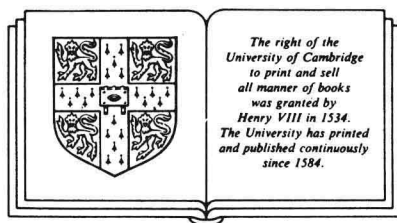


An
Introduction to
**Karl
Marx**

Jon Elster

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AN INTRODUCTION TO KARL MARX

PREFACE

In 1985 I published a lengthy book on Marx, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge University Press). The present book is much shorter, about 25 percent of the first. It has virtually no exegetical discussions of the texts or of the views of other Marxist scholars. The main intention is simply to state Marx's views and engage in an argument with them. With two exceptions, there is little here that is not found, in some place and some form, in the first book. In Chapter 1, I provide a brief bio-bibliographic survey that is not included in *Making Sense of Marx*. In Chapter 3, I offer a discussion of alienation that goes substantially beyond what was found in the earlier book. A fuller development of the ideas sketched there is found in my "Self-realization in work and politics," *Social Philosophy and Policy* (1986).

A companion volume of selected texts by Marx, organized along thematic lines corresponding to Chapters 2–9, is published simultaneously with this book.

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OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

ONE hundred years after his death, Marx is an enormous presence among us. On purely quantitative criteria, judged by the number of his self-avowed followers, he exerts a greater influence than any of the religious founders or any other political figures. His doctrine being secular rather than timeless, we would not expect it to have the staying power of Islam, Christianity, or Buddhism, but up to now it has shown few signs of waning. It is not difficult to justify a continued interest in his writings.

The interest may be extrinsic or intrinsic. One may go to Marx to understand the regimes that have been influenced by him, or to understand and assess his writings as if he had had no posterity whatever. Of these, the former requires the latter, but not the other way around. When a doctrine – be it religious or political – becomes an institutional force, it always becomes the object of intense scrutiny in its own right, because the proper interpretation may be a matter of momentous importance. This is not to say that all dogmatic controversies are decided on purely internal criteria of validity or consistency. Many of them owe their resolution to mundane struggles of power, in which, however, purely textual arguments serve as one form of ammunition. Although textual considerations and rational assessment by themselves probably do not set constraints on the outcome, they may in some cases tip the balance one way or the other. The student of political processes in contemporary communist societies will do well, therefore, to know the texts that form part of the arsenal of debate. Although Engels and Lenin are the more frequently cited, Marx provides the final touchstone.

The guiding interest in the present exposition is, however, purely intrinsic. This will be taken to mean three things. First, it is a matter of establishing *what Marx thought*. This task is subject to the usual principles of textual analysis: to understand each part in the light of the whole and when in doubt to choose the reading that makes the texts appear as plausible and as consistent as possible. In Marx's case the task presents unusual difficulties. For one thing, the bulk of the corpus consists of unpublished manuscripts and letters in a very uneven state of completion. Some of them, though preserved for posterity, are still unpublished, so that no interpretation can claim to be based on all surviving texts. For another, the published writings are largely journalistic or agitatorial and as such are unreliable guides to his considered opinion. There is, moreover, the problem of ascertaining what was written by Marx and what by Engels and whether the latter's writings can be used as evidence for Marx's views. Finally, one must take account of the fact that Marx's thought changed over time, including both discontinuous breaks and more gradual evolution.

We have, in fact, only two published writings that show us Marx at the height of his theoretical powers: *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and the first volume of *Capital*. They make up approximately one thousand pages, of a corpus of perhaps thirty thousand. They form, as it were, the fixed point from which the other writings may be surveyed and guide the choice between different readings. They do not suffice, however, to eliminate all ambiguities – among other things because they are far from perfectly clear and consistent themselves. Even in his most carefully written works, Marx's intellectual energy was not matched by a comparable level of intellectual discipline. His intellectual profile is a complex blend of relentless search for truth, wishful thinking, and polemical intent. Between the reality he observed and his writings, there intervened at least two distorting prisms, first in the formation of his thought and then in the way he chose to express it.

The operation of the first kind of bias is most evident in his views on communist society – whether communism as he conceived it was at all possible, and whether it would come about in the course of history. He seems to have proceeded on two implicit assump-

tions: First, whatever is desirable is feasible; second, whatever is desirable and feasible is inevitable. The second kind of bias is most clearly seen in his political writings. There is the bias of compromise, due to the need to reconcile different factions; the bias of exhortation, arising from the desire to use "the analysis of the situation" as a means to changing it; and the bias of anticipated censorship, which operated when he had to disguise or tone down his views to be allowed to state them at all.

Next, I shall ask *whether Marx was right* in what he thought on the numerous issues – historical as well as theoretical – that he confronted. This examination will involve deliberate anachronism, in the sense that it will draw on facts and theories not available to Marx. In particular, the exposition of Marx's economic theories will use language developed much after his death. I shall also have the occasion to point out that on various factual matters Marx has been proved wrong by more recent scholarship. In fact, by and large it will appear that strictly speaking Marx was almost never "right." His facts were defective by the standards of modern scholarship, his generalizations reckless and sweeping.

A more interesting question, however, is *whether Marx remains useful* for us today. Which of Marx's theories are hopelessly dated or dead, and which remain a source of new ideas and hypotheses? To answer this question we must look at the wood, not just at the trees. As in the somewhat similar case of Freud, we may find that a theory can be shot through with errors of detail, even have basic conceptual flaws, yet remain immensely fertile in its overall conception. It is in the nature of the case that such assessments must be somewhat vague. The Marxian ancestry of a given line of inquiry may not be obvious and is certainly not proven by the claim of its practitioners to be among his descendants. Yet there exist unmistakably Marxian theories of alienation, exploitation, technical change, class struggle, and ideology that remain viable and vital.

The organizing idea of the exposition, therefore, is to set out what I believe were Marx's views on the central issues before him, to assess their validity in the light of the best knowledge available to us today, and to discuss whether the general conceptions underlying them can be useful even when his specific implementation is flawed. The range of issues covers normative as well as explanato-

ry problems. I take the view that Marxism includes both a specific conception of the good life and a specific notion of distributive justice, in addition to a theory of history and an analysis of capitalism. The emphasis on normative issues is probably the most distinctive and controversial feature of the exposition. Most other commentators affirm that Marx denied the existence of absolute values, some of them seeing in this a cause for praise and others for blame.

Can one be a Marxist today? The overriding goal of the exposition is to help the reader form an answer to this question. Many would say, both on intellectual and on moral grounds, that it is no longer possible to be a "Marxist." Many of Marx's most cherished doctrines have been totally demolished by argument. Others have been refuted by history, which has shown us that the logical consequence of his political philosophy is an abhorrent social system. What little remains can be and largely has been absorbed into mainstream social thought.

Each of these three arguments may be countered. To the question whether I am a Marxist, or why, on intellectual grounds, I would want to call myself a Marxist, I have a well-rehearsed answer: "If, by a Marxist, you mean someone who holds all the beliefs that Marx himself thought were his most important ideas, including scientific socialism, the labor theory of value, the theory of the falling rate of profit, the unity of theory and practice in revolutionary struggle, and the utopian vision of a transparent communist society unconstrained by scarcity, then I am certainly not a Marxist. But if, by a Marxist, you mean someone who can trace the ancestry of his most important beliefs back to Marx, then I am indeed a Marxist. For me this includes, notably, the dialectical method and the theory of alienation, exploitation, and class struggle, in a suitably revised and generalized form."

Among intellectuals in Eastern Europe, with few exceptions, "Marxism" is a dirty word. To them it signifies not the liberation but the oppression of man. The view is encapsulated in Solzhenitsyn's refusal to meet Sartre in Moscow and memorably argued in Kolakowski's *Main Currents of Marxism*. It is an attitude that commands great respect, but its implications for the understanding of Marx are somewhat unclear. True, the work of Marx was one of

the causes that led to the Soviet regime; equally true, that regime justifies itself through Marx, asserting that it is roughly the kind of regime he wanted to bring about. That assertion is manifestly false. Yet the real question lies elsewhere. It is whether any attempt to bring about the kind of regime he wanted necessarily has to employ means that will in fact bring about something roughly similar to the Soviet regime. This I deny. Yet I shall also argue that an attempt to achieve the goal by means of a violent proletarian revolution will be self-defeating. The revolutionary bid for power can succeed only under conditions of backwardness that will also prevent, not only initially but indefinitely, the flowering of the productive forces that Marx posed as a condition for communism as he understood it.

It would seem, finally, that Marxism as a body of positive social theory, concerned with establishing and explaining facts, ought to disappear if it is bad and also if it is any good. In the latter case its findings will enter the main body of the historical and social sciences and cease to be specifically "Marxist." The identity and survival of Marxism is linked, however, to its normative foundation. Because of their adherence to specific, not universally shared values, Marxist scholars ask different questions. In arguing for their answers, on the other hand, they have to follow the same canons of method and reasoning as other scholars. Because of their values they look for different things to explain, but the logic of explanation is the same. Their theories will, if plausible, enter the mainstream of social science if they can also be useful to scholars who ask other questions; and if they cannot it is a good bet that they are not very plausible.

MARX: LIFE AND WRITINGS

Because of the great variety and diversity of Marx's writings, it is often useful to know when, under which circumstances, for which purposes, and for which public they were written. The following chronological survey of his writings is meant to facilitate the more systematic discussions in later chapters. It is *not* intended as a biographical sketch. Only information about Marx's life directly relevant to the understanding of his work is included.

1818–1835: Trier. Marx grew up in the town of Trier in Prussian Rhineland, a formerly liberal province now under a harshly oppressive regime. Both his parents descended from rabbinical families, but his father converted the whole family to Protestantism to escape discrimination against Jews. Much has been made of Marx's Jewish background and the alleged self-hatred that led him to espouse anti-Semitism. There is something to the allegation, but Marx's anti-Semitism never took a virulent practical form. His attitude toward the Slavonic peoples – his "Russophobia" – was in fact more deeply shaped by racism.

1835–1841: University studies. Upon leaving school, Marx studied briefly at the University of Bonn and then for five years in Berlin. Here he came to know the philosophy of Hegel and met a group of left-wing philosophers known as the "Young Hegelians," who were mainly concerned with the critique of religion. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on "The Difference between the Philosophies of Nature in Democritus and Epicurus," an echo of which is found in the frequent references in later works to the trading nations who live "in the pores of society, like the Gods of Epicurus." The Hegelian imprint these years gave to his thinking never wore off completely, although it is not equally apparent in all his writings.

1842–1843: Journalism and philosophy. During this period Marx worked as journalist and then as editor for the Cologne newspaper *Rheinische Zeitung*. His articles show him to be a radical liberal, concerned with freedom of the press and protection of the poor, without, however, seeing the latter as the agent of their own emancipation. After the paper was suppressed by the government in early 1843, Marx devoted a long summer to philosophical studies. One fruit of this activity is *The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, a commentary on §§261–313 of Hegel's work. The work was first published in this century. Another, the essay "On the Jewish Question," shows Marx from his worst side as a writer. It is replete with overblown and obscure rhetoric as well as offending remarks about Judaism. It remains of some interest, however, because it contains Marx's only statement on the rights of man, which he characterizes as "the rights of egoistic man, of man separated from other men and from the community."

1843–1845: Paris and communism. From late 1843 to early 1845

Marx lived in Paris. He became a communist and in the article "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction" stated his belief that the proletariat must emancipate itself and thereby the whole of society. He also wrote a long critique of capitalism, variously known as *The Paris Manuscripts* or *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, published only in this century. The notion of the alienation of man under capitalism is the central theme. In Paris he also began his lifelong friendship with Friedrich Engels and collaborated with him on an exuberantly juvenile refutation of the Young Hegelians, *The Holy Family; or, Critique of Critical Criticism*.

1845–1848: Brussels. Marx had been active among the émigré German politicians in Paris and, as a result of pressure from the Prussian government, had to leave Paris for Brussels. He remained active in politics, first on a local and then on a European scale. Three important writings punctuate these years. In 1845–6 he and Engels collaborated on the posthumously published *German Ideology*, in which historical materialism emerged in full-fledged form, or at least as fully fledged as it ever came to be. In 1847 he published *Misère de la Philosophie*, a reply to P.-J. Proudhon's *Philosophie de la Misère*, which had appeared the previous year. In the heavily ironic style he had not yet discarded, Marx makes fun of Proudhon's attempt to master the Hegelian dialectic and of his petty-bourgeois outlook. In 1848 Marx and Engels collaborated on *The Communist Manifesto*, published in London by the Communist League. This masterpiece of political propaganda contains a sweeping historical overview and extravagant praise of the civilizing power of capitalism, concluding that "what the bourgeoisie produces, above all, is its own gravediggers." By this time two of the three major pieces of Marx's doctrine were in place: the theory of alienation and historical materialism. The theory of exploitation existed in an embryonic stage but was not fully worked out until many years later.

1848–1849: Revolution in Germany. On 26 February 1848 news of the revolution in Paris reached Brussels. A week later Marx arrived in Paris and left for Cologne in early April to become editor of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, which published 300 issues before it folded in May 1849. In its pages Marx initially encouraged the

German bourgeoisie to pursue the work of the democratic revolution, but when they shied away from what in his view was their historical mission, his policy took a leftward turn. He could not, however, stem the counterrevolutionary tide. When he was expelled from Germany in May 1849, he also left active politics for fifteen years, not counting émigré squabbles in London.

1850–1852: The sociology of French politics. From August 1849 to his death Marx lived in London, interrupted by a few brief visits abroad. In the short-lived *Neue Rheinische Zeitung: Politisch-ökonomische Revue*, he wrote a series of articles on French politics, which were published by Engels in 1895 as *The Class Struggles in France*. They cover the period from the outbreak of the February Revolution to August 1850. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* was published in 1852 and covers the whole period from 1848 to Louis Napoleon's coup d'état in December 1851. These writings remain our main source for the understanding of Marx's theory of the capitalist state, together with the contemporary articles on English politics.

1850–1878: Economic studies and writings. In June 1850 Marx obtained a ticket to the Reading Room in the British Museum, thus beginning the economic studies that eventually led to the three volumes of *Capital*. The road was long, twisted, and thorny. Of the numerous manuscripts Marx produced in these years, only two – *Critique of Political Economy* and *Capital I* – were published in his lifetime. The publication of the others has been scattered over a century, from 1884 to 1982. To help the reader orient himself in this wilderness, I shall indicate the date of writing and of publication of these manuscripts, as well as their relation to one another.

1857–1858: Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie. This huge manuscript – 1,000 printed pages – was first published in Moscow in 1939–41 but was not available to Western scholars until the East German publication in 1953. It is partly an impenetrable Hegelian thicket, partly a wonderfully inspiring study of economic philosophy and economic history. It is perhaps the freshest and most engaging of all Marx's works, one in which his ideas can be studied *in statu nascendi*.

1859: A Critique of Political Economy. This work corresponds to the first and least interesting part of the *Grundrisse*. Its place in the

history of Marxism is due to the important preface where Marx summarized, in a single long paragraph, the basic tenets of historical materialism. Until the publication in 1926 of the first part of *The German Ideology*, these few sentences remained the only authoritative statement of the theory.

1861–1863: *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*. This enormous manuscript – 2,300 printed pages – consists of twenty-one notebooks. Of these, notebooks 6 through 15 were published by Karl Kautsky in 1906–8 as *Theories of Surplus-Value*. They deal mainly with the history of economic thought, but contain also important substantive passages. The remaining notebooks were published in 1976–82, in the new scholarly edition of Marx's and Engels's collected works (see the section, "Editions of Marx's Writings"). They are preliminary studies to the first and third volumes of *Capital*, and supplement them on some points.

1865: *Results of the Immediate Process of Production*. This manuscript was published in Moscow in 1933 but was first made available to Western scholars in 1969. It was intended to serve as a bridge between the first and the second volumes of *Capital*.

1867: *Capital I*. This book is beyond doubt and comparison Marx's most important work. It stands with Darwin's *Origin of Species* as the most influential book of the nineteenth century. Although Marx intended it to serve the cause of the working class, it is also and preeminently a book for the happy few, by one of them. Marx assumes that *his* readers know Greek, Latin, and the major European languages; that they are capable of recognizing remote allusions to literary and philosophical works, besides being thoroughly familiar with arcane matters of political economy. It is carried by a white-burning indignation that is all the more effective for being more disciplined than in Marx's earlier works, which were often marred by heavy sarcasm. Considered as economic analysis it was not a lasting achievement, but it remains unsurpassed as a study of technical change, entrepreneurial behavior, and class conflict in the age of classical capitalism.

1865–1878: *Capital II*. This work, published by Engels in 1884, is with a few exceptions utterly boring and, unlike the two other volumes, does not repay reading for anyone but Marx scholars. Marx's attempt to draw interesting conclusions from simple ac-

counting principles was not successful. The exceptions are the schemes of simple and extended reproduction, which anticipate modern input–output analysis, although the gist of Marx’s analysis can be stated in one page whereas he uses more than one hundred.

1864–1875: Capital III. This work, published by Engels in 1894, is much more valuable. The chapters on economic history are among Marx’s most important writings. The chapters on value theory and crisis theory contain his most authoritative statements on these topics. It must be added, however, that the scholarly consensus today is that these theories are seriously, perhaps irreparably, flawed. The nonspecialist reader will not profit much from struggling with Marx’s exposition of them.

1852–1862: American journalism. To earn a living, Marx wrote about five hundred articles, over a period of ten years, as European correspondent for the *New York Daily Tribune*, a leading American newspaper of progressive persuasions. Many of his contributions are small masterpieces of historical and political analysis, notably the articles on the British rule in India and the numerous articles on English politics, which form a useful supplement to the writings on France. In others one is more struck by his bias than his acumen, as when he touches upon one of his *bêtes noires*, the British foreign minister Lord Palmerston or Napoleon III.

1864–1872: The First International. Marx played a leading, in fact dominating, role in the International Working Men’s Association, an organization of European trade unions. Marx penned the inaugural address and the provisional rules of the International and was elected to the General Council, which was in charge of day-to-day affairs between the annual congresses. Its first years were marked by Marx’s successful struggle against one anarchist faction, the followers of Proudhon; the last years by the unsuccessful struggle against another, grouped around Mikhail Bakunin. The most important written work from this period is *The Civil War in France*, a postmortem on the revolutionary insurrection in 1871 known as the Paris Commune.

1873–1883: Last years. The last years of Marx’s life were marked by ill health. He worked on the manuscripts for *Capital* but without much progress. He guided from a distance the emerging working-