



Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life

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Between his birth in 1818 and his death sixty-five years later, Karl Marx became one of Western civilization's most influential political philosophers. Two centuries on, he is still revered as a prophet of the modern world, yet he is also blamed for the darkest atrocities of modern times. But no matter in what light he is cast, the short, but broad-shouldered, bearded Marx remains—as a human being—distorted on a Procrustean bed of political “isms,” perceived through the partially distorting lens of his chief disciple, Friedrich Engels, or understood as a figure of twentieth-century totalitarian Marxist regimes.

Returning Marx to the Victorian confines of the nineteenth century, Jonathan Sperber, one of the United States' leading European historians, challenges many of our misconceptions of this political firebrand turned London émigré journalist. In this deeply humanizing portrait, Marx no longer is the Olympian soothsayer, divining the dialectical imperatives of human history, but a scholar-activist whose revolutionary *Weltanschauung* was closer to Robespierre's than to those of twentieth-century Marxists.

With unlimited access to the MEGA (the Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe, the total edition of Marx's and Engels's writings), only recently available, Sperber juxtaposes the private man, the public agitator, and the philosopher-economist. We first see Marx as a young boy in the city of Trier, influenced by his father, Heinrich, for whom “the French Revolution and its aftermath offered an opportunity to escape the narrowly circumscribed social and political position of Jews in the society.” For Heinrich's generation, this worldview meant no longer being a member of the so-called Jewish nation, but for his son, the reverberations were infinitely greater—namely a life inspired by the doctrines of the Enlightenment and an implacable belief in human equality.

Contextualizing Marx's personal story—his rambunctious university years, his loving marriage to the devoted Jenny von Westphalen (despite an illegitimate child with the family maid), his children's tragic deaths, the catastrophic financial problems—within a larger historical stage, Sperber examines Marx's public actions and theoretical publications against the backdrop of a European continent roiling with political and social unrest. Guided by newly translated notes, drafts, and correspondence, he highlights Marx's often overlooked work as a journalist; his political activities in Berlin, Paris, and London; and his crucial role in both creating and destroying the International Working Men's Association. With Napoleon III, Bismarck, Adam Smith, and Charles Darwin, among others, as supporting players, *Karl Marx* becomes not just a biography of a man but a vibrant portrait of an infinitely complex time.

Already hailed by Publishers Weekly as “a major work . . . likely to be the standard biography of Marx for many years,” *Karl Marx* promises to become the defining portrait of a towering historical figure.

Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life Details

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Ed says

This is, I imagine, a definitive biography of Marx. I was curious both to get a better understanding of Marx's ideas as opposed to Marxism and also to use his biography to get a better idea of what living in the nineteenth century was like. This book fulfilled both of these objectives. It is written clearly. It is long and I had to skip on chapter because the details of economic theory were too much. The book very clearly outlines the difference between Marx and Marxism [much of which is Englesism]. Marx's life was a poignant one, full of struggle and tragedy. In the end what made Karl Marx run remained somewhat of a mystery, which I took to be the mark of a good biography, ie. Not reducing Marx to some explanatory formula. If you've got the time and the interest I would highly recommend this book.

JS Found says

Sperber's basic premise is to locate Marx and his work in his time and not in the time that followed. He clears away what the twentieth century said and did under his name to reveal Marx as a fundamentally nineteenth century thinker. Seen as a future prophet after his death, and used for some very un-Marxian totalitarian states like the Soviet Union and China, the actual man actually looked backward for his life's work and thought. He looked to the French Revolution, to the philosopher G.W.F Hegel, and to early economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo. His communism was decidedly NOT the communism practiced in the 20 century by those two empires, and it was not violent. But I'm talking as if this biography talks about the 20th century when it does not. It simply and compellingly describes his life and thought, usually studying the Communist Manifesto and Capital but also some of the more neglected writings. It also of course talks about the man, the friend of Engels, the husband and the father.

This was my first biography of the man and I read it alongside the Communist Manifesto, which I also hadn't read before. The biography talks about this deep intellectual who spent his life and days reading the news, economics and abstruse philosophy--while the Manifesto is short, pithy, punchy and very easy to read. Marx was a gifted writer of intellectual argument as well as stirring pamphlets. What surprised me--everything surprised me because it was all new--was that he was a rhetorical jerk towards others. Former friends and followers he had cutting remarks for and attacked in his writing. Engels, was supposedly the jerk in social real life. But don't be deterred by that little factoid. He was a very loving husband and father. His at times attacking attitude stemmed from his deep advocacy for what he always and firmly believed in, and this was based in the evidence of what he read for all his life. He was an enormous thinker, one of the West's titans, and it is invaluable intellectually to get to know the man and read his work.

William West says

A supremely lucid biography of Marx that takes as its central thesis the fact that all his innovations were made in the context of now largely forgotten nineteenth century machinations. I'll admit that at first this approach struck me as simply common-sensicle. But Sperber convinced me that much of twentieth century Marx historiography was rooted in the conviction of finding a prophet of twentieth century communism,

rather than the Jacobin sentimentalist that Sperber brings to life.

I must say that the histories of Bolshevism that I have read, such as those of Isaac Deutscher, describe a cabal of young revolutionaries obsessively comparing themselves to the Jacobins and wondering with dread which one of them would reveal themselves as the Bonapartist element. All eyes were then, in retrospect tragically, on Trotsky rather than Stalin. So perhaps the original Bolsheviks, at least, were not so out of step with Marx's Jacobinism.

Sperber makes clear the reasons for Marx's Jacobin-centrism. The French republican revolutionaries had been the first to rid his native Prussia of feudalistic absolutism, and the first to grant full citizenship to Marx's Jewish ancestors. It seems not so surprising, then, that Marx consistently prioritized a bourgeois capitalist revolution over a communist revolution in his Europe, most forcefully in his Prussia. Indeed, he was a life-long champion of free-trade, feeling that it facilitated the still-comparatively progressive cause of the bourgeoisie over feudalism in Europe.

The book also goes into detail about the nineteenth-century European conception of Jewishness and its affects on Marx's thought. Marx often ruminated on his own ethnic Jewish ancestry while making notes about the Jewish religion that would today be considered insensitive. Then again, he simultaneously called for full Jewish (religious and else-wise)-citizenship in all European countries, then a radically egalitarian stance.

The book also shows that the racialization of Jewish people has been a relatively recent occurrence. It was the Nazis, following the footsteps of the American colonizers's racial dehumanization of Native Americans and Blacks, that transformed the notion of Jewishness into racial, ancestral terms.

In terms of Marx-studies, Sperber tries to deconstruct the long-standing bifurcation, holy to Marxist philosophers, between Marx's early thought- the 1844 manuscripts- and his most "mature" thought, such as Das Kapital. Sperber has been perhaps the first biographer to have access to the MEGA- the entirety of Marx and Engel's complete oeuvre. While the earlier manuscripts do indeed touch heavily on Hegelian and/or "existentialist" themes, much of the manuscripts, the majority of which has remained unseen until recently, dealt with political economy in a spirit not so different than that of Kapital. And the spiritual elements of the Manuscripts are repeated in Kapital, if in less obviously spiritual terminology.

The last innovation of the book is its focus on Marx's journalistic writing, the least studied, and most voluminous, of his life. In his articles and editorials he at once developed a line that would prove to be his most prophetic, that the first socialist upheaval would occur in Russia against the Czar, his most just, taking up the Abolitionist cause in the United States, and his most bizarre: his conviction that the then-PM of Britain, a rabid nationalist Torry, was an agent of the Russian Czar.

Brittany Bond says

Kind of boring.

Joe says

A remarkable book. Sperber wears his immense learning lightly, and offers what seems to me, as a layman, a balanced account of a passionate and conflicted life. I was very much taken on the late chapter on Marx as a private man. And, as someone who had never read a biography of Marx before, I was fascinated by his life—by the way he blended scholarship and revolutionary activism, by the difficulty he had in finishing writing projects, by the intensity of his relationships—quick and strong to friendship, sudden and intractable to anger.

Jan Chlapowski Söderlund says

This is my first book about Karl Marx and the origins of communism. Therefore I might not be the best of judges. With that in mind, please read on.

Jonathan Sperber's biography of Karl Marx gives a surprisingly level-headed and even account of this controversial monument of a man. The author covers both Marx as a family man, as a politician-revolutionary and as a philosopher.

More than once, J.S. mentions how critics or supporters of Marx tend to highlight certain events or writings, while hiding others. Then sheds light on the particular subject with his own (seemingly) objective view.

What is more, the book's title is very appropriate. "Karl Marx: *A Nineteenth-Century Life*" gives an colourful overview of the 19th Century itself, an epoch I am not very familiar with yet. The book has made me interested in this era and I am sure to follow it up with more reading in the near future.

One detail which was covered in the book, and which I found intriguing, was the influence of the philosopher George Hegel on Marx and many others during the 1800:s. The way J.S. described it - that this new philosophy changed society in an almost revolutionary manner and how it made people feel alive. Sounds almost exaggerated, but how magnificent if a *philosophy* can have such an effect on people. I wonder if something like this would be at all possible in today's numb society?

Karl Marx was evidently a very quarrelsome man, as I presume you almost have to be to fit the description of revolutionary. This lead to a very tedious middle one third of the book, mainly concerned with political in-fighting, intrigue and general abuse of each other. I quickly got lost in who was attacking who for what reason etc. To me - not an avid communist in any way and with only a cursory interest in Marx, this part was **VERY** tedious.

I feel this book is a very good introduction to Karl Marx. As apolitical as a biography of this highly politicised person can be. As I mentioned, it has inspired me to read more on related subjects, which is a very good quality in any book. Despite the highly tedious middle part, this book is definitely worth 4 stars.

Matthijs de Zwaan says

Interesting for what it says on the cover - a biography. Learned a lot about Marx's life, and I agree with the numerous other reviewers who write that Sperber's attention to the political/social/intellectual context improves understanding. Nevertheless, the book leaves me with some important questions: how did Marx become the radical that he was? Why did Marx become such an important figure in the socialist/communist movement, rather than one of the many many other aspiring leaders? Sperber does not really discuss these questions. For me, this gives the story an 'after-the-fact' feeling, despite his attention to historical context. I cannot imagine that things were so clear at the time, but the way the book is written it seems that history could never have been otherwise.

William2.1 says

Excellent biography. Herr Marx was a *nasty* motherfucker. If you did not agree with him, he vilified you. The man was no scholar. He was a polemicist. He was an economic determinist, a crackpot with dubious math skills. The book is terrific. It is not a critical biography. Author Sperber has his hands full simply taking Marx's fragmented and jumbled oeuvre and making some sense of it. The reader in many instances becomes more enlightened than Lenin ever could have been, not to mention Kropotkin or Trotsky. Their view of the great man's thought was grossly distorted in comparison to the sharp overview before us here. Marx belonged to the very bourgeois class that he theorized must be violently eliminated in order to bring about the dictatorship of the proletariat. The book is full of such breathtaking paradoxes. Essential reading if one wants to uncloak the mystery of Marx, who was nothing if not enigmatic, not to mention (often) self-confuting.

Greg Brozeit says

Has any historical figure ever had so many misconceptions and distortions imposed on his or her legacy as Karl Marx? After reading Sperber's incredibly human biography, I doubt it. This is an incredibly satisfying biography for anyone interested in an objective view of Marx.

Sperber does a masterful job of recounting Marx's life, struggles, humanity, flaws and ambitions. We meet a Marx who is brilliant polemicist but also frustratingly hypocritical at critical times during his lifetime. But most of all, we learn about a man who is far removed from the 20th Century ideas imposed upon him by self-described disciples and enemies alike.

I disagree with some of the reviewers who find the discussions on political economy less than satisfying. To meet their unrealistic standards, Sperber would have had to write a book of thousands of pages. Instead he delves into some critical ideas that help the reader to understand the context in which Marx intended them to be. And that means understanding how his ideas were formed and fit into the 19th Century times in which he lived. I was particularly struck with the thorough way that Sperber showed the progression and inner conflict Marx experienced with his early days of Hegelianism philosophy and his later incorporation of positivist ideas. Additionally, the contrast with his writings and his constant striving for the ideal Victorian family life is masterful.

Sperber makes me wish I could be a young man again and attend his classes at the University of Missouri. Having read Isaiah Berlin's somewhat unsatisfying biography (the only book written by Berlin I haven't loved), I envy any student today who will have this work as a starting point to understand Marx and his

ideas.

Adam Ford says

I've just finished Sperber's Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life. Some thoughts:

Communism's roots in personal responsibility and equality of opportunity:

The origin of Communism was the inability of the poor to gather wood in forests previously owned by monasteries or the nobility. Prior to the industrial revolution and the revolutionary political period in Europe during the 18th century the poor were largely rural and agricultural and free to hunt small game and gather tree-fall (the naturally falling branches and trees in the forest) for cooking and warmth through the winter. But with the political revolutions (peaceful in England and most of modern Germany, violent in France and much of what would become Italy) the land was sold off to private owners who asserted trespass rights and claimed theft for any takings. The industrial revolution moved the poor to a significant degree out of the countryside and into the cities to work in the factories.

So there existed for the first time in western European history a large population of urban poor without the ability to fend for themselves. They were surrounded by private property and left without the hunter/gatherer recourse their ancestors had enjoyed since the beginning of time. What to do with these poor? Give them handouts? No. Better to allow them to fend for themselves by opening back up the forests and countryside so they could hunt rabbits and squirrels and gather their fallen branches.

But how to open up the forests when everything is titled and owned and recorded with deeds? Someone had to own the ground. Should they give it back to the Catholic Church? That wouldn't work as there were lots of Protestants about and even many Catholics didn't trust the Church to use the wealth for the benefit of the poor. So who to hold the deed? The people would be best off to hold the property in common. Communism enables the poor to take the initiative and take care of themselves. All that is needed is to take the vast land holdings away from the wealthy, who could not possibly use all that tree-fall themselves anyway.

This history of the founding rational for Communism I never before understood. Amazing.

The influence of Hegel:

Georg Hegel was the philosopher within whose framework Marx lived and worked. He was a "Young Hegelian", according to Sperber. Hegel's name appears more often in the book than even Engels. I don't know anything about Hegel and the abstract descriptions of Hegel's philosophy here were not detailed or clear enough for me to really get a grasp. Hegel's Wikipedia page has an amazing quote: Michel Foucault has contended that contemporary philosophers may be "doomed to find Hegel waiting patiently at the end of whatever road we travel". Hegel is clearly a very important guy in the history of thought and I should learn more about him and his work. I'm sure that my understanding of Marx's ideas was significantly hampered by not first understanding Hegel—like jumping into a Russian novel half-way through.

The Importance of Engels:

Friedrich Engels and Marx entered a partnership, very nearly a marriage in its commitment and longevity. Engels provided financial support to Marx for decades. He even took the blame for fathering the child Marx

fathered with his long-time housemaid in order to save Marx's marriage. (Engels kept a mistress and had a number of lovers. He believed that marriage was relic of private property rights to ensure inheritance to biological which would fade away in a Communistic future.)

Marx was desperately poor and never would have survived without Engels's constant financial help. Marx regretted marrying and having children as they suffered greatly (and even died due to poor living conditions and medical care). Engels would send what he could and did so regularly for many decades. Without Engels there would be no Marx.

Getting Work Done:

Marx couldn't/didn't finish Capital in spite of spending decades working on it. What you buy now as Capital is actually Engels's synthesis of Marx's papers and drafts and other articles and pamphlets all put together in the form of a book. Engels should probably be on the spine along side Marx. Engels complained that Marx would get side-tracked for months in the details of Russian peasant labor wage data and make no progress. Marx was hiding in minute data from the daunting task of writing his magnus ops. A struggle many writers can relate to. Only the devotion of Engels to complete Capital saved Marx from being remembered only as a moderately influential economic journalist.

Marx would not write anything for weeks, then find inspiration and sit and write non-stop for days, finally collapsing from exhaustion. Hundreds of pages would result, to be tinkered with slightly and ignored until the next visit from the muse. Not a great formula to meeting deadline or getting a book done at all—which not surprisingly Marx failed to do.

Celebrating Economic Downturns:

Marx and Engels believed that the worker's rebellion would begin after an economic collapse, so they watched with glee for news of pending economic calamity. They would write letters back and forth excitedly about each recession in the United States and each crop failure in Russia and each drop in the stock market in England. They were so hopeful for the revolution, but so convinced that only a significant economic disruption could prompt it to occur, that they constantly hoped for dire economic news. What a odd way to live and read the events of the day.

Economic Theory—The Death of Capitalism:

Marx felt that the death of capitalism was unalterably foretold in the falling rate of profit in any given industry under capitalism—and idea set forth by Adam Smith, David Ricardo and John Stuart Mills. The idea is that over time due to competition and efficiency gains, every industry would see profits slip so low as to no longer be able to attract investment which would seek greater returns in younger industries. Capitalism's competition lead owners to invest in better machinery and increase efficiency until no more gains could be squeezed out of the business—including further product price reductions. When this happened in all industries, capitalism would collapse as there would not be anywhere for capitalists to invest to meaningful returns.

The failure of this theory to actualize seems to be due to its lack of belief in the creativity of man to invent new industries and to general geographical myopia. Even today an efficient business in London in an established field can nearly always increase profits by opening new markets. And every decade new industries are created—Marx might not have been able to foretell air travel or the internet, but history shows us that there have always been new industries every decade or two. This biography didn't get into the matter

Emma says

A fascinating, complicated, and difficult biography for a fascinating-difficult-complicated man. Sperber attempts the titanic undertaking of combining a complete and appropriate biography of Marx the Man, with a complete and appropriate biography of Marx The Myth. And he succeeds, most of the time; although the detour at the beginning of Section 3, with 2-3 chapters just analyzing Marx The Political Economist, are a somewhat unnerving departure from the rest of the book, which manages to segue between theoretical Marx and actual Marx with feet of clay.

One thing you can certainly expect it to do is send you off in search of other biographies and other histories. I am certain there's one for Friedrich Engels out there for me; Jenny Von Westphalen I'm less sure about. And given my own predilections, I feel like both of those may find their truest expression in historical fiction, or adaptations of their lives. (Which definitely fall into the Truth Is More Fictiony Than Fiction category.)

One of those most useful things to be gained from this biography is not Sperber's analysis of Marx's theory, though that is excellent. What was most fascinating to me was Sperber's elaboration of revolution and activism as process. That is to say, (for lack of a better term) the sociology of activists, a subject near and dear to my own heart. The author returns again and again to Marx and Engel's difficult relationship with their fellow revolutionaries (communist, socialist, German, European). And indeed, as we've seen with movement histories in the 20th century, and histories through social media in the first decade of this century, how even with best efforts to the contrary, the personal inflects the political. That within a small and intimately acquainted group of like-thinkers, the irrational and emotional can overcome the ideological.

Then again, this is a biography, and not a history or pure analysis, though it includes aspects of both. Sperber certainly lives up to his subtitle, portraying Marx in the context of the 19th century. Which is to say, changing at every single moment, and finding one portrait or one moment inadequate to the task of definition. And as much as we 21st century denizens like to think we are at the point where everything changes? As Sperber demonstrates, Marx and his contemporaries may have as rightful and substantially argued a claim to that title. Or perhaps everything changes every century, and it's only in the last 300 years that a majority have accessed the analytical and literary tools to deal with it.

Naeem says

This is a terrific book. It humanizes Marx and places his life and his ideas in his historical context. About the

man, we learn, for example, that he loved his family; he was dedicated to his playtime with his children and devoted too to his wife and partner, Jenny. The excerpted love letters (late in their life) are gems. I learned that he wrote much, much more as a journalist than as a theorist; that he was a perfectionist who had to be nagged (by Engels and by Jenny) to get his work in. I learned that he was dogged by (relative) poverty and that without inheritance, loans, and gifts – mostly from Engels – he and his family would not have survived. As it was, three of their seven children died. (Jenny had 7 births. Marx had a child with the live-in family servant – Lenchen Demouth. Everyone agreed to believe in the fiction that this child was the product of Lenchen’s union with Engels). I learned that his inability to secure a job, acquire regular income, or even live in one city was the result of his refusal to moderate his ideas or his convictions.

Sperber places Marx in his Nineteenth Century context. I learned about how Marx responded to the impact of the 1848 revolutions, the Crimean War, and Darwin’s ideas. The strongest sense I had was understanding the role of nationalism in the time period when both Germany and Italy were not yet states. One gets a powerful sense of the lingering influence of the Reformation in response to which some are fighting for a secular world of states while others are fighting for a return to empire and the papacy. Of course, Marx is a partisan for modernity in this context.

Sperber clarifies Marx’s ideas as well. Chapter 10 shows that Marx was fully devoted to Hegel and his methods – even as he dramatically inverted the Hegelian dialectical. Chapter 11 argues that Marx is a Ricardian, that he mostly accepts Ricardo’s political economy but critiques it with his Hegelian methods. As such, Marx is a Hegelianized Ricardo as well as a Ricardian Hegel. I think Sperber gets the ideas right. I got the sense that Sperber understood how to place each element, -- for example, the labor theory of value, the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, the relationship between value and price – in the context of Marx’s overall system.

So, we get vivid details about is life, we learn much about 19th century Europe, and Sperber explains Marx’s ideas in non-technical ways. All this comes alive in a writing style that had me turning the pages – I read the 550 pages in a few days and then immediately purchased the book. I am not sure what else we can ask of a biography.

To see Marx as merely a human being was liberating for me. I could see his incredible genius, his tremendous work ethic, and his sheer tenacity. But I could also see him as created by his times, as essentially flawed, and as a fully human. The result is that I have now become confident in the belief that he made “mistakes.” This might seem obvious to some but not to someone like me who works under the premise that seeing “mistakes” in the thoughts of great thinkers usually indicates poor reading. (We could dub it the “humility premise.”) Against this premise, I immediately set out to make a list of what I think Marx gets wrong. The list of what he got right will take longer to write. Much longer.

Mal Warwick says

In a new biography of Karl Marx, the historian Jonathan Sperber set out to explain his subject in the context of nineteenth-century circumstances and attitudes. “Marx was not our contemporary,” he writes, “[but] more a figure of the past than a prophet of the present.” He concludes that the way we view the man today is substantially different from the way he was viewed by his contemporaries — or the way he viewed himself. However, to my mind, he’s only partially successful.

Karl Marx, the armchair revolutionary

In one important way, Sperber makes his case with a detailed recitation of Marx's decades-long career as a journalist and activist. The book is at its strongest in describing the evolution of his thinking from the 1830s, when he was a student of philosophy and enamored of the work of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. In the 1840s and 50s, as Marx became progressively more engaged in writing (and arguing) about politics, he grew hostile toward Hegel and his followers, often engaging in acrimonious public debates about the philosopher's work. During that period, his politics bore no resemblance to the beliefs he professed even a few years later. As Sperber notes about a polemic Marx penned in 1843, "The man who would write the Communist Manifesto just five years later was advocating the use of the army to suppress a communist workers' uprising!"

Marx "had much more success in founding a radical political newspaper than in organizing the working class." He appears to have come closest to becoming actively engaged in political action during the Continent-wide wave of revolutions in 1848, but even then his involvement was limited to intellectual fisticuffs. Later, as his fame grew through the 1860s, Marx became even more insulated from political action. Instead, he grew preoccupied with sectarian debates among the many small and ineffectual Communist organizations that sprang into being in mid-century and devoted most of their energy to quarreling among themselves. Marx wrote hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of words about revolution. The most common thread among all these writings was that he was wrong about nearly every prediction he ever made. For decades on end, he continued to predict that the revolution that would overthrow capitalism was just around the corner.

Karl Marx, the theorist

Self-described Communists in the twentieth century idolized Marx as the patron saint of their movement. However, Marx himself would not have recognized what has passed as Communism since the Russian Revolution of 1917. Latter-day Communists have built much of their ideology around imperialism, following Vladimir Lenin's reformulation of the gospel according to Marx. By contrast, Marx did not view capitalism and imperialism as integrally linked. In fact, he often wrote favorably about the British Raj, implying that the British had helped drag millions of Indians out of a more primitive state by introducing them to civilization. In other ways as well, the tortured historical analysis Marx laid out in his many books and thousands of essays and articles bore little resemblance to the simplistic logic of twentieth-century Communism. Marx would have been scandalized by Lenin, Stalin, and Mao. He was not a Marxist.

Karl Marx, the anti-Semite

One of the recurring themes in Sperber's biography is that Marx was not a self-hating Jew even though he wrote disturbingly anti-Semitic statements on many occasions. The "'Israelite faith is repulsive to me,'" he wrote in 1843. Later, he "explicitly endorsed the view of Judaism as an ethically inferior religion." On other occasions, he described other Jews individually using pejorative, anti-Semitic terms.

Sperber attempts to make his case by asserting that in the mid-nineteenth century, Jews were not viewed through the lens of biology as a "race." That only came later with the emergence of Social Darwinism. Instead, Jews were defined by religion and culture; since Marx was neither a practicing Jew (his father had converted to Protestantism, and Marx himself married a Protestant woman) nor did he identify with Jewish culture, he was free to engage in talking and writing about Jews in a highly disparaging manner. The argument falls flat. For many centuries, Jews had been persecuted throughout Europe, not because of their religion or cultural practices but simply because they had descended from Jewish ancestors. To understand this fact, all you need do is look to the persecution of conversos (Jews converted to Catholicism) by the Inquisition.

Karl Marx, the man

In Sperber's telling, Marx was a loving husband and a doting father and grandfather. Nonetheless, he routinely took steps in his life as a journalist that guaranteed he and his family a life of poverty. Until the 1870s, when Friedrich Engels finally inherited a fortune and was able to support the Marx family in a semblance of comfort, Marx, his wife, and the three of his many children who survived into adulthood lived hand-to-mouth, forever begging, borrowing, and dodging creditors. And Marx fathered an illegitimate son on the family's long-time, live-in maid.

In his personal relationships outside his family, Marx was no more considerate. He was combative and often nasty and vindictive. Much of his writing consisted of lengthy diatribes attacking his personal enemies — who were often former friends with whom he had parted company on one or another minor point of ideology. Typically, the reason he had grown so hostile to them was that they continued to advocate beliefs he had once held himself. In one of the many unfinished manuscripts Marx wrote, he devoted "about 65 percent of the 517 pages . . . to a distinctly minor figure who died soon afterward in obscurity." Sperber adds, "internecine conflict became an obsession for Marx and Engels." Marx even quarreled, sometimes to the point at which they cut off relations, with Engels, who was the closest he ever had to a brother. In fairness, Engels was widely viewed as an even nastier fellow whose "tactless remarks and excessive behavior had alienated fellow leftists." Even so, Karl Marx was not a guy you'd likely want to become your best friend.

About the author

Jonathan Sperber is a history professor at the University of Missouri. He teaches modern European history. *Karl Marx* is his eighth book.

Ross says

I can only give this work 2 stars because it's 600 pages was far more about Karl Marx than I ever wanted to know. I skimmed the whole book to find the 50-60 pages worth of information that I was actually interested in.

Previously I knew almost nothing about Marx except references to the fact his writings were the basis for the communist revolutions in Russia and China. I more or less thought he invented communist doctrine. So given that the revolutions in Russia and China resulted in deaths of between 75 to 100 million people in those two countries, I decided to learn more about what Marx actually preached.

First I learned that Marx was simply the prominent voice of the communist/socialist ideology, and not the inventor. His work "The Communist Manifesto" simply stated what a broad movement of people in Britain and Europe had been advocating for a very long time.

Second I learned about his famous work, *Das Kapital*, which is the only thing I was interested in understanding about Marx and Marxism. I wanted to know what exactly was this economic theory that resulted in so many deaths.

It turns out that Marx was trained in Germany as a philosopher in the school of the German philosopher Hegel to use analytical methods called Hegelism or dialectics. While this at the time was regarded by many as a very deep and intellectual approach, the problem for Marx and his ideas was the method is nonsense. Consequently, the enormous work by Marx analyzing why capitalism must be replaced by socialism is also technical economic nonsense.

The author emphasizes with his subtitle "A Nineteenth Century Life" that Marx had no way to know, writing when he did, that it was all nonsense. The author further argues that it was not Marx's fault the revolutions he forecast and prayed for would be seized by the monsters Stalin and Mao

Tse-tung.

Basically Marx simply had the strong belief in the socialist creed "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need."

He just didn't understand that it wouldn't work.

Jack says

A well-researched albeit slightly overly academic chronological examination of the life of Karl Marx. The book is best when it is debunking the larger-than-life mythology that surrounds his life and distorts his political ideology.

Peter says

This isn't a breezy read like a Claire Tomalin bio, but it's an engrossing account of Marx, and an attempt to remove him from iconic status and place him back in his nineteenth century context. Sperber has a thesis here that Marx was in fact more backward-looking than forward-looking in his theorizing, despite the fact that most tests of Marxism are of whether he predicted the future accurately, or on what effect his ideas appear to have had on subsequent history. He sees Marx as looking back constantly to 1789 and 1793 and revolution in France, and not spending too much time imagining a post-revolutionary future.

For me what's most interesting here is how he refuses to see Marx's work as a monolithic, fully coherent body of theory. He traces the development of Marx from his Young Hegelian roots to a theorist influenced by, but in many ways working against, scientific positivism. I thought it was very interesting that he saw Engels's opportunity to edit Marx's work in the decades following his death, at a time when mass working-class movements were finally actually appearing, as the turning point in Marx being seen as a positivist scientist of history. But the Marx that emerges from Sperber's account is a little more confused, dealing with some philosophical and economic contradictions and problems that are not easily explained away--and is thereby rendered both more complex and more interesting.

Personally I also benefited from Sperber's ability to offer potted accounts of what Hegelian actually means, and liked too his account of the ways in which Marx lived up to expectations of a bourgeois gentleman (even down to the occasional challenge to a duel flung in the face of publishers who got on his wrong side). I found interesting the aside that Marx didn't seem to see any contradiction between the many ways in which he lived as a bourgeois not a proletarian (prudishness in mixed company, preference for "high" art etc.) and seeing the proletariat as the revolutionary class and himself as part of that movement. He just did not have the same kind of concern over authenticity as radicals of the next centuries.

Ben says

Marginal utility theory was just developing in the 1870s. According to the Russian academic Maxim Kovalevsky, then a frequent visitor in the Marx household, Marx was resuming his study of calculus to respond to the ideas of an English economist, William Stanley Jevons, one of the first marginal utility theorists, who deployed this advanced mathematics. Marx never seems to have put his considerations of this new version of economics on paper, but by the time all three volumes of *Capital* had appeared, it had

increasingly become the dominant form of economic analysis. In Germany itself, marginal utility theory could make little headway against the Historical School; instead, it was Austria that became a center of marginal utility analysis in the German-speaking world and on the Continent more generally. Eugen von Boehm-Bawerk, one of the leading Austrian economists, wrote a celebrated critique of Marx's ideas in 1895, following the publication of Volume Three of *Capital*. The point at which Boehm-Bawerk struck at Marx was his analysis of the transformation problem, the way that commodities, whose value was derived from the socially necessary labor time needed for their production and reproduction, came to be sold at market prices....

Boehm-Bawerk was not contending, as other contemporaries did, that Marx had gotten the transformation problem wrong, but that a transformation from value to prices was conceptually impossible. His criticism was a declaration that most economists were living in a completely different intellectual world from the one Marx had inhabited. Of course, this applied to Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and James and John Stuart Mill as well, since they too had based their economic analysis on a labor theory of value. Boehm-Bawerk was honest enough to admit this, but most "neoclassical" economists, as partisans of the marginal utility approach came to be known, were not so open about the fundamental differences in their understanding of economics from that of the iconic pioneers of their discipline. They hid these differences by quoting phrases, such as Smith's "invisible hand," generally wrenched completely out of their original context.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Marx's economics had become unorthodox, fundamentally different from the mainstream, neoclassical version of economics, and also at odds with the chief established alternative to the mainstream, the ideas of the Historical School. Marx's economic conceptions, however, had found a home in the burgeoning early twentieth-century socialist labor movement, as part of that movement's more general rejection of the ideas of the bourgeois society it criticized and rejected. This was not at all what Marx himself had intended. Far from opposing the mainstream political economy of his day, the ideas of Smith, Ricardo, and their followers, Marx had embraced it and promoted his own work as the most advanced and correct version of their approach. His criticisms generally centered on the extent to which political economists were unwilling to develop the ultimate consequences of their ideas. Marx was an orthodox political economist, who rejected most socialist criticisms of Ricardo. He did not want to see his economic writings limited to a ghettoized existence in a labor movement promoting a counterculture to the established bourgeois capitalist world; he had yearned for a public confrontation in the established newspapers, magazines, and scholarly journals of his day, and was frustrated when it failed to materialized.

Camilo Ruiz Tassinari says

As a Marxist, it is a very demanding intellectual exercise to read Sperber's iconoclastic account of Marx's life. When one reads something about Marx, one could expect to find either a reactionary attack on him, a radical, probably dogmatic defense or maybe a social-democratic partial appropriation. Yet Sperber's biography is something completely different... He perfectly combines the three essential aspects of his life: the theorist, the politician and the private man in order to convey a very realistic, honest and very well researched picture of Marx's life (Throughout the book, I just kept wondering how many books, letters and random things Sperber had to read in order to write it... apparently he read the whole MEGA files) In the end, Sperber's theoretical framework, -that Marx has been seen in the light of the 20th century, and understood under the model of those historical events, so different to the ones he lived and studied, and that therefore the role of the biographer/historian is to put back the character into the time in which he lived- is not only justified in historiographical terms, but also perfectly done. Beware: A careful reading of this book may make the reader a little bit more Marxist... or at least to think one's own Marxism is founded on a more

solid ground.
