

MORE THAN JUST ANOTHER MARX BIOGRAPHY

A Marx biography was the last thing that Marx wanted. He made this clear at least on two occasions. In 1868, he wrote to Ludwig Kugelmann that he was asked to provide one for Joseph Meyer's *Konversationslexikon*. "Not only did I not send one; I did not even reply to the letter" (Marx, 1988, 144; Heinrich, 2019, 9). About ten years later, he told Wilhelm Blos that "neither of us [*i.e.*, Marx and Engels] cares a straw for popularity. . . . such was my aversion to the personality cult that at the time of the [First] International when plagued by numerous moves . . . to accord me public honor, I never allowed one of these to enter the domain of publicity, nor did I ever reply to them, save with an occasional snub" (Marx, 1991, 288; Heinrich, 2019, 9).

It is indeed an irony of the history of Marx scholarship that, for Marx's friends and foes, Marx biographies figure as a medium to either admire or bury the "great master." Just before the "Marx boom" on his 200th birth anniversary in 2018, we had Jonathan Sperber's (2013) and Gareth Stedman Jones' (2016) massive takes in this genre. Depicting Marx largely as an outdated figure of the 19th century, both authors advised their readers not to exaggerate Marx's significance. Anyone who is eager to "apply" a past theory to the present, the argument went, should at least keep in mind that, say, no contemporary physicist explains quantum mechanics by means of 19th century thermodynamics.

We have also had rather positive portrayals of Marx, even bordering on hagiography, such as Heinrich Gemkow's legendary work (1967) or Auguste Cornu's much earlier multi-volume account (1954–1968). Though, for instance, Cornu may have not managed to complete his undertaking, he provided us with one the most sophisticated and comprehensive documentations of Marx and Engels' early years, based on MEGA research. Now Michael Heinrich's *Karl Marx and the Birth of Modern Society*¹³ claims that title.

Admittedly, this is a work that many of us have been waiting for. But what finally arrived is somewhat more than just another biography of Marx. It contains some surprises, to say the least. For instance, I did not expect to find an appendix (Heinrich, 2019, 323–340) dedicated solely to philosophical

13 *Karl Marx and the Birth of Modern Society: The Life of Marx and the Development of His Work*. Volume I: 1818–1841, by Michael Heinrich. Alex Locascio, trans. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2019. \$34.00. Pp. 390.

theories and the history of biographical writing. This looks strange in a Marx biography at first glance. But on a second thought it makes all the more sense not just to question what is said in a Marx biography but also to put up for debate how philosophical theories, political worldviews or ideological beliefs inform the ways Marx is portrayed. After all, what particular shapes “Marx” takes in any biography are co-determined by the present problems that one tries to solve; biographers have various reasons to return to, and rewrite, the well-known or forgotten episodes of Marx’s life from one angle or another. Heinrich’s concern is, first and foremost, to get young Marx’s story right. The methodological premise that underlies this ambitious task consists of the ways in which social and political contexts shape an intellectual and revolutionary figure. The central issue is not just what and who has influenced Marx but also Marx’s impacts upon others.

The material gathered in this volume highlights Marx’s rather less discussed early years starting from his childhood and family circle, and it covers the period until the end of Marx’s dissertation projects in 1841. The book is divided into three very large chapters: Marx’s childhood and youth (1818–1835), his intellectual awakening (1835–1838), and the beginning of his Young Hegelian adventures (1838–1841).

Born in rural Trier on May 5, 1818, “around two o’clock in the morning” in a house on Brückengasse, the third child of Heinrich and Henriette — both of Jewish origin, though converted to Protestant Christianity — “Carl” (his first name on the birth certificate), “Karl Heinrich” (the name he used when enrolled at the University of Berlin) or simply “Karl” (as we call him) (Heinrich, 2019, 34–35) grew up in a middle-class household in a newly emerging epoch (named “modern society” in *Capital*). Much of the first chapter takes into consideration the social history of the idyllic yet poor Trier, the political environment and religious views dominant in the area, and the educational background and profession of the family members.

Significantly, Heinrich Marx enjoys great attention. Here we find not merely a father figure, a successful lawyer or a moderately enlightened monarchist but also a source of intellectual influence on Karl. Placing great burdens upon Karl, Heinrich Marx was not simply pressing the son to fulfill his expectations; he was, for instance, also drawing Karl’s attention to Kant’s anthropology in passing, or exposing him to a sense of enlightenment rationality not very untypical of the Prussian middle/upper-class milieu (cf. Heinrich, 2019, 112–113). Patient readers will notice that this narrative is always accompanied by careful scrutiny of alternative accounts. Some unwarranted claims of Sperber (2013, 24), for example asserting that Heinrich Marx had lied about his aspirations to study law, are critically examined and traced back to their sources (cf. Heinrich, 2019, 54–55). Such details may not matter much to “ordinary” students of Marx, but they clearly show that

all the historical and secondary sources have been cross-checked with great circumspection.

Also impressive is the depiction of young Marx's relation to his future father-in-law, the Prussian state officer Ludwig von Westphalen, to whom Marx dedicated his dissertation (Heinrich, 2019, 83–91). This is followed by a closer look at Marx's school curriculum. Most notably, when mentioning Marx's German paper "Reflections of a Young Man on the Choice of a Profession," we are offered this comment, by Marx's teacher Wilhelm Hamacher: "Here as well to the error quite common to him of an excessive quest for a rare expression rich in imaginary" (*ibid.*, 103; Taubert, *et al.*, 1975, 1198, 1200). Even the professional profile of Marx's school teachers, Marx's exam papers (Heinrich, 2019, 104–109) and later careers of his classmates at the time are thoroughly documented. The book seems to cover literally everyone and everything that was involved in young Marx's life in one way or another.

We are provided with a comprehensive account of student life around 1830 in Bonn; the literature circle Marx joined (monitored by the police); his first acquaintance with the future "True Socialists" such as Karl Grün (attacked in *The German Ideology*); and Marx's tavern life and fencing duels (Heinrich, 2019, 133–135). It is well-known that Marx wrote poems, but it is not clear what turned him away from (Romantic) poetry to another intellectual orientation, such as (Hegelian) philosophy. Since at least Franz Mehring's biography (1918), scholars have a strong inclination to identify Marx's poetry with Romanticism. Accordingly, Marx is usually taken to depart from it and turn first to idealism, and then to materialism. Regarding Romanticism, Heinrich takes up a group of classical yet forgotten studies, including Leonard Wessel's book on Marx and romantic irony (1979) and Günther Hillmann's magisterial work *Marx and Hegel* (1966). For Heinrich, categorizing Marx as a "Romantic" is justified to some extent, but an alleged transition from "German Idealism" to "Materialism" from the angle of young Marx is highly dubious (2109, 156).

Contra Mehring, who explained Marx's turn away from Romantic poetry by a lack of talent, Heinrich argues that Marx went through a process of philosophical self-criticism that gave birth to a transition towards Hegelian philosophy (Heinrich, 2019, 186). Heinrich comes close to characterizing Marx's Romanticism largely as showing a certain sense of emotional subjectivity and an "inner experience" of "(unrealizable) longing for an ineffable other" (*ibid.*, 177). It is this emotional attitude of the young poet that Marx himself charged with "idealism," for he no longer assumed that literary art can change the world by positioning "ought" against "is," or more broadly idealism against realism (*ibid.*, 188–189).

However, it does not follow that Marx had adopted an anti-materialist position by this turn away from his Romantic poetry. The presupposed dualism

between idealism and materialism is largely a neo-Kantian invention that many biographers readily project onto the young Marx (Heinrich, 2019, 156).¹⁴ To explain Marx's Hegelian turn, Heinrich consults Cornu's account. We are told that Cornu exaggerates the impact of the Hegelian philosopher of law Eduard Gans. Rather, Hegel's criticism of Romantic art as well as his conceptual holism and representational realism attracted Marx to the philosophical terrain. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Marx decided to pursue his academic career in philosophy. Having met such an ambitious Hegelian as Bruno Bauer in the Doctor Club, Marx found enough courage to go so far as to work out, along with Bauer, an atheistic Hegelianism in 1841–1842 around the time when he became a journalist and newspaper editor at the *Rheinische Zeitung*.

If you are looking for a good Marx biography, you need to read this book. Currently, Heinrich is writing the second volume. It will open with the year 1842, a very long year for young Marx, when so much began and ended for him. Spoiler alerts: his “brother in arms” Bruno Bauer will become a fierce sectarian enemy; Marx will erect and then destroy a “Feuerbach cult”; and finally he will discover political economy that will “eat him up” for the rest of his life.

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14 Notice that the term “German Idealism” was used both in *The Holy Family* and *The German Ideology*, though without further contextualization (Marx and Engels, 1975a, 24; Marx and Engels, 1975b, 125). The claim that it was popularized much later by neo-Kantians such as Friedrich Albert Lange was originally asserted in Walter Jaeschke's (2000) seminal work on this issue.

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