

Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life

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Author:

Jonathan Sperber

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Diana Siclovan

Jonathan Sperber has so far been mainly known as a historian of 19th-century Germany, and of the Rhineland in particular. His previous books include *Rhineland Radicals: The Democratic Movement and the Revolution of 1848–1849* and *Property and Civil Society in South-Western Germany 1820–1914*.⁽¹⁾ He is thus well suited to write about the Rhineland's perhaps most famous inhabitant from this period: Karl Marx, born in Trier in 1818, a student at Mainz, and for some time a journalist in Cologne.

Why should Marx's native land and early life merit such centrality? The answer lies in the subtitle of Sperber's book: 'a nineteenth-century life'. The guiding theme and clear emphasis of Sperber's biography is the need to present Marx squarely in his historical context. The problem Sperber addresses is that the name of Karl Marx has become entwined with the experience of state socialism in the 20th century. Marx has been for over a decade alternately celebrated or condemned as the prophet of 20th-century communism. Even more than 20 years after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the end of the Cold War, the association of Marx with the Soviet experience remains strong. Some undergraduates, encountering the subject for the first time, are even surprised to hear that Marx did not actually live in the 20th century.

The roots of this problem lie in the long history of tendentious writings on Karl Marx. Especially in the politically charged environment of the Cold War, one had to take sides. That either meant not giving Marx and the history of socialist thought any serious scholarly attention, or, alternatively, treating the subject in a way compatible with the 'party line'. This led to highly teleological narratives of the ascent of Marx's ideas. Marx was idealized as a person and a thinker, and those elements of his thought were highlighted that bore

most relevance to contemporary concerns. The first biography of Marx appeared two years after his death, written by Gustav Gross in 1885. It was a rather short work, but already biased: it concentrated on Marx's late economic writings which were first gaining a degree of attention at the time.⁽²⁾ A number of works were published by leaders of the nascent workers' movements in Europe in the early 20th century, for example by Franz Mehring in 1918.⁽³⁾ Isaiah Berlin published his Marx biography in 1939, which, given Berlin's strong scepticism towards communism, naturally took a more critical stance towards the protagonist.⁽⁴⁾ In 1973, David McLellan's *Karl Marx: his Life and Thought* was first published. In its fourth edition, it has been one of the most read works on Marx in English.⁽⁵⁾ In 1999, Francis Wheen published an accessible account of Marx's life that paid less attention to his ideas and more to the details of his life, and which proved very popular.⁽⁶⁾

What differentiates Sperber's work from other recent Marx biographies? As McLellan and Wheen certainly do not idealize Marx in a plainly ideological way, Sperber's work varies from them mostly in nuance and emphasis. The fact that Sperber needs to highlight the point that Marx was a figure from the 19th century shows how hard it has been to shake off the contemporary associations. Sperber stresses, re-stresses, and ultimately perhaps over-stresses that we need to understand Marx as not primarily, but exclusively a 19th-century figure that by no means equates to, and in fact has virtually nothing to do with, the version of communism that came to be realized in the Soviet Union. As Sperber describes the purpose of the book:

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. 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, than as a surefooted and foresighted interpreter of historical trends. Such are the premises underlying this biography (p. xiii).

Sperber's objective is to deal with the fact that 'Even after the end of most communist regimes in 1989, this view of Marx as our contemporary has remained' (p. xii). While the associations of Marx and the Soviet Union might be waning, other presentist invocations have replaced them. It has for example become common in popular writing on Marx to begin with the claim that his ideas need to be better understood given the *most recent* crisis of capitalism.

One novelty of Sperber's approach is that, as a 19th-century historian, he is aware of the recent historiographical innovations in the study of this period, and takes them into account in his interpretation of Marx's life. Such historiographical revisions have included downplaying the effects of the industrial revolution, and highlighting that religion was much more central to the period than previously assumed. Aside from the literature Sperber mentions, there has recently also been a revision of the history of socialist thought. Intellectual historians such as Gareth Stedman Jones, Douglas Moggach, Warren Breckman and David Leopold have tried to correct the generalisations of older Marxist historiography with their detailed studies of Marx and his contemporaries, bringing to light the complexities of their ideas in their historical context.⁽⁷⁾ Gareth Stedman Jones has, for example, highlighted the deeply religious nature of early socialist thought.⁽⁸⁾

The other novel element in Sperber's work is its reliance on a very large collection of sources. The MEGA (Marx Engels Gesamt-Ausgabe) project, the collected works of Marx and Engels begun in the 1920s, then interrupted for decades and resumed in 1975, is finally nearing completion. This means that almost everything Marx ever wrote, including mundane notes, is now available to the reader. As Sperber makes clear, 'This new source contains no smoking gun, no single document that completely alters existing understandings of Marx; but it does bring to light hundred of small details that subtly change our picture of him' (p. xiv). Additionally, Sperber has provided new translations of many key passages from Marx's

writings that had previously been misunderstood due to inadequate translations.

The strength of Sperber's book certainly lies in these nuances and details. It is full of highly interesting facts and anecdotes that, put together, make up a captivating account of Marx's life. The book, which is by the way a beautifully bound edition, stands out for its accessibility, clarity and the colourful picture it paints of its protagonist. Throughout Sperber is concerned to explain as plainly as possible Marx and his circumstances, and to present him first and foremost as an accessible and *understandable* person. At the same time he cautions against seeing him as 'one of us'. On the opposite, a central message of Sperber's book is that Marx's times were very different from ours.

Sperber is particularly concerned to reveal the truth about aspects of Marx's life that have long been idealized. Indeed, we learn many, perhaps surprising, things about Marx from Sperber's book: for example that he was a poor public speaker, that his courtship of his future wife was highly 'romantic' even by contemporary standards, and that more than the global bourgeoisie he hated the Prussian monarchy and the Russian Tsar. The book is characterized by great frankness. Sperber wants to demystify Marx and in order to do so he draws on all sorts of detailed stories and expert insights. Medical knowledge, for instance, is utilized throughout the book to explain facts such as the precise nature of the skin condition that Marx developed with age. The frank tone of the book extends to Marx's relationship with his wife, and details such as whether they ever used contraception are discussed. This directness is a chief virtue of the book. It is a demystifying mission which does not make Marx any less interesting – certainly an achievement which requires a greatly skilled historian.

The book is divided into three parts, each roughly 200 pages in length. The first, 'Shaping' describes Marx's family background and traces his life and the development of his thought up to end of the year 1846. The second, 'Struggle', begins with Marx's involvement in the revolution of 1848 and follows his time in London exile up to 1871 and the experience of the Paris commune, an event that brought Marx sudden worldwide fame. The third and final part, 'Legacy', besides covering the last 12 years of Marx's life, includes thematic chapters that explain in more detail aspects of his thought and offers reflections on his life as a whole.

In the first part of the book we learn about the 'society of orders' of Marx's childhood to which he was deeply opposed and that came to be dissolved in the course of his life. Sperber makes clear the impact that Prussian rule had on the Rhineland and he explains why Karl's father, Heinrich Marx, converted from Judaism to Protestantism in the 1810s. In the second chapter, we learn why Marx's courtship of and engagement to Jenny von Westphalen was one of the most radical aspects of his life. The early engagement, long before Marx was in a position to have a secure income, to a woman four years his senior without a dowry, defied 19th-century conventions. Sperber convinces us that Marx and Jenny were connected by true love, and his description of Marx's relationship to his wife is one the highlights of the book. So much is clear: they really loved and were committed to each other. Despite their chaotic and unstable living situation and Marx's repeated failure to stabilize the family's finances, Jenny remained loyal to Marx. She took an active interest in his work, and defended him in even the pettiest of his many disputes with political and philosophical rivals.

Subsequent chapters address Marx's relation to the Young Hegelians and his journalistic activity for the *Rheinland News*. Sperber retells the more familiar aspects of Marx's life, such as the beginnings of his friendship with Engels, but also brings to light previously obscure issues. For instance, he rightly stresses the role of Karl Grün, a character who is only very briefly treated, if not completely absent from most existing Marx biographies. Grün is today virtually unknown, but he was one of Marx's most important rivals in the 1840s. Like Marx, he discovered socialist ideas in the early 1840s, and went on to promote them both within the German Confederation and, following his expulsion, among the German workers in Parisian exile. It was because of his influence among the Paris community that he increasingly came to be viewed as a rival by Marx and Engels in the second half of the 1840s. They began to consciously ostracise Grün, and translated personal antipathy into philosophical attacks, most notably in the *German Ideology*, where Grün was first denounced as a 'true' German socialist, allegedly 'backward' because of his emphasis on the humanistic content of socialism. Sperber comments on the relationship between Marx and Grün: 'The conflict between

the two men arose precisely because they were so similar, because they were both seeking to occupy the same niche in the German socialist movement: that of the theorist who could provide the missing link between French ideas and German social conditions' (p. 185).

Sperber describes the institutionalization of the radical movement in the period before the 1848 revolution in which Marx played a major part. It was for an institution, the Communist League, that he and Engels wrote the *Communist Manifesto*. Sperber picks apart the elements of the *Communist Manifesto*, today one of Marx's most famous writings, and explains their origins in Marx's intellectual biography up to the point of its publication in early 1848. Marx's main project in the course of 1848–9, when he returned to the Rhineland from exile in Brussels, was to edit the *New Rhineland News*. Sperber points out that many arguments presented in the paper during its short existence can be described as 'downright un-Marxist'. Marx in this time, for example, by no means advocated class struggle, but in fact argued against it. In previous scholarship, Sperber reminds us, such passages had been commonly suppressed or their authenticity doubted.

By the late summer of 1849 Marx was forced to flee Germany and to go to exile in London. He remained in England until his death. But as Sperber points out, Germany remained an important focus for his political thinking. He writes: 'Marx's plans after 1859 for a political comeback were all centered on Germany, on issues of German nationalism' (p. 557). Marx seriously considered returning there in 1861. Yet by that time his family, and his teenage daughters in particular, had become so accustomed to life in London that he decided against the move.

Never free from money problems earlier on, Marx's financial situation in London became disastrous. Marx's chronic lack of funds is a topic that Sperber explores at length, providing such vivid illustrations as the story of Marx's six-year old son protecting his father from the creditors when they turned up at their house (p. 256). Little Edgar himself ultimately fell victim to the Marxes' poverty. He died aged eight in 1855, a trauma that affected the family for years.

The early period of the Marxes' life in London was also overshadowed by the birth of an illegitimate child. Their housekeeper, Helene Demuth, gave birth to a son, Frederick, in 1851. The reputed father was Marx, although the unmarried Engels claimed paternity, allegedly to save Marx's reputation and marriage. The story of Marx's paternity is a telling example of the way his biography has been a battlefield of political interests. In another recent Marx biography Paul Thomas has cast doubts on the veracity of the story. Thomas highlights that the story was first included in Marx biographies in the 1960s, politically highly charged times. He also points out that the account is based on one single source: a letter written by the wife of the social democrat Karl Kautsky in 1898, who had never met Marx. It is this letter that recounted the supposed deathbed revelation of Engels about the true paternity of Helene Demuth's son. No other source ever mentioned the story, and the addressee of the letter, August Bebel, never brought it up. Most notably there is no evidence of such a rumour circulating around the time of Frederick Demuth's birth itself, when Marx's many political opponents in London would have devoured any opportunity for gossip about him.⁽⁹⁾ Sperber, however, defends the fact that Marx fathered the child, although, taking into account chronological evidence, he struggles to establish when the child could have been conceived (p. 262). Whether one believes Thomas' account or Sperber's, the issue shows that details of Marx's life remain controversial.

In the 1850s Marx mostly developed as a journalist. A fact unknown to most is that journalistic pieces constituted the bulk of Marx's writings. Among them are what are acknowledged to be his most brilliant pieces, for example *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in which Marx analysed Napoleon Bonaparte's coup d'état of December 1851. It was also in the 1850s that Marx began hoping for the advent of an economic crisis that would lead to the end of capitalism. Active political engagement meanwhile moved to the background. Marx's interest in it was only revived by Ferdinand Lassalle who visited Marx in London in 1860, and who the following year nearly convinced him to return to Germany in order to become involved in the new workers' movement there. Marx chose to remain in England and instead, from 1864, became involved in the tedious organizational efforts of the International Working Men's Association which culminated in the famous conflict with Mikhail Bakunin in the early 1870s.

Marx's life up to this point is recounted in the first two parts of Sperber's book as what is a captivating and rich narrative. The third part of the book which covers the last decade of Marx's life and addresses some overarching themes is somewhat less coherent. Some of its thematic chapters are more successful than others. The chapter 'The theorist' that describes Marx's confrontation with positivism in the second half of the 19th century is interesting. It was a complicated encounter and Sperber rightly stresses the extent to which Marx remained a Hegelian even later in his life. Marx defended Hegel against Charles Darwin, and the story that Marx planned to dedicate *Capital* to Darwin is revealed as a myth. As Sperber observes, even Marx's later economic writings had a strikingly 'Hegelian' structure. The next two chapters are less successful. A rather technical chapter that aims to provide an introduction to Marx's economic thought is directly, and somewhat abruptly, followed by one that recapitulates his character as a private person and assesses how far he concurred to 'Victorian views of masculinity'. It repeats much information presented earlier in the book and adds little to the argument. At the end of the book, in a chapter dedicated to Marx 'The icon', Sperber explains how Marx came to be a celebrity in the last ten years of his life and where and how the term 'Marxist' originated (Marx notably distanced himself from it). Sperber ultimately provides a short account of the events after Marx's death in 1883 that led to his rise as a 20th-century icon.

How far does Sperber succeed in de-mystifying Marx? He certainly makes a great effort to present Marx as an ordinary man. Paradoxically this results in some myth-making of his own. Sperber rightly stresses Marx's financial difficulties throughout the book and provides examples for monetary mismanagement from virtually every episode of Marx's life. Yet the point is ultimately over-stressed. What is one to take away from knowing that Marx was extremely poor at handling money? Sperber, at one point, writes: 'The only way one could tell from Marx's conventional exterior that he was a radical was his chronic financial woes' (p. 500). Is that a satisfying conclusion to what has been an attempt to present Marx as something other than a 20th-century icon? While it is a highly worthwhile venture to debunk Marx and to present him as a deeply human character, with many contradictory traits and ordinary problems, there remains the need for a meaningful 'label' and an overall characterization. Future generations will not be content with knowing that Marx suffered from a particularly severe form of acne. It would have been interesting to know how Sperber would present a simplified version of Marx, a new way of making sense of him in summary.

This concluding thought is a minor criticism of what is otherwise an extraordinary achievement. Sperber's book will certainly be widely read in the years to come, and generations of students will get to know Marx that way. This is a good thing, as Sperber succeeds in setting right many long-standing misconceptions and presents a version of Marx that is appropriate to the 21st century. Those wishing to learn more about the technicalities of debates surrounding aspects of Marx's thought will naturally not get the full story in Sperber's biography and will need to turn to the vast specialist literature. In that sense, reading Sperber's book is like a hand-shake with Marx: it is only an introduction, but one that leaves a strong and vivid impression.

Notes

1. Jonathan Sperber, *Rhineland Radicals: The Democratic Movement and the Revolution of 1848–1849*

- (Princeton, NJ, 1992); *Property and Civil Society in South-Western Germany 1820–1914* (Oxford, 2005).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Gustav Gross, *Karl Marx. Eine Studie* (Leipzig, 1885).[Back to \(2\)](#)
 3. Klara Zetkin, *Karl Marx und sein Lebenswerk* (Elberfeld, 1913); [Franz Mehring](#) [2], *Karl Marx. Geschichte seines Lebens*, (Berlin, 1918); in English: Franz Mehring, *Karl Marx. The Story of His Life* (London, 1939).[Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment* (London, 1939).[Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. David McLellan, *Karl Marx: his Life and Thought* (London, 1973).[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. Francis [Wheen](#), [3] *Karl Marx: A Life* (London, 1999).[Back to \(6\)](#)
 7. Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Introduction', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London, 2002); *The New Hegelians: philosophy and politics in the Hegelian School*, ed. Douglas Moggach (Cambridge, 2006); Warren Breckman, *Marx, the Young Hegelians and the Origins of Radical Social Theory: Dethroning the Self* (Cambridge, 1999); David Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx: German Philosophy, Modern Politics, and Human Flourishing* (Cambridge, 2007).[Back to \(7\)](#)
 8. Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Religion and the origins of socialism', in *Religion and the Political Imagination*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Gareth Stedman Jones (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 171–89.[Back to \(8\)](#)
 9. Paul Thomas, *Karl Marx* (London, 2012), pp. 120.[Back to \(9\)](#)

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Guardian

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New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/31/books/review/karl-marx-by-jonathan-sperber.html> [5]

Times Higher Education

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/books/karl-marx-a-nineteenth-century-life-by-jonathan-sperber/2003343.article> [6]

Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/10088573/Karl-Marx-A-Nineteenth-Century-Life-by-Jonathan-Sperber-review.html> [7]

New York Review of Books

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/may/09/real-karl-marx/> [8]

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[8] <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/may/09/real-karl-marx/?pagination=false>

[9] <http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2013/803>