

# Getting Marx Backwards

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For the last twenty-five years, it would be safe to say that Marx's thought seemed very distant to all but a minority of scholars and leftists. Despite ever increasing economic inequality and the extreme concentration of wealth at levels not seen since before the Great Depression, the collapse of the Soviet Union and economic prosperity were said to have relegated Marx to the past. Marxists were at the bottom of a daunting uphill public relations battle. Today, with an ongoing financial crisis and daily revelations of corporate wrongdoing, the general public has become more aware and critical of global elites and capital. Marxists now receive some attention from movements and the media, albeit still very little. Whereas before the crisis, right-wing groups and pundits could only concoct nightmares out of "radical Islamists," they now warn that Marx's specter possesses the Democrat currently in the White House. For his admirers, detractors, and many who were altogether agnostic, Marx has become more relevant than he has been in years. Indeed, the last time Marx's work was reconsidered in the midst of a crisis by a non-Marxist was in David McLellan's 1974 *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought*. In his new biography, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life*, Jonathan Sperber agrees that it is time to reconsider Marx. Yet, Sperber thinks we ought to see Marx anew precisely by understanding him as a man of a bygone age: a legatee of the upheavals of the late eighteenth century and a participant in and analyst of nineteenth-century politics.

One of the leading historians of nineteenth-century Europe, if not the leading contemporary historian of the 1848 Revolutions, is eminently qualified for the task of situating Marx in his age. Sperber does a fine job of sympathetically introducing Marx to an audience of laypeople. Despite this, Sperber simply does not understand the depth of Marx's thought. This makes for a very uneven biography. At times, Sperber plays on his readers' neophytism by presenting old debates as new revelations and oversimplifying complex texts. For all his dismissiveness of Marx scholars (he has a particular bone to pick with Marxologists), Sperber does not serve his readers by thrusting scholarship aside. He should know that there are people who both take Marx seriously and are not dummies. Further, it is questionable if placing Marx's life in context does Marx's thought justice and, more importantly, if doing so means anything for Marxism's future. Sperber thinks it does:

The view of Marx as a contemporary whose ideas are shaping the modern world has run its course and it is time for a new understanding of him as a figure of a past historical epoch, one increasingly distant from our own: the age of the French Revolution, of Hegel's philosophy, of the early years of English industrialization and the political economy stemming from it. It might even be that Marx is more usefully understood as a backward-looking figure, who took the circumstances of the first half of the nineteenth century and projected them into the future, than as a surefooted and foresighted interpreter of historical trends. (xiii)

These premises are likely meant to incite Marx's admirers. Sperber is not the first to try to add another mound of dirt to the tomb at Highgate. Like so many others, he fails. He is not, however, motivated by the same vitriol as others. Even if he reserves his condescension for Marxists, Sperber seems to respect Marx. Sperber is trying to be a good historian by understanding Marx through his context. There are strong scholarly justifications for adopting this approach. As Sperber rightly points out, the historical understanding of the nineteenth century has changed dramatically. Everything from the origins of imperial expansionism to the inner workings of the households of every social stratum has undergone thorough reexamination. It is well worthwhile to reintegrate Marx into this world since he had so much to say about every aspect of it.

There is a second, more dubious justification for Sperber's biography. The book jacket advertises that Sperber was given "unlimited access to the *MEGA* (the Marx-Engels *Gesamt-ausgabe*, the total edition of Marx's and Engels' writings, only recently made available)." Vaunting this as an impetus for reevaluating Marx's life is less persuasive given that Sperber's "unlimited access" yielded "no smoking gun" and "hundreds of small details" (xiv). The small details are fascinating, but they do not radically transform Marx. Even odder is the fact that Sperber acknowledges that the *MEGA* remains incomplete and that, for some materials, one has to turn to "less comprehensive and less scholarly text editions" (563). At the very least, the reader should be alerted to the publisher's hyperbole and the fact that Sperber himself does not put much stock in the claim that his book's originality lies in some privileged access.

Given his expertise, it is unsurprising that Sperber is at his finest when discussing nineteenth-century political struggles. This comes through in the book's first two-thirds. Sperber really does not have anything entirely new to say about Marx. The outline of the story of Marx's family background through to his years as an émigré was covered well by great Marx biographers going back to Franz Mehring. Still, Sperber provides a detailed account of how the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era shaped both the political views of Marx's father, Heinrich, and political life in the city of Marx's birth, Trier. The Napoleonic Code, for example, still served as the basis of law in the Rhine Province up until 1900. All this is well known, but Sperber makes it clear that Marx's family and city were both very much the products of the Enlightenment and radical European politics. Marx's connection to the first generation of Hegelians is also recast. Even if Eduard Gans has largely become a forgotten figure, he was Hegel's most prominent student and interpreter after Hegel's death. It is significant to learn that he was an early mentor to Marx and recognized Marx's promise at the University of Berlin. Another Hegelian, the more incendiary Bruno Bauer, who desultorily shifted from right to left and back (Bauer's right-wing attack on David Friedrich Strauss prompted Strauss to draw the distinction between left and right Hegelians), ultimately became Marx's mentor (Gans died abruptly) and early supporter of Marx's journalism. The fact that Marx began to learn Hegel from Gans suggests that the Young Hegelians alone did not mediate Marx's engagement with Hegel. Learning that Marx was exposed to very different currents of Hegelianism comes as a relief and gives Marx's Hegelianism a more interesting pedigree.

After losing his teaching position at the University of Bonn, Bauer entered journalism and initiated Marx into this world. Far from being a mature theoretician and revolutionary, Marx, the editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, was a young radical embracing a number of revolutionary positions in opposition to the Prussian regime. Such a chapter in Marx's life particularly speaks to Sperber's keen ability to navigate the terrain of radical political positions open to a budding opponent of the reactionary Prussian state. Sperber situates the *Rheinische Zeitung* in the contentious print culture of nineteenth-century Prussia in which authorities and reactionary newspaper editors sought to silence writers attacking the political and religious establishment. Sperber repeatedly emphasizes that the paper's supporters and readership were primarily German liberals. Marx himself was sympathetic to liberal positions and gained early financial support from liberal admirers. He often worked to moderate the tone of the newspaper in order to circumvent censors. But Marx's tenure as editor of the paper was short-lived, lasting from late 1842 to the banning of the paper by Prussian authorities in 1843. Being a liberal sympathizer in 1842 Prussia was a radical position and does nothing to asperse Marx's revolutionary credentials. Indeed, as so many biographers before him have noted and maybe even exaggerated, Sperber points to Marx's articles on wood theft as indicators of the radical revolutionary yet to emerge.

Sperber's discussion of Marx's émigré years remains strong so long as he continues to deal with Marx's political contact with the networks of radicals in Paris, Brussels, and Cologne, including Engels, and his work on the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* and the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*. As

the reader sees Marx develop into the mature theoretician, Sperber begins to show his weaknesses. Once he is forced to contend with Marx's early writings, he begins to slip out of his league. The problem is only exacerbated when he is confronted with Marx's more difficult later writings. Given over a century's worth of excellent literature on Marx's texts, directed both at the scholar and layperson, Sperber's exegesis proves facile. The account of *On the Jewish Question*, the first serious Marx text engaged by Sperber, waivers between a poor summary and a discussion of nineteenth century anti-Semitism. It glosses over Marx's critique of liberalism, which constitutes the greater half of the work. In turn, Sperber misses the point of Marx's 1844 *Paris Manuscripts*, only mentioning the concept of alienation briefly and focusing on the texts' sources in Scottish, British, and French political economy.

The issue of Marx's anti-Semitism recurs throughout the biography. It is soon joined by the question of Marx's racism. Ferdinand Lassalle was the most frequent target of anti-Semitic remarks and in a letter to Engels was described as "nigger-like" (411). Despite this, Marx permitted his daughter, Laura, to marry Paul Lafargue, a man partly of African descent. Further, it is clear that Marx cannot be placed in the camp of the nineteenth century's most infamous race theorist, Arthur de Gobineau. Sperber notes that Marx "read Gobineau's book with some care and remarked that 'to such people it is always a source of satisfaction to have somebody whom they think themselves entitled to despise'" (410). Even if Sperber admits that Marx was no partisan of Gobineau, one cannot help but sense that Sperber relishes a good scandal. Sperber tries to pin on Marx charges of anti-Semitism and racism by dredging old debates, but there is no "smoking gun." This is not to suggest that the old debate is not worth continuing. The second, much shorter, half of *On the Jewish Question* has undeniably repugnant things to say about Jews. Still, it should not be forgotten that the text was written in reply to the far more inflammatory work of Bauer. As for the comments Sperber uncovers in the letters, Marx continually comes off significantly better than his contemporaries during a period when entire theories were built on racial taxonomies and hierarchies. Marx should not be excused his comments, but he never made anti-Semitism or racism an integral part of his thought. At the same time, details about Marx's financial woes and his relationship to his wife Jenny, and children, become more prominent. Such may be the result of the precedent set by Mary Gabriel's inanelly tender *Love and Capital*. This sets the book on a trajectory in which politics gradually fades away in favor of familial drama.

In chapters five through nine, Sperber is once again in his element discussing the radical émigrés, the formation of political organizations, such as the Communist League, and factional strife. Given the skill with which Sperber treats Marx's political activism, it is strange that he tells us,

Countless twentieth-century Marxist activists, including Lenin, eagerly adopted the hallmarks of the professional revolutionary, continuous single-minded conspiracy and agitation, but Marx never did. Neither Marx's professorial demeanor, nor his scholarly interests, nor his family commitments and the financial demands they made upon him fit these requirements. (157)

Marx may have not been a Lenin, but these chapters portray a very politically engaged intellectual. Marx worked hard to forge revolutionary organizations, create political alliances, keep abreast of global political affairs, and engage in debates. Participation in the politics of the International Workingmen's Association was a bit more than the pastime of a scholar. All of this actually delivers on Sperber's promise that we can learn something new about Marx by placing him in the context of nineteenth-century politics. Marx's political activism may not be forgotten and several Marx scholars for over a century have reminded us of it, but it still often all too easily recedes into the background amidst scholarly disputes. Although the particular struggles that Marx engaged on a daily basis may be those features of Marx's life that are most distant from our own, Sperber bestows a picture of Marx as activist; a picture that may not be so inconsequential for modern political activists as Sperber himself might think. Herein lies one of the virtues of Sperber's nineteenth-century lens. But

as politics became less a part of Marx's daily affairs (though never entirely absent) and theory became more central, Sperber's account lulls. Part Three, "The Legacy," with its tortured explanations of Marx's economic theory—a task better left to the various scholars with very different interpretations of *Capital*, such as Paul Sweezy, Ernest Mandel, David Harvey, and, more recently, Michael Heinrich—that, ultimately, only emphasizes Marx's debt to Ricardo (something we already know) and its focus on sentimental discussions of Marx's family life, is particularly tedious. For Sperber, Marx the economist, is, in the final analysis, an extension of the political economists he read and, as a result, Sperber says nothing new, misses Marx's originality, and says nothing of exploitation.

Throughout the book there is a tension between Sperber's strengths as an historian of the nineteenth century and his weaknesses as an interpreter of Marx's thought. More frequently than not, there is a disjointedness in the narrative when Sperber jumps from Marx's life to his texts. For all the fascinating details about Marx's life and context, Sperber still cannot connect that man to the author of what remains one of the most sophisticated critiques of capitalism. Perhaps, in adamantly insisting that Marx was a mere mortal whose world conditioned his vision and was not some omniscient deity, Sperber demeans mortals. He has forgotten that even mortals are able to recognize that their conditions often constrain their ability to know and that one must exert to extract oneself from his or her context in order to understand. Is that not one of Marx's most fundamental lessons?

Only the most obtuse reader of Marx's work would entirely ignore Engels' famous injunction to understand Marx in light of German philosophy, British economics, and French politics. Yet, Sperber seems to think he does something novel when he emphasizes these as the sources of Marx's texts. Sperber's whole book might be read as an exercise in taking Engels' assertion far too seriously; except with details added about Marx's personal life that are, in turns, mawkish and licentious. Marxists of all stripes, Bernstein and Luxemburg alike, have long known that reducing Marx to his context belies ideas that invite renewal and reinterpretation. They never took Marx whole hog and, rightly or wrongly, tried to move beyond Marx. Marxists have rarely been blind to the distinction between Marx and Marxism—the man himself knew the difference. When Sperber suggests that he is trying to disabuse readers of the notion that Marx was a "prophet," who are these readers? Are they the victims of totalitarian regimes that plastered Marx's visage everywhere? Are they party devotees proselytized by propaganda? Or, are they simply people in search of a messiah? To many of Marx's admirers, Marx was no prophet. His work is the basis of a system of ideas or method (depending on the tradition of Marxism one comes out of) that has long since developed beyond the man and serves as a tool for diagnosing an exploitative and alienating economic system.

Sperber is not naïve. He anticipates such criticisms of his book. He recognizes the distinct projects of Marxists and Marxologists, but is dismissive of both. Of Marxologists, he states that their efforts to study "Marx's own ideas, so that revisions and later accretions can be erased and Marxism can be returned to its original purity" is "a project more suited to adherents of revealed religion than proponents of a purportedly secular and rationalist theoretical framework" (xviii). This acerbic repartee is ironic. The requisite Quineans or Wittgensteinians dominating philosophy departments are seldom accused of being "adherents of revealed religion." It is bizarre because Sperber sets himself the task of getting to some originalist understanding of Marx via his context. He is kinder to Marxists, stating, "I am struck by the differences—between Marx's world and the contemporary one, or between his system of thought and his political aspirations and those of his twentieth-century successors, who called themselves 'Marxists'" (xix). To this Marxists can only reply, "so are we, but we are also struck by the continuities and therein lies the rub."

As a biography of an acute observer of nineteenth-century politics and participant in some of its epochal episodes, Sperber's *Karl Marx* is a fine study. There are prominent flaws, but it is a good

work of nineteenth-century history and Sperber is a good historian. The project of understanding Marx's age is served by Sperber's expertise. And, the book is far stronger as an account of the age than of the man. Marx's admirers will easily identify the book's many shortcomings and questionable interpretations. They should still appreciate the enterprise and forgive Sperber his misinformed assaults. Despite Sperber's choice of terms, there is something to be said for seeing Marx as "a backward-looking thinker" insofar as this means that Marx's link to the Enlightenment and the heritage of democratic revolution can be reestablished. The release of a new, accessible, and sympathetic study of Marx for a popular audience should be applauded. Even if Sperber does not grasp Marx's ideas or their usefulness, he tries to be sensitive to Marx the man. The book is no vulgar smear campaign. He shows a popular readership that Marx was not a demon. He sheds Marx of many twentieth- and twenty-first-century biases, which may actually do more to disabuse those with common misconceptions than to disillusion his admirers. Nevertheless, the book does not attain the greater goal it sets itself. Sperber does not consign Marx to his age. The problem for Marxists has never been that Marx died in the nineteenth century, but that capitalism has persisted into the twenty-first.