



University of
Massachusetts
Amherst

Karl Marx: An Intellectual Biography

Item Type	review;article
Authors	Besalke, Brandi
Download date	2024-11-11 14:07:13
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/22474

***Karl Marx: An Intellectual Biography.* By Rolf Hosfeld. Translated by Bernard Heise.** New York: Berghahn Books, 2013. 190 pp. \$29.00 / £18.00 Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-85745-742-4.

It goes without saying that Karl Marx is a controversial historical figure. On the one hand, over twenty years after the end of the Cold War, the words “socialism” and “communism” are still evoked by politicians as scare words. On the other hand, tiny finger puppets bearing the visage of the “tapeworm of socialism,” as the French philosopher and economist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon called Marx (qtd. 62), can be found for purchase in university bookstores across the country. Do Marx’s ideas on political economy and the crisis-ridden system of capitalism have any bearing today? What were the historical circumstances and intellectual forerunners which provided the impulse for his economic critiques and continued calls for revolutionary action? While the latter question is the focus of Rolf Hosfeld’s book, *Karl Marx: An Intellectual Biography*, the reader will also continually consider the former question — heavily emphasized on the back cover — due to the uncanny historical parallels drawn between Marx’s age and our own. Above all, the volume provides a fascinating glimpse into the general worldview and intellectual debates that crisscrossed nineteenth-century Europe, which experienced rapid change thanks to the quick advancement of industrialization amid constant political upheaval.

Karl Marx: An Intellectual Biography is a translation of Hosfeld’s 2009 monograph *Die Geister, die er rief* (Piper, Munich). Bernard Heise’s translation feels very awkward at first, as the text seems to stick too closely to German word order and phrasing, though this may be an effect of the shotgun style of the opening pages, which attempt to set the stage for the arrival of Karl Marx with a barrage of isolated political and economic incidents from across Europe at the dawn of the industrial age. These first few pages are a laborious read, as the mind futilely attempts to string connections between the factoids in order to construct a single train of thought. Once the book is firmly focused on its titular subject and the gestation of his ideas, the narrative reads well and is often as gripping as a historical novelization. The fact that this is a translation fades away and is quickly forgotten.

The primary purpose of this new biography is to situate Marx’s ideas in the context of the intellectual arguments of the age. It forgoes details like the circumstances surrounding Marx’s birth or grammar school days and concentrates instead on the accumulation of philosophies and ideologies. Hosfeld’s book generally succeeds in this, but it works best if the reader already has a basic understanding of the ideas attached to names. In particular, the reader should be somewhat familiar with economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo, as well as utopian idealists like Robert Owen, Henri de Saint-Simon, and Charles Fourier. It is an absolute though unmentioned prerequisite that the reader have an extremely comfortable familiarity with Hegel, particularly his dialectic and his notion concerning the spirit of history. Marx’s entire oeuvre, from *The Communist Manifesto* to *Capital*, is rooted in Marx’s dialectical application of Hegel’s dialectic to Hegelian thought itself, and Hosfeld’s intellectual biography emphasizes this strongly. Marx essentially uses Hegel’s dialectic on Hegel’s own philosophy and concludes from this “negation of negation” (43) that communism is the end goal of history once capitalism has brought about its own destruction.

The book is divided up into four main sections of unequal length: “Ideas,” “Deeds,” “Discoveries,” and “Consequences.” Although these section titles imply a thematic organization,

the book is in fact arranged chronologically. The first two sections, “Ideas” and “Deeds,” constitute well over two-thirds of the volume. “Ideas,” while following Marx through his *Rheinische Zeitung* days, lays forth five key concepts that form the foundation of Marx’s later works: reasonable freedom (especially from censorship), historical materialism, the creation of a universal class in order to avoid class conflict, the idea that production is the basis of the political and economic state, and the idea that the absolute rule of the proletariat is necessary.

The narrative picks up speed quickly in the second section, “Deeds,” accompanied by the image of the railroad as a metaphor for the acceleration of technological advancement. The *Communist Manifesto* is discussed here, as is Marx’s work with the socialist-leaning *New York Daily Tribune*. In addition to commenting on his impressive intellectual output, Hosfeld presents Marx as a complex person complete with flaws. Jealous at the successes of some of his acquaintances, Marx made lists of mocking, anti-Semitic nicknames (99). It is also noted that he was “tremendously cheerful” concerning the devastating financial crisis of October 1857, certain that this would usher in his long-awaited communist revolution (94). While the reader likely does not share Marx’s childish jibes or his enthusiasm in these circumstances, Hosfeld’s strong writing makes it hard for the reader not to feel sympathetically disappointed when the fruits of fifteen arduous years of research, culminating in Marx’s *Contributions to the Critique of Political Economy*, are met with indifference and ignored by his contemporaries (97). This enormous section begins with a hopeful Marx, certain that he is the mouthpiece for the spirit of history. This Marx is constantly emboldened and refreshed by heroic figures like Abraham Lincoln (106) and the relatively frequent capitalist crises, but the hope has mostly dissipated by the end, following the fall of the Paris Commune and the increase of the European bourgeoisie in the early 1870s (120).

The following section, “Discoveries,” finds Marx disappointed in the absence of revolution and burying himself in economic theory. This portion of the book deals primarily with political economy and situates Marx among his fellow theorists. Unlike Smith and Ricardo, writing while industrialization was in its infancy, Marx writes from within its fully developed state. This section also includes some retrospective remarks on Marx’s contributions to the field from modern-day theorists. Charles Taylor, for example, is quoted as saying that Marx’s biggest discovery was that capitalism is the “most innovative and creative economic system in human history – and simultaneously also the most destructive” (133). Marx’s intellectual framework is also compared to his economic predecessors; while Smith and Ricardo’s systems of thought were rooted in Newton’s theory of causality, Marx is firmly planted in the Hegelian dialectic with a touch of Darwinism. With regards to capitalism, if the capitalist or seller is the thesis, then the consumer or buyer is the antithesis. When the divide between these two becomes too great, the system of capitalism reaches synthesis, or a restoration of balance, through an economic crisis (146-7). In order to escape the spiraling cycle of crises, which Marx believed would lead to the eventual suicidal destruction of the capitalistic system, the system of capital needed to be replaced with a state-controlled, thoroughly planned organization of labor (151). The reception of Marx’s culminate work, *Capital*, is picked up in “Consequences,” the final and shortest section. This section turns to Russia, a land Marx once reviled but now applauded, as the students and revolutionaries consume his masterpiece with a fervor lacking in the West.

The book employs a small gimmick, introduced in a small note preceding the text: italics are used to mark words and short phrases lifted from Marx's own writings and inserted into Hosfeld's work. As explained in the note, these snippets are meant "to infuse the text with Marx's voice and perspective in a seamless manner." These short segments of Marx often work exactly as stated in this quotation, though they are used more and more sparingly as the book progresses. The formatting used to denote them, however, is a little problematic, as italics are also used, as is standard for English prose, to mark journal and book titles, which are named in abundance, in addition to the occasional German word.

The greatest achievement of *Karl Marx: An Intellectual Biography* is that it clearly illuminates the relationship between Marx's early obsession with Hegelian thought and Marx's later economic writings. This will be especially appealing to scholars interested in the history of economic thought, historicism, and the progression of the nineteenth-century zeitgeist. This strength, however, also marks the book's greatest weakness. As Hosfeld's volume lacks any explanation of the Hegelian dialectic or of his historical philosophy, readers should already be familiar with these concepts. So long as this caveat is kept in mind, this compelling volume would especially make excellent background material for graduate-level seminars focused on nineteenth-century German philosophy and intellectual history.

Brandi Besalke
Washington University in St. Louis