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[Review Article]

## From Trier to Eternity: The Life and Legacy of Karl Marx

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**Abstract** *This article reviews the recently published biography of Karl Marx by Jonathan Sperber, Curator's Professor of History at the University of Missouri. It notes how, in making full use of the documentary material assembled by the MEGA project, Sperber is able to set Marx in his historical context and better explain the course that he charted, particularly in the revolutionary years of 1848–49. It suggests, however, that there is a cost to this, since Sperber's detailed and sensitive grasp of the times is not always balanced by similar quality of insight into the nature of the man himself, especially in key areas like the source of his atheism and the significance of his relationships with the women in his life. Considerable use is therefore made of the work of other writers, most notably Thomas Masaryk, in an attempt to discern the deeper significance of some of the evidence that Sperber has assembled. The problem of accounting for the anger that permeated Marx's thinking and writing is addressed, and a picture drawn of an individual who found it exceptionally difficult to come to terms with any form of restraint on his behaviour or thought. The significance of the turbid nature of his thought for the twentieth century is explored and an attempt made to assess the degree of his responsibility for the impact that Marxism had on countries such as Russia and China after his death.*

Jonathan Sperber. 2013. *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life*. New York, Liveright Publishing Corporation. Pp. xx, 648. ISBN 978 0 87140 467 1 (hardback).

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Setting out to write his major study of Marx more than a century ago, Thomas Masaryk was conscious that the resources he needed for a full understanding of his subject were not yet available; '...many of Marx's important works are not widely accessible...A critical edition of all of Marx's earlier works would add to his stature as a thinker, and would definitely help us know him better...It is, of course, also unfortunate that we lack a detailed

biography' (1972, p. 29).<sup>1</sup> According to Jonathan Sperber, the most recent in a long line of historians who have tried to tell the story of Marx's life, those gaps in the scholarly foundations have now mostly been filled. True, the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*, the project to publish the complete writings of Marx and Engels, begun as far back as the 1920's, is still on-going (it is usually known by its acronym, *MEGA*, which, given the titanism of the duo whose works it enshrines, is deliciously, if unintentionally, appropriate). But its work on the factual base is already extensive enough, Sperber believes, to allow the superstructure of interpretation to be erected with genuine confidence. Even so, he warns us at the outset, we should moderate our expectations; the *MEGA* material is unlikely to revolutionize our view of Marx. Are not the seemingly meagre results of so much endeavour cause for disappointment? No, Sperber reassures us, for whatever the changes that can now be made to Marx's portrait may lack in excitement, they more than make up for in substance. 'This new source contains no smoking gun, no single document that completely alters existing understandings of Marx; but it does bring to light hundreds of small details that subtly change our picture of him' (p. xiv). Today, then, if we are patient, we can learn a great deal more about Marx, factually, than could Masaryk. Information has accumulated like sediment in the interim; the passage of time and the labor of many hands have worked to give us this advantage over he who went before.

Yet knowledge, information pure and simple, is not the only, or indeed the main, factor that conditions and deepens historical understanding. The factual material has also to be digested and assimilated, and this requires insight; at root, what matters most is not weight of evidence in and of itself, but what we make of it, the significance we discern in it. And insight cannot be aggregated, it has to be achieved afresh in each generation — or not, as the case may be — so that progress here is far from automatic, far from inevitable. This point is implicit in the criticism that Masaryk levelled against Marx's own handling of history.

A genuinely scientific history must meet two requirements.  
One was taken for granted even in Marx's time: history, like all the

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1. As Erazim Kohák, the editor and translator of this study by Masaryk, notes (1972, pp. 16-17), it was originally published in Czech in 1898, and went through various revisions. Masaryk's concerns about the documentary lacunae may have faded somewhat with the passage of time, but they remained valid in 1936 when the fifth and final Czech edition appeared. Kohák's 1972 abridged translation of this edition made the work available to English readers for the first time, but its date of publication should not, of course, be taken as that of the original work's conception and revision.

sciences, must cling rigorously to experience; it must be genuinely realistic, if this means careful noting of individual facts. Second, it must also present an explanation of the meaning of the facts it records — history cannot be simply a careful catalogue of facts, a collection of “human documents,” but rather also an explanation of individual facts and documents, their origin, and their significance for man and society. We express this methodologically in our demand for a history built on sociological and philosophical foundations.

Marx — rightly — has such a foundation. He builds his history on his materialism. But this philosophical foundation is not scientifically acceptable. Materialism does not provide the historian with an adequate psychology, and without a psychology...a correct interpretation of historical facts is impossible. (1972, pp. 119–120)

And Masaryk’s axioms hold true not just for Marx, but for all who write about the past; the quality of insight embodied in an historical study is directly related to the ‘philosophical foundation’ that underpins it. A work of history may ostensibly concern itself only with its subject, but it also serves as a self-judgment, revealing the historian’s depth of understanding of reality, grasp of psychology, and so on. Any deficiencies in these broader areas will vitiate the quality of the work produced, regardless of the quantity of evidence on which judgment is being exercised.

For none is this truer than for biographers of Marx, given that their central task is to find the underlying connections between the man’s life and his ideas. For Marx’s ‘philosophical foundations’ were clearly not just a matter of pure thought — passion, amounting not infrequently to violence, characterised both their essence and the manner of their expression. They are evidence of the working of something deeply personal, deeply hidden. In the concluding sentences of his study, Jonathan Sperber rightly highlights the nature and importance of this for any understanding of Marx’s legacy.

Marx’s actual ideas and political practice — developed in the matrix of the early nineteenth century, the age of the French Revolution and its aftermath, of Hegel’s philosophy and its Young Hegelian critics, of the early industrialization of Great Britain and the theories of political economy emerging from them — had, at most, only partial connections with the ones his latter-day friends and enemies found in his writings. In some ways, the actual intellectual connections were beside the point. Marx’s passionately irreconcilable, uncompromising, and intransigent nature has been the feature

of his life that has had the deepest and most resonant appeal, and has generated the sharpest rebukes and opposition, down to the present day. (p. 560)

But aside from the legacy, we have also to consider the man himself. Were the irreconcilable, the uncompromising and the intransigent elements within him, elements that had such an effect on others, present from the moment of conception? Was nature alone responsible, his life being simply the unfolding of the predetermined? Nurture surely played its part too, and so we are drawn ineluctably to ask how, and how far, those circumstances of Marx's time to which Sperber rightly draws attention, the impact of the French Revolution and the rest, conditioned the course of his life. Naturally no complete, no final answer is within our grasp, for we will never be privy to Marx's innermost life — there is no diary of his most personal thoughts, and even if one ever existed and were miraculously to surface, it would not answer every question. For while Marx certainly did not understand so much about the world on which he exercised his thought, he understood even less about himself — and this not least because, while savagely critical of so many others, he lacked any appetite for self-criticism. In his analysis of late 19th century Marxism, Masaryk noted how 'Criticism without self-criticism is dangerous' (1972, p. 330), and this holds just as true for any and every individual, including Marx, as it does for mass movements.<sup>2</sup>

Marx's blindness to his own nature was especially dangerous when it came to dealing with his dominant character trait, his tendency to feel and to indulge anger. Masaryk recognized this trait, and was generous and insightful enough to try to explain it in terms that invoke more than just personality defects.

Marx is first and foremost a partisan. He has no sense of general solidarity. His revolutionary wrath reinforces his antisocial feelings and feeds even hatred. I realize clearly and fully that this

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2. In explaining how Marx 'took his own previous views and projected them on to other thinkers, where he could then reject them without have to criticize himself' (p. 172), Sperber might appear to be endorsing this view of Marx's character. Contending that this 'was the only form of self-criticism that his personality would allow, and one that enabled him to maintain his position as the person articulating the direction of history' (*loc. cit.*), he cites *The Eighteenth Brumaire* as 'a particularly drastic example of Marx's practice of engaging in self-criticism through the criticism of others' (p. 287), and refers to other examples of his 'implicit' self-criticism (p. 251). The only objection to all of this is that Marx's repeated U-turns simply do not deserve to be dignified with the name of self-criticism, for there was no recognition, let alone acknowledgement, of error whatsoever. The self was not being criticized but, yet again, deceived.

brutality is no worse than the perfumed indifference of the upper classes. Coarse ethical materialism is really at home precisely in these classes, and Marx takes his philosophical materialism from bourgeois philosophers... (1972, pp. 330–331)

So, in the first place, Masaryk contends, Marx was conditioned by a degenerate culture (though this cannot be allowed to pass completely unquestioned. Was Marx denied any real choice here? Was the conditioning of his environment truly inescapable? Was its coarseness so overwhelming as to render it totally irresistible?).

Then there is the question of Marx's family background. Here, too, Masaryk is understanding and, in measure, sympathetic.

Marx is a heretic, an arch-heretic, by temperament.

In part, Marx would be disposed in this direction by his nationality. The pressure that his parents and he had to withstand as Jews would early have had the same effect as exile later. Bernstein points to the influence of Jewish origins and social status for understanding Lassalle. I believe the same holds for Marx... (1972, p. 332)

We shall return to this important issue shortly, but first we should note another factor that is held to have contributed to Marx's characteristic anger. Here again Masaryk points us in the right direction.

There are a number of answers to the question of what philosophical and literary influences shaped Marx's mind...which intellectual trends of his time Marx followed, whom and what he found congenial. To me it seems significant that Marx liked Heine and his works, especially since Marx himself was serious in temperament...I consider Marx's fondness for Heine evidence of that special bitterness, of that partly anarchistic mood. Marx is totally devoid of humor, but he has a generous allowance of Schopenhauer's anger.

This temperament is already manifest in his first articles. I would cite particularly his article on the Jewish question and his articles in *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* [*Franco-German Yearbooks*] generally. His works are full of criticism and warfare, frequently against his former friends. (1972, pp. 332–3)

Marx is allowed to appear here as in some degree the victim of what he read. And it is true, with other mentors he might have developed dif-

ferently. But we should still not overlook the element of choice available to him; in later life, for example, Marx could declaim from Shakespeare and Goethe for his children (p. 297). Was there nothing essential to be learned from them? Did *they* teach him historical materialism? In the final analysis, we surely have to admit that he followed in philosophy and literature what he found most congenial, not what was forced on him.

All of this relates to the young Marx, to his family origins, the character of the cultural milieu within which he grew to maturity, and his formative encounters with philosophy. How far is Masaryk's analysis of those early years, an analysis that is now more than a century old, confirmed by the evidence available to Jonathan Sperber today?

On the fact that Marx was an 'angry young man' there is little disagreement, as is clear in Sperber's account of Marx's debut as a writer in the *Rhineland News*.

Two long essays of his appeared in the spring and summer of 1842, Marx's first foray into the public sphere...At least as impressive as the content of these essays was their style — angry, sarcastic, and polemical, not features of Marx's previous writings...Marx gave the Young Hegelian style his own distinct personal twist, characterized by the use of nastily amusing analogies and a practical, anti-idealist, almost cynical take on politics, two characteristics that would become a permanent feature of his political writings. (p. 83)

But Sperber does not directly address the origins of this change in style, being far more preoccupied with the genealogy of Marx's ideas than with the mode of their expression. This is unfortunate, because we have not just to delineate, as Sperber does with great care, which authors influenced Marx in which particular order, but also to try to explain why he chose to be influenced by some and not by others. What explains the appeal of what he found 'congenial'? Sperber provides some useful hints on this matter in his very full account of Marx's upbringing, but the threads are not drawn together very tightly. How might this best be done?

We can glean much from certain phrases scattered through Sperber's account, including references to Marx as a 'self-assertive young man' (p. 37) when he left home to embark on university life in 1835, and to his 'impetuous bearing' (p. 41) which initially frightened his future wife. Taken together they speak of an individual who found self-restraint extremely difficult, and any restraint imposed by the outside world well-nigh insupportable, an itch that could rapidly bring the sufferer close to frenzy. Such external restraints presented themselves in several forms.

The most troublesome, and hence the one against which Marx kicked most consistently and most vigorously, was that of religion, and more especially, religious authority. As Masaryk notes,

Whenever Marx has occasion to speak of religion, of the Church, or of a particular clergyman (such as Malthus!), he cannot help giving vent to his anger and hate. Precisely this anger and hatred of religion are most characteristic. As for most atheists, atheism for Marx and Engels is a revolutionary atheism. (1972, p. 299)

It is not easy to find anything in Sperber's account of Marx's adolescence and early adulthood that can convincingly account for this. Sperber rightly dismisses (p. 17) the argument that Marx resented his father Heinrich's conversion from Christianity to Judaism as any kind of betrayal, and his account of Marx's upbringing suggest that the Marx family's new faith did not impose any great burdens on their second son. Quite the contrary; the temperature of the 'intellectual nexus' of 'Protestantism, religious rationalism, and the Enlightenment' which Heinrich embraced and which constituted 'the spirit in which the young Karl Marx was raised' (p. 63) was tepid at best. But then there was his mother, and about her Sperber has much of interest to tell us. Henriette Presburg's marriage to Heinrich Marx was likely an arranged one, and her Dutch upbringing did not fit her well for life in the Franco-German surroundings of Trier where Karl was born in 1818. She had brought with her from Holland a 'very household-oriented version of female Jewish piety', and did not take kindly to her husband's abandonment of the faith, a calculated decision that was likely taken around the end of 1819 and purely for self-interested reasons of career advancement.

Henriette was evidently reluctant to convert, and held out on the conversion of her children as well. Karl Marx was only baptized in 1824, five years after his father; Henriette finally accepted her baptism the following year. (p. 23)

Sperber is understandably reluctant to be drawn on the degree of 'religious tension' that this may have caused between husband and wife, but the questions of how that 'female Jewish piety' manifested itself before 1824 and what happened to it after that date remain important ones. For the demands of religious piety and its corollaries, individual humility and submission to authority, were clearly anathema to the adult Karl Marx and provoked in him the most furious outbursts of contempt.<sup>3</sup> If his mother had imposed and perhaps continued to try to impose, either in secret or openly,



any of the restrictions of piety, that could account for much of what Sperber notes about the relationship between Marx and his parents.

Henriette...has not had a good press from historians and biographers. They have taken their cues from Karl Marx himself, who was very much his father's son. Years after his death, his daughter Eleanor reported that her father was deeply devoted to his own father's memory and never tired of speaking of him. He always carried around with him a daguerreotype of Heinrich, which the family placed with Karl Marx in his grave. There is no mention of Karl keeping a picture of his mother with him. Quite the opposite; he got along badly with her, seeing her as a philistine, with no interest in intellectual questions, quarrelling constantly with her over his inheritance and showing little emotion at the news of her death. (pp. 21–22)

However exactly it happened, acceptance of meaningful religious restraints on his behaviour went early with Marx. The next barrier to fall was the belief that there were any restraints on his own capacities. Here the crucial encounter was with the writings of Hegel, something which occurred not long after Marx began his legal studies at the University of Berlin in 1836. Hegel was irresistible to Marx because he offered him the illusion, so attractive to his self-conceit, that he could understand everything, that there were no bounds whatsoever to his intellect. As Sperber says,

...Hegel saw philosophy as an imperialist branch of knowledge, incorporating all others, its methods and conclusions being reproduced in these other forms on knowledge and also affirming them...A second point...was Hegel's understanding of his philosophical system as self-proving. If Hegel could represent his philosophy as the culmination of the systematic development throughout history of the highest forms of human intellect in philosophical reasoning, then this proved that his philosophy was the culmination of all previous philosophical reasoning. Self-consciousness became the highest form of proof for Hegel and his followers. (p. 51)

An utterly self-deceiving self-consciousness, of course, but the point is that Hegelianism allowed Marx to conceive of himself, quite literally, as

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3. It is worth noting in this context Marx's confession to Arnold Ruge in 1843 that 'the "Israelite faith is repulsive to me"' (p. 129).



a 'know-it-all',<sup>4</sup> and this was a self-conception that was never to leave him, even after he had turned his Hegelian weapons against the master himself and against his chief disciples, most notably Feuerbach (whose spirit, while it aspired to godlessness, was swathed in an atheistic cloak whose fibers still retained enough of the incense of piety to offend Marx's very sensitive nostrils). Marx's philosophy was in its origins and in its every expression imperialist, only with Marx himself rather than Hegel as Caesar (and its absolutist pretensions fitted it perfectly for the role of the ruling ideology in a totalitarian regime).

The constraints of religious and intellectual authority may have been swept aside with relative ease, but Marx's road to his own apotheosis was still not barrier-free. For one thing, the unbridled philosopher had still to eat and, even worse, so did the young lady he wished to marry. Given that he held the keys to understanding the entire world in his hands, much the most attractive solution for Marx was to ignore the constraints of earning a living and simply appropriate the financial resources he needed; hence his bitter and unavailing fight with his mother for his inheritance immediately after his father died in 1838. That event at least released Karl from any further need to comply with Heinrich's preference for his able son to follow him into a legal career, and the academic world seemed to offer itself as the best alternative to an unearned income. But university appointments required political sanction from the authorities in Berlin, and Sperber explains very clearly how the Young Hegelianism that Marx shared with his mentor, Bruno Bauer, was to rule this out completely once Friedrich Wilhelm IV ascended to the Prussian throne in 1840. Journalism was the next recourse, and here for once Marx did briefly attempt some form of compromise (in his own eyes, at least), trying to placate the Prussian government to a limited extent during his brief stint as a member of the editorial staff of the *Rhineland News* in 1842–3. It did not work. The Prussian monarchy closed the newspaper from which Marx derived his income, and from that time down to the revolutions of 1848–9 Marx had the overthrow of that government firmly in his sights. And that meant moving somewhere outside the reach of his declared enemy.

For Masaryk, the experience of exile also helps to account for the viru-

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4. Marx used this very phrase in a typically vitriolic attack on the Prussian government in a leading article in the *New Rhineland News* in August 1848, sarcastically reminding all his readers of how the many chances they had had to 'admire' in Prussian officials 'this incomparable, pretentious know-it-all attitude, this union of narrowness and infallibility, this crudeness that tolerates no contradiction!' (p. 234). As a self-description this could scarcely be bettered, but Marx was just as blind to his own nature as was the object of his scorn here — which goes far to explaining the astonishing wealth of ironies embedded in the story of his life.

lence of Marx's anger. He draws our attention to the fact that Marx was to spend most of the remainder of his life cut off from his native land (and in one telling anecdote, Sperber reminds us (pp. 494–5) that Marx was proud of his country, enthusiastically 'praising German *Wissenschaft* and German music' in a drunken confrontation with English "snobs" in a London pub in the 1850s). Masaryk felt that this circumstance does much to explain what Marx became.

In Marx I have always been taken aback by his strange blindness to important facts and important social forces...His whole philosophy of science is equally abstract; it sees only that one side of economic evolution, damning or ignoring all else. This is sociological color-blindness. Marx is a utopian, dry and abstract.

I am not sure, but I sense something in him that reminds me of Spinoza. Perhaps of Spinoza's temperament.

At first I was very much disturbed by Marx's strange sectarian temperament. It is a part of that abstractedness and narrowness. In time I lost that feeling, or at least I was able to explain it. Unless I am mistaken, it is a characteristic of many emigrants. Herzen in his memoirs depicts this effect of exile rather well. A man in a foreign land and a foreign context is left alone with his anger. A special bitterness and negation grows in him, sustaining his revolutionism. It reinforces sectarian absolutism, sectarian dogmatism. (1972, p. 332)

Penetrating and convincing as this explanation is, it is not yet the entire story. For again we have to ask whether exile was simply something that happened to Marx, or whether an element of choice did not remain to him, very restricted though his options were. Did he not in fact opt for exile, rather than simply have it imposed upon him by a reactionary government? True, the alternative was almost certain imprisonment in Prussia, and this choice, to go, or not to go, abroad, was a desperately hard one (yet there was, perhaps, a third option; to renounce his beliefs, even at best simply rein himself in, which might just have been enough to secure him his physical freedom, as it was to do in Belgium in 1845–47). At all events, Marx was not denied the choice, however difficult, of émigré life, unlike, for example, multitudes in the Soviet Union after 1922, the year in which Lenin shipped out many of the finest elements of the Russian intelligentsia aboard the 'philosophy steamer' before realizing his mistake. Marx was at least offered the chance to go beyond the borders of his land, and he took it. And before joining Masaryk completely in his sympathy for Marx as an émigré,

we have also to assess how truly insupportable exile would prove to be as a way of life. We need a yardstick by which to judge such matters, and there is one available in the form of the recognition that something of Germany did remain for Marx once he was outside its borders; he did not face the ultimate bleakness of which the Russian philosopher Semyon Frank spoke when describing his existence as an émigré in the 1920s and after.

There is no way out, because there no longer exists a motherland. The West does not need us, nor does Russia, because she no longer exists. You have to retreat into the loneliness of a stoic cosmopolitanism. (Chamberlain, 2006: dustjacket)

And another Russian exile pinned the blame for his country's descent into the abyss squarely on Marx's inability to come to terms with his own exile, on the philosophical inadequacies that he failed to remedy in all his years in Paris and London, and on the mounting anger that he chose to indulge rather than master, rage that expressed itself in his fully developed 'ethic of hate'. Boris Vysheslavtsev could not help but ask,

Why didn't Marx deepen his concept of 'exploitation' and realize that it is based on the admission of the value of the person as an end in himself. Because the idea of the person is essentially Christian in origin and bound up with an ethic of love, Marx found all that repulsive and antipathetic. What he needed was an ethic of hate. Positive values were unnecessary and dangerous for him. They could lead him to the 'sacred' and force him to bow down before it. He needed a negative value to underpin hatred and negation, and he found it in exploitation. (Chamberlain, 2006: pp. 240–241)

On this reading, exile was not merely a missed opportunity for Marx himself, but a curse for those who had to live with its chief consequence, the 'ethic of hate' that took increasingly virulent form not just in Marx's émigré writings, but in his new role as a political activist.

One of the great merits of Jonathan Sperber's new study lies in the full and sensitive understanding of the context of Marx's life in exile that it provides. It was in Paris between 1843 and 1845 that he first came into meaningful contact with those who did not share his relatively privileged background. Here 'he met working-class political activists, and spent time in taverns both with artisans belonging to illegal, secret societies and with members of legal mutual benefit associations' (p. 117). Such elements re-

mained part of his milieu both in Brussels between 1845 and 1847, and in London after 1849. Given that the proletariat henceforth came to dominate Marx's interpretation of the world, it is tempting to view his initial encounters with existence amongst the lower orders as the essential turning point in his life. Yet, in truth, it paled in comparison to the impact already made upon him by Hegelianism, which continued to constitute the distorting medium through which Marx sought to view reality. His concept of the proletariat made its bow in one of the essays that Marx wrote for the double issue of the *Franco-German Yearbooks* that appeared in February 1844. As Sperber rightly notes, here

...the working class appears as the moving force behind, and the subject of, history. It is the successor to Hegel's Absolute Spirit, Bauer's human self-consciousness, and Feuerbach's human species essence. Marx, one could say, invented the working class for political reasons: to realize the aspirations emerging from his frustrating encounters with authoritarian Prussian rule...Marx's personal acquaintance with the actual working class, with its own sufferings, actions, aspirations, and ideas, was barely beginning when he placed his revolutionary hopes in it. (p. 126)

And closer acquaintance failed to give Marx a much firmer grasp of the spirit or the realities of working class life. Commenting on a passage in his writings in which Marx recounts his early meetings with workers in Paris and speaks of how '...the nobility of humanity shines out at us from figures hardened by labor', Sperber draws attention to the fact that Marx was only interested in such figures as a type, for what they represented, not for what they were.

This distinctly romanticized description of the meeting of a secret society marked a new stage in Marx's invention of the working class. Not just the necessary instrument of revolutionary political change, as he described the workers in the "Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," they were now the group whose social practices were articulations of the future social and political order Marx envisaged. (p. 149).

And for the remainder of his life they were to concern him only as abstract entities, categories of thought, cardboard cut-outs, 'instruments' or 'articulations', fit only for future use in remodelling the world according to his vision; he, (and Lenin, Stalin and Mao after him) would never permit

the reality of their three-dimensional existence as human individuals with concerns in the present concerns to intrude. They were destined to be forever 'the people' rather than 'people'.

Yet before these imaginary proletarians could take center stage in Marx's mature thought, the tension between his particular hostility to the Prussian autocracy and his emerging general thesis of class conflict needed to be resolved in their favour. Here the events of 1848–49 proved decisive, and Sperber comes into his own as a guide to the tortuous course of events as the collapse of government authority across wide swathes of Europe in those heady years appeared to hold out to radicals like Marx the opportunity to fashion a new world.

Marx's vantage point in this crisis was Cologne, and since the city was not in the eye of the storm, while he 'aspired to be a national figure...Marx remained primarily a provincial figure, a revolutionary leader of the second rank...' (p. 223). His main weapon was a newspaper, the *New Rhineland News*, through which he sought to advance his 'political strategy...the recurrence of the French Revolution directed against the Prussian monarchy and the recurrence of the French Revolution by the workers against the bourgeoisie...' (p. 219). The essential problem was that these goals were mutually exclusive, for to overthrow the Prussian monarchy he needed the help of the bourgeoisie. The end result was that he fell between two stools, switching back and forth between his twin principal backers, the workers and the wealthier Cologne citizens, with maladroit timing. For someone who claimed to have mastered the unfolding of history, the outcome should have served as a chastening experience; Prussian authority over the city was reasserted and Marx was expelled from it in May 1849. But the conclusions he drew from this did nothing to change his fundamental view of the world; like many other revolutionaries he made his way, with his grudges intact and in tow, to the safety of London, where he was to remain for the rest of his life.

His years there are notable mainly for what seemed like a retreat from action back into the world of scholarship, as hopes of renewed insurrections in Europe faded in the 1850s and he himself began to age. It was in London that he embarked on the intensive study of British economic thought that resulted in *Das Kapital*. He engaged more fully, too, with scientific positivism, notably with the work of Darwin. Sperber is right to argue that this at best complemented rather than replaced the Hegelianism that still lurked at the core of Marx's being. For Masaryk, the new influences did not result in the achievement of anything like the panoramic survey of the world that Marx had long believed lay within his grasp.

Marx could not finish the struggle. In the place of a creative synthesis he was content with a dilettantish syncretism of Hegelian pantheism, French and English positivism, Feuerbach's materialism, Darwin's evolutionism, and economic Smithism. Here there is little new, and there is little life in the inorganic mixture. (1972: p. 360)

For Masaryk, then, Marx failed at the task he had set himself, as it was inevitable that he should, and the culmination of his thinking was in effect a surrender to realities he had tried so hard to ignore.

In the third volume of *Capital* Marx was forced to modify his theory of value and surplus value until Engels explicitly proclaims legal parliamentary tactics more modern and more effective than revolution. Engels surely made this rejection of revolution in the spirit of Marx's later development. (1972: p. 365)

There was continued activism for Marx in the shape of his involvement with the IWMA and the First International. But for all the excitement generated by the Paris Commune of 1870, by the time of his death in 1883, as Sperber notes, the 'members of the Workers Association were...aging and declining in numbers; Marx and Engels had been on chronically bad terms with them since the Franco-Prussian War [of 1870] and the dissolution of the International' (p. 546). Amid the wreckage there was a limited fame, or at least notoriety, to comfort him, but the problem remains of explaining how Marx managed to survive such a run of reverses without succumbing to disillusion, especially once his health began to decline. Masaryk believed that Marx's philosophy would have afforded him no escape route here.

Modern man does not despair only because of poverty and need, just as, on the other hand, his anger does not derive only from poverty. This mood has its source elsewhere. In the head and in the heart. In philosophy. In Marx himself we can see pretty easily where this mood came from; he says it himself: from the time Feuerbach destroyed Heaven there was nothing left for philosophy to do but revolutionize the world. Faust, too, and Cain, Manfred, Rolla, Ivan Karamazov, all these modern titans begin with a battle against the supernatural and end with revolutions or their own deaths. Schopenhauer disposed of God in the same way and declared a blind will directed towards nothingness to be the essence of the world. Marx and Engels set up material in the place of God and surrendered themselves to blind chance...In a blind, worthless

world there is no time or place for love and joy. (Winters, 1990: pp. 72–3)<sup>6</sup>

It is perhaps the greatest paradox of Marx's life that despite the whole tenor of his philosophy, he was able to find love, and perhaps in some measure, joy. And this he owed, for the most part, to those closest to him. The devotion and support of Engels is well known, but Marx drew most deeply for sustenance on the women in his life; his wife, his daughters and their one female servant. And there was in them a devotion to him that is palpable but also difficult to account for. Jonathan Sperber gives over considerable space to chronicling the vicissitudes of the Marx family, especially in exile, where money, adequate lodgings and the perceived necessities of bourgeois life were hard to come by for years on end, especially in a city as expensive as London. But he never really broaches the question of how Marx was able to inspire the feelings that he evidently did in the women around him. This question is most acute in one particular case. Here is Sperber's account (p. 473) of

...the servant Lenchen Demuth. She had given Marx a son, albeit one he could never acknowledge. Wilhelm Liebknecht has left an intriguing portrait of her place in the Marx household:

Lenchen exercised...a kind of dictatorship...And Marx bowed to this dictatorship like a lamb. It has been said, that no one is a great man to his valet. To Lenchen, Marx certainly was not. She would have given her life for him, and Frau Marx and each of the children one hundred times over — indeed, she gave him her life — but Marx could never impress her. She knew him, his moods and his weaknesses and she could wrap him around her finger. Was he in such an angry mood, did he storm and rage so much that others were happy to stay far away, Lenchen went into the lion's den, and, if he growled, she read him the law so impressively, that the lion became tame like a lamb.

Sperber speculates (p, 474) that Lenchen's 'secret hold' over Marx stemmed from the son they had together. He acknowledges that she never tried to blackmail Marx, but the impression remains of something rather untoward about their relationship (aside from its impact on Marx's wife).

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6. The translation of this passage differs in detail from that by Kohák and seems to have been the work of Robert B. Pynsent, the author of the chapter in Winter's volume in which it appears.



Yet this is to miss the point, and to overlook Liebknecht's account of the depth of Lenchen's feeling for Marx and his family. The simple fact was that it was in the presence of women alone that Marx was able to restrain his anger to a tolerable degree, and so allow the better elements of his nature to the surface. And there must have been enough of those hidden in the recesses to make him lovable. How and why he was able to do this is still the deepest mystery of his life.

But it was, sadly, far from the whole story of that life. The personal devotion of others faded with time, and his legacy became overwhelmingly an intellectual and political one. What was its nature? Those who try to assess it usually fall into one of two categories: students of economic and social thought, who treat Marx as a philosopher, a successor in some measure to Adam Smith, Malthus, Ricardo, Mill and the like, and an influence on a wide array of 20th century thinkers; and historians, who try to describe and measure his impact on events subsequent to his death.

For economic philosophers, Marx has long been viewed as a central figure, even by those who disagree with him. His portrait features on the front cover of the seventh edition of Robert Heilbroner's account of 'the great economic thinkers' entitled *The Worldly Philosophers*, while between the covers his analytical powers are credited with 'extraordinary properties', including the invention of 'a new task for social inquiry — *the critique of economics itself*'. A great part of *Capital* is devoted to showing that earlier economists had failed to understand the real challenge of the study they undertook...Marx invented a kind of "socio-analysis" that puts economics in a new light' (1999: pp. 162–3). Further encomia on the quality of Marxist economic thought follow.

It remains the gravest, most penetrating examination the capitalist system has ever undergone...Marx was not just a great economist. In his graveside oration...Engels was not wrong in emphasizing Marx's vision of the historic process as an arena in which social classes struggle for supremacy. Marx taught us not just to look at, but to look through history... (1999: 168)

Thomas Masaryk was much less impressed by Marx's handling of the concept of social class and by his attempt to 'look through history', but he too was prepared to offer praise where he felt it was due.

For the recognition and understanding of the true significance of socialism, of the worker, and of the proletarian question, Marx and Engels have done much; their merit in this respect would be

hard to overestimate. Marx and Engels presented all the important questions of the time and of the life of the masses of workers, and led the masses towards a theoretical and a practical solution. That is a great achievement, and one worthy of sincere recognition. (1972: p. 334)

Here Masaryk has, as ever, a foot in both camps, those of philosophy and history, and his analysis is the richer for it. Jonathan Sperber's preoccupation, by contrast, is clearly with events past and present rather than the progress or otherwise of the intellect. As a biographer writing in the early 21st century, he tells us that he feels a special and rather new kind of obligation. For as historical figures recede in time, so the danger of viewing them anachronistically seems to increase in proportion; loss of understanding becomes an ever greater threat. This is especially true of a figure like Marx, Sperber argues, because of the influence that his ideas seemed to exert on the course of events during much of the 20th century. Only with the collapse of communist regimes in central and eastern Europe in the years 1989–1991 did that influence wane, suddenly and catastrophically. And as great as this liberation was for the peoples of that region, it also served, we may deduce from Sperber, to set the understanding free as well, making it possible for us to see Marx as he really was, not least by restoring him to his proper context. Sperber is very clear about the nature and importance of that context.

Recent historical scholarship has downplayed the extent and significance of the industrial revolution, observing that conflicts between social classes have been just one feature shaping political confrontations in general and the socialist and labor movements in particular, pointing out the long-lasting and continuing influence of the French Revolution of 1789, the key role that religion played in interpreting the world, the considerable if complex and convoluted effect of nationalism, and the significance of family life and relations between men and women for the organization of society. The upshot of all these investigations has been to delineate an era rather different from our own. (pp. xiv-xv)

This is an implicit criticism of those who wish to wrench Marx's ideas from their context and treat them as contributions to the timeless realm of economic thought. That way anachronism lies.

The view of Marx as a contemporary whose ideals are shap-

ing 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. It might even be that Marx is more usefully understood as a backward-looking figure, who took the circumstances of the first half of the nineteenth century and projected them into the future, rather than a surefooted and foresighted interpreter of historical trends. Such are the premises underlying this biography. (p. xiii)

More explicitly, Sperber expresses his disdain for those who seek to determine the 'contemporary relevance' of Marx's ideas; both extant versions of such "Marxology" are, for him, 'singularly useless pastimes. Marx's life, his systems of thought, his political strivings and aspirations, belonged primarily to the nineteenth century...more often than not, I am struck by the differences...between Marx's world and the contemporary one' (pp. xviii-xix). It is hard not to agree with him on this, but reservations aplenty spring up when he extends the argument, perhaps in an unnecessary attempt to appear even-handed.

Critics of these Marxists see Marx as a proponent of twentieth-century totalitarian terrorism, as intellectually responsible for the Russian Revolution and Stalin's mass murders. Defenders of Marx's ideas vigorously reject these assertions, often interpreting Marx as a democrat and proponent of emancipatory political change. Both these views project back onto the nineteenth century controversies of later times. Marx was a proponent of a violent, perhaps even terrorist revolution, but one that had many more similarities with the actions of Robespierre than those of Stalin. (p. xix)

The implications of this argument are either that no line, and specifically no line relating to the use of terror, can be drawn from Robespierre to Stalin, or that if one can be drawn, it does not pass through Marx; neither assumption can be accepted without at least some form of proof being offered. Sperber also seems to imply that Marx had not the least responsibility, either intellectual or (more importantly) moral, for what happened in Russia after 1917, or in China after 1949, or in the host of other twentieth century countries where his name was venerated and where mass murder became the norm. Is the assertion of any connection between his ideas and such widespread killing entirely unwarranted? Was it all just some kind of

ghastly coincidence? We have already heard from Boris Vysheslavtsev on this subject, and it would be insensitive to describe him as simply a 'critic' of Marxism. He was one of those many, many millions who experienced what a regime calling itself Marxist could do even when it stopped short of killing in individual instances. And while those millions may not be our contemporaries, their questions about the link between the generations cannot be consigned to the dustbin of history. Some more rigorous attempt to assess Marx's legacy is surely required, and while it is understandable that Jonathan Sperber does not offer an extended one in the context of a biography, it is a matter of regret that his final chapter, entitled 'The Icon' (a strangely unsuitable epithet for an atheist) is so short. What else might it have contained?

A key question is how far one can separate the man from the subsequent movement(s), Marx from Marxism, and more specifically Marx from Marxism-Leninism or Bolshevism. Nor is distance in time necessarily an advantage to us here; indeed, the reverse may be true. Through his involvement with the Czech Legion, Thomas Masaryk was the closest of observers of the Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917 and its immediate aftermath. He was, as he tells us, 'an eyewitness of the Bolshevik movement at Petrograd, and had seen it spread to Moscow and Kiev', and subsequently he 'had lived for six months under the Bolshevik régime and had noted its growth and evolution' (1927: pp. 174, 178). Based on the evidence of his own eyes as well as his enormously extensive reading, he gave it as his considered judgment that,

In point of fact, the Bolsheviks stand nearer to Bakunin than to Marx, or follow Marx in his first revolutionary period — 1848 — before his Socialist doctrine had been worked out. To Bakunin they could appeal in justification of their avowed Jesuitism and Machiavellism. To him they were drawn by their secrecy — which had become to them, as conspirators, a second nature, — and by their striving for power, for dictatorship. To seize power and to hold it was their first aim. People who believe that they have reached the highest and ultimate degree of development, who think they have gained infallible knowledge of the whole organization of society, cease to trouble about progress and perfectibility, and have one chief and only aim — how to keep their power and position. (1927: pp. 181–2)

These may be rather fine distinctions, especially given Marx's friendship with Bakunin that lasted from the 1840s until 1864. It is true that, as

Sperber notes (pp. 372–4), their relationship broke down completely over the question of the role of secret societies in bringing about revolution, but this was a dispute about means rather than ends. One has to ask why it would have been from Bakunin rather than Marx that the Bolsheviks derived their belief that they possessed ‘infallible knowledge of the whole organization of society.’ Was this not the gift of Hegel to Marx, and when did he ever renounce it?

Nonetheless, Lenin, like Bakunin and unlike the Marx of the 1860s, did espouse secrecy and did promote the role of a conspiratorial party as the revolutionary vanguard, and those who seek to downplay Marx’s influence over events in Russia after 1917 have often turned the spotlight onto Lenin when accounting for Bolshevik totalitarianism and its consequent murderousness, a murderousness that amounted to what R. J. Rummel has termed ‘democide.’ By his calculations, ‘Probably 61,911,000 people, 54,769,000 of them citizens, have been murdered by the Communist Party — the government — of the Soviet Union’ between 1917 and 1987 (1996: p. 1).<sup>5</sup> His account of the origins of that Party divides the responsibility for its existence along fairly conventional lines.

[Its] philosophy is a universal perspective, at once a theory about reality (dialectical materialism), about man in society (historical materialism), about the best society (communism), about an [sic] implementing public policy (a socialist dictatorship of the proletariat), and about political tactics (revolution, vanguard, party, etc.) ...

The theoretical part of this communist ideology was first developed in the works of the nineteenth-century philosopher and political economist Karl Marx and his followers. Lenin, both a philosopher and a political revolutionary, added a political program and tactics. Lenin’s peculiar brand of communism became known as Bolshevism before and for decades after he successfully seized power in Russia. (1996: pp. 12–14)

Walter Laquer, though, looking back over the entire course of the history of the Soviet Union, seems to set Marx’s role at something of a discount and fixes his gaze more firmly on Lenin as the author of Bolshevism, noting that in Europe generally,

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5. Then there is the issue of China under communism, where Rummel believes that the figure for democide between 1949 and 1987 may be of the order of 35,000,000 (1994: p. 100). And there is Cambodia and the rest.

...the overwhelming majority of socialists were democrats and had misgivings about a revolution that would bring a dictator (or a group of little dictators) to power. True, Marx had written in a letter of 1875 about the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” but he had never elaborated the theme. It was clear that he regarded it as an emergency measure, not, as Lenin later described it, “a particular form of government during a whole historical epoch.” Marx had even argued that he did not mean by “dictatorship” the abolition of democracy, although he did not make it clear how the two opposites could be combined — perhaps he was not a consistent Marxist. Those who gave the issue more thought knew, of course, that such an impersonal dictatorship was a mere abstraction. Political power in such a case would not be in the hands of a social class but in the hands of an individual...Hence the misgivings uttered even by orthodox Marxists such as Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg vis-à-vis the Bolsheviks virtually from the day they seized power... (1994: p. 5)

Marxists did come in several hues, it is true, so delimiting the nature and extent of Marx’s influence over the events of the twentieth century is clearly a complex matter, calling for the nicest judgment. One has no right to expect Jonathan Sperber to engage fully with it in a biography of a 19th century figure; he does instead a very fine job of placing Marx in the context of his times, and that is both a welcome and a necessary service. Even so, it is only part of what is required if we wish to advance towards a full understanding of what Marx was and what he means. We still need to grasp more of what went on inside the man, and we need to divine exactly how far he was responsible for what was done in his name after his death. Yes, Marxism may be to all intents and purposes extinct and Marx himself may have retreated to his niche among the economists. He might therefore appear increasingly inconsequential to anyone today who does not live in North Korea and who wishes to understand the twenty-first century. But many who felt the impact of his thought on their lives in the twentieth century are still with us, which means that he cannot but remain a contemporary concern. The context may continue to recede, but, for some time to come, the man will not.

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**Author's Profile**

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