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KARL MARX

HIS LIFE AND ENVIRONMENT

ISAIAH BERLIN



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PREFATORY NOTE

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I. B.

OXFORD

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Things and actions are what they are, and their consequences will be what they will be: why then should we seek to be deceived?

BISHOP BUTLER

No thinker in the nineteenth century has had so direct, deliberate and powerful an influence upon mankind as Karl Marx.⁷ Both during his lifetime and after it he exercised an intellectual and moral ascendancy over his followers, the strength of which was unique even in that golden age of democratic nationalism, an age which saw the rise of great popular heroes and martyrs, romantic, almost legendary figures, whose lives and words dominated the imagination of the masses and created a new revolutionary tradition in Europe. Yet Marx could not, at any time, be called a popular figure in the ordinary sense: certainly he was in no sense a popular writer or orator. He wrote extensively, but his works were not, during his lifetime, read widely; and when, in the late 'seventies, they began to reach the immense public which several among them afterwards obtained, the desire to read them was due not so much to a recognition of their intrinsic qualities as to the growth of the fame and notoriety of the movement with which he was identified.

Marx totally lacked the qualities of a great popular leader or agitator, was not a publicist of genius like the Russian democrat Alexander Herzen, nor did he possess Bakunin's marvellous eloquence; the greater part of his working life was spent in comparative obscurity in

London, at his writing-desk and in the reading-room of the British Museum. He was little known to the general public, and while towards the end of his life he became the recognized, and admired, leader of a powerful international movement, nothing in his life or character stirred the imagination or evoked the boundless devotion, the intense, almost religious, worship, with which such men as Kossuth, Mazzini, and even Lassalle in his last years, were regarded by their followers. x

His public appearances were neither frequent nor notably successful. On the few occasions on which he addressed banquets or public meetings, his speeches were overloaded with matter, and delivered with a combination of monotony and brusqueness, which commanded the respect but not the enthusiasm of his audience. He was by temperament a theorist and an intellectual, and instinctively avoided direct contact with the masses, to the study of whose interests his entire life was devoted. To many of his followers he appeared in the role of a dogmatic and sententious German schoolmaster, prepared to repeat his theses indefinitely, with rising sharpness, until their essence became irremovably lodged in his disciples' minds. The greater part of his economic teaching was given its first expression in lectures to working men: his exposition under these circumstances was by all accounts a model of lucidity and conciseness. But he wrote slowly and painfully, as sometimes happens with rapid and fertile thinkers, scarcely able to cope with the speed of their own ideas, impatient at once to communicate a new doctrine, and to forestall every possible objection; the published versions were generally turgid, clumsy, and obscure in detail, although the central doctrine is never

in serious doubt. He was acutely conscious of this, and once compared himself with the hero of Balzac's *Unknown Masterpiece*, who tries to paint the picture which has formed itself in his mind, touches and retouches the canvas endlessly, to produce at last a shapeless mass of colours, which to his eye seems to express the vision in his imagination. He belonged to a generation which cultivated the emotions more intensely and deliberately than its predecessors, and was brought up among men to whom ideas were often more real than facts, and personal relations meant far more than the events of the external world; by whom indeed public life was commonly understood and interpreted in terms of the rich and elaborate world of their own private experience. Marx was by nature not introspective, and took little interest in persons or states of mind or soul; the failure on the part of so many of his contemporaries to assess the importance of the revolutionary transformation of the society of their day, due to the swift advance of technology with its accompaniment of sudden increase of wealth, and, at the same time, of social and cultural dislocation and confusion, merely excited his anger and contempt.

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.

This sense of living in a hostile and vulgar world, intensified perhaps by his dislike of the fact that he was born a Jew, increased his natural harshness and aggressiveness, and produced the formidable figure of popular imagination. His greatest admirers would find it difficult to maintain that he was a sensitive or tender-hearted man, or in any way concerned about the feelings of those with whom he came into contact; the majority of the men he met were, in his opinion, either fools or sycophants, and towards such he behaved with open suspicion or contempt. But if his attitude in public was overbearing and offensive, in the intimate circle composed of his family and his friends, in which he felt completely secure, he was considerate and gentle; his married life was exceptionally happy, he was warmly attached to his children, and he treated his lifelong friend and collaborator, Engels, with uniform loyalty and devotion. He was a charmless man, and his behaviour was often boorish, but even his enemies were fascinated by the strength and vehemence of his personality, the boldness of his views, and the breadth and brilliance of his analyses of the contemporary situation.

He remained all his life an oddly isolated figure among the revolutionaries of his time, equally hostile to their persons, their methods and their ends. His isolation was not, however, due merely to temperament or to the accident of time and place. However widely the majority of European democrats differed in character, aims and historical environment, they resembled each other in one fundamental attribute, which made co-operation between them possible, at least in principle. Whether or not they believed in violent revolution, the

great majority of them were, in the last analysis, liberal reformers, and appealed explicitly to moral standards common to all mankind. They criticized and condemned the existing condition of humanity in terms of some preconceived ideal, some system, whose desirability at least needed no demonstration, being self-evident to all men with normal moral vision; their schemes differed in the degree to which they could be realized in practice, and could accordingly be classified as less or more utopian, but broad agreement existed between all schools of democratic thought about the ultimate ends to be pursued. They disagreed about the effectiveness of the proposed means, about the extent to which compromise with the existing powers was morally or practically advisable, about the character and value of specific social institutions, and consequently about the policy to be adopted with regard to them. But they were essentially reformers in the sense that they believed that there was little which could not be altered by the determined will of individuals; they believed, too, that powerfully held moral ends were sufficient springs of action, themselves justified by an appeal not to facts but to some universally accepted scale of values. It followed that it was proper first to ascertain what one wished the world to be: next, one had to consider in the light of this how much of the existing social fabric should be retained, how much condemned: finally, one was obliged to look for the most effective means of accomplishing the necessary transformation.

With this attitude, common to the vast majority of revolutionaries and reformers at all times, Marx came to be wholly out of sympathy. He was convinced that human history is governed by laws which, like the

laws which govern nature, cannot be altered by the intervention of individuals actuated by this or that ideal. He believed, indeed, that the inner experience to which men appeal to justify their ends, so far from revealing a special kind of truth called moral or religious, is merely a faculty which engenders myths and illusions, both individual and collective. Being conditioned by the material circumstances in which they come to birth, the myths embody in the guise of objective truth whatever men in their misery wish to believe; under their treacherous influence men misinterpret the nature of the world in which they live, misunderstand their own position in it, and therefore miscalculate the range of their own and others' power, and the consequences both of their own and their opponents' acts. In opposition to the majority of the democratic theorists of his time, Marx believed that values could not be contemplated in isolation from facts, but necessarily depended upon the manner in which the facts were viewed. True insight into the nature and laws of the historical process will of itself, without the aid of independently known moral standards, make clear to a rational being what step it is proper for him to adopt, that is, what course would most accord with the requirements of the order to which he belongs. Consequently Marx had no new ethical or social ideal to press upon mankind; he did not plead for a change of heart; a change of heart was necessarily but the substitution of one set of illusions for another. He differed from the other great ideologists of his generation by making his appeal, at least in his own view, solely to reason, to the practical intelligence, denouncing only intellectual vice or blindness, insisting that all that men need, in order

to know how to save themselves from the chaos in which they are involved, is to seek to understand their actual condition; believing that a correct estimate of the precise balance of forces in the society to which men belong will itself indicate the form of life which it is rational to pursue. Marx denounces the existing order by appealing not to ideals but to history: he denounces it not as bad, or unfortunate, or due to human wickedness or folly, but as being caused by the laws of social development, which make it inevitable that at a certain stage of history one class should dispossess and exploit another. The oppressors are threatened not with deliberate retribution on the part of their victims, but with the inevitable destruction which history has in store for them, as a class doomed shortly to disappear from the stage of history.

Yet, designed though it is to appeal to the intellect, his language is that of a herald and a prophet, speaking in the name not of human beings but of the universal law itself, seeking not to rescue nor to improve, but to warn and to condemn, to reveal the truth, and above all to refute falsehood. *Destruam et ædificabo* ('I shall destroy and I shall build'), which Proudhon placed at the head of one of his works, far more aptly describes Marx's conception of his own appointed task. In 1845 he had completed the first stage of his programme, and acquainted himself with the nature, history and laws of the evolution of the society in which he found himself. He concluded that the history of society is the history of struggles of opposed classes, one of which must emerge triumphant, although in a much altered form: progress is constituted by the succession of victories of one class over the other, and that man alone is rational

who identifies himself with the progressive class in his society, either, if need be, by deliberately abandoning his past and allying himself with it, or if history has already placed him there, by consciously recognizing his situation and acting in the light of it.

Accordingly Marx, having identified the rising class in the struggle of his own time with the proletariat, devoted the rest of his life to planning a victory for those at whose head he had placed himself. This victory the process of history would in any case secure, but human courage, determination and ingenuity could bring it nearer and make the transition less painful, accompanied by less friction and less waste of human substance. His position henceforth is that of a commander, actually engaged in a campaign, who therefore does not continually call upon himself and others to show reason for engaging in a war at all, or for being on one side of it rather than the other: the state of war and one's own position in it are given; they are facts not to be questioned but accepted and examined; one's sole business is to defeat the enemy; all other problems are academic, based on unrealized hypothetical conditions, and so beside the point. Hence the almost complete absence in Marx's later works of discussions of ultimate principles, of all attempts to justify his opposition to the bourgeoisie. The merits or defects of the enemy, or what might have been, if no enemy and no war existed, is of no interest during the battle. To introduce these irrelevant issues during the period of actual fighting is to divert the attention of one's supporters from the crucial issues with which, whether or not they recognize them, they are faced, and so to weaken their power of resistance.

All that is important during the actual war is accurate knowledge of one's own resources and of those of the adversary, and knowledge of the previous history of society and the laws which govern it is indispensable to this end. *Das Kapital* is an attempt to provide such an analysis. The almost complete absence from it of explicit moral argument, of appeals to conscience or to principle, and the equally striking absence of detailed prediction of what will or should happen after the victory, follow from the concentration of attention on the practical problems of action. The conceptions of natural rights, and of conscience, as belonging to every man irrespective of his position in the class struggle, are rejected as liberal illusions: socialism does not appeal, it demands; it speaks not of rights, but of the new form of life before whose inexorable approach the old social structure has visibly begun to disintegrate. Moral, political, economic conceptions and ideals alter no less than the social conditions from which they spring: to regard any one of them as universal and immutable is tantamount to believing that the order to which they belong—in this case the bourgeois order—is eternal. This fallacy underlies the ethical and psychological doctrines of idealistic humanitarians from the eighteenth century onwards. Hence the contempt and loathing poured by Marx upon the common assumption, made by liberals and utilitarians, that since the interests of all men are ultimately and have always been the same, a measure of goodwill and benevolence on the part of everyone may yet make it possible to manufacture some sort of general compromise. If the war is real, these interests are totally incompatible. A denial of this fact can be due only to stupid or cynical disregard

of the truth, a peculiarly vicious form of hypocrisy or self-deception, repeatedly exposed by history. This fundamental difference of outlook, and no mere dissimilarity of temperament or natural gifts, is the property which distinguishes Marx sharply from the bourgeois radicals and utopian socialists whom, to their own bewildered indignation, he fought and abused savagely and unremittingly for more than forty years.

He detested romanticism, emotionalism, and humanitarianism of every kind, and, in his anxiety to avoid any appeal to the idealistic feelings of his audience, systematically removed every trace of the old democratic vocabulary from the propagandist literature of his movement. He neither offered nor invited concessions at any time, and did not enter into any dubious political alliances, since he declined all forms of compromise. The manuscripts of the numerous manifestoes, professions of faith and programmes of action to which he appended his name, still bear the strokes of the pen and the fierce marginal comments, with which he sought to obliterate all references to eternal justice, the equality of man, the rights of individuals or nations, the liberty of conscience, the fight for civilization, and other such phrases which were the stock in trade (and had once genuinely embodied the ideals) of the democratic movements of his time; he looked upon these as so much worthless cant, indicating confusion of thought and ineffectiveness in action.

The war must be fought on every front, and, since contemporary society is politically organized, a political party must be formed out of those elements which in accordance with the laws of historical development are destined to emerge as the conquering class. They

must ceaselessly be taught that what seems so secure in existing society is, in reality, doomed to swift extinction, a fact which men may find it difficult to believe because of the immense protective façade of moral, religious, political and economic assumptions and beliefs, which the moribund class consciously or unconsciously creates, blinding itself and others to its own approaching fate. It requires both intellectual courage and acuteness of vision to penetrate this smoke-screen and perceive the real structure of events. The spectacle of chaos, and the imminence of the crisis in which it is bound to end, will of itself convince a clear-eyed and interested observer—for no one who is not virtually dead or dying, can be a disinterested spectator of the fate of the society with which his own life is bound up—of what he must be and do in order to survive. Not a subjective scale of values revealed differently to different men, determined by the light of an inner vision, but knowledge of the facts themselves, must, according to Marx, determine rational behaviour. The society which is judged to be progressive, and so worthy of support, is that which is capable of further expansion in its initial direction without an alteration of its entire basis. A society is reactionary when it is inevitably moving into an impasse, unable to avoid internal chaos and ultimate collapse in spite of the most desperate efforts to survive, efforts which themselves create irrational faith in its own ultimate stability, the anodyne with which all dying institutions necessarily delude themselves. Nevertheless, what history—to Marx an almost active agency—has condemned will be inevitably swept away: to say that it ought to be saved, even when that is not possible, is to deny the

rational plan of the universe. To criticize the facts themselves was for Marx a form of childish subjectivism, due to a morbid or shallow view of life, to some irrational prejudice in favour of this or that virtue or institution; it revealed attachment to the old world and was a symptom of incomplete emancipation from its values. It seemed to him that under the guise of earnest philanthropic feeling there thrived, undetected, seeds of weakness and treachery, due to a fundamental desire to come to terms with the reaction, a secret horror of revolution based on fear of the truth, of the full light of day. With the truth there could, however, be no compromise: and humanitarianism was but a softened, face-saving form of compromise, due to a desire to avoid the perils of an open fight and, even more, the risks and responsibilities of victory. Nothing stirred his indignation so much as cowardice: hence the furious and often brutal tone with which he refers to it, the beginning of that harsh 'materialist' style which struck an entirely unfamiliar note in the literature of revolutionary socialism. This fashion for 'naked objectivity' took the form, particularly among Russian writers of a later generation, of searching for the sharpest, most unadorned, most shocking form of statement in which to clothe what were sometimes not very startling propositions.

Marx had, by his own account, begun to build his new instrument from almost casual beginnings: because, in the course of a controversy with the Government on an economic question of purely local importance, in which he was involved in his capacity as editor of a radical newspaper, he became aware of his almost total ignorance of the history and principles of economic

development. This controversy occurred in 1843. By 1848 his education as a political and economic thinker was complete. With prodigious thoroughness he had constructed a complete theory of society and its evolution, which indicated with absolute precision where and how the answers to all such questions must be sought and found. Its originality has often been questioned. It is original, not indeed in the sense in which works of art are original, when they embody some hitherto unexpressed individual experience, but as scientific theories are said to be original, when they provide a new solution to a hitherto unsolved problem, which they may do by modifying and combining existing views to form a new hypothesis. Marx never attempted to deny his debt to other thinkers: 'I am performing an act of historical justice, and am rendering to each man his due', he loftily declared. But he did claim to have provided for the first time a wholly adequate answer to questions which had been previously either misunderstood, or answered wrongly or insufficiently or obscurely. The characteristic for which Marx sought was not novelty but truth, and when he found it in the works of others, he endeavoured, at any rate during the early years in Paris, in which his thought took its final shape, to incorporate it in his new synthesis. What is original in the result is not any one component element, but the central hypothesis by which each is connected with the others, so that the parts are made to appear to follow from each other and to support each other in a single systematic whole.

To trace the direct source of any single doctrine advanced by Marx is, therefore, a relatively simple task which his numerous critics have been only too anxious

to perform. It may well be that there is not one among his views whose embryo cannot be found in some previous or contemporary writer. Thus the doctrine of communal ownership founded upon the abolition of private property, has probably, in one or other form, possessed adherents at most periods during the last two thousand years. Consequently the often debated question whether Marx derived it directly from the writings of Mably, or from some German account of French Communism, is too purely academic to be of great importance. As for the more specific doctrines, historical materialism of a sort is to be found fully developed in a treatise by Holbach printed a century before, which in its turn owes much to Spinoza; a modified form of it was restated in Marx's own day by Feuerbach. The view of human history as the history of war between social classes is to be found in Saint-Simon, and was to a large extent adopted by such contemporary liberal French historians as Thierry and Mignet, and equally by the more conservative Guizot. The scientific theory of the inevitability of the regular recurrence of economic crises was probably first formulated by Sismondi; that of the rise of the Fourth Estate was certainly held by the early communists, popularized in Germany in Marx's own day by von Stein and Hess. The dictatorship of the proletariat was adumbrated by Babeuf in the last decade of the eighteenth century, and was explicitly developed in the nineteenth in different fashions by Weitling and Blanqui; the present and future position and importance of workers in an industrial state was more fully worked out by Louis Blanc and the French State Socialists than Marx is prepared to admit. The labour theory of value derives from Locke, Adam Smith

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