

# Karl Marx

*En Biografi*

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Marx is a controversial figure. What is the source of this controversy? It can hardly be that of Marx as a philosopher. As a philosopher he was steeped in the Hegelian tradition, so dominant during the 19th century, and although he supposedly rejected it, more precisely turned it on its head, his philosophy would not make sense without the Hegelian context in which it was embedded. Notions such as dialectics, whose source can be led back to Plato, at least etymologically, play an important role in Marx thinking. And although he repudiated the idealism of Hegel, proudly presenting himself as a materialist, there are, as we will see strong idealistic streaks in his thinking. Had philosophy been the sole contribution of Marx he would hardly have been remembered to this day, except among a small coterie of experts on Hegel. As a historian he is known for his dialectical materialism in history. Many historians claim to be Marxists historians, the most notable example being Hobsbawm. What it actually means is quite another thing, and least of all it is apparent from the writing of Hobsbawm himself, if it is supposed to mean something more than just sympathy for Marx in particular and Socialism in general. One would assume that it entails a method or at least an attitude as how to view history and not just a perspective. One thing, however, has stuck, namely that Marx would have claimed that history is preordained, that it is bound to follow a course, in particular that it is vain to go against history. To this we will return. Finally there is Marx the economist with the ambition to establish a scientific theory of science. As such he was a student of Adam Smith and Ricardo, criticizing both of them, but as with the case of Hegel, necessarily being caught within their circle, as those were the major economists of the time, and thus providing a point of departure. The crucial question is to what extent did Marx travel from them in purely technical terms. Did he attend to some problems they left behind providing solutions which they may have appreciated, and in this case furthering the development of the tradition. And if not, in what revolutionary ways did he depart from them, giving an entirely new perspective on the discipline?

One of the technical problems that occupied Marx, and which is discussed at length in the book, was the value of a commodity, making a distinction between its intrinsic value and its exchange value. This is of course not original with Marx but goes back at least to Aristotle. A commodity has a unique value relating to its use as consumption. One may think of it as its utility. Such values being unique are very hard to compare, in fact impossible, but of course inevitable as life consists in making choices, so priorities have to be made. Whenever two goods are bartered there is a need to set priorities. If I prefer A to B which I do not have, and the converse with the owner of B who covets A, it is hard not to make an exchange. In fact the total happiness in the universe seems to increase, a so called win-win situation. On the other hand things are never simple in human

interaction, there may be third parties who are negatively affected by the transaction. A and B could be slaves, to take a drastic (and unexpected) interpretation. Now even if you believe in the possibility to compare two commodities it does not mean that the relation you define is transitive, i.e. consistent. If it is, it will always be possible to assign numerical values to each commodity in such a way that the ordering is preserved. In economics you need to make simplified assumptions and postulate unwarranted premises about human nature and consistencies in order to get off ground. One can always claim that one does so out of curiosity to see what it leads to, a fully legitimate attitude. The next step in the abstraction of economic life is the introduction of money. This is an invention I suspect has been made repeatedly in human cultural history, as it is such a natural one. It greatly simplifies barter. In one way by giving a price to everything you make all commodities and services comparable, or as the Greeks would say commensurable, even those which by their very nature cannot be compared. A commodity then becomes something that can be traded and once it is tradable it comes with a price tag. There is something repulsive about it, not to say something immoral. From an abstract point of view people being love can be seen as exchanging goods and services. To render a sexual service something else has to be given. Any relationship is a case of giving and taking after all. But what has to be given in exchange is something very particular that fits the bill. Thus if something such as unspecific as money enters the act becomes degraded. An act of love is demeaned to an act of simple prostitution. In a sense prostitution can be given a much wider meaning, namely the reduction of a unique utility to an item of trade and hence subject to a price and hence becoming exchangeable. In Plato's dialogues, to make a short digression, erotic love, as opposed to real love, is supposed to be exchangeable, and hence any attempt to gratify such a desire automatically becomes a commercial transaction, even, if I believe, this conclusion is not explicitly stated.

Anyway it is clear that one cannot separate morals from economics, after all it has to do with human welfare. This has been the case since antiquity. Thus the dealing with money has always been fraught with disapproval. A trader survives by buying cheap and selling dearly.  $M \rightarrow V \rightarrow M'$  where  $M$  is the buying price,  $V$  is the incidental commodity, and  $M'$  the selling price, and the whole idea is that  $M' > M$ . There is something inherently repulsive about this, even if we can argue that a trader serves a function making things available which would otherwise not be. Some traders do that, but not all. How is this possible? If every item had a fixed price tag this would be impossible. But there is no such thing that with authority puts a price tag. There is no intrinsic price value. Prices are negotiated between prospective buyers and sellers. Thus price will not only vary over time and place, but also from context to context. Thus the enterprising trader can make a killing. In fact this is true for commodities as commodities, the values attributed to them depend on the individual and the circumstances, but those differences are hard to take advantage of<sup>1</sup>. Otherwise it is with the fluidity of prices. Commodities will have a value for the trader, but that value will not be related to its utility as a unique item

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<sup>1</sup> Although not impossible. Through successive bartering of commodities one may climb a ladder. Some people can in that way acquire attractive apartments, commodities which are exempt from regular trade but not from barter. Typically though people tend to slip down the ladder when engaging in such activities

of consumption. The trader is not interested in its specific utility only as its use in the process above. The commodity is not interesting for its own sake only for its exchange value. There is something repulsive about it. The repulsiveness comes with the process of abstraction. Money is an abstraction, commodity turning into an exchange item, is an abstraction. Commodities rather than being ends in themselves become instrumental. Now money itself becomes a commodity of sorts. Its value as an item of consumption is based on the element of trust in it. Money which is not trusted soon drops out of circulation, as no one wants to touch them. Commodities such as food are consumed in order to provide nourishment. Money can be consumed for similar reasons, to provide riches, namely more money. Thus the notion of interest, which has popped out in human exchange repeatedly, has been generally frowned upon, to earn money on money has not been seen to be fair, and fairness is an important element in economic transaction. Thus laws against usury in many religions.

Now what makes it all possible, that fluidity of money out of which advantages can be taken, is the notion of supply and demand which governs individual bargaining processes, all of which to be given collective coherence in the notion of the market. In this way the grand picture of economy emerges, that of fluids running along gradients, and when increase is matched by decrease, there will be an equilibrium. And classical economy has been conducted in that spirit, which lends itself to differential calculus, in the spirit of Newtonian celestial mechanics, the impossible model to which all serious sciences strive.

There are two aspects of economics. Descriptive and normative. Often they are confused. Adam Smith is a highly moral individual, and his moral judgements are everywhere apparent in his *magnus opus* - *The Wealth of Nations*. Yet of course he presents a descriptive model of how the actual economy works, presenting with elegance the notion of the invisible hand. The beauty of this presentation is due to giving an explanation of how the economy works without being consciously planned, and how good intentions are unnecessary assumptions, everything can be explained by simple selfishness. It is the inherent egotism that makes the world go around. To focus on the egotism and claim that Smith celebrates it, is to miss the point. The explanation is materialistic, while Smith as a moralist is of course idealistic. It explains something complex in terms of something simpler. Basically it is similar to how to explain life itself by the mindless movements of particles. The mindlessness of the motions is of course not a virtue, just a fact. The higher virtues are emergent phenomena, in no way present in the simpler constituencies<sup>2</sup> Darwinism has a lot to do with Smith, the very notion of order emerging spontaneously out of chaos, is reminiscent of Smith, although as far as I know there is no explicit reference to him in his works. There is however an important debt to Malthus acknowledged by Darwin. Malthus is notorious for his claim that poverty is inevitable. Arithmetic growth of resources cannot keep pace with geometric growth of population. Or as we would say nowadays, without changing the meaning, exponential growth overpowers linear. One may view Malthus as a smug Victorian clergyman (never mind that Malthus died three years before the ascension of the young queen Victoria) rationalizing poverty. True Malthus was a moralist of sorts as well, exhorting virtuous behavior, meaning abstentiousness (he

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<sup>2</sup> There is a philosophical branch that claims that consciousness is to be attributed even to elementary particles be it in a rudimentary form.

himself sired three children, of whom one died young and childless). Whatever his moral fibre, this is irrelevant. It is about a fact, in fact the fact about the folly of sustained exponential growth in a limited environment (and what environment is not limited?) and its consequences. Malthus made a deep impression on Darwin because he was led to ask himself what happens to all that progeny the organic world produces in great profusion. If any species would be left to their own, they would soon populate the whole world to the exclusion of everything else (as humans are about to do). Thus there must be some kind of selection. Who gets to survive? The rest is history. The thought process started has nothing to do whether Malthus was a good man or not. Unlike the view of post-modern thinkers, the moral fibre of a person has no bearing on his ideas, which are objective, at least as to their consequences. Malthus was a good friend of Ricardo, whose ambition it was to put economy on the same footing as Euclid's geometry, although differing from him on many points (and at least from a Keynesian perspective, Malthus was in the right).

Marx is also a descriptive economist, in 'Das Kapital' he tries to reveal the inner structures of a capitalist economy. To describe is obviously not the same thing as to condone. No one has accused Marx of being soft on Capitalism. One formula that the author repeatedly returns to is the above mentioned  $M \rightarrow V \rightarrow M'$  but where now money is used to produce a commodity  $V$  and then sell to to a higher price  $M'$ , and just as with the trader this makes for a spiraling of profits. What interests Marx is what exactly makes the value of the product exceed what was put into it. Following Ricardo he thinks in terms of the work of the laborer. The excess value  $M' - M$  is entirely due to the effort of the worker, and only a fraction of this is repaid to him as wage. In fact it is in the interest of the owner and wage-giver, to make that fraction as small as possible, not because of greed or malice, but in order to survive in a merciless word of cut-throat competition. Thus as in Smith's world where the beneficial aspects of peoples actions are not due to conscious benevolence likewise in the Capitalist world of Marx, the malice is built into the system, not something necessarily present in the capitalist, he too is caught in his role. This is of course a materialistic explanation, talking about emergent processes. 'Das Kapital' contains a lot of things, but when it comes to economics, the author focuses on the struggles Marx had of making sense of the worth of commodities and their relation to prices. Incidentally Popper in his critique of Marx concentrates on this rather technical question, otherwise mentioning with appreciation Marx moral compassion, which he thought of as a revival of Christian ethics, as well as lauding Marx's exhortation that philosophers should change the world not only describe it. Marx struggled filling reams of papers with numerical examples that apparently led nowhere. In desperation he talked about trying algebra. This is not the talk of a mathematically accomplished individual, for whom algebraic manipulations would be second nature. Marx had not been given a mathematical upbringing, his education at the Gymnasium was a solid humanistic one as was to be expected of Gymnasias at that time, especially in Germany. As a mathematical economist Marx is unremarkable.

Marx is not known and appreciated as a technical economist who through specialized work advances the subject a little. He is known as a visionary and revolutionary, who foremost endowed the study of economics with moral indignation. A moral indignation that fueled his unflagging energies to reveal, as noted above, the inner workings of a Capitalist economy, and in particular look for its inherent contradictions. He did predict a

cycle of busts and booms, based on the fact that at times the feed-back process expressed by his formula above, may come to a halt, there is no longer a market for the products of the enterprising capitalist and a reverse process is started. Predictions are about the future, and the more scientific the more accurate. To predict is to draw the ultimate conclusions. Marx did that about the future of capitalism as he did not consider as being sustainably viable, due to its inherent contradictions. He prophesied that the exploited classes would eventually take command and establish, what he, for a want of better words, termed the dictatorship of the proletariat. What this would actually mean, he was very vague about, except thinking of it as a state in which man would be liberated from circumstances and free to develop his personality, just as Marx had been doing for all his life. Neither did he present a blue-print as how to conduct a non-capitalist economy, he was busy enough studying the capitalist economy. Thus the planned economies of the Soviet Unions could never find any guidance in the writings of Marx, apart from the rhetorical, and hence to claim that their collapse once and for all invalidates Marx is to miss the point. As already noted the value of Marx lies in his prediction of the future course of capitalism, and especially his claim of the dictatorship of the proletariats, which he, ostensibly on scientific grounds, proclaimed inevitable. The claim that history has a pre-ordained course, has been justly attacked, and therein lies also Poppers main criticism, while the author claims that this is just one of many myths about Marx, although he admits that it is natural to draw the conclusion. As to Marx prediction of the imminent collapse of the Capitalist system has come to grief, the claim is, as we say non-falsifiable, as we do not know what will be yet in store for us later. One of the main motivations for the author to write the book, was to show that Marx now at the beginning of the 21st century is more topical than ever. To that we will return.

Thus the great interest of 'Das Kapital' is not as a scientific contribution to economics, although that may very well have been his ambition, but as a pioneering work in sociology with its political overtones. Economy was just one aspect of modern society, although connected with almost everything else, and how much connected, was what Marx emphasized more than anyone else. In particular how economic conditions necessarily leads to a class division, which is not only morally deplorable but intrinsically unstable, hence his prediction. On the other hand what the classless society would entail, is quite another matter, on which Marx is notably reticent, as already noted, maybe due to a reluctance to speculate about the unknowable. A deplorable state of affairs cannot be preserved only because we cannot a priori reject the possibility that the alternatives will be even worse. Some cues as to what vision Marx may have had formed, we have just suggested. That when work is liberated, true activity, as that a writer, an artist, or an intellectual as Marx himself, might engage in, may arise more naturally and commonly, or more generally that everyone will find their own 'garden' to cultivate. How realistic such visions may be is another matter. One unknowable element is technological innovation, that fascinated him, and whose importance for the transformation of society he was always prone to emphasize. In this context, the alienation of which he often wrote, must be briefly commented upon. By that he meant that the kind of work that capitalism forces upon workers is unnatural. Working for a wage is different from working for a natural purpose, there is no longer any natural connection between the effort and the result, it is all becoming too abstract. This

attitude seems to suggest that Marx in some sense was a reactionary, that he longed back to a previous age, expressing sympathy with the kind of utopia that Rousseau's 'Back to Nature' endorses, a proclamation which incidentally Rousseau never articulated. Marx was very explicit that he did not want to return to a feudal past, on the contrary he saw Capitalism as an advance upon the previous feudal era, that Capitalism was a great social innovation which made technological progress possible to a much larger degree than previous. It evolving so much faster because of the cut-throat competition that characterized Capitalism. But on the other hand technological advance by changing the conditions of mankind by itself involves alienation. To take one trivial example, industrial husbandry of pigs and cows. It certainly is good for the consumer, if not for the animals to be butchered. And dealing with it, irrespectively as a wage-earner or an independent owner, must involve a fair amount of alienation. As far as I know those are issues Marx did not spend time on. On the other hand as noted, he had to make priorities.

As to the inevitability of history, the author quotes him in another context, in which he claims that this is vain and impossible, history is just too fraught with contingencies, to allow a neat summary. Of course, as with any philosopher with a penchant for rhetorics, another example that comes to mind is Nietzsche; it is always possible to find evidence for any claim the commentator finds fit to formulate. One should keep in mind that any science, especially any quantitative such, is concerned about predicting the future. In fact life becomes impossible unless we have that ability to some extent, and thus by making economics or even sociology a science a certain amount of prediction is inevitable. In one sense the mechanical vision of the universe, which is the essence of the Newtonian approach, naturally lends itself to a vision of the future being already present in the present, a vision formulated by Laplace, and which led to the scientific notion of determinism, still a controversial issue. However, no one took Laplace vision seriously, least of all Laplace himself, when it came to ordinary life. Different it was with Darwinism that suggested another kind of determinism, the determinism of inevitable progress, be it in the perfection of man as a biological entity (evolution being viewed as a process in which man himself was the apex and, in blatant contradiction to what Darwin himself thought), or of society itself, a notion which was very widespread and well entrenched by the end of the Victorian era. Marx was deeply affected by Darwinism, although in what particular sense the author does not make very explicit<sup>3</sup>, apart from it being congruent with Marx materialistic perspective. The notion of the inevitability of progress, although admittedly that it is compatible with human happiness has become far less obvious, is still very much assumed when it comes to the development of artificial intelligence, the extreme visions of which makes you think of the world spirit of Hegel continually improving itself, or even the creation of a divinity,

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<sup>3</sup> I remember that during my high-school days I gave a lecture in class about evolution as opposed to revolution, in other words pitting the right against the left, much to the appreciation of my teacher, who was conservative. My lecture was sincere and not intended to play up to the sympathies of the teacher, because that would have indicated that I possessed at the time an amount of social sophistication I clearly did not have. On the other hand I was retroactively impressed by my intellectual sophistication. However, reading the biography I start to appreciate that the issue of Marxism, does not allow such neat oppositions to be made.

albeit not particularly well-disposed to humanity<sup>4</sup>. Finally, physics itself provided another vision of the future based on the inevitable increase in entropy which would eventually level the energy potential leading to a flat (not to be confused with non-curved) universe so to speak, where there will be no longer any gradients to supply useful energy for action. This goes unchallenged, but once again as with the case of Laplace, with no practical implications on human history which takes place on quite another time scale. In short there is nothing remarkable of Marx historical determinism, given the tenor of the times. A determinism, which in the case of Marx has to be taken with more than a grain of salt.

Newton affected a revolution, but he did not spawn any Newtonians, in the sense of people studying *Principia* carefully to find out what he meant. Newton pointed to potentials for explorations providing tools to be developed. His successors followed Newton in spirit, not in letter. And to the extent they did, like his compatriots who tended to stick with his notation, progress was blocked, and British progress during the 18th century was stalled, compared to the strides taken on the continent by the French and the Swiss (Euler and the Bernoulli's), and was revived only in the 19th by non-Newtonian physics (electro-magnetism) although of course very much inspired by Newton. Darwin also affected a revolution, very different from that of Newton, and in this context we can speak of Darwinists, very much so because there is an alternative, retroactively known as Lamarckism<sup>5</sup>. Darwinism, in its modern version, did not emerge until the 1920's, when it was merged with Mendel's findings on inheritance, and only after that synthesis became truly scientific. Darwinism does not supply much guidance in technical biological research, it shows its grandeur in providing a unifying framework and suggesting paths of exploration, and as has been noted, nothing in biology makes any sense, unless viewed from a Darwinian perspective. How does Marxism compare to Newtonism (a temporary neologism) and Darwinism?

The striking thing is that Marxism amounts to the study of the writings of Marx. A study not unlike that the Bible has attracted. A critical study, which at its best involves a close textual analysis in the tradition of German biblical criticism. And the author's biography is essentially a report on his own close reading of Marx, enabling him to puncture many myths of what Marx wrote, some of which we have already remarked on, another being that Marx never said that religion was the opium for the people, implying that it was imposed from above; instead he meant that given the desperate conditions of the down-trodden, it was no wonder that they created a religion in order to bear with them. This is very different in spirit, in particular implying a much more sympathetic conception of religion, on the other hand it is quite a different matter, as how accurate such a view may be, but that is a secondary issue. Furthermore most of the references in the book are to modern appraisals and reappraisals of Marx. In short the biography is a book about reading Marx. In particular the author must also address the issue of dogmatic Marxism, a strong, state supported tradition, with its various ramifications in the modern Western tradition. Many of my colleagues from the East reported with resentment the seminars

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<sup>4</sup> Or perhaps more relevantly to the genie in the bottle let loose, but this is a digression.

<sup>5</sup> A remarkable biologist ahead of his time, and the first proponent of evolution. His daring speculations, not based on conclusive evidence, were very much criticized by his contemporaries, such as Cuvier, and may have been a reason why Darwin dithered so long before going public.

on Marxism and material dialectism they were forced to participate in. It was a chore and ritual, and totally devoid of any meaning. In the East Marxism was tied up with state authority, to be radical was to reject it. In the West with inexorable logic, being a Marxist was associated with being against state authority, and thus to be radical was to embrace it. The Marxist dogmatism in the West was more varied than in the East, for one thing variants as Trotskyism were not only tolerated but seen as sophisticated, if at times misguided, versions, but basically it was dogmatic in spirit. Truthfulness to the essential Marx being the issue, and vigilance against close but rivaling interpretations. Present day versions of the same all too human predisposition are to be found in radical feminism and related gender studies. The phenomenon raged during the 60's and 70's as some kind of mass movement (in contrast to the vogue for Marxism present in the 30's which was both more elitist and popular, in the sense of being more anchored among actual workers.) but ironically subsided during the 80's, the decade of Reaganism and Thatcherism, when the actual need for it became more pressing only to die out with the collapse of the Soviet Union. 'Communism' became reduced to the 'k-word' and dropped as much as possible, and many of its most adamant proponents turned coats. The author takes exception to this dogmatic Marxism as he sees being a deformed and degraded version of Marx thought. One wonders, along with the author, how much this is due to Engels, who by dint of a long friendship and championship of Marx, became the custodian of his Nachlass, and in particular the one who edited and published the remaining parts of 'Das Kapital'. Engels was very much a junior partner to Marx, but this does not mean that he was a subservient one, having very strong opinions himself, opinions to be unchallenged once Marx was dead and gone. Soviet appreciation of Marx was no doubt very much colored by being seen through the prism of Engels. One may compare what would have been the case if Darwin had been handed down to posterity by Spencer, who at the end of the Victorian age became a self-appointed interpreter of Darwin. The expression 'The Survival of the fittest' is supposedly due to Spencer. Nowadays Spencer is largely discounted and widely forgotten. Furthermore Marxian thought was further interpreted by Lenin, leading to the wider notion of Marxism-Leninism, and even Stalin, at least according to Hobsbawm, has written not only competently but engagingly on Marxism. The tradition started of course long before that, forcing Marx to exclaim famously that he was not a Marxist. This leads us back to the initial question of why Marx has become such a controversial entity, so far nothing we have discussed can account for the attention he has attracted.

Marx was not just an intellectual, he was famously not content with just describing the world, he also wanted to change it. This meant that he became politically active. And it is Marx as a political activist, not to say as a socialist 'jihadist' that he was feared and paid attention to. The socialist and communist movement did of course not start with Marx, it can be traced to antiquity. As a more of a political movement it was revived in connection with the French Revolution to which the modern distinctions between left and right can be traced. One may argue that in recent confused times the distinction is becoming blurred, but this is a side-issue, much can be said for conservatism, and a conservative interpretation of left and right, free from recent obfuscations has its points. Marx was initially averse to Communism, no doubt because of the utopian character that still dominated it, but was soon won over. One may see his life ambition to liberate Communism from its idealistic



and utopian ballast, and make of it something harder and in particularly materialistically based. In short less sentimental. His activities were monitored by the Prussian authorities, whose power was widespread enough to have him ejected out of Paris, so any suggestion that he could have evaded them by finding sanctuary in some other German state is somewhat naive. Marx became famous, or at least notorious in his role in formulating the Communist Manifesto in 1848, which preceded, and did not coincide nor follow from the various revolutions that marked this year and branded its numerals into history. This was a time of great revolutionary excitement and upheaval, which brought about many liberal and lasting reforms, but yet did not cause any more radical changes in European power structures, that would have to wait another seventy years until the end of the First World War. Marx had hoped for more, if not immediately at least that 1848 would soon be followed by another '1848' but in this his hopes were frustrated. Anyway he became a very active participant in the Third International not to say its leader, if not necessarily formally. His next great hour came in connection with the Commune in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war. This was a short-lived experiment in Communism, the first Communist experiment in modern time, and lasted for a few months in 1871. It greatly excited Marx for obvious reasons, isolated as he was in London, and his comments and advice was greatly publicized and he became, if temporarily a celebrity. A few years later the International was dissolved and he lost an important platform, yet of course his acknowledged predominance in the movement was, if intermittently challenged never in doubt. It is important to note that although he was politically active he never held any political power. As many people learn to their peril, the first may be a prerequisite for the latter, but the latter is seldom an implication of the former. But as a political activist one may nevertheless exert a lot of influence on those who eventually may gain power. This leads to the controversial question of moral responsibility, which today is exemplified by the issue of so called 'hate speech' and its connection to so called 'free-speech'. Do your moral responsibility also extend to the actions that may or may not have been directly inspired by you. Marx was never criminally charged for his opinions, but of course the possibility of which no doubt entered into his decision to find a sanctuary in London. Besides the consequences of his influence did not become apparent until long afterwards, and as the Soviet Union was never defeated in war, the formal criminalization of its activities has never been an issue, as opposed to intermittent rhetorical condemnation.

But Marx had an influence. In academic discourse variety of opinion is at a premium, not to say in a multi-cultural society, but in a movement uniformity of purpose is essential. Marx was instrumental in weeding out dissenting opinion, and thus setting up a dogmatic tradition seen as necessary for the struggle. The author discusses a few of his fellow-travelers with whom he would eventually fall out. He never fell out with Engels, maybe because he could not afford to. Emotionally or financially, growing more and more dependent on him, emotionally as well as financially although an inheritance from his mother in the 60's led to some domestic relief. Among those whom he finally rejected, Lassalle maybe listed as one of the most interesting. A German whose name would make you suspect him of being a Huguenot, but apparently he was of Jewish stock (maybe even both?). Marx found him too voluble, but as a result entertaining, at least to a point. They would eventually diverge, and Lassalle would die young. He is most known for his

discussions with Bismarck, and his founding of what would be the moderate wing of the Socialist movement at the time. Bismarck did adopt some of his suggestions, thereby no doubt hoping to preempt the socialist movement, and to some extent he succeeded, shrewd as he almost always was. Marx was less moderate, and temperamentally not inclined to sell-out, as Lassalle no doubt had. In fact by putting socialism on a less sentimental basis, he helped to fan the romanticism of revolution. Thus it was not entirely surprising that the revolution happened in Russia, not in a more industrially advanced society. The very notion of 'Intelligentsia' may be of Russian provenance. There was a Russian tradition of terrorism, albeit a very focused one, directed at heads of states, such as Alexandre II, not at innocent bystanders. Principal and the Austrian Archduke is the most fateful example in the tradition. Dostoevsky wrote disapprovingly of the phenomenon. Marx with his no nonsense approach to socialism must have made an impact on the Russians. His repudiation of mere sentimentalism must have struck a chord. Breaking eggs to make omelets, or leaving tea-parties prematurely, all fits into this frame of mind. This is why, rightly or wrongly, Marx was and is still thought of as a controversial figure, with much to explain to the tribunal of posterity.

The author will have none of this. He is an admirer of Marx, and the whole purpose of the book is to lift up the fascinating and favorable sides of Marx. Not surprisingly what comes to the forefront is the intellectual Marx, not only the writer and revolutionary whose proverbial pen is mightier than the sword, but the thinker, the forger of words and memorable phrases, the man steeped in a humanistic culture. He is the writer as a hero, and of course it is hard not to get carried away with the enthusiasm of the author, after all all what chords are not struck?

Marx was born in Trier. This is in a sense as atypical German you can be, or at least as un-Prussian, although politically at the time part of expanding Prussia. At the very westernmost part of Germany, part of the Rheinland, which the French has thought of as more French than German in spirit. He was also a Jew, a fact he may have made light of, his father, whom he admired, being of a assimilating temperament, and not surprisingly of a much more cautious stamp than his son. He did well at school, without necessarily exerting himself in this regard. Unlike popular sentiment, this tends to be rule with successful men of the intellect, and the reigning tradition of school at the time, tended to serve them well, in spite of putting an emphasis also on rote learning, such as memorization of poetry, whose pedagogical advantages have been denounced and hence discarded by more modern and ignorant pedagogues. The result was that Marx did get a very solid grounding in the humanities, meaning a mastery of many languages, including Latin and Greek, as well as more modern tongues. It also meant a love for poetry in particular and belles lettres in general, and not to forget an intimate knowledge of the Bible, all of it combining to endow him with a deep culture and a propensity as well as a corresponding ability to spice his writing with appropriate allusions, making their perusal a pleasure to those with the wits and means to appreciate it. Of course this education was not the sole achievement of the educational system, bound to have many shortcomings, if so, the world would be filled with remarkable men, but only that the gifts of Marx did not meet with a uncongenial atmosphere, much more (and definitely not less) can you hardly expect of a functioning educational system. But of course the schools at the time did not provide a corresponding

grounding in the sciences, this came later during the century, and many of the star students did have problems with mathematics. Nietzsche being a typical example, but remarkably the converse does not seem to hold. It is tempting to continue to digress, but it should be resisted. Nevertheless part of it is necessary to understand the excitement that must meet a newly matriculated student to enter upon university studies. Unless following a strictly professional career, a great prospect of freedom, so much the greater to be contrasted against the constriction of the school years, opening up. The student was free to follow his inclinations, and moving from university to university was encouraged. Admittedly Marx studied some law accommodating the wishes of his father, and no doubt it served him well, as most of the things he studied, but that was more of a diversion than a commitment. Important in the life of a university student were the various coteries he (never a she) could be involved in. In many cases this amounted to nothing more than drinking associations, complete with brawls and duels, the dueling scar was for most of the 19th century a mark of distinction, but in some cases the purpose was intellectual, one thinks of the Apostles in Cambridge, and was an important part of the education, because one should never discount the social aspect of learning, and only in discussion with peers, does an individual discover the weaknesses of his arguments and thus gets an opportunity to hone his skills, not only as a debater. It also provided important contacts, net-working in modern jargon, and Marx did his share. All in all it must have been a happy time, and Marx spent a lot of money much to the concern of his father, but the household was fairly wealthy. It was also at his very youth Marx with passionate ardor paid court to his future wife of aristocratic descent. To write a thesis seems also have been a minor exertion, done in stride, so to speak. He submitted it to the university in Jena to escape Prussian control and he seems not to have been required to even attend and defend. It was meant to give him the ticket to a university career, but for some reasons that did not work out and he had to look for alternate occupations and ended up being the editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung* in Köln giving him a platform as a publicist. For two years (43-45) he resides in Paris with his family. That must have been his happiest time in life, as well as that of his wife, or at least the most comfortable and glorious. He has access to Parisian salons, and it is up to speculation whom he could have met during his extended sojourn there, something the author cannot refrain from doing. But as noted he would soon be expelled and be exiled to Brussels, if anything a pale copy of Paris. Then followed the year of 1848 and as a result in the following year he left for London to evade political persecution. London provided an intellectual sanctuary, and he would end up spending more than half of his life in the British capital, initially in poverty making you think of Dickens. But poverty is a relative concept, and the Marx family was not worse off than being able to afford a maid, but Marx used to a somewhat lavish lifestyle had problems of financial co-ordination always being in arrears with creditors banking at his door, be they butchers or tailors. After the death of his mother he was able to liquify some of the families holding and for his last two decades he was able to live in his own house in London. It was the quintessential Victorian household with a growing breed and early child deaths, which had a ravishing effect on the parents. Especially the death of Marx young son was a very hard blow that shattered him deeply. But yet, and this is the heroic part, his intellectual energies were unflagging. In this context it is nowadays proper to ask how much Marx engaged himself

in household chores. Most likely none at all, although no doubt he did engage himself with the children, but that is hardly to be filed under household chores. Had he done that, as modern men in the name of fairness are expected to do, we would in all likelihood not have read a biography of Marx. His work as an intellectual was not compatible with taking a share in domestic duties. Nether was he expected to. His wife stood loyally by him, and suppressed her own talents and inclinations to serve her husband, particularly in copying his scribbles, no doubt doing some respectful editing on the side. Obviously she must have been sympathetic to her husband ideas, not only out of spousal duty, but there were never a question of collaboration.

Like all serious writers, Marx was an avid reader. He did not read merely to distract himself, but his reading had always a purpose. He made extensive excerpts from what he read which became important source material for his books. When Marx encountered an argument, it was not enough for him to oppose it. This was too easy. What was required was to enter into the shoes of the opponent and draw all the conclusions of his reasoning and assumptions, and in that way explode it from within laying bare all the contradictions. This made him into a formidable polemist, cutting the ground from under the feet of the opponents. In addition to that, at least initially, he also had to earn his upkeep, and apart from allowances from Engels that meant journalism. He had acquired sufficient fluency in English to write for the English language press, also the American, but the latter revenue came to an end in connection with the Civil War. And besides Marx always being pressed for time, some of the writing he relegated to his ever obliging Engels.

As noted the biography does not focus on the quotidian life of Marx, nor does it spend much space on painting the general 'Zeitgeist', and the initial summary of the emergence of modern industrial society is very sketchy indeed. The author trusts the general education of the reader to fill out the gaps by his or her own fonts of associations (such as Dickensian London<sup>6</sup>). The biography is in a sense a bibliography, meaning that it are the works after all, which are interesting when Marx is concerned, not his retroactive celebrity status (although of course, the author cannot be indifferent to this very human fascination with), and the bulk of the biography is devoted to reports on their contents, especially books, which were overlooked and only published much later, as those help to deepen our conception of Marx thought, showing him far more complicated than the traditional picture centered on a few catch-phrases, some of which were admittedly manufactured by Marx himself, conveys. The author repeatedly reminds the reader of Marx felicitous use of words, and in particular the memorable prose that went into the Communist Manifesto. This bibliographic approach, is due to two things. First it is a biography after all, not a text-book on Marxism, and in that sense the personality of Marx should always be brought into the foreground. Secondly this is not science, at least not in the Anglo-Saxon meaning of the word. In science the combinations of theory and its implications is what takes pride of place, and in an exposition of Newtonian theory the writer is more concerned with a few crucial insights of Newton, out of which the rest will follow. There is no need, save

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<sup>6</sup> A German journalist covering the scene at about the same time is the latter writer Fontane, who gives some telling scenes from a German prospective. In particular he remarks on the striking lack of musical talent and culture among the British.

the historical, to go back to the sources<sup>7</sup>. In the humanities it is different, there is no sense, as in science, of an objective Marxism. What Marx thought and taught cannot be separated from the sources as it can in the case of Newton or even Darwin. In science and mathematics an argument stands on its own, who formulated it, is of secondary importance, in fact in principle of no importance at all (but of course in practice the word of a renown authority is still given more attention), while in the humanities the source of the argument is an integral part of it. One (maybe too charitable an interpretation?) explanation is that in the humanities arguments are not as objective, meaning that they are not so explicit and transparent, and much of their force is hidden and not formulated, but seen as still residing in the vast experience of their generators. Something similar is the case with *obiter dictas* by renowned scientists. If expressed by the insignificant they carry little if any weight, because there is scant reason to trust the experience out of which they have sprung.

In summary, although the book is thick, it suffers little from one of the major hazards of writing biographies, namely tedium. The author is not concerned with displaying every scrap of fact he may have unearthed during archival searches, as a consequence the book reads smoothly to the point of almost being a page-turner. Almost, but not quite, and this is of course not meant as censorship on the contrary, it is hard to take anything seriously which is too easily digested. To combine serious scholarship with pleasure of reading is a minor feat.

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<sup>7</sup> Although one should not forget the admonishment of the Norwegian mathematician Abel, always to go back to the masters (i.e. the sources) and not read the interpreters.