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The Real Karl Marx

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Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life

by Jonathan Sperber

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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



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.’

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 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 Kołakowski 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.

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