



## Karl Marx: His Life and Environment

*Isaiah Berlin*

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## **Karl Marx: His Life and Environment** Isaiah Berlin

First published over fifty years ago, Isaiah Berlin's compelling portrait of the father of socialism has long been considered a classic of modern scholarship and the best short account written of Marx's life and thought. It provides a penetrating, lucid, and comprehensive introduction to Marx as theorist of the socialist revolution, illuminating his personality and ideas, and concentrating on those which have historically formed the central core of Marxism as a theory and practice. Berlin goes on to present an account of Marx's life as one of the most influential and incendiary social philosophers of the twentieth century and depicts the social and political atmosphere in which Marx wrote.

This edition includes a new introduction by Alan Ryan which traces the place of Berlin's Marx from its pre-World War II publication to the present, and elucidates why Berlin's portrait, in the midst of voluminous writings about Marx, remains the classic account of the personal and political side of this monumental figure.

## **Karl Marx: His Life and Environment Details**

Date : Published September 12th 1996 by Oxford University Press, USA (first published 1939)

ISBN : 9780195103267

Author : Isaiah Berlin

Format : Paperback 228 pages

Genre : History, Philosophy, Biography, Politics, Nonfiction, Economics



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## From Reader Review Karl Marx: His Life and Environment for online ebook

### Jackson Cyril says

Though he was himself vehemently opposed to communism his entire life, Sir Isaiah gives as clear an exposition of Marxist philosophy as is possible in 200 pages in the lucid prose for which he is renowned. I will note only two arguments from the book which I had not hitherto encountered in my (admittedly not very extensive) Marxist reading and which struck me as worth noting down; Berlin traces the origins of Marx's materialism, not to Feuerbach, but to his beloved father who was himself very much influenced by eighteenth century thought, especially the work of Voltaire; this, Berlin argues, was what allowed Marx to retain a healthy skepticism of the Hegelian metaphysic from the very start, and also later made him better receptive to Feuerbach's "Theses" and Feuerbach's criticisms of his teacher. Also, Berlin judges that the two years Marx spent in Paris (1843-5) were the most formative in his career, for they exposed him to the path-breaking work of the French socialists and marked the stage in which his own political thought reached a high degree of maturity.

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### Fraser Kinnear says

I was wholly new to Marx, and this was a great introduction to his ideas, suggested in the Economist when they reviewed a more recent book about Marxism. This book is probably 30% biography and 70% a study of Marx's ideas, the ideas in the air among other communists at the time, and a lot about their precursor, Hegel.

Berlin provides his longest chapters to Marx's two great contributions: the theory of Historical Materialism, and his massive tome Capital, which took him 15 years to write post 1848 while he exiled himself in London.

Historical Materialism is an evolution from Hegel, wherein Marx accepts the Hegelian idea of history being a "single non-repetitive process which obeys discoverable laws", but rejects Hegel's underlying constant "Spirit", because it is a non-refutable, non-testable idea that doesn't contribute to one's knowledge of the world in any real way (although later thinkers like Popper rejected Marx's ideas as pseudoscience as well).

Hegel seems to have a very upbeat interpretation of history, believing that the world's ideas are working through a dialectic that will eventually converge on a perfect way of living. Conversely, Marx takes a much more negative attitude, and focuses on the adversarial nature of people against the systems they are a part of:

History is not the succession of the effects on men of external environment or of their own unalterable constitutions, or even the interplay between these factors, as earlier materialists had supposed. Its essence is the struggle of men to realize their full human potentialities; and, since they are members of the natural kingdom (for there is nothing that transcends it), man's effort to realize himself fully is a striving to escape from being the plaything of forces that seem at once mysterious, arbitrary and irresistible – that is, to attain to the mastery of them and of himself, which is freedom.

Marx argued that people lacked that freedom in his time:

Most individuals concealed their own dependence on their environment and situation, particularly on their class affiliation, so effectively, even from themselves, that they quite sincerely believed that a change of heart would result in a radically different mode of life. This was the most profound error made by modern thinkers. It arose partly as a result of Protestant individualism, which, arising as the 'ideological' counterpart of the growth of freedom of trade and production, taught men to believe that the individual held the means for his happiness in his own hands, that faith and energy were sufficient to secure it, that every man had it in his power to attain spiritual or material well-being, that for his weakness and misery he ultimately had only himself to blame. Marx maintained, against this, that liberty of action, the range of real possibilities between which men could choose, was determined by the precise position which the agent occupied on the social map. All notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, altruism and egoism were beside the point, as referring exclusively to the mental states of their owner – which, while in themselves quite genuine, were never more than symptoms of his actual condition. Acts alone counted, particularly the objective behavior of a group, whatever the subjective motives of its members.

This adversarial nature between parties is further elaborated in Marx's Capital. In it, he outlines how division of labor leads to a consolidation of capital to specific individuals, who then exert power over others, creating commodities of them. Marx divides society between those who labor and create value, and those who own the capital that labor leverages, and are simply rent-seeking. Of course, the marginal value that labor creates is subject to constantly evolving prices in a free market, and Berlin (surprisingly) asserts that Marx was never clear as to what other way one might calculate the magnitude of that premium of value. I'm still a bit confused by Berlin's point, as deciding prices in a market is basically a fundamental tenant of command economies, an implementation of Marxism. However, Berlin has limited the scope of his work to the ideas as they were while Marx was alive, only hinting to how unsuccessful their later implementations were.

Ultimately, it's the sentiment of resentment in Marx that proves most seductive to his audience:

The central thesis which made so powerful an appeal to workers, who did not for the most part begin to comprehend the intricacies of Marx's general argument about the relation of exchange value and actual prices, is that there is only one social class, their own, which produces more wealth than it consumes, and that this residue is appropriated by other men simply by virtue of their strategic position as the sole possessors of the means of production, that is, natural resources, machinery, means of transport, financial credit, and so forth, without which the workers cannot create, while control over them gives those who have it the power of starving the rest of mankind into capitulation on their own terms.

So what to do about this? Famously, Marx calls for a violent revolution to redistribute wealth and the means of production back to the proletariat, as he calls for most famously in the Communist Manifesto. Then what? How do we keep from returning back to a new consolidation of capital post-redistribution (which, for example, is what has happened in China from its 1950 land reforms to today)?

It turns out Capital's first volume, the only one released while Marx was alive, doesn't get too much into the details of the solution, but it involves finding a smart way to redistribute, which has sometimes been summarized as 'From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!'

Marx's biography was just as fascinating – Berlin paints a curmudgeonly, undeniable, intense man who was somehow quite affectionately loved by his small family, who he mostly kept in poverty due to his lack of interest in making any money. I really enjoyed how he was portrayed in his later years, after publishing Capital and destroying the International.

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### **Naele says**

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### **Macoco G.M. says**

Un libro fantástico y muy ameno. No esperes una biografía, si no un análisis del entorno y evolución de las ideas alrededor de la mente de Marx.

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### **Kevin says**

This was a train wreck from the beginning for me, and I'm not afraid to admit that it was only so because it was basically out of my league. This is a book about a 19th century intellectual, written by a 20th century intellectual, and when read by a 21st century average joe, like myself, it doesn't always translate so well. I struggled with the prose from page one. Half page, run-on sentences packed with references to 18th and 19th century philosophers and their tenets made for an extremely hard read for me. For this reason, I found it too wordy and self-indulgent, it seems that Sir Isaiah Berlin made this work much more confusing than it had to be. Of course, someone with a more refined pallet would probably think it was eloquent and to the point.

The dryness of the material had me daydreaming, and I would finish two or three pages before I realized that I hadn't retained a word of it. Even after going back and rereading these parts I often found it hard to grasp, especially the discussions on basic Hegelianism and historical materialism. Unfortunately, these were important concepts in Marx's own philosophical development, so that made the later discussions on Marxism cloudy and confusing as well.

Still, I did get what I set out to get from this book, which was a basic understanding of Marxism and the man that Karl Marx was, along with the historical and philosophical environment that created both. I learned a lot

of hidden European history that we simply do not ever talk about in the USA. The plight of the 19th century European working class in the throws of the industrial revolution is covered in detail. The most interesting theme for me is that of the revolutionary thinkers and leaders of the time who set out to improve the condition of the masses, but often succumbed to the basic human urge to improve their own condition first.

There is a short two-part passage near the end of the book that I found important and representative of this book's content and my experience with it. Berlin is speaking of Marx's seminal work, *Das Kapital*, it starts "It has been blindly worshipped, and blindly hated, by millions who have not read a line of it." To me, this first part is absolute truth. Future communist societies that grew out of Marxism, like the USSR, often misinterpreted or ignored even the most basic elements of Marxist thought, most notably, his disillusionment with the state. Nevertheless, Marx was held up as a hero and father of their bastardized offshoots. Meanwhile, Americans growing up in the Cold War era generally have no understanding of the tenets of Marxism or its importance in the development of modern social and political thought. Yet Marxism carries a connotation only slightly less negative than Nazism in the USA. The second part continues "...or have read without understanding its, at times, obscure and tortuous prose." This simply represents my own personal feeling about Berlin's book in general.

I'm sure that I am not among the target audience for this book and my rating reflects that. I would guess I grasped about sixty percent of the material, and I am positive that a more scholarly individual would find much more to like, less to dislike, and would give this thing a higher rating. Still, even through my struggles, I am glad I stuck it out, because the stuff I did get out of it was very interesting. Despite my low rating, I would actually recommend this book to anyone looking to get a basic understanding of Marxism and is willing to put in the time to negotiate the challenging style.

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### **Zebardast Zebardast says**

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### **Alain says**

Desde hace tiempo tenía pendiente leer alguna obra de Isaiah Berlin. Tras haber tenido la oportunidad de haber disfrutado de algunos de sus artículos, era consciente de que la fama de Berlin como uno de los mejores ensayistas del siglo XX era más que merecida, pero desde luego sus textos cortos no son comparables con sus obras más elaboradas (al menos con esta).

Karl Marx, su vida y su entorno, fue publicada por primera vez en 1939. Como consecuencia de todos los cambios que se han producido en la interpretación del pensamiento de Marx en los últimos 80 años, pensaba que esta biografía intelectual se habría quedado un poco anticuada, pero no podía estar más equivocado.

Pese a su brevedad, diría que esta es una de las biografías de Marx más completas que se han escrito. Es muy difícil encontrar obras sobre un personaje tan determinante en la historia mundial que huyan tanto de la hagiografía como de la demonización más absoluta, pero sin duda Isaiah Berlin lo logra con creces. Pese a su distancia ideológica con respecto al principal pensador marxista, en ningún momento deja de analizar con la

más absoluta exactitud las ideas del filósofo comunista, sin pretender en ningún momento recurrir al tópico de los muertos bajo el régimen estalinista.

En definitiva, es todo un gusto leer al mejor ensayista del siglo pasado hablar sobre las ideas de uno de los filósofos más brillantes de la historia de Occidente. Además, estoy seguro de que esta es de las poquísimas obras sobre Marx que será capaz de satisfacer tanto a los marxistas como a los antimarxistas. Berlin consigue algo a la altura de sólo unos pocos.

Más sobre esta obra aquí: <https://alainacevedo.wordpress.com/20...>

Andrew says

Isaiah Berlin, the sort of broad-ranging thinker that makes me want to give up the intellectual effort entirely, takes on Karl Marx, a bright but impoverished family man living in London.

What I loved about Berlin's analysis was that while personal details were critical to the narrative, Marx's relationship with the ideas that came both before and after him is far more important. We learn not only about Marx, but about Hegel and Engels, Lafargue and Duhring, Saint-Simon and Feuerbach. And what I love most is how nonpartisan Berlin is with his analysis of the man's philosophy. Instead of writing as a fawning Trotskyist or a fuming anticommunist, he is merely writing as someone whose first allegiance is to the intellectual approach, albeit his own pluralistic, skeptical, emphatically liberal-democratic intellectual approach.

**Ivars Neiders says**

There may be better introductions now on Marx in the terms of scholarship, but the style of Isaiah Berlin's prose compensates this. To read Berlin is always a pleasure.

## **Subhan sherzada says**

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**Joel says**

In addition to being about a titanic man in Marx, this is the first work of another titan, Isaiah Berlin. It is more of an intellectual biography than a close look at the chronological details of Marx's life. Marx comes across as a horrendous man, totally obsessed with his cause to the detriment of all else. He was driven by a single minded desire to see what he thought was inevitable come to pass, namely, the overthrow of capitalism. He believed this to be inevitable due to the inexorable laws of history, as outlined by Hegel. Although this did not come to fruition in his lifetime, he laid the foundation for the bloody and tyrannical revolutions of the past century which imposed dictatorships across the world in the name of the worker.

Marx operated with an intense hatred of all who disagreed with him, usually in even the smallest matters. He viewed many who agreed with him with contempt due to their dullness of perception, histrionic mannerisms, or love of popularity. All paled before the cause and failure on the part of others to grasp what he saw unleashed his vehemence.

His devotion to reading and study was voracious and commendable. For example:

His leisure, since his schooldays, had been mainly spent in reading, but the extent of his appetite in Paris surpassed all limits. As in the days of his conversion to Hegelianism, he read night and day in a kind of frenzy, filling his notebooks with extracts and abstracts and lengthy comments on which he largely drew in his later writings" (72).

Describing him late in life, Berlin says:

"His mode of life had scarcely changed at all. He rose at seven, drank several cups of black coffee, and then retired to his study where he read and wrote until two in the afternoon. After hurrying through his meal he worked again till supper, which he ate with his family. After that he took an evening walk on Hampstead Heath, or returned to his study, where he worked until two or three in the morning" (228-29).

To show that great evil can coexist with a love for the good, witness his fondness for Shakespeare:

"He was fond of poetry and knew long passages of Dante, Aeschylus and Shakespeare by heart. His admiration for Shakespeare was limitless, and the whole household was brought up on him: he was read aloud, acted, discussed constantly" (230).

Marx showed absolutely no concern for his religion:

"He was baptized a Lutheran, and was married to a Gentile: he had once been of assistance to the Jewish community in Cologne: during the greater part of his life he held himself aloof from anything remotely connected with his race, showing open hostility to all its institutions" (83).

A couple of his quotes that jumped out at me:

"Ignorance has never yet helped anyone."

"To leave error unrefuted is to encourage intellectual immorality."

He died in peace, which is more than can be said of millions who fell victim to his idealogical heirs.

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## **Erik Graff says**

This is the first book-length biography of Karl Marx I read. Actually, it is more a book about Marxism than about the individual. Few very personal details are included, but what is discussed is important. The occasion of my reading of it is burned in memory. Except to me, it is not important.

By junior year I was quite the high school radical. A member of Students for a Democratic Society and The Young People's Socialist League, a good student, a volunteer on weekends at the Chicago A.C.L.U., I was an unremovable thorn in the side of the school's conservative administration, a delight to most of my teachers, an associate of the intellectuals of the senior class and an absolute neurotic when it came to females of my own age.

So great was my reputation that I was occasionally invited to political events associated with schools out of the district. On one such occasion, a meeting at a private home in Skokie to organize the Niles Township schools, I met Fern Platt.

Fern was also left-wing, Fern talked to me, Fern even invited me to meet with her a few days after the meeting: one particularly slushy day by Old Orchard, a shopping center near her house, far from mine. Arriving, footsore, chilled and soaked, my shoes ruined, we spent a rather uneventful hour or so looking into stores, maybe buying an ice cream, before I had to trudge home in the darkening afternoon. By now I was

obsessed, excited thoughts of her occupying the hours and miles back to Park Ridge. She had said she'd telephone the next day, Sunday.

Sunday, another grey, miserable day with the temperature hovering at the freezing point. I sat upstairs in my brother's room, Isaiah Berlin in hand, waiting for the call. Hours passed. The phone would sound, but not for me. My thoughts struggled to apprehend the progress of the Idea in history against the steady pull of Fern: her visage, her voice, her smell. Hours passed. Hegel was replaced by dialectical materialism. The alluring image of Fern was increasingly disrupted by doubt ("she said Sunday, didn't she?"), fear ("perhaps something horrible has happened!"), dread ("she'll never call--she never intended to call--we'll never meet again!") and despair ("no girl would ever want me").

She didn't call. I finished the book. I never saw her again.

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### **Bruce says**

The curriculum I taught this year at my high school involved using Marxism as a critical lens through which to evaluate various works of literature. Unfortunately, I didn't know nearly as much about Marx as I needed to, and have begun to address this lack with Isaiah Berlin's wonderfully succinct biography. I agree with everything said about it by my Goodread's friend, James Henderson, and, like him, am now very interested in pursuing Berlin's other works.

As to Marx, I find it an amazing contradiction in his character that though a life-long devotee of books and ideas, as a determinist he discounted the power of ideas to influence history. History was for him a dialectical mechanism with a predetermined end. But, as Berlin comments on this idea, "the very extent of its own influence on human affairs has weakened the force of its thesis." Marx is a classic example of a determinist who saw himself as somehow outside his own deterministic framework.

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### **James says**

This book was my introduction not only to Karl Marx and his thought, but to the author Isaiah Berlin. While I have fondness neither for the thought nor for the writings of Marx, I have become a fan of both the works and thoughts of Isaiah Berlin over the decades since this first encounter. Even in this early work (first published in 1939) Berlin's incisive and elegant style highlighted by meticulous scholarship is present. He brings to his study of Marx a much needed freedom from bias. While it is a short book it covers the essentials of a life that was devoted to reading and writing--unlike many other radical lives that were devoted more to the battlements and the streets. From the youth of Marx to the revolutions of the 1840s to the appearance of the first volume of *Das Kapital* in 1867 there is a thoroughly intense readability to this biographical portrayal of ideas. And the portrayal and analysis of ideas is why I enjoyed this book and continued to return to Berlin's other books over the ensuing years.

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### **Ali Amiri says**

If you read this not for the sake of Marx but to get a glimpse of what a brilliant mind Isaiah Berlin has, then you'll be pleased. Nonetheless, it's a very good biography of Marx and description of the development of his

philosophy.

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