized. First, we are shown how his ideas were affected by his constant need for money, years of exile, illness, the distraction of journalistic work-for-pay, and other obstacles to sustained scholarly effort. Second, we are made to appreciate how his political positions and changes of mind often resulted from the exigencies of the moment and the need to speak strategically about ongoing events, to position himself vis-à-vis rivals, and to say as much as he dared while avoiding censorship or worse. Thus, Sperber meticulously details Marx’s responses to one crisis or radical possibility after another, vehemently urging action, deftly reacting, shifting position, laying blame, exposing conspiracies, warning, threatening, consoling, defending, and forever harrying the always annoying Prussians or the Russian czar (his particular *bête noir*). Unpacked as well is the influence of Hegel, Feuerbach, Darwin and the many internecine squabbles among and between Young Hegelians and True Socialists, German democrats, and disgruntled affiliates of the International Working Men’s Association. Engels’s many contributions to Marx’s thought and career (to say nothing of his welfare) are detailed. Bakunin and the unsavory Bruno Bauer are here, along with foppish but effective Ferdinand Lassalle and treacherous Karl Vogt (who accused Marx of being a spy), Wilhelm Liebknecht and Lajos Kossuth, Gottfried Kinkel and Karl Grün.

Indeed, the reader may eventually suffer information overload, a possibility helped not at all by the failure of more than a few characters to come alive and Sperber's prose, which is admirably clear but rarely gripping. Still, as the author or editor of nine previous books on nineteenth-century European history (most of them focused on radical politics and/or Germany), Sperber is well prepared to tell Marx's complicated story, and he does so confidently and authoritatively. He makes judicious use of new material appearing in the *Karl Marx Friedrich Engels Gesamtausgabe* (the MEGA), an in-progress complete edition of the writings and correspondence of Marx and Engels, and the breadth of his research is impressive (One does not casually acquire the knowledge that Marx's critique of British colonialism was anticipated by Richard Cobden and John Bright.)

Alas, for Sperber, Marx is ultimately "a backward-looking figure," more product than shaper of his times, "who took the circumstances of the first half of the nineteenth century and projected them into the future." His envisioning of revolution "was always modeled on the Jacobin phase of the French Revolution," and his understanding of capitalism remained tied to "the early years of English industrialization and the political economy stemming from it." Further, Sperber argues, Marx's economic theories, at the time he conceived them, were largely orthodox reformulations of David Ricardo, Adam Smith, and other mainstream economists, many of whose ideas Marx appropriated with an eye toward "greater theoretical precision and greater empirical accuracy" and fitted to his theories of "the stages of human history" and belief in the eventual triumph of communism.

Because Sperber conjures a backward-looking prophet, and because he believes that it was Engels's interpretations of Marx, rather than Marx's writing itself, that proved influential to twentieth-century communists and socialists, Sperber's Marx is, finally, no longer pertinent. That Marx's ideas are still "shaping the modern world" is a view that "has run its course," Sperber contends, and he consequently wishes to offer "a new understanding of [Marx] as a figure of a past historical epoch, one increasingly distant from our own." The story, we are assured as the book begins, remains "fascinating and important," although that importance is nowhere adumbrated. The closest we come are useful reminders such as that neither Stalin's USSR nor Mao's China had much to do with anything Marx himself ever wrote. Judging Marx harmless because (happily?) outdated, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life*, for all its strengths, seems to have been for its author little more than an erudite exercise in satisfying an apparently academic curiosity. If nothing else, Sperber has shortchanged both Marx and himself.



BOOKS

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Marx After Marxism

What can the revolutionary teach us if the revolution is dead?

By [Peter E. Gordon](#)

Photo: Thomas Frey/DPA/Getty Images

Biographies come in two kinds. The first and more conventional kind portrays the hero as an exception, a genius or a rebel against his time. (I say “his” time because traditional biographies celebrated great men; the arrival of biographies about women has been painfully slow.) We are all familiar with the exceptional biography because it has been and remains the most popular genre on the market—alongside that other study of the dead, the murder-mystery. Biographies typically attract readers who admire, or at least think they admire, the person in question. Eulogies spoken at the graveside are a primitive form of biography, and they establish the rule for the genre: do not speak ill of the dead. Most of us feel drawn to personalities from the past—geniuses or inventors or statesmen or entrepreneurs—because we cherish their achievements and identify with their heroism. And like most kinds of idol-worship, this genre comes with a

narcissistic payoff: the great man isn't so exceptional after all, because we understand him. He is unique, just like us.

But professional historians as a rule are uncomfortable with the celebratory mode. A scholar's charge is to dismantle myth, to replace legend with fact. This is why the academic biographer may feel duty-bound to tell us that the great man was not really so exceptional, but was merely an exemplum of his time. The academic biographer, like the logician, loathes the exception. One cannot leap out of one's own time, so even the rebel only rebels in the ways his time allows. The second kind of biography does away with all talk of unique gifts. Where the first lionizes, the second historicizes; it shows the protagonist as a specimen of his age. The payoff here is complicated: historical instruction, obviously; but underneath the respectable goal of learning about the past, we read an exemplary biography also because it unties us from that past. Its covert message is that the dead have no claim upon the living. The hero belonged to his time, not to ours.

There have been many biographies of Karl Marx, and most of them fit into the first category. This is understandable, because until recently most people saw Marx as the founding father in a drama of communism that was still unfolding across the globe. Celebrated or excoriated, Marx seemed very much our contemporary, a man whose explosive ideas and personality continued to fascinate. One of the earliest efforts was [published in 1918](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0415607264/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0415607264&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20) - http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0415607264/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0415607264&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20 - by **Franz Mehring**, a journalist who helped Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in founding the [Spartacus League](http://www.marxists.org/glossary/orgs/s/p.htm) - <http://www.marxists.org/glossary/orgs/s/p.htm> - (soon renamed the German Communist Party). He was not what you would call an unbiased source. Mehring wished to portray Marx "in all his powerful and rugged greatness." After summarizing the second and third (never-completed) volumes of *Capital* - http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0140445684/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0140445684&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20 - he assured the reader that their pages contain a "wealth of intellectual stimulation" for "enlightened workers."

Less partisan was *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment* - http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0195103262/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&

creative=9325&creativeASIN=0195103262&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20 - by Isaiah Berlin, which appeared in 1939. In many respects, Berlin was the ideal person for the job, since he understood the inner workings of Marx's theory but remained sensitive to its complicated and catastrophic political consequences. He was not completely unsympathetic: like Marx, Berlin was a cosmopolitan of Jewish descent who fled persecution on the Continent and ended up in England. Unlike Marx, Berlin assimilated to British custom and made a career of defending liberal pluralism against totalitarian thinking right and left. But Berlin's skepticism did not prevent him from comprehending Marx's ideas. A good biographer needs critical distance, not ardent identification. His book, a perennial classic, has all the virtues of Berlin himself: charm, erudition, and (occasionally) grandiloquence.

I things are evanescent, but that does not make them obsolete.

Over the last century, a handful of previously unknown writings by Marx have come to light, and they have modified the way we understand his legacy. The most important of these were the "[Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/preface.htm) - <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/preface.htm> - " of 1844, often known as the "Paris manuscripts," dense and speculative texts that were discovered in the late 1920s and first published in 1932. They are significant because they give us a glimpse of the young Marx as a humanist and a metaphysician whose theory of alienation relied on the Hegelian themes that he absorbed while a student at the University of Berlin. In 1939, researchers unearthed the [Grundrisse](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0140445757/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0140445757&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20) - http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0140445757/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0140445757&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20 - (or "foundational sketch"), which contains many of the insights Marx would publish as *On the Critique of Political Economy* in 1859. Like so many of Marx's writings, the *Grundrisse* is incomplete. But its ambitions are enormous: it takes up the Hegelian themes of the Paris manuscripts and grafts them onto an economic theory that Marx would present in developed form only in the

first volume of *Capital*.

The first biographer to take the *Grundrisse* seriously was the British political theorist David McLellan, whose [biography of Marx appeared in 1973](#) -

http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0060128291/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0060128291&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20 - . For those who see Marx primarily as a social theorist and a

critic of modern economics, McLellan's book remains indispensable. Sober in its tone, it downplayed the significance of the Paris manuscripts, which McLellan called "an initial, exuberant outpouring of ideas." He implied that others found them appealing mainly because they spoke to fashionable trends in existentialism. McLellan preferred the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*; he found them "more solid."

Many disagree with such a low estimation of the 1844 manuscripts. Whereas Marxist-Leninism within the orbit of the Soviet Union stressed the "scientific" character of Marx's ideas, the discovery that Marx drew inspiration from Hegelian and left-Hegelian themes of self-consciousness and self-expression, of alienation and "species being," helped to renew enthusiasm for his work in the bourgeois democracies in the West. Perhaps the most original interpretation was [Marx's Fate: The Shape of a Life](#) - http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0271025816/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0271025816&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20 - , by the intellectual historian Jerrold Seigel, who took up the Hegelian theme of "inversion" as an Ariadne's thread to guide readers through all of Marx's major writings, from his early dissertation on ancient Greek philosophy all the way through *Capital*.

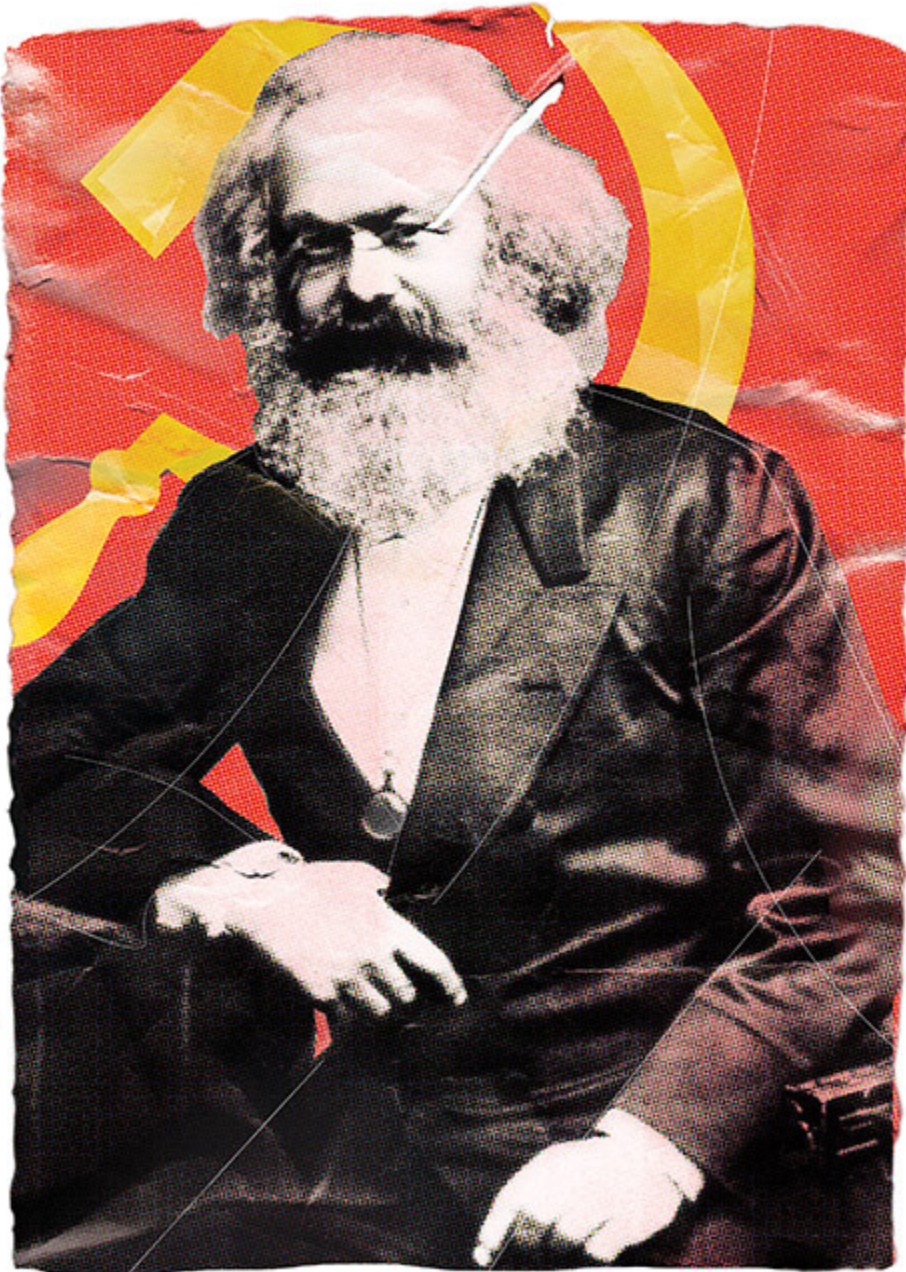
There have been more exotic studies. In 1948, Leopold Schwarzschild published [Karl Marx: The Red Prussian](#) - http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0007EGA2Q/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=B0007EGA2Q&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20 - , in which hostility overwhelms insight. In 1966, the Swiss radical democrat Arnold Künzli published a "psychography" that digs into Marx's "private existence" and his relations with his mother and father to expose the roots of Marx's "absolutism." (The book is nearly nine hundred pages long. Marx had issues.) Then there is Saul Padover's [Karl Marx: An Intimate Biography](#) - <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product>

/0451618971/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0451618971&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20 - , more than six hundred pages; and also joining the personal to the political is Mary Gabriel's *Love and Capital: Karl and Jenny Marx and the Birth of a Revolution* - http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0316066125/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0316066125&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20 - . Francis Wheen [published a detailed biography](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0393321576/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0393321576&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20) - http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/085745742X/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=085745742X&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20 - in 2000, which included the record of a chess game that Marx played. (He won.) [A much shorter intellectual biography](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/085745742X/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=085745742X&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20) - http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/085745742X/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=085745742X&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20 - by Rolf Hosfeld appeared in Germany in 2009 and was translated into English in 2013. In 2008, the German film-maker Alexander Kluge released *News from Ideological Antiquity*, a film that explores Marx's three-volume study of political economy, *Capital*. It is nine and a half hours long.

All of this may prompt the question as to whether a new biography is needed. The answer brings us back to the different types of biography—the exceptional versus the exemplary. Jonathan Sperber's book belongs to the second category. In many respects Sperber is well suited to the task. An accomplished historian, he has dedicated much of his career to making sense of the revolutions that swept through mid-nineteenth-century Europe. He also has at his disposal a trove of new historical evidence: the newly completed edition of the Marx-Engels writings that includes letters from and addressed to both authors.

Even more important, of course, is the shift of perspective that has come with the fall of communism. Sperber's is among the first major Marx biographies of the post-1989 era. This may help to explain its occasionally unimpressed tone, and its perpetual refrain that Marx now belongs to a bygone age. "The view of Marx as a contemporary whose ideas are shaping the modern world has run its course," Sperber writes, "and it is time for a new understanding of him as a figure of a past historical epoch, one increasingly distant from our own." Although Marx is often credited with some measure of foresight into the political revolutions and economic

crises of the twentieth century, Sperber enjoins us to recognize that Marx was just “a mortal human being, and not a wizard—Karl Marx, and not Gandalf the Grey.” But this is a non-sequitur. The fact that Marx lived in the nineteenth century should not prompt us to see him as the inhabitant of a foreign world. Was the nineteenth century really that long ago? Historians are faced with a special challenge in an accelerating society that dispenses with the past like a used paper cup. All things are evanescent, but that does not make them obsolete.



Karl Marx was born in May 1818 in Trier, a southwestern German town that had been annexed to the French republic during the Revolution. The mainly Catholic population in this area of the Rhineland suffered under the anti-clerical policies of the revolutionary government, and their persecution nourished grievances against France that would endure throughout the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, the region's Jewish minority praised the revolution for abolishing the discriminatory laws of the old regime. With Napoleon's defeat, the entire region fell under the rule of the eastern kingdom of Prussia, the quasi-colonial presence of which Trier's inhabitants resented. Throughout his life, Marx himself would harbor a deep animus against Prussian rule even as he took a certain pride in his German identity.

Among his contemporaries, it was common knowledge that Marx was Jewish by descent. But whether this is significant for understanding his legacy remains a matter of some dispute. His Jewish ancestry played into anti-Semitic theories that described the entire history of communism as a Jewish conspiracy. Occasionally, Jews who identify with socialism have permitted themselves to take delight in the fact of Marx's Jewishness, even though according to Marxist doctrine this sort of ethno-religious identity is historically irrelevant and even retards working-class solidarity. It was something that Marx himself rarely mentioned, except when he was vilifying rivals in the socialist movement (such as Moses Hess and Ferdinand Lassalle) who happened to be Jewish as well. The fact remains that Marx descended from a line of rabbis, which stretched as far back as the Trier rabbi Aaron Lwow in the seventeenth century and as far forward as Moses Lwow, who was rabbi in Trier until the very eve of the French Revolution. His daughter Chaje was Marx's grandmother, and Chaje's husband, the rabbi in a French town about thirty miles from Trier, was known as Mordechai or Marx Lewy. They named their son Heschel, also known as Henri or Heinrich. Heinrich was Karl's father.

Heinrich worked as a secretary for the Jewish Consistory, the administrative system created by Napoleon. Heinrich was evidently keen to break free of old-world constraints, and when he found that establishing his career as a lawyer would require conversion to Christianity, he did so, apparently without hesitation. His bride, Henriette Presburg, a daughter of Dutch Jews, was more reluctant: their son,

Karl, was baptized in 1824, five years after his father, and Henriette converted the following year.

Throughout his life, Karl Marx was occasionally the object of anti-Jewish slurs, though more often he was the person using them. Owing to his dark complexion and “Semitic” looks, friends nicknamed him “The Moor.” But his feelings were not uncomplicated. In a letter to his uncle late in his life, Marx referred to “our tribal comrade Benjamin Disraeli.” In Merhing’s biography, the fact of Marx’s Jewish ancestry is mentioned with some embarrassment as a burden that was cast aside. Yet the story is more subtle than that. Marxism has been described as a secularized expression of Jewish yearning for the messiah, but that is mere romanticism. Sociologists would say that a bitter schooling in exclusion and persecution predisposed Jewish populations across Europe to embrace the modern ideologies of egalitarianism and universal progress; this is the major explanation for the obvious overrepresentation of Jews in leadership roles in both liberal and socialist causes throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But this very predisposition also meant that some Jews shrugged off the garments of traditional religion as unwanted reminders of the past.

Heinrich Marx seems to have bequeathed to his son a passionate commitment to the new language of universalism. By the time Karl graduated from Gymnasium, he was already starting to misbehave: he greatly admired Johann Heinrich Wyttenbach, the director of the Gymnasium, who was a partisan of Enlightenment philosophers such as Kant. When the Prussian authorities dismissed Wyttenbach for his failure to resist “subversive” tendencies in the school, Karl demonstrated his dissent by refusing to pay the customary visit to the conservative successor. Heinrich expected his son to follow in his footsteps by becoming a lawyer, and at first things went as planned: Karl went to the university in Bonn and then, in 1836, to the University of Berlin. Meanwhile, he became engaged to Jenny von Westphalen, the daughter of a Prussian bureaucrat. During his first semester in Berlin, he found himself drawn to the new literary fashions, and he sent his fiancée a “Book of Love” composed in the florid tones of the new Romanticism.

It was in Berlin that Marx first encountered the philosophy of Hegel, and the experience, recorded in a letter to his father in 1837, was transformative: “A curtain had fallen.” He “ran like mad in the garden on

the filthy water of the Spree ... ran to Berlin and wanted to embrace every day laborer standing on street corners.” He would devote himself to Hegel’s intoxicating ideas “from beginning to end.” Heinrich was not pleased. His response to his son drips with irony: Karl had surrendered himself to “disorderliness, dull floating around in all areas of knowledge, dull meditation in front of a darkling oil lamp; running wild in the scholars’ night-gown and with uncombed hair.... And here, in this workshop of senseless and purposeless learnedness, this is where the crop will ripen, that will nourish you and your beloved, the harvest will be gathered that will serve to fulfill your sacred obligations?”

Any attempt to understand Marx’s evolution from student-rebel to mature critic of political economy cannot avoid the serious question of what happened in Berlin when the young scholar began to immerse himself in Hegel’s philosophy. It is hard to disagree with Sperber’s remark that Hegel’s ideas are “notoriously complex and convoluted,” but their imprint on Marx’s style of thought was so profound that no biographer can rightly be excused from the task of explaining their appeal. Marx himself summarized Hegel’s significance in the Paris manuscripts, where he characterized the dialectic as a model of the “self-creation of man.” It involved the difficult process of overcoming negativity and the consequent sense of satisfaction as consciousness achieved a fuller and more concrete reality. For Marx this meant that Hegel grasped “the nature of labor and understands objective man—true because real, man—as the result of his own labor.”

Certain scholars of Marx’s work conveniently sidestep these metaphysical concerns by arguing for a strong break between the younger Hegel-inspired philosophical texts and the mature works of political economy. Sperber insists, by contrast, that even the late works show “the continued and even renewed presence of Hegel’s ideas.” So one cannot help but feel some disappointment when Sperber concludes his abbreviated and uncertain two-page summary of Hegelian principles with a dismissive wave of the hand. Hegel’s philosophy, he remarks, may seem “arcane, vague, and terribly abstract,” but for Marx and his contemporaries Hegel’s philosophy “packed a powerful punch.” Maybe this is meant to sound reassuring. But without greater sensitivity to the inner life of the ideas, it only sounds glib. For confirmation of the profound bond between Hegel and Marx the reader must turn

elsewhere, to McLellan and Seigel, and to Shlomo Avineri's still valuable *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* - http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0521096197/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0521096197&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20 - , which appeared in 1968.

Sperber's biography is far more effective once it turns from philosophical matters to tell the tale of Marx's adventures as a journalist and political agitator. In the fall of 1842, Marx joined the editorial staff of the *Rheinische Zeitung* - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rheinische_Zeitung - , a paper based in Cologne that served as a home for a small group of young Hegelians whose radical ideas would soon draw the unwanted attention of the Prussian authorities. At this early stage, Marx had not yet warmed to the communist themes that fascinated his peers. He mocked their articles as little more than "beer suds pregnant with global upheaval but empty of thought." Once he was editor, his condemnation was more decisive: future issues would not dignify communist themes since they would only "defeat our intelligence." His first contributions to the paper, including an article series on winegrowers in the Moselle Valley, betray his early conviction that a market economy, once freed from the constraints imposed by the Prussian bureaucracy, would suffice to resolve the "social question."

Sperber's biography is effective when it tells the tale of Marx's adventures as a journalist and political agitator.

There is little in the early articles to signal that Marx would invest all political hope in the working class. The transformation came about partly because the Prussian authorities took umbrage at his essay on the Moselle winegrowers, and in early 1843 they struck back, forbidding the *Rheinische Zeitung* to publish. His career uncertain,

Marx, accompanied by Jenny, quit Cologne for Paris, where he joined Arnold Ruge in launching a new journal that would unite radical democrats from Germany and France. It was in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deutsch%E2%80%93Franz%C3%B6sische_Jahrb%C3%BCher - that Marx would publish some of his most important early essays, such as his “[Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Critique_of_Hegels_Philosophy_of_Right.pdf)” - http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_Critique_of_Hegels_Philosophy_of_Right.pdf - ” and “[On the Jewish Question](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question/)” - <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question/> - .” The latter essay is notorious for its anti-Semitic passages. (“What is the worldly religion of the Jew? *Huckstering*.”) In fact, Marx wished to defeat opponents of Jewish emancipation by using their language against them. He actually supported Jewish emancipation, but he distinguished between merely “political” emancipation and genuinely social or “human” emancipation. Here the working class was declared the unique agent of a social revolution: future change, Marx argued, would come only when there emerged “a class with radical chains, a class of civil society which ... possesses a universal character through its universal suffering.” Such a class would represent an “all-sided antagonism” to the present order; its own suffering would mean “the complete loss of man” and its own emancipation “the complete regaining of man.” This reclamation of the human essence could come only from one source: the proletariat.

But the doctrine that we now know as Marxism was not the creation of a solitary man. In the summer of 1844, Jenny returned to Trier to visit her mother, and Marx, alone in Paris, was introduced for the first time to a political radical named Friedrich Engels. The son of a German textile manufacturer, the Protestant-born Engels had been sent to England to train with the family’s business associates in the northwestern industrial town of Manchester. For a young man born into relative prosperity, the experience came as a brutal awakening: coal dust clotted the city air; in the lace factories children as young as eight worked in wretched poverty and died before adulthood from consumption or malnutrition. With damning precision, Engels documented the misery in 1845 in his book *The Condition of the Working Class in England* - http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0199555885/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0199555885&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20 - . He sent other essays abroad to be published in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*. On a return

journey from Manchester back to his family in Germany he visited the journal's office and, in a Parisian café, he met the editor himself.

For the rest of his life Marx would rely on his friend, not only for loans when the Marx family plunged repeatedly into financial debt, but also as his confidant throughout the years of political turbulence. In their correspondence, they gossiped, sometimes savagely, about colleagues whom they feared would derail the communist movement or who were simply competitors for leadership. Received wisdom has it that Engels, nicknamed “the General,” lacked the theoretical subtlety of his partner. Sperber affirms the old view that Engels was responsible for transforming Marx's critique of bourgeois economics into unyielding laws modeled after the laws of nature. But after the publication a few years ago of *Marx's General* - http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B008SLYYV4/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=B008SLYYV4&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20 - , Tristram Hunt's biography of Engels, this unflattering view of Engels as a positivist may deserve reconsideration. In some cases, of course, Marx distinguished himself both for his critical acumen and for his rhetorical fire. This was true most of all in *The Communist Manifesto* - http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1453704426/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1453704426&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20 - , the program for the newly reorganized “Communist League” that was assigned successively to different authors. An earlier draft by Engels was crude—a catechism of twenty-five questions each with an answer explaining the movement's principles. In the autumn of 1847, the task of re-working it passed to Marx, who, after much delay, composed one of the most powerful specimens of political prose ever written.

1 848 was the year of revolution across Western Europe. Liberals in Cologne and across the western German lands agitated for a constitution, and many yearned for a republic like that of Jacobin France in 1792. Artisans and workers nourished more radical hopes, and occasionally demonstrations erupted into rioting. By early summer, laborers had torn up the Parisian cobblestones, and from behind the barricades they battled with the new republican government. But Marx himself, not yet the hardened revolutionary, condemned the “bloody outcome” of class warfare. Basking in his new authority as editor-in-chief of

Cologne's *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neue_Rheinische_Zeitung - , he insisted in a public speech that the notion of dictatorship by a single class was “nonsense.” True change would instead come only through “the use of intellectual weapons.” In light of the revolutionary affirmation of the working class in *The Communist Manifesto* just a few months earlier, the speech, as Sperber notes, sounds “downright un-Marxist.” Marx, in other words, was still caught in a conflict between anti-Prussian and revolutionary aims. In the early months of 1848, Marx was not yet a Marxist. He would commit himself to his own principles only at the year's end.

But 1848 ended in failure. The Prussian army declared martial law in Cologne, and publication of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* was forbidden. Liberal activists in Germany drafted a constitution for King Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia, but he rejected it without ceremony. A rumor spread that Marx was helping to foment revolution, and he was expelled from the territory. Fleeing to Paris, the family was thrown back on its own meager resources. Jenny pawned what was left of her jewelry. Politically, conditions in Paris were no more favorable to revolution. With the defeat of the Parisian insurgents the political mood had darkened. Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte (the nephew of the revolutionary-turned-emperor) was elected president of the republic, and it was feared that a new monarchy was on the horizon.

By the summer of 1849, the Marxes had decided to flee the Continent, and they moved to London, where they would spend the rest of their lives. Home life in London oscillated between poverty and relative ease. Karl and Jenny were loving parents who were determined to raise their daughters as proper bourgeois ladies, which meant lessons in Italian and French, music and drawing. But Marx, at heart a bohemian, was careless with his finances. In 1852, a spy for the Prussian government sent this description of their Dean Street flat:

As father and husband, Marx, in spite of his wild and restless character, is the gentlest and mildest of men. Marx lives in one of the worst, therefore one of the cheapest, quarters of London. He occupies two rooms.... In the middle of the salon there is a large old-fashioned table covered with an oilcloth, and on it there lie manuscripts, books and newspapers, as well as the children's toys, the rags and tatters of his wife's sewing basket, several cups with broken rims, knives, forks, lamps, an inkpot,

tumblers, Dutch clay pipes, tobacco ash—in a word, everything topsy-turvy, and all on the same table.... Here is a chair with only three legs, on another chair the children are playing at cooking—this chair happens to have four legs. This is the one which is offered to the visitor but the children’s cooking has not been wiped away; and if you sit down, you risk a pair of trousers.

Raising a family in such disorder was not easy. Karl and Jenny saw one child die in childbirth, and another succumbed to illness when he was only eight years old, a tragedy from which Jenny barely recovered. Marx also fathered an illegitimate child by the family servant, Lenchen Demuth, and although the boy was sent to foster parents, he occasionally visited his mother at the Marx home. Marx never acknowledged the child was his. Engels, always mindful of his friend’s reputation, claimed paternity instead.

Sperber’s narrative is at its best when he moves between the drama at home and the political intrigue of post-1848 Europe. When Louis-Napoléon declared himself emperor, Marx was beside himself with outrage, and he responded with one of his most searing political essays, “[The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/) - <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/> - .” Into the later 1850s and 1860s, his reputation swelled, and he emerged as a leader of the European socialist movement. A meeting in 1864 in St. Martin’s Hall in London inaugurated the International Workingmen’s Association, later remembered as the “First International.” Ironically, the initial cause for this self-avowed internationalist organization was to agitate for the nationalist cause of Polish independence from Russia.

Marx may have been an ideologist for revolutionary violence, but he did not picture freedom as the gulag.

It is sobering to recall that throughout his life Marx looked upon Imperial Russia as the most reactionary state in all of Europe. The outbreak of Bolshevik revolution a little more than three decades after his death would have struck him as a startling violation of his own historical principle that bourgeois society and industrialization must reach their fullest expression before the proletariat gains the class-consciousness that it requires to seize political control. Marx's antipathy toward Russia also moved him to condemn the Balkan uprisings against Ottoman oppression in 1877 as a mere outbreak of pan-Slavist reaction. Nor was he impressed by the rebellions in India against British rule. In one of his many columns for *The New York Tribune*, he reasoned that British imperialism, however regrettable, was a historical necessity: only via modernization could India overcome its heritage of "Oriental despotism."

By the last decade of his life, Marx was a figure of some renown, thanks in part to his spirited work on the Paris Commune, *The Civil War in France* - http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0717806669/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0717806669&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20 - . When Germany defeated the French army in 1870, moderates in France responded by declaring a republic. Opposing the moderates in the new National Assembly, Parisian workers declared a revolutionary government and erected barricades against the German troops. Marx threw caution to the wind: the Commune was "the glorious harbinger of a new society." Its brutal defeat, Sperber tells us, marked "the beginning of the end of Marx's activism."

Alongside his journalism and his organizational work for the socialist cause, Marx also spent long hours in the reading room of the British Museum, immersed in the study of classical political economists such as David Ricardo and Adam Smith. It is hard to decide whether Marx was really more a political agitator who got entangled in theory or a theorist who got entangled in politics. An early portrait by Ruge of Marx in his Paris days hints at an answer: "He reads a lot," Ruge wrote. "He works in an extraordinarily intense way.... but he never finishes anything—he interrupts every bit of research to plunge into a fresh ocean of books.—He is more excited and violent than ever, especially when his work has made him ill and he has not been to bed for three or even four nights on end." It is a cardinal principle of Marxism that theory and practice are inseparable, and Marx's evident difficulty with bringing his

own theoretical work to completion reflected a distaste for imagining that one can leap ahead of one's historical age. Theory cut free of practice, Marx felt, was a symptom of bad utopianism. From the London years, only two books would see the light of day during Marx's lifetime: *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in 1859, and the first volume of *Capital*, in 1867. The task of sorting through the great disorder of notes for the second and third volumes of *Capital* fell to Engels, who published them soon after his friend's death in 1883.

For a reader who wishes to comprehend the inner argumentation of *Capital* and the other works, Sperber's biography may represent a step in the wrong direction. Sperber is a graceful narrator, but unfortunately his account of Marx's actual contribution to social and economic thought too often avoids the rigors of rational reconstruction, and it concludes with the dispiriting lesson that little has survived. The biography as a whole is governed by the historicist conceit that Marx was a man of his time. In some respects this is no doubt true: Marx's conviction that there is a single key to all social reality and that one group alone possesses the remedy will strike most readers today as a remnant of nineteenth-century metaphysics that few now find credible. Social reality is too complex, its conflicts too manifold and paradoxical, for there to be a final reconciliation of the sort envisioned by both Hegel and Marx. History itself ran in directions that Marx never anticipated. That a Russian revolution would erupt when and how it did would have startled him. That the Soviet experiment would soon degenerate into authoritarianism and mass murder might have torn out his soul. Marx may have been temperamental and egotistical and even an apologist for revolutionary violence, but he did not picture freedom as the gulag.

Ideally, the story of a consequential thinker should leave us with a sense of possibility. After all, the most radical ideas exceed the hour of their birth, and they slip into the future with renewed power. Despite all its flaws, Marxism as a critical perspective has survived the death of its namesake. Like any theory, of course, it casts only a partial light on a world whose infinite complications otherwise forbid understanding. In most of the developed world today, the income gap between rich and poor has only widened since the Great Depression. To explain this predicament, a Marxian theory of capitalist exploitation may prove too simple, and in some respects simply misleading. But that does not mean that the theory is without use.

Contemporary capitalism is not exactly humming along smoothly, and some of its failures and abuses have been calamitous. For those who feel that the purpose of a biography is to fasten an individual wholly to his time, Sperber has written a life of Marx that is at once engaging and thick with historical detail, but no one will emerge from this biography with the sense that they now understand why Marx passed such a great many hours in the rotunda of the British Museum. Marx may have lived his life in the nineteenth century, but the exploitation that roused his fury is hardly a thing of the past.

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Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life. By *Jonathan Sperber*.
New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013. Pp. xx+648. \$35.00.

Jonathan Sperber's new biography of Marx is a well-researched, clearly written attempt to reconstruct Marx's life and work within their original mid-nineteenth-century European contexts. Marx should not be viewed as our contemporary with special prophetic insights into historical trends defining the current world's present and future, Sperber insists, but as a mortal human being who lived and died within the horizons of a specific epoch in European history, a world that is increasingly distant from our own. The most obvious factor creating the need for a new historical look at Marx is of course the fading of the Cold War, the collapse of the confrontation between fear and hope grounded in ideologies and regimes allegedly based on Marx's writings, but also, and more broadly, the development of modern societies beyond the frameworks of the French Revolution and the early Industrial Revolution that shaped Marx's theoretical perspectives on politics and social development. At the same time the renewed energy devoted to completing the collection and publication of documents tied to Marx's life and work in recent decades has made available new materials that can enhance attempts to place Marx in his times with greater historical detail and comparative nuance than was previously possible. Sperber does not actually specify what was so limited or ahistorical in standard biographies of Marx, like that of David McLellan, which made similar claims about transcending the ideological partisanship that had tended to make Marx a controversial contemporary rather than a historical "other." For Sperber, historicizing Marx means accepting his obsolescence, his basic irrelevance for the tasks of thinking through the conflicts and dilemmas of our own age. Marx's story has itself become a historical curiosity, he claims, a portrait in an archival museum, whose value lies in its illumination of the gap between past and present.

Sperber's historical contextualization of Marx has three general focal areas: his personal or private life as son, husband, friend, and father; his public activity as journalist, political organizer, and revolutionary agitator; and his scholarly investigations and theoretical constructions as a thinker about socioeconomic existence and historical development. The first dimension, the recreation of Marx's personal life on the basis of new archival evidence and recognition of historical difference, is certainly one of the more engaging aspects of this biography. This is clearly not a biography of Marx's "inner life": it is not a psychobiography, like that of Jerrold Seigel, which attempts to trace the individual identity-formation of the historical subject we know as Marx. In fact, Sperber often simply ignores textual evidence about Marx's inner conflicts and self-formation, like his youthful literary productions, including the substantial collection of poetry in the late romantic vein of Byron and Heine. In contrast to his meticulous cataloging and summarizing of even the most obscure of Marx's newspaper articles, Sperber remarks in a dismissive aside that "the less said the better" (48) about the youthful writings that have provided other historians with insights

into the psychological crisis that led Marx to his reluctant conversion to the Hegelian identification of historical reality and rational self-reflection. What Sperber means by a “nineteenth-century” life is a life framed by bourgeois social norms and cultural assumptions regarding professional status and financial security, masculine strength and responsibility, family and collegial relations, as well as ethical/cultural values that articulated middle-class expectations about propriety and respectability. He provides detailed descriptions of the financial pressures and personal conflicts that shaped Marx’s daily attempts to mediate the pressures of maintaining a respectable bourgeois existence with the life of a radical revolutionary activist in exile, scrambling to make ends meet and keep his household together and negotiating the constantly shifting alliances, friendships, and personal conflicts within the international group of associates and enemies in the underground world of nineteenth-century dissidents and insurgents. Some of this information does alter our views of Marx’s personal “character” in minor, but usually positive ways. His relationship to Jenny looks a bit different once we know about her family’s actual social and economic circumstances (less aristocratic and certainly less wealthy than usually imagined) and about the extent to which their engagement was less a leap across a social gulf and more an affront to nineteenth-century bourgeois standards of masculine responsibility. In general, Sperber’s attempts to place Marx’s personal life into a nineteenth-century, middle-class frame are empathetically intended, excusing faults more than listing crimes, and even if he does reiterate the standard view of Marx as a somewhat irascible, passionate, belligerent, “difficult” person, these traits appear as indications of genuine commitments to certain values and principles in a fairly normal, even likable, man of his time, culture, and class. Rocky moments in the relationships with Jenny (usually tied to domestic finances) and with Engels (often with similar causes) become more understandable within a contextualizing frame of reference: “compared to many of his contemporaries, Marx comes across as having chosen some of the best possibilities available to a husband and father of the mid nineteenth-century Anglo-German middle class” (486). On one issue in particular—Marx’s statements about Judaism and contemporary Jews—their forgiving dimension in Sperber’s historicizing perspective is especially noticeable. Accusations of anti-Semitism and Jewish self-hatred are critically dismantled as anachronistic judgments based on assumptions of a later age. Marx in fact tended to share the general attitudes of secular, emancipated Jews of his generation toward Judaism as a historically limited religious culture and a premodern “nation” within a society of “estates” or “orders,” a perspective within which assimilation and even conversion seemed rational choices about contingent identifications.

Primarily known for his scholarly accomplishments as a prolific historian of nineteenth-century European, and especially German, politics, Sperber obviously enters into his zone of expertise and comfort when he switches his historicizing lens to Marx’s public life. For Sperber the collapse of a possible academic career and the transition to political journalism in 1841 marks Marx’s transition to “adulthood.” It is as a crusading journalist, as a principled critic of the contradictions and inequities of public life revealed in contemporary events and historical movements, and as a committed activist seeking for ways to mobilize the collective forces needed to translate his principles into practice that Marx finds and defines himself. Even his private life, insofar as it was individuated beyond the norms of his class and culture, was marked by the ways he connected his personal associations to an uncompromising commitment to public principles. The confusing complexity of Marx’s political associations, strategies, and critical engagements in the middle decades of his life do in fact become clearer as one follows Sperber’s detailed accounts of how the political situation in the Prussian Rhineland (where Marx grew up and made his most important initial connections to political associations and movements) was marked by the legacy of

French rule during the Napoleonic period, or how Marx's intense engagement with post-1840 Prussian politics shaped his views of the sequential historical relationship between a political transformation on the French revolutionary model, culminating in Jacobin-style democratic republic, and the mobilization of forces that would bring about the communist regime that would displace the reign of bourgeois liberalism. Marx's political choices and strategies, Sperber shows again and again, were grounded in the context of postrevolutionary, central European conflicts and associations. Positions that first appear contradictory or based on personal expediency emerge as understandable and principled if one can think oneself back a century and a half and recreate the historical contexts in which they were formed. Even Marx's curious loyalty to David Urquhart and his paranoid theories of secret British collusion with Russian policies seem less curious in the context of general views among German radicals about Russia's oppressive interference in the politics of Central Europe and the Middle East.

Sperber's focus on the defining role of political activism in Marx's public life also informs his perspective on Marx's work as a scholar and thinker. Marx's historical "observations" and "theories" concerning the structural dynamics of capitalism, the trajectory of human historical development, and the politics of revolutionary change, he argues, were forged in an ongoing engagement with a changing historical situation and intense polemical arguments with mentors, colleagues, and critics. Attempts to systematize or "purify" Marx's various claims into a unified theoretical vision that transcends the specific horizons of the world in which they were first formulated, Sperber claims, are "singularly useless pastimes" (xviii). Marx's positions were formulated within the conceptual frames of French revolutionary theory, British political economy, and Hegelian philosophy—all embedded in the world of early nineteenth-century Europe. Sperber does not see Marx's thought as an intentionally directed movement of critical thinking with and beyond this inherited textual legacy, but as a dispersed meandering through a conglomeration of observations, pragmatic choices, and polemics, best examined in Marx's journalistic responses to the events of the day. Thus he does not follow the line of Marx's reflections on the post-Hegelian understanding of human historical existence as material subjectivity from the concept of alienated labor, to the division of labor in social production, to the definition of labor as labor-power within the dynamics of capitalism; he also dismisses as a kind of pointless, obsessive personal polemic the four hundred page critique of Max Stirner in the *German Ideology*, in which Marx thought his way through to a conception of human autonomy and self-production as a social and historical process. To understand Marx as an historical thinker, however, does not just mean to recognize that he shaped his observations and theories in response to a changing historical constellation of events, movements, and personalities, or that the principles organizing his thought and action emerged from an intense dialogue with texts produced in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, but also to recognize that Marx's work articulates a historically situated activity of self-reflective critical thinking about issues like human freedom, the material foundations of human agency and social life, and the meaning of history that continues to engage us and demand our attention precisely because it does address us from another time and place, and thus provides a counterpoint to our own universalizing pretensions and historical forgetfulness in the present.

JOHN E. TOEWS

University of Washington

Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life, by Jonathan Sperber, review

 [telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/10088573/Karl-Marx-A-Nineteenth-Century-Life-by-Jonathan-Sperber-review.html](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/10088573/Karl-Marx-A-Nineteenth-Century-Life-by-Jonathan-Sperber-review.html)

By Ben
Wilson

01/06/2013

This is not a book about how Karl Marx changed the world. It is not about the revolutions and crimes committed in his name in the 20th century. Without a doubt Marx remains an iconic and mythologised figure, bogeyman for some, prophet for others. In much contemporary discussion of him, whether it be in academia or popular journalism, the tendency is for Marx to become unmoored from his own times, leaving us free to project on to him our own prejudices and controversies as if he were our contemporary. The Right rages at him to this day as the inveterate foe of the capitalist status quo; the Left venerates the thinker who so effectively highlighted the anarchic and destabilising effects of capitalism.

Jonathan Sperber is unwaveringly true to the book's subtitle: this is pointedly a 19th-century life. It is refreshingly free from the dogma and partisan passion which bedevilled discussions of the great man in the blood-soaked 20th century. Sperber seeks to understand and explain Marx purely within the context of his times: "The view of Marx as a contemporary whose ideas are shaping the modern world has run its course and it is time for a new understanding of him as a figure of a past historical epoch, one increasingly distant from our own: the age of the French Revolution, of Hegel's philosophy, of the early years of English industrialisation and the political economy stemming from it."

Sperber succeeds magnificently in this task. He charts Marx's intellectual evolution with enviable clarity, elucidating his ideas and putting them in context. He draws upon fresh material from the gigantic archive of Marx's complete published and unpublished works – known by its German acronym, **MEGA**. It yields no smoking gun, "but it does bring to light hundreds of small details that subtly change our picture of him".

The notion of "Marxism" dissolves; instead we have a man who, like the rest of us, accepted and repudiated ideas and held a wide variety of competing beliefs. As a journalist with deadlines forever looming and debts to pay, he reacted swiftly to events, firing out his articles. He did what was expedient. In 1842, for example, when he was appealing to a liberal audience, he attacked communism and advocated force of arms to halt it. In 1848, just six months after co-authoring **The Communist Manifesto**, he dismissed the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat as nonsense in a speech at Cologne. 1848 was the year of revolution in Europe, and Marx was torn between two imperatives – realising communism and ridding Germany of autocracy. In his Cologne speech he reached out once again to liberals, reassuring them that revolution could occur without violent class warfare.

Sperber shows how Marx's views on capitalism were built up during the course of a life of research. He also shows convincingly how Marx was a man of the mid-19th century, steeped in the writing of the British political economists, most notably **David Ricardo**. Like most of us, he drew upon the past to understand the present; in that way he was more a "backward looking figure" than a prophet or someone who can offer a guide in our present or future crises. Sperber also shows how the development of Marx's ideology was shaped not just by contemporary events but by personal miseries, financial woes and, most interestingly, by "factional pettiness" in the ranks of the socialists. Sperber does a brilliant job at recreating these poisonous conflicts and inflated egos, taking us into the murky world of émigré revolutionaries in the middle of the 19th century.

As Sperber writes, the feature of Marx's life that had the most resonant appeal is his "passionately irreconcilable, uncompromising, and intransigent nature". The biography is rich in detail about Marx's upbringing and education, his travails as a journalist and editor, his loves, his friendships and his family life. Marx breathes in these pages. We follow him on his wanderings, settling in one seedy apartment after another. We trudge around with him as he seeks cash to stave off his creditors and redeem his wife's jewellery from the pawnbrokers. We enter the chaos of his study, where manuscripts tottered in piles. Marx's life was nothing if not precarious; he lived forever on the brink of financial ruin and personal tragedy. Most endearingly, we encounter Marx spending hours playing

with his children and grandchildren and setting off for picnics on Hampstead Heath. The Marx who emerges is “patriarchal, prudish, bourgeois, industrious, independent (or trying to be), cultured, respectable, German, with a distinct patina of Jewish background”. In other words he was very much the conventional middle-class man.

The result is to demystify Marx and return the man to us shorn of the mythmaking and iconography. He remains a towering figure, but becomes a less forbidding, more human one.

Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life by Jonathan Sperber

512pp, WW Norton & co, £23 (PLUS £1.35 p&p) 0844 871 1515 (RRP £25)

Karl Marx: A Nineteenth Century Life by Jonathan Sperber

THE [timeshighereducation.com/books/karl-marx-a-nineteenth-century-life-by-jonathan-sperber/2003343.article](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books/karl-marx-a-nineteenth-century-life-by-jonathan-sperber/2003343.article)

25/04/2013

I once caused shock and distress when lecturing to a group of trade unionists from South Korea by mentioning that Karl Marx had had an illegitimate son, Freddy Demuth. I tried to reassure them by saying that Demuth became a respectable Labour movement figure who helped to found the Hackney Labour Party, but to no avail. The impact of Marx's ideas has led the man himself to be presented as either flawless and all-knowing, or deluded and demonic. Jonathan Sperber's magnificent, scholarly biography cuts through the dichotomies by examining Marx in the context of his times.

The author is able to draw on a wealth of knowledge about 19th-century European, and specifically German, history. He dwells in some detail on Marx's Jewish family in Trier, explaining the pressure on them to assimilate, as well as the obstacles faced by Marx's father, Heinrich, a man influenced by Enlightenment thought.

Two lifelong characteristics are apparent early on; young Karl was unable to manage his finances and had difficulty in finishing one piece of work before starting another. His exasperated father wrote to him protesting about his overspending, asking sardonically, "how can a man who every week or two invents new [philosophical] systems, and must tear up the old...descend to petty matters?" Heinrich was even more anxious about his son's tendency to busy himself "hunting up the shadow of learnedness" rather than focusing on lectures and exams.

By placing Marx firmly in his 19th-century setting, Sperber shows that it was by no means preordained that Marx would become a communist

Sperber shows how Marx's association with the iconoclastic and irreverent Young Hegelians blighted any hopes of an academic career as the political ethos in Germany became more conservative. He brings out the characters of figures such as Bruno Bauer and Ludwig Feuerbach, whose misfortune it has been to be remembered largely through Marx's scathing critiques of their ideas. The attack on Max Stirner, who argued that egoism should be the basis of ethics, became particularly obsessive. If Marx had known how Stirner's ideas would echo in anarchist circles in the late 19th century, influencing Nietzsche, the artistic avant-garde, syndicalists and the extreme right, the fulminations in Marx's *The German Ideology* would no doubt have been even more lengthy.

Karl Marx reveals the daunting scope of a man familiar with the Classics, who studied philosophy, history, literature and economics as well as the nascent disciplines of anthropology and sociology that were emerging during his lifetime. Marx's restless intellect extended to science and bounded off into geology and theories of evolution. What an appalling headache he would have been for the research excellence framework!

Sperber's knowledge of German history enables him to elaborate well on Marx's journalism on the *Rhineland News* and then on the *New Rhineland News*, revealing how Marx took extensive notes and read far more than was necessary. After the 1848 revolutions, Marx would write for the anti-slavery radicals Horace Greeley and Charles Anderson Dana, on the *New-York Tribune* and, as capitalism flourished, adopted some contorted Machiavellian arguments. Sperber shows how Marx's intractable opposition to Russia and his suspicion of the motives of Lord Palmerston led him into an uneasy alliance with the eccentric David Urquhart - an enthusiastic supporter of the Ottoman Empire.

Sperber is most interesting on the sectarian disputes and paranoia pervading the émigré milieu that Marx inhabited in London. Marx's attacks on his opponents are notoriously abrasive, while his correspondence with Engels is full of acrimonious comments about political associates. Sperber is, however, carefully judicious, explaining how those targeted often responded in kind. Isolation, defeat and powerlessness encouraged suspicion. Marx was no exception; in some cases he was to be proved right about the presence of police agents, although he trusted the Austrian spy, Janos Bangya.

Karl Marx portrays a man who was sharply perceptive while being, in both his life and in his ideas, capable of contradictory blind spots. By placing Marx firmly in his 19th-century setting, Sperber shows that it was by no means preordained that Marx would become a communist. Indeed, the man who wrote the *Communist Manifesto* and supported the revolutions of 1848 had, only six years earlier, advocated using cannon against insurrection. A fascinating question raised in the biography is one that Marx himself recognised in his own theorising but also relates to the choices he made in his own life. Why do some individuals come to break with their own social and economic interests to support the cause of others? Marx was troubled by the implications of his choices for his beloved wife Jenny and his family, but he persisted through poverty, illness and the tragic, painful deaths of his children.

I smiled at Sperber's throwaway comment that feminists have not embraced Marx. In fact, Marx has had a profound effect on socialist feminism in Europe, Latin America, Asia, Africa and even North America over the past few decades. We read Marx critically but took much from him. Many of us also placed him in a historical context, finding out how he had influenced women's movements for emancipation globally, as well as how he failed to assimilate insights existing within the maligned utopian strands of socialism of his own times. Certain people within these movements, including the women who participated in the 1848 revolutions for example, evinced a greater alertness to the material circumstances of domestic labour and to the powerful psychological hold of male-defined dominant ideas and customs.

Sperber gives us a Marx who was neither infallible in his contemporary judgements nor "entirely prophetic" in his forecasts. However, it is not necessary to regard Marx as a source of revelatory doctrine to mine his writing for challenging questions. Indeed, two key tensions in Marx's political and social thought mentioned in this biography resonate for the contemporary social movements demanding rights, social justice and an alternative economy. One is the dual emphasis on furthering democratic revolution while seeking to secure the power of the working class. The second is Marx's ambivalence about the ideal future. Was it to be characterised by extensive leisure or by deeply fulfilling work for all?

Sperber rightly dismisses many of Marx's obsessions. But some of his apparently abstruse preoccupations, such as his loathing for Stirner, can signal continuing dilemmas for radicals who challenge established customs and moral systems.

This biography sees Sperber follow the historical Marx with consummate skill, but he seems perplexed by the impact of Marx. He succeeds well in conveying Marx the mighty and Marx the petty with superb erudition and impressive clarity. He does not, however, communicate the intellectual excitement surrounding a man who has been reinvented by several generations since his death and who will undoubtedly be recreated by future ones. Surely it is possible to recognise great thinkers in their own times as historical figures *and* consider their ideas in relation to the present. We do this after all with Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau and Mill. Why not with Marx?

The author

"I was born and grew up in New York City. As an adult, I have lived mostly in the Midwest, so you might say that I am a defrocked New Yorker," says Jonathan Sperber, professor of modern European history at the [University of Missouri](#).

"I live in Columbia, Missouri, with my wife Nancy Katzman and our two cats. Our son, Adam, is currently an undergraduate at [Northwestern University](#) in Evanston, Illinois (near Chicago), so he is not around at home quite so much any more.

"Columbia is a very pleasant small city, with a low cost of living, easy access to nature and a relatively slow pace of life. Sometimes these positive features can also be a little annoying.

"When I first came to Columbia in 1984, it was very much a college town, but I would say that over the years it has evolved into a small Midwestern city. The university, although of course still very important, no longer has the dominant place it once did. Other forms of employment have gained significance. There is what I call the

'sickness and death business' - Columbia has a number of hospitals and a large concentration of medical practices and medical laboratories. Insurance and finance are also important: the city is the corporate headquarters of an important regional insurance company and regional headquarters of a national insurance company. We have even had a little high-tech business - a remote service center of IBM has recently come here.

"Along with the city's economic evolution has come its cultural evolution: more and better restaurants and retail establishments, an increasingly lively arts scene, including music and cinema, as well as the representational arts, not necessarily tied to the university. If the university does not loom quite so large as it once does, these other branches of enterprise generally involve a well-educated labour force, so Columbians have been persistent supporters of education, and higher education in particular. Unfortunately, that's not always the case for the state of Missouri in general," Sperber observes.

Asked about his early years, Sperber recalls, "I was quite the studious child, encouraged in that direction by my parents, who were very much petit bourgeois with educational aspirations. Both attended New York City's municipal colleges, my father in night school over many years. They both had corresponding jobs: my mother as a schoolteacher, my father as a municipal employee involved in financial auditing.

"As an undergraduate, I attended Cornell University, one of the less prestigious of the Ivy League colleges, which has always been a site of social upward mobility for young people from working-class and lower-middle-class families in the New York City area. In my day such young people were mostly Jewish; today they are mostly Asian. In spite of my undergraduate involvement with both the 1960s counterculture and student radicalism (this was toward the end of the era of the Vietnam War), I did have aspirations toward a university career. At first, it was in mathematics, but I later switched to the study of central European history."

Sperber carried out postgraduate study at the University of Chicago, where he studied with the "unjustly forgotten" historian Leonard Krieger. Krieger was, he says, "an unusually profound thinker and scholar; his great work, *The German Idea of Freedom*, remains an intellectual tour de force. As a dissertation adviser, he supported my work and guided it in some very promising directions, although my interests in social history were very far from his.

"Like many historians, I have always had aspirations to write for a broader audience. Previous attempts to write scholarly monographs with a broader appeal - to use the language of the music industry, 'crossover works' - have not been too successful. Textbooks do have larger sales, but they are textbooks. So I very much enjoyed the challenges involved in writing a work based on historical scholarship, but in lively prose understandable and enjoyable for the general reader, and brought out by a trade publisher. Although I am not sure if I will write a biography again, my future plans do centre on this sort of historical writing designed for a general, educated readership."

Of his goals in writing this book, Sperber says, "the point of my biography is to remove Marx from the 20th century/Cold War era binary opposition, in which he was either a keen analyst of capitalism and prophet of human emancipation, or an evil forerunner of totalitarian dictatorship and a deluded enemy of the free market. This latter, hostile attitude is still very widespread in the US. Describing Marx as a 19th-century figure, I think, makes it easier to consider his ideas.

"Most past biographies of Marx have tended either to idealise or to demonise him - the former the attitude of Marxists, the latter of anti-communists. (There are exceptions, such as the long-term standard Marx biography by David McClellan, an excellent work.) I have tried to write a biography that is neither an idealisation nor a demonisation, both often understood in contemporary terms, but a work that puts Marx in his historical context," he notes.

To his surprise, Sperber recently found himself discussing Karl Marx (and the thinker's apparently undergraduate-like fondness for procrastination and alcohol) on the popular US TV programme *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

"I was astonished when I found out that I would appear on *The Daily Show*. Doing the show was a blast. Jon

Stewart is a wonderful performer, who is also very good at guiding a conversation and putting his guests at ease. He has an excellent staff that prepared me very carefully for my appearance. *The Daily Show* is very popular among US intellectuals and academics; my colleagues, friends and acquaintances (to say nothing of the university administration, and even my students) were very pleased at my appearance.”

Of his non-academic pastimes, Sperber says: “I like to go to the movies and to hear live jazz. For exercise, I run long distances, 15 to 25 miles per week. When I have the time, I like to read works of fiction, both serious literature and genre fiction, especially fantasy and science fiction. I have even taught classes on the works of J.R.R. Tolkien. From Tolkien’s point of view, one could say that I have written a life of Sauron.”

Karen Shook

Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life

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'Karl Marx,' by Jonathan Sperber

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By JONATHAN FREEDLAND

29/03/2013

The Karl Marx depicted in Jonathan Sperber's absorbing, meticulously researched biography will be unnervingly familiar to anyone who has had even the most fleeting acquaintance with radical politics. Here is a man never more passionate than when attacking his own side, saddled with perennial money problems and still reliant on his parents for cash, constantly plotting new, world-changing ventures yet having trouble with both deadlines and personal hygiene, living in rooms that some might call bohemian, others plain "slummy," and who can be maddeningly inconsistent when not lapsing into elaborate flights of theory and unintelligible abstraction.

Still, it comes as a shock to realize that the ultimate leftist, the father of Communism itself, fits a recognizable pattern. It's like discovering that Jesus Christ regularly organized bake sales at his local church. So inflated and elevated is the global image of Marx, whether revered as a revolutionary icon or reviled as the wellspring of Soviet totalitarianism, that it's unsettling to encounter a genuine human being, a character one might come across today. If the Marx described by Sperber, a professor at the University of Missouri specializing in European history, were around in 2013, he would be a compulsive blogger, and picking Twitter fights with Andrew Sullivan and Naomi Klein.

But that's cheating. The express purpose of "Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life" is to dispel the dominant notion of a timeless Marx — less man, more ideological canon — and relocate him where he lived and belonged, in his own time, not ours. Standing firm against the avalanche of studies claiming Marx as forever "our contemporary," Sperber sets out to depict instead "a figure of the past," not "a prophet of the present."

And he succeeds in the primary task of all biography, recreating a man who leaps off the page. We travel with Marx from his hometown, Trier, via student carousing in Bonn and Berlin, to his debut in political journalism in Cologne and on to exile and revolutionary activity in Paris, Brussels and London. We see his thought develop, but glimpse also the begging letters to his mother, requesting an advance on his inheritance, along with the enduring anxiety over whether he can provide for the wife he has loved since he was a teenager. We hear of the sleepless nights that follow the start of the American Civil War: Marx is troubled not by the fate of the Union, but by the loss of freelance income from *The New York Tribune*, which, consumed by matters closer to home, no longer requires his services as a European correspondent. We see the trips to the pawnbrokers, the pressure to maintain bourgeois living standards, "the show of respectability," as Marx put it to his closest friend and co-conspirator, Friedrich Engels.

The picture that emerges is a rounded, humane one. Marx is committed to revolution, without being a monomaniac. He is an intensely loving father, playing energetically with his children and later grandchildren, but also suffering what would now be diagnosed as a two-year depression following the death of his 8-year-old son Edgar. He is clearly also an infuriating colleague, capable of spending 12-hour days in the reading room of the British Museum but stewing on book projects for years, only to fail to deliver. Engels, Sperber writes, spent decades repeating the same message: Get the work done!

Besides the long, devoted marriage to Jenny, there is another love story here: the partnership with Engels, who it seems was prepared to do anything for his comrade. Engels famously subsidized Marx; perhaps less well known is that he spared his friend a scandal by claiming paternity of the child born to the Marx family servant, Lenchen Demuth: the boy was in fact Karl's son. After the great man's death, it was Engels who waded through Marx's scrawled notes to assemble, and publish posthumously, the final two volumes of "Das Kapital." Even Marx's signature text, "The Communist Manifesto," included a 10-point program lifted almost verbatim from an earlier Engels program. Engels was Aaron to Marx's Moses, able to speak in public and so make up for the deficiencies of his partner, who was burdened by both a strong Rhineland accent and a lisp. Such was his devotion that Engels even planted anonymous reviews of "Das Kapital" in the German press. Imagine what the pair would have got up to in the age of Amazon.

All this is fascinating enough as human drama (complemented by Sperber's provision of a comprehensive

reading of every Marx-related text — whether speeches, letters, articles, grocery bills or invoices — in a winningly informal, readable style). But it has extra value. For the act of reclaiming Marx as a man, and a man of his time, alters the way we understand his ideas.

Plenty of scholars sweated through the 20th century trying to reconcile inconsistencies across the great sweep of Marx's writing, seeking to shape a coherent Marxism out of Marx. Sperber's approach is more pragmatic. He accepts that Marx was not a body of ideas, but a human being responding to events. In this context, it's telling that Marx's prime vocation was not as an academic but as a campaigning journalist: Sperber suggests Marx's two stints at the helm of a radical paper in Cologne represented his greatest periods of professional fulfillment. Accordingly, much of what the scholars have tried to brand as Marxist philosophy was instead contemporary commentary, reactive and therefore full of contradiction.

Thus in 1848 Marx could make a speech denouncing as “nonsense” the very idea of a revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat, even though that notion formed a core plank of Marxist doctrine. The old Communist academicians used to insist the text of that speech must have been a forgery, but Sperber believes in its authenticity. Marx delivered it to a Rhineland audience then demanding the broadest possible front against authoritarian Prussian rule. Pitting one Rhenish class against another made no sense in that place at that time, so “Marx repudiated his own writing.” The book makes clear that, determined though Marx was to devise an overarching theory of political economy, he was, even in exile, forever preoccupied with German politics and fueled by a lifelong loathing of Prussian despotism. Whatever he wrote in the abstract was informed by the current and concrete.

Only in one area do Sperber's efforts at contextualization fall short. He argues that Marx's writings on the Jewish question, including his hostile comments about Jews, should be understood as “embedded” in the attitudes of the age and therefore not deemed straightforwardly anti-Semitic. But such a view is not easy to hold given the evidence Sperber himself marshals, including an 1875 letter to Engels in which Marx — born a Jew, apparently just before his father's conversion to Protestantism — casually describes a fellow train passenger as a “little Yid,” before offering a description that Sperber, to his credit, concedes “is a stereotypical denunciation of an uncultured and greedy Jew.”

Not that this relatively soft treatment of Marx's anti-Semitism detracts from the overall achievement of the book. Sperber forces us to look anew at a man whose influence lives on. And he also offers a useful template for how we might approach other great figures, especially the great thinkers, of history — demystifying the words and deeds of those who too often are lazily deemed sacred. For all the books that have been written about America's founding fathers, for example, we still await the historian who will do for them what Jonathan Sperber has done for Karl Marx.

KARL MARX

A Nineteenth-Century Life

By Jonathan Sperber

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