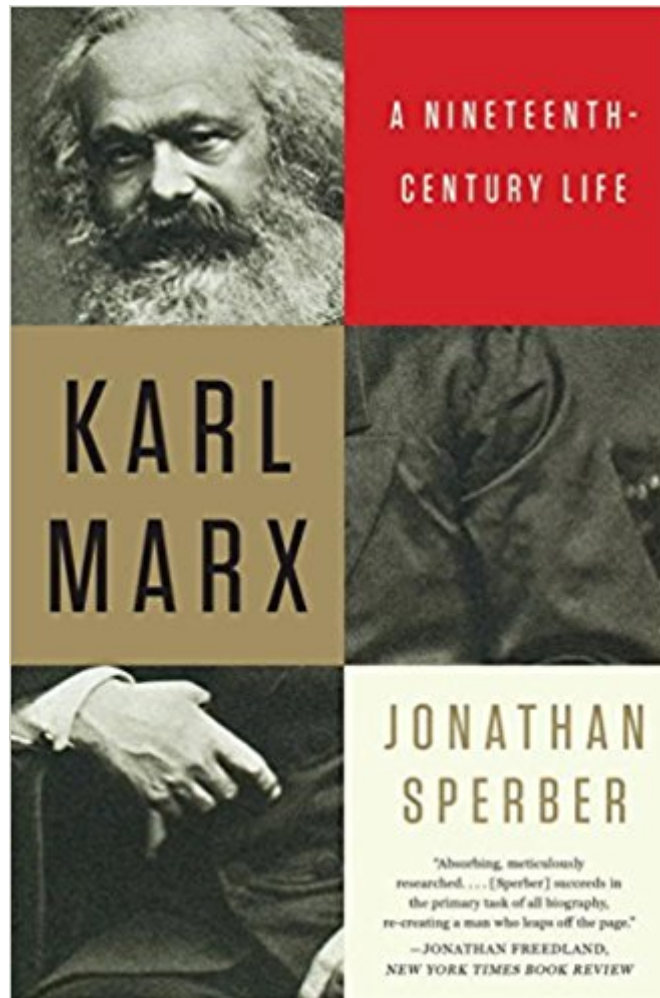




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Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life



Synopsis

“Absorbing, meticulously researched. . . [Sperber] succeeds in the primary task of all biography, re-creating a man who leaps off the page.” — Jonathan Freedland, New York Times Book Review In this magisterial biography of Karl Marx, “likely to be definitive for many years to come” (John Gray, New York Review of Books), historian Jonathan Sperber creates a meticulously researched and multilayered portrait of both the man and the revolutionary times in which he lived. Based on unprecedented access to the recently opened archives of Marx’s and Engels’s complete writings, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* provides a historical context for the personal story of one of the most influential and controversial political philosophers in Western history. By removing Marx from the ideological conflicts of the twentieth century that colored his legacy and placing him within “the society and intellectual currents of the nineteenth century” (Ian Kershaw), Sperber is able to present a full portrait of Marx as neither a soothsaying prophet of the modern world nor the author of its darkest atrocities. This major biography fundamentally reshapes our understanding of a towering historical figure. 34 illustrations

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Customer Reviews

Recent Marx biographies, such as Francis Wheen’s *Karl Marx* (2000) and Mary Gabriel’s *Love and Capital* (2011), leave scholarly room for Sperber’s cradle-to-grave portrait. A specialist in nineteenth-century European history, Sperber maintains that Marx, the power of his ideas having “run their course,” must be anchored historically

to his youthful inspiration by Hegelian philosophy and the French Revolution. According to Sperber, Marx's intellectualism, despite his prophetic visions of a Communist society, was retrospective. Sperber's interpretations of Marx's ideas might rankle a modern Marxist, who believes in their contemporary relevance, which implies a subsidiary purpose of Sperber's work, to depict Marx the man before there was Marx the "ism." That aim results in Sperber's most interesting and accessible sections, which underscore Marx's birth into bourgeois society, the conventions of which he never relinquished; the influence of his parents; and the poverty and exile his wife and children endured because of his revolutionary activities. Including the cast of Marx's enemies and acolytes, Sperber superbly recounts the life Marx led. --Gilbert Taylor --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Doing for Marx what Ian Kershaw did for Hitler, Jonathan Sperber has given us more than just a landmark biography, but a magnificent literary and historical achievement. --Christopher M. Clark, author of *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947* Karl Marx is our contemporary, interpreted anew by each generation--and that is as it should be. What Jonathan Sperber has done, and done wonderfully well, is return Marx to his own time. He makes us look again at the writings, through nineteenth-century eyes, and gives a vivid account of Marx's often difficult personal circumstances. Deeply researched but highly readable, this is a biography to savor. --David Blackbourn, author of *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany* Including the cast of Marx's enemies and acolytes, Sperber superbly recounts the life Marx led. Sperber credibly reveals Marx's personal and political passions, ironies and contradictions... Authoritative. [A] scrupulously detailed account of its subject from cradle to grave. --Terry Eagleton Absorbing, meticulously researched... [Sperber] succeeds in the primary task of all biography, recreating a man who leaps off the page... Sperber forces us to look anew at a man whose influence lives on. And he also offers a useful template for how we might approach other great figures, especially the great thinkers, of history--demystifying the words and deeds of those who too often are lazily deemed sacred. For all the books that have been written about America's founding fathers, for example, we still await the historian who will do for them what Jonathan Sperber has done for Karl Marx. --Jonathan Freedland Sperber prefers a firmly historicist approach, and attempts, by viewing his subject purely in the context of the times, to show us a quintessentially 'nineteenth-century life'... Sperber's rigor... yields gems. The first significant Marx biography in decades... Sperber details graphically the often-times scurrilous intrigues and competitive struggles, in doing so developing a panorama of a European-wide network of artisans, revolutionaries and

intellectuals... In careful detail, [he] reconstructs the genesis of Marx's works, the influences of David Ricardo and Adam Smith on Marx's political economy, as well as his fascination with Darwin's theories. --Alexander Cammann, author of *Die Zeit* Starred review. This superb, readable biography of the most controversial political and economic thinker of the last two centuries achieves what scholars have been hard-pressed to deliver in recent decades: a study of Marx that avoids cold war, ideological, and partisan commitments and arguments. A major work, this is likely to be the standard biography of Marx for many years. "By locating Marx squarely in the society and intellectual currents of the nineteenth century, rather than interpreting him in the light of twentieth-century history, Jonathan Sperber's excellent biography succeeds splendidly in reshaping our image of the man and his thought. --Ian Kershaw, author of *Hitler: A Biography*" Brilliant, original, and beautifully written, Jonathan Sperber's biography of Marx dazzles. Neither a prophet nor a purveyor of a political system gone awry, Marx emerges in these pages as a man struggling, personally and intellectually, with the profound issues of his own time. With insight and erudition, Sperber weaves Marx's life and time seamlessly together, and gives us the first deeply researched, engaging biography of Marx in more than three decades --Helmut Smith, author of *The Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town* "The first significant Marx biography in decades Sperber details graphically the often-times scurrilous intrigues and competitive struggles, in doing so developing a panorama of a European-wide network of artisans, revolutionaries and intellectuals In careful detail, [he] reconstructs the genesis of Marx's works, the influences of David Ricardo and Adam Smith on Marx's political economy, as well as his fascination with Darwin's theories. --Alexander Cammann, author of *Die Zeit*"

The closer you look at a thinker, the harder it is to say what he thought. The simplifying of Marx, often inspired by those both pro and con, reduces him to class struggle, theory of surplus value, dialectical materialism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the falling rate of profit, etc. Sperber's biography goes a good way towards showing that Marx's actual thinking is much more dynamic, more complex, and less consistent. Sperber's intention is to treat Marx, as the subtitle indicates, as a nineteenth century figure, in the context of nineteenth century thought and events. And he does so admirably. He avoids the iconic Marx, created primarily by twentieth century thought and events, allowing us to see Marx as a thinker among thinkers and as a revolutionary among revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries of his own time. I am not a Marx scholar by any means. I have not studied Marx as closely as other 19th century thinkers (Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche), and I don't have the background in the history of economics to pick up the subtleties of *Capital* or to criticize

Marx's principal contentions there and elsewhere. But Sperber's book does give me the broader context and at least the rudiments of Marx's thinking to put together for myself an historical picture of Marx's intellectual development and something of the development of the culture of revolutionary thinking during the mid-nineteenth century. Marx never had the leisure to be a "philosopher" in the traditional sense. He never held academic positions. Instead he pieced together a career as a journalist, surprisingly even a popular journalist at times, to help make ends meet for himself, his family, and his causes. He didn't always succeed, and, of course, he famously depended on the support of Engels to remain afloat financially. But through the journals he founded or contributed to and through mostly unfinished manuscripts of a more theoretical nature, we can see something of the evolution of his thought, sometimes punctuated by issues of personality and struggles within the politics of revolutionary movements. Sperber is particular adamant in his portrayal of Marx as an Hegelian to the end, somewhat contrary to the portrait, encouraged by Engels, of Marx as a positivist economist, constructing theories from hard economic data. Underlying the theories is always the sense of historical development, a rationale, in Hegelian manner, to the progressions that Marx saw in the forms of labor and the organization of production. The book is also a personal biography. Sperber presents a convincing account of Marx's troubled devotion to his family. In fact, he goes some way toward pointing out the apparent contradiction between the traditional attitudes Marx had toward family, the role of men as fathers and breadwinners, and bourgeois morals and respectability. The personal Marx was inescapably a man of his time. It's no sanitizing account of Marx as a person, though. Marx could certainly be petty. Sperber follows a running theme of Marx's penchant for attacking those around him, both personally and publicly. Within the circles of revolutionaries, it was if Marx attempted to monopolize what was (and still is) a broad spectrum of what could be called "socialism" and even covered the tracks of his own intellectual development by harshly criticizing those who thought what he once thought but has changed his mind about. It's hard to write a book about Marx. Everybody already knows who Marx is, or they think they do. For us, Marx is polarizing. Are you pro or con? It's a sucker's question, and a way to close, not open, thinking. Hopefully, Sperber's book will help a little bit to bring discussion of Marx back to the real Marx rather than that iconic Marx of twentieth-century making.

This is a useful book in covering Marx's life and, especially, his political activities, and situating them in their nineteenth century context. For this reason, it is a valuable corrective to many works on Marx, which treat him as a timeless intellectual giant. That being said, Marx is of continuing importance because of his theories, and Sperber does a remarkably poor job of explaining these.

Marx's social theory is all but ignored, and the central core of his economic theory is poorly explained. To a certain extent, Marx's theory--"Marxism"-- is a construction of subsequent figures who read it back into his works. Engels was especially influential in this regard. But in a biography of Marx, one expects detailed treatment of Marx's major theoretical contributions. Unfortunately, this is sorely lacking in this book.

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 thoroughly unsatisfying biography (the only bad thing of which I am aware that Berlin ever wrote), I envy any student today who will have this work as a starting point to understand Marx and his ideas.

This is a great biography of Marx. It clearly shows the intellectual influences he had, the effect upon him of the circumstances of his time, and the impact of his character. Sperber has a very bad opinion of Engels, that I think should be compared with Tristram Hunt's biography: Marx's General. Marx, as Kolakowski said, was a German philosopher of mid-XIX Century. He was not an economist. And I think Sperber makes very clearly that Marx really was an extraordinary journalist, a great writer with no reluctance to steal ideas, attack enemies, indulge in rethorical whirlwinds...A very good biography.

I found the book very interesting in the sense that the author describes the external influences of Marx's life rather than the theories and economics. Although there are some very basic elements of his economic positions the essence of the book is on the life of Marx. The book is well written and provides sufficient detail to provide a strong understanding of what influenced his views including Darwin and many others. I was not educated with a strong understanding of Marx but after having lived in Brasil and other countries where his influence is ingrained in the education system more than the american system I found the book to be very revealing and an interesting view of the man, Marx, rather than the math of Marx.

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