

## Introduction

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**K**arl Marx has been a specter haunting the field of labor history. Certainly the idea from Marxist theory that the working class is a moving force in history has been a prime orientation of many scholars working in the field, whether or not they consider themselves Marxists. The forum on Jonathan Sperber's *Karx Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* is derived from that acknowledgment, but Sperber's work asks us to rethink the relevance of concepts derived from the nineteenth-century man to conceptual frameworks we deploy. In this introduction, I summarize his argument.

In *Karx Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* Jonathan Sperber uses the tools of intellectual, political, social, and cultural history to excavate and demystify the context of the development of Marx's life and ideas. The contextual clues and ideas are framed by a deep understanding of early nineteenth-century German and European history. He also takes a fresh look at Marx's writings, not only the well-known polemical and theoretical writings but also his journalism, for clues to Marx's context. He argues that Marx was both brilliant and shortsighted, unable to predict the future and more limited for current debates about capitalism than the recent increase in interest in Marx might suggest.

"The tradition of dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living" is among the most famous of Marx's quotes, from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). Sperber applies this to Marx as well to establish a claim that he was a backward-looking thinker rather than a prophet of the future. The core dead generation that contextualized Marx's life was that which experienced the French Revolution and the beginning of the destruction of the "society of orders" that would take another century to complete. Marx's origins in the town of Trier in the Rhineland, which had been completely reorganized in the aftermath of the Napoleonic empire, was a key turning point for Marx's family, especially after the Rhineland was turned over to Prussia in 1815. It established the basis for contesting the society of orders and led Marx's family to convert to Protestantism while still retaining a strong commitment to Enlightenment values.

Protestantism would be crucial to Marx's introduction to Hegelianism at the University of Berlin, where he was immersed in the biblical criticism of Bruno Bauer

and other writings of the Young Hegelians, and provided the basis for what would become Marx's concept of an alienated working class rather than alienated religion as a moving force in history. Sperber argues that it was not Marx's contact with workers that led to this transformative insight but rather the outcast Marx (an Enlightenment-influenced Protestant turned Hegelian atheist) who invented the working class as key agent for political reasons: to realize the aspirations emerging from his frustrated encounters with authoritarian Prussian rule—a theoretical mechanism that could overthrow Prussian autocracy and yet avoid the rerun of post-1789 disasters.

Sperber makes much of Marx's comments as a journalist in his argument that Marx continued to be reluctant to embrace a struggle for worker control and working-class agency. Sperber contends that as editor of *Rhineland News*, Marx called for “use of the army to suppress a communist workers' uprising!” Even during the events of 1848 and 1871, Sperber presents Marx as an advocate for democracy trying to overthrow Prussian absolutism rather than as a revolutionary intent on bringing about communism. In addition, he argues that Marx was caught up in the 1789 past in seeing France as the basis for enlightened revolution, the model for the future. The revolutionary republic, the recurrence of the French Revolution, was a very influential force in Marx's life, Sperber argues. This understanding of Marx was replaced after Marx's death with a smooth line in which he only is recognized as an advocate for the workers overthrowing capitalists.

Sperber contends that many of Marx's positions as a political activist and theorist were based on his position regarding ruling European powers and their intrigues and rivalries. For example, he argues that Marx's famous struggle with Mikhail Bakunin for leadership of the International Workingmen's Association (Marx was coordinating secretary) was less over the role of anarchist thought and more about Marx's belief that Bakunin was a pan-Slavist with secret ties to the czar.

Sperber insists that Marx's critique of capitalism had very limited application to the modern world and that his economics were not prescient about the way capitalism developed as many have alleged. For example, Sperber examines Marx's journalism for the *New York Tribune* and shows that Marx was aware of and described the role of financial instruments of capital accumulation and organization such as Credit Mobilier, the world's first corporate bank and what would now be termed a capitalist leverage instrument. Nevertheless, Sperber argues that Marx saw these instruments not “as the capitalist avant-garde” but as “marks of economic backwardness” of France.

Sperber also questions the conceptualization we have of Marx as anticipating that the bourgeoisie would be a constantly revolutionary force far into the future. Sperber asserts that the problem is a mistranslation of the iconic comments of the most critical quote from the *Communist Manifesto* on this point: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned and man is at last compelled to face, with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.” He claims it should be “everything that firmly exists and all elements of the society of orders evaporate, everything sacred is deconsecrated and men are finally compelled to regard their posi-

tion in life and their mutual relations with sober eyes.” For Sperber, this translation corrects the impression of Marx as anticipating the twentieth-century transformation that still roils us. Instead, he argues Marx meant to suggest only that the feudal traditions of pre-modern Prussia and Germany would “evaporate” under pressure from capitalist development.

Sperber emphasizes Marx’s indebtedness and support for classical economists. For Sperber, Marx is a mainstream thinker in this regard. In Paris in 1843–44 he read the classics of Smith, Ricardo, Say, and Mill and continued to be wedded to them and the labor theory of value in later writings, and Sperber attributes Marx’s inability to transcend these economists for his inability to finish *Das Kapital*. He used these classical theories as weapons to denounce socialist detractors of the classical interpretation. Sperber delights in telling the reader that Marx consistently argued against protectionist laws and for free trade because he was an adherent of Ricardo. As such, his idea was that the base of future socialist society was for capitalism to take its course. Marx is the old man looking backward while new strains of ideological thought overtake Hegelians and classical economics. More innovative thinkers challenged the supposition about the primacy of philosophy and replaced it with the primacy of science. While Sperber acknowledges that Marx described a field of “positivist shit” he argues that nonetheless it was the influence of positivists that led Marx to develop in *Das Kapital* the idea of “progress through distinct stages of historical development.” But he suggests Marx was not as innovative as William Stanley Jevons, whose new theory of marginal utility gave us a whole new version of economics because he asked new questions about wealth. Marginal utility theorists rank as the key economic theorists who Sperber credits as innovators because they, unlike Marx, were forward looking. They understood the declining rate of profit as an issue but found it easily overcome in consumer spending.

As for Marx’s personal life, Sperber presents Marx’s marriage to wife Jenny as one that was essential to his ability to produce his work but shows it was not transcendent of the limits of nineteenth-century patriarchal provision. Sperber relates the connection between personal and political events and their emotional context, makes much of the fact that Marx fathered a child with his maid, and suggests perhaps a residual context in which the personal is political. Desperate poverty, and the deaths of three of his children as a result, undermined his sense of manhood and redounded to his carbuncles and ill health. His death was requited by the love and adherence of Friedrich Engels, whose wealth allowed Marx’s ideas to flourish. In Sperber’s view, we ought to recognize Marx as a product of another era without much relevance except as a remnant of another time. ■

