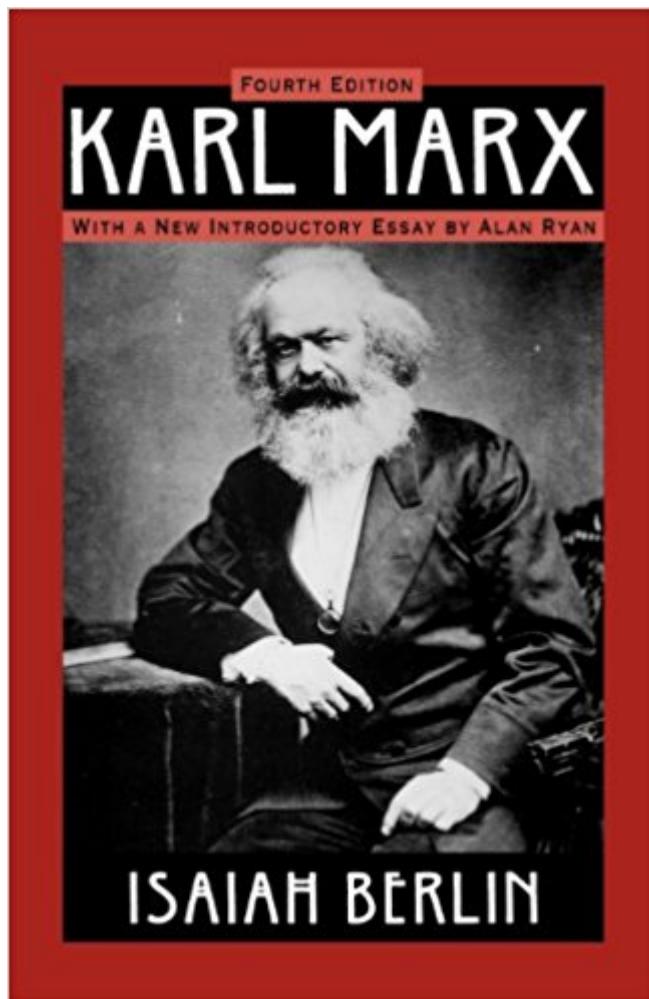


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Karl Marx: His Life And Environment



Synopsis

First published over fifty years ago, Isaiah Berlin's compelling portrait of the father of socialism has long been considered a classic of modern scholarship and the best short account written of Marx's life and thought. It provides a penetrating, lucid, and comprehensive introduction to Marx as theorist of the socialist revolution, illuminating his personality and ideas, and concentrating on those which have historically formed the central core of Marxism as a theory and practice. Berlin goes on to present an account of Marx's life as one of the most influential and incendiary social philosophers of the twentieth century and depicts the social and political atmosphere in which Marx wrote. This edition includes a new introduction by Alan Ryan which traces the place of Berlin's Marx from its pre-World War II publication to the present, and elucidates why Berlin's portrait, in the midst of voluminous writings about Marx, remains the classic account of the personal and political side of this monumental figure.

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First published over fifty years ago, Isaiah Berlin's compelling portrait of the father of modern Communism has long been considered the best short account written of Marx's life and thought. It provides a penetrating, lucid and comprehensive introduction to Marx as theorist of the socialist revolution, illuminating his personality and ideas, concentrating on those which have historically formed the central core of Marxism. In turn, Berlin presents an account of Marx's life as one of the most influential and incendiary social philosophers of the nineteenth century and brilliantly depicts the social and political atmosphere in which Marx wrote. This edition includes a new introduction by Alan Ryan which traces the place of Berlin's Karl Marx from its pre-World War II publication to the present, and shows why Berlin's portrait, in the midst of voluminous writings about Marx, remains a classic account of the personal and political side of this monumental figure.

great

This is simply the best book on Karl Marx ever written. Back in college, it converted me! Who was this prophet who turned the world? Isaiah Berlin helped me to see Karl Marx as a vessel of hope, indeed, the new religion on Earth. Though Berlin is remembered as a bastion of liberty, and indeed, a grand old man of freedom, who a young Tony Blair asked for advice on the viability of socialism, this book on Karl Marx is religious in intensity and brilliance and there is no pussy footing around with liberalism when your pen is erecting the story of Karl Marx, the red. Isaiah Berlin has his Jewish prophets back. After all, today we worship the profits over the prophets, but we still crave a man who will show us the way out of rat race capitalism, and can you blame us for our weakness? Childhood was better, no? When this book was written, Karl Marx was bigger than Jesus, so you follow! Two thirds of Planet Earth was covered with the footprint of Karl Marx. Amazing! Isaiah Berlin doesn't go into the negative parts and this is a good lesson for people today. Like modern debtor capitalism, or the ancient slavery of Greece and Rome, a system that is so strong that the Gods themselves

struggle to cook up an alternative, and not even the brightest minds of the times can imagine a way out of this Matrix, will produce well intentioned conformity in the cleverest people.

The philosophical side of this book might be a strong support for the idea that philosophy was in bad shape when Nietzsche found it. The political side of the book ought to establish that it was no wonder. Before I bought this book, I had a copy of *THE POVERTY OF PHILOSOPHY* by Karl Marx, which was written when Nietzsche was quite young. It was an attack on the thoroughly political view of economics which had been adopted by Proudhon. According to Berlin, "Marx was convinced that Proudhon was constitutionally incapable of grasping the truth; that, despite an undoubted gift for telling phrases, he was a fundamentally stupid man; the fact that he was brave and fanatically honest, and attracted a growing body of devoted followers, only made him and his fantasies more dangerous;" (Berlin, p. 87). In a move that is sure to remind historians of how often Communists turned against others who thought that they were on the same side, Marx's book attacked the roots of Proudhon's system in Chapter 2, *The Metaphysics of Political Economy*, with his usual summary of Hegel. "As to those who are not acquainted with Hegelian language, we would say to them in the sacramental formula, affirmation, negation, and negation of the negation. . . . Instead of the ordinary individual, with his ordinary manner of speaking and thinking, we have nothing but this ordinary manner, pure and simple, minus the individual." (Marx, p. 115). Berlin is capable of providing summaries of the issues, even admitting that "Marx took immense trouble to demonstrate that Proudhon was totally incapable of abstract thought, a fact which he vainly attempted to conceal by a use of pseudo-Hegelian terminology. Marx accused Proudhon of radically misunderstanding the Hegelian categories by naively interpreting the dialectical conflict as a simple struggle between good and evil, which leads to the fallacy that all that is needed is to remove the evil, and the good will remain. This is the very height of superficiality: to call this or that side of the dialectical conflict good or bad is a sign of unhistorical subjectivism out of place in serious social analysis." (Berlin, pp. 85-86). The current clash of civilizations might be considered as stupid as anything that Marx analyzed in Proudhon's system, by those who are sure that philosophy is a style adopted by the good side, while anyone who has adopted the politics of mounting destructiveness has all the faults which the free world has always attributed to communism. Plenty of poisons have entered this contest in the last 155 years, since Karl Marx tried to side with the rising class while arguing against their unexamined notions of good and evil, but philosophies have been as powerless on this kind of question as Nietzsche might be considered absurd for attempting to encompass powerful ideas. People who can't relate to this book must lack an appreciation for something that philosophers

always wanted, even in the days of the pre-Platonics. It might be considered tough to read, having been revised little since it was Isaiah Berlin's first great book in 1939. I thought it was better than a lot of what I have tried to read about Hegel, and I wasn't trying very hard.

Because of the way my brain is wired, I take a lot more interest in the historical than I do in the philosophical. Even though Marx spent a good chunk of his life sequestered away in the reading room of the London Library, I still find the narrative details of his life fascinating: his banishment from one country to another, his participation in the 1848 revolutions, the numerous petty squabbles he had with other 19th century revolutionaries, his involvement in the politics of the International, and his last great fight against Bakunin. It's always a struggle to find a good biography that focuses on the historical instead of on the philosophical. And after reading Isaiah Berlin's take on Marx's life, I am beginning to appreciate how good the biography by Francis Wheen was that I read this past summer. Isaiah Berlin does a good job of summarizing Marx's life in under 300 pages, but most of the book lingers on Marx's philosophical development, with whole long chapters devoted to topics such as "The Young Hegelians" and "Historical Materialism." I would have preferred more emphasis on the narrative sections, but when reading a biography of a philosopher, I suppose it is hard to get away from the philosophy. One thing Berlin does which I thought was very interesting was that he emphasized the paradoxes in Marx's legend. For example Marx lived during the age of romantic revolutions in which popular revolutionary figures like Herzen, Mazzini, Blanqui, and Lassalle commanded almost religious like followings. Marx spent most of his life in obscurity in the London library, and yet today his name is still known by almost everyone on the planet. Marx's central thesis, that historical material conditions and not ideas influence history, has been undercut by its very success. Or how the German and Austrian communists, who followed Marx's advice about organizing from the bottom up, were eventually overwhelmed by the fascists, where as the Bolsheviks, who committed the most un-Marxist act of a revolutionary coup, was the first (and for a time the only) successful Marxist revolution. Bakunin, as seems to be the case with any biography vaguely sympathetic towards Marx, comes off a bit badly here. I suppose that's to be expected. (When I was in my big anarchist phase at College, I used to read biography's about Bakunin in which Marx came off badly.) There is no denying that Bakunin had his flaws. Anyone who has read any piece of analysis by Bakunin knows he didn't have the brilliance of Marx's pinky. He was a romantic without a clear ideology, and he didn't share Marx's horror for Revolutions that went off half-cocked with no chance of succeeding. And, as every biography of Marx makes clear, he was an anti-Semite. And yet, he was right (well, not about the anti-Semite part). But history has shown all of

Bakunin's criticisms of Marx to be true. And, to his credit, Isaiah Berlin does include some of Bakunin's extended quotations:"We believe power corrupts those who wield it as much as those who are forced to obey it. Under its influence, some become greedy and ambitious tyrants, exploiting society in their own interest, or in that of their class, while others are turned into abject slaves. Intellectuals, positivists, doctrinaires, all those who put science before life...defend the idea of the state and its authority as being the only possible salvation of society-quite logically, since from their false premises that thought comes before life, that only abstract theory can form the starting-point of social practice...they draw the inevitable conclusion that since such theoretical knowledge is at present possessed by very few, these few must be put in control of social life, not only to inspire, but to direct all popular movements, and that no sooner is the revolution over than a new social organization must be at once be set up; not a free association of popular bodies...working in accordance with the needs and instincts of the people but a centralized dictatorial power concentrated in the hands of this academic minority, as if they really expressed the popular will....The difference between such revolutionary dictatorship and the modern State is only one of external trappings. In substance both are a tyranny of the minority over the majority in the name of the people-in the name of the stupidity of the many and the superior wisdom of the few-and so they are equally reactionary, devising to secure political and economic privilege to the ruling minority, and the...enslavement of the masses, to destroy the present order only to erect their own rigid dictatorship on its ruins."Berlin gives a surprisingly hostile account of the Paris Commune, which he appears to have based completely off the Bourgesious press. And he also advances the interesting idea that Marx actually opposed the Paris Commune because it was more along the lines of Bakunin's revolutionary ideology, but once it was clear the Commune was going to fall, Marx embraced it for the cynical reasons of the desire to link his name with the most infamous revolution in Europe at the time. Berlin is the first writer I have come across who claims this, and well it certainly is not an impossible conclusion, it would be nice if he gave some more evidence for it.

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