



BOOKS

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Marx After Marxism

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

By **Peter E. Gordon**

Photo: Thomas Frey/DPA/Getty Images

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

first volume of *Capital*.

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

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

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

Many disagree with such a low estimation of the 1844 manuscripts. Whereas Marxist-Leninism within the orbit of the Soviet Union stressed the "scientific" character of Marx's ideas, the discovery that Marx drew inspiration from Hegelian and left-Hegelian themes of self-consciousness and self-expression, of alienation and "species being," helped to renew enthusiasm for his work in the bourgeois democracies in the West. Perhaps the most original interpretation was [Marx's Fate: The Shape of a Life](#) - [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0271025816](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0271025816/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0271025816&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20)

[/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0271025816&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20](#) - , by the intellectual historian Jerrold Seigel, who took up the Hegelian theme of "inversion" as an Ariadne's thread to guide readers through all of Marx's major writings, from his early dissertation on ancient Greek philosophy all the way through *Capital*.

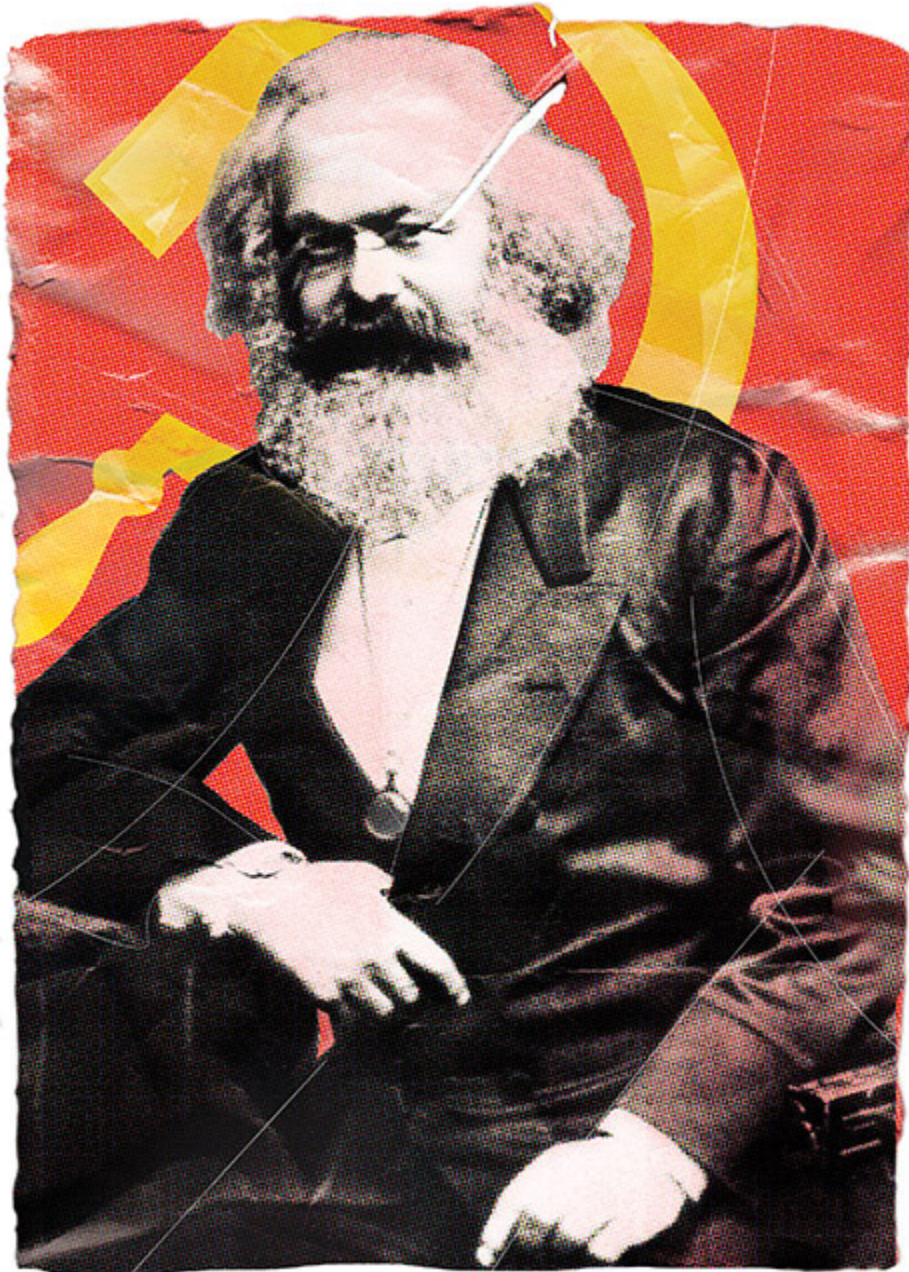
There have been more exotic studies. In 1948, Leopold Schwarzschild published [Karl Marx: The Red Prussian](#) - [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0007EGA2Q](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0007EGA2Q/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=B0007EGA2Q&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20)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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cologne's *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neue_Rheinische_Zeitung - , he insisted in a public speech that the notion of

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

By the last decade of his life, Marx was a figure of some renown, thanks in part to his spirited work on the Paris Commune, *The Civil War in France* -

http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0717806669/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0717806669&linkCode=as2&tag=thenewrep08-20 - .

When Germany defeated the French army in 1870, moderates in France responded by declaring a republic. Opposing the moderates in the new National Assembly, Parisian workers declared a revolutionary government and erected barricades against the German troops. Marx threw caution to the wind: the Commune was "the glorious harbinger of a new society." Its brutal defeat, Sperber tells us, marked "the beginning of the end of Marx's activism."

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

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

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

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

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

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