

FOREWORD

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KARL MARX WAS Isaiah Berlin's first book. He was just thirty years old when it appeared. In Oxford and London he was already known as a dazzling conversationalist and a strikingly gifted young philosopher; but it was in *Karl Marx* that he first revealed his special talent as a historian of ideas – the discipline in which he enthralled his readers for the rest of his writing life. That talent is, as such gifts often are, a talent that is easier to admire and enjoy than it is to describe; but it emerges as an astonishing ability to do justice both to the thinker and the thought – to paint a picture of the personalities of the men and women he writes about, without for a moment forgetting that we want to know about them because of their ideas rather than their marital adventures or their tastes in dress, and to make the picture vivid just because, although ideas have a life of their own, they are also stamped with the characters of the men and women whose ideas they are.

It is a talent that made Berlin's essays on great ideas and great men a considerable art form. As readers of his collected essays know, *Personal Impressions* – the volume devoted to encounters with his contemporaries, memorial addresses, and accounts of the greatness of the century's great men – is hardly different in tone and style from his *Russian Thinkers* or *Against the Current* – the companion volumes of essays in the history of ideas. It seems almost inconsequential that Berlin never talked to Turgenev as he talked to Anna Akhmatova, that he never discussed the history of Florence with Machiavelli as he did discuss the history

of eighteenth-century England with Lewis Namier. It has been suggested that all serious thinkers inhabit an ‘invisible college’, where a silent conversation goes on between the living and the immortal dead, and Plato is as present as the newest graduate student wrestling with his work. Berlin’s writing suggests the image of something livelier and more spirited than most colleges, perhaps a vast intellectual soirée where the guests come from every social stratum and all possible political persuasions. Whatever one’s favourite metaphor, the effect is to bring all his subjects fully and thoroughly to life.

All the same, historians of ideas are not novelists, nor even biographers. Although Berlin gave *Karl Marx* the subtitle ‘His Life and Environment’, it was Marx’s life as the theorist of the socialist revolution that Berlin was chiefly concerned to describe, and the environment that Berlin was interested in was not so much the Trier of Marx’s boyhood or the North London of his years of exile, but the political and intellectual environment against which Marx wrote the Communist Manifesto and *Capital*. The moral of *Karl Marx*, however, must be taken as a comment on both Marxism and Marx himself; in his final paragraph, Berlin observes:

[Marxism] sets out to refute the proposition that ideas govern the course of history, but the very extent of its own influence on human affairs has weakened the force of its thesis. For in altering the hitherto prevailing view of the relation of the individual to his environment and to his fellows, it has palpably altered that relation itself, and in consequence remains the most powerful among the intellectual forces which are today permanently altering the ways in which men think and act.

Marxism, by way of the activities of the communist parties it inspired, turns out to be a cosmic philosophical joke against the man who created it. Marx was a theorist who argued that individuals were the playthings of vast and impersonal social forces;

but as the inspiration of Lenin, Stalin and Mao Zedong, the individual Marx was himself the originator of vast social forces. Marx argued that ideas were epiphenomena, the reflections of social interests that they disguised and rationalised; but his own ideas changed the world – even if, ironically, it was in ways he would mostly have deplored. *Karl Marx* offers its readers many pleasures, and not the least of them is the wry picture that Berlin paints of the way its subject set in motion a historical drama that called his whole life's work into question.

Berlin later argued at length against the doctrine of historical inevitability, and against any attempt to make the study of history 'scientific' by evacuating it of moral and political concerns. Marx was the most obvious inspiration of these views during the 1930s and afterwards. While it is hard to believe that his indignation against the capitalist order was fuelled by anything other than a strong sense of justice, he frequently claimed that his historical materialism superseded any 'moralising'¹ critique of the existing order, and Engels at any rate said of him that what he had uncovered was the law of 'development of human history' and the law of the 'present-day capitalist mode of production',² the laws that dictated the inevitable collapse of capitalism and its replacement by socialism.

Berlin is neither the first nor the last critic of Marx to notice that his professed indifference to moral considerations is hard to square with his evident hatred of the injustice and cruelty so visible in the early years of the Industrial Revolution, and that his assertion of the inevitability of the downfall of the capitalist order was equally hard to square with the way he sacrificed his health and domestic happiness to promoting the revolutionary cause. What was distinctive about Berlin's reaction to Marx is not that he was affronted by these logical tensions and inconsistencies,

¹ *Moralising Criticism and Critical Morality* (1847), CW 6: 318.

² *Karl Marx's Funeral* (1883), CW 24: 467, 468.

but that he spent the rest of his intellectual career thinking and writing about their origins, about alternative visions of the world, and about the contemporaries and successors to Marx who thought about them too.

Berlin's Marx is an interesting figure because he was simultaneously so much a product of the Enlightenment, and so much a product of the Romantic revolt against the Enlightenment. Like the French materialists of the eighteenth century, Marx believed in progress, believed that history was a linear process, not, as the ancient world had thought, that it was a repetitive cycle of growth and decay; but, like critics of the Enlightenment such as Burke, Maistre and Hegel, he thought that social change had not occurred in the past and would not occur in the future merely because some enlightened persons could see that it would be more reasonable to behave in a different way. It was violent and irrational forces which brought about significant change, and the rationality of the whole historical process was something we could understand only after the event. His encounter with Marx seems to have inspired Berlin to grapple with the anti-Enlightenment; he wrote afterwards at length about the anti-rationalist critics of revolutionary and liberal projects, such as Herder, Maistre and Hamann.

In much the same way, it was the people Marx slighted during his career who later came to interest Berlin particularly. Moses Hess was the first person to appreciate Marx's formidable energy and intelligence, but the kindest way Marx referred to Hess was as a donkey.¹ Berlin was intrigued by the fact that Hess saw something which Marx systematically refused to see – that the condition of the Jews in modern Europe was impossible to resolve by the liberal recipe of assimilation – and thus became one of the founders of the benign, liberal Zionism on which Berlin has written so movingly.

¹ Marx to Engels, 15 May 1847, 25 January 1865, CW 38: 117, 42: 66. [Cf. Engels to Marx, 14 January 1848, CW 38: 153, where Engels refers to Hess as 'the donkey'.]

Again, Marx was contemptuous of his contemporary and rival, the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin; almost until the end of his life he regarded Russia as the home of every sort of backwardness and repression. The thought that there might be a route to freedom and democracy that suited the Russian people's Russianness as well as their ordinary humanity was one that could hardly find room in his mind; Marx's detestation of what he thought of as the Slav character was only part of the problem, the other being his contempt for all sentiments of nationality that did not more or less directly foster the advance of socialism. In the 1950s Berlin went on to reveal to English and American readers the riches of nineteenth-century Russian populism and liberalism as represented by Alexander Herzen, Vissarion Belinsky and Ivan Turgenev, and to argue something we need to remember today more than ever, that nationalism can be and has been an ally of liberalism as well as the expression of atavistic and irrational allegiances that we should all be better off without.

It is more than seventy years since the first edition of *Karl Marx* was published, and they have been tumultuous years. The book went to press shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War; after that war, we saw forty years of cold war, followed by an uncertain peace in which hostility between two great ideological camps has given way to a coolish friendship between great powers, and continuous low-level ethnic and nationalist conflict in the Balkans, the Trans-Caucasus and much of Africa.

The book was published in London as Britain went to war with Nazi Germany – and its author went to a dazzling career in the British Embassy in Washington; it reappeared in successive editions in a very different world. The second edition was published soon after the war; by then the cold war was firmly established, and the Soviet interpretation of Marxism was as rigid as ever. There was nothing in the work of apologists for the Soviet regime to make one think that Berlin's emphasis on the deterministic rigidity of Marx's vision of history was excessive,

and nothing to make one think that Marx's materialism might have been less extreme than his disciples had suggested.

By the time the third edition appeared in 1963, Nikita Khrushchev's speech to the Twentieth Party Congress of 1956 had taken the lid off Stalinism in front of a Russian audience; the Hungarian Revolution had disillusioned British Communists and had forced the much larger and more robust Communist parties of France and Italy to rethink their political and intellectual allegiances. This was when a new 'humanist' Marxism was discovered (or perhaps one should say invented); attempts at a rapprochement between left-wing Catholics and philosophically sophisticated Marxists were a striking feature of the late 1950s and 1960s, and the thought that Marxism was essentially a religious faith could be seen as something of a compliment rather than a complaint. One of this movement's fruits was 'liberation theology', a phenomenon that would surely have been savaged by Marx himself, but another was the idea that the young Marx at any rate had been a more subtle and interesting moral critic of capitalist society than had been thought.

A fourth edition of *Karl Marx* appeared in 1978. Even after forty years it had worn extremely well, but in the previous twenty years there had been a flood of work by writers on both sides of the Atlantic that might have made any author reconsider his former views. Much of it was work of deep and dispassionate scholarship. Although many of Marx's modern interpreters continued to admire Marx as the scourge of capitalism, many others were motivated by the challenge of knowing just what Marx was after. The less simple-minded and the more sympathetic Marx appeared, the harder it was to give a clear account of his thinking. Was there one Marx or two? Had he changed in 1846 from a young Hegelian humanist and idealist to a scientific anti-humanist, as Louis Althusser claimed? Or was he rather a cultural critic, a social analyst concerned with the alienated state of the soul of man under capitalism? The popularity of such

books as Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* and *Eros and Civilization* suggested the rich vein of social criticism that might be mined by somehow reconciling Marx and Freud.

The flood of scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s revealed something that a reader would guess from the sheer exuberance of Berlin's account, but which is not much emphasised in *Karl Marx*. For the half-way sympathetic reader, Marx offers innumerable enticements – as a voracious reader and a savage critic, who worked by testing his ideas against those of his predecessors and opponents, Marx whets the modern reader's curiosity about nineteenth-century economics, German philosophy, ancient history, the French revolutionary underground, and more. This has its dangers; just as Marx increasingly became unable to finish any work he started because he wanted to read everything ever written on the subject, students of Marx can find themselves trying to read everything Marx ever read as well as everything he wrote.

Still, the attraction is undeniable. The intellectual world Marx inhabited is far enough away to be somewhat strange to us, but close enough to give us some hope of understanding it. It presents a challenge, but not irreducible obscurity. It cannot be said that the new scholarly climate produced any particular consensus on just what Marx had achieved or had hoped to achieve, but it marked the first time in many years that he was accorded the sort of calm, scholarly respect that less contentious figures had always received. Oddly, perhaps, this flood of new work called into question little in Berlin's account of Marx.

Berlin acknowledged in 1963 that there was one change in his own and the scholarly community's understanding of Marx that he had incorporated into the revisions he had made to the book. The wide circulation of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* on the one hand, and the seemingly endless post-war prosperity of the United States and Western Europe on the other, had persuaded many social critics that it was foolish to go on reciting Marx's predictions of the inevitable and imminent

collapse of capitalism; but Marx's philosophical critique of a society that sacrificed men to machines, that valued culture only in cash terms, and allowed itself to be ruled by the inhuman and abstract forces of the marketplace could hardly be written off as outdated in the same way. The Marx of the first edition of *Karl Marx* was, as Berlin acknowledged, the Marx of official Marxism, the Marx of the Second and Third Internationals, hailed by his followers as a social scientist, not as a humanist philosopher. Now that the dust has settled, it is clear that Berlin was right to do no more than adjust his account a little; the more one thinks about the theory of alienation, the clearer it is that Marx was right in later life to think that anything he had said in the obscure language of Hegelian philosophy, he could say more plainly in the language of empirical social analysis.

When *Karl Marx* was first published, there was little serious scholarship on its subject in English. Franz Mehring's 1918 biography, *Karl Marx*, had been translated from the German in 1935; *Karl Marx: Man and Fighter*, an engaging biography written from a thoroughly Menshevik standpoint by Boris Nicolaevsky and Otto Maenchen-Helfen, was one of the few other accounts of Marx that avoided hagiography and demonology. On Marx as a philosopher and social critic, the American philosopher Sidney Hook – at that time a disciple of Trotsky as well as John Dewey, and only later a ferocious anti-Communist – had published two highly imaginative and interesting books in the early 1930s. *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* and *From Hegel to Marx* are still valuable for their treatment of the Young Hegelians, and to a lesser extent for their attempted reconciliation of Marxism and American pragmatism; but they were not much read in the United States at that time and hardly at all in Britain. Marx's economics were not taken seriously other than on the Marxist Left, and it was not until the post-war years that German scholars who had been forced to flee their homeland by the rise of Hitler began to make their mark in English. *Karl*

Marx thus met a real need, and its success was wholly deserved.

The book Berlin first wrote was not the book that the Home University Library published. According to his 1978 preface, the first draft was more than twice as long as the series allowed, and he dropped most of what he had written on Marx's sociology, economics, and theory of history, recasting the book as an intellectual biography. Less may have been lost than that suggests. Berlin's account of Marx's life turned out to be more lastingly interesting than the innumerable interpretive disputes that have dominated academic discussion since. Astonishingly, the literary and expository personality that has since made Berlin's work so instantly recognisable was already on full display.

A thumbnail sketch of Marx drawn from the Introduction to the first edition might have been written at any time in the next fifty years – one sentence lasts for a whole paragraph, powerful adjectives hunt in threes, the argument is carried by sharp antitheses. The reader takes a deep breath and plunges in, to emerge several lines later exhilarated and breathless:

He was endowed with a powerful, active, unsentimental mind, an acute sense of injustice, and exceptionally little sensibility, and was repelled as much by the rhetoric and emotionalism of the intellectuals as by the stupidity and complacency of the bourgeoisie; the first seemed to him aimless chatter, remote from reality and, whether sincere or false, equally irritating; the second at once hypocritical and self-deceived, blinded to the salient features of its time by absorption in the pursuit of wealth and social status.¹

Few commentators even now have struck such a persuasive balance between psychological portraiture and intellectual analysis. Berlin leaves the reader with the sense that if Marx were to walk into the room we would know what to say to him – and, unless

¹ KM1 (267/167) 11; 3 below.

we were spoiling for a fight, what not to. This, as I said before, is Berlin's great talent as an intellectual historian, and one that was first revealed in this book. I first read *Karl Marx* some fifty years ago, and devoured it at one sitting; new readers will find it equally engrossing.

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