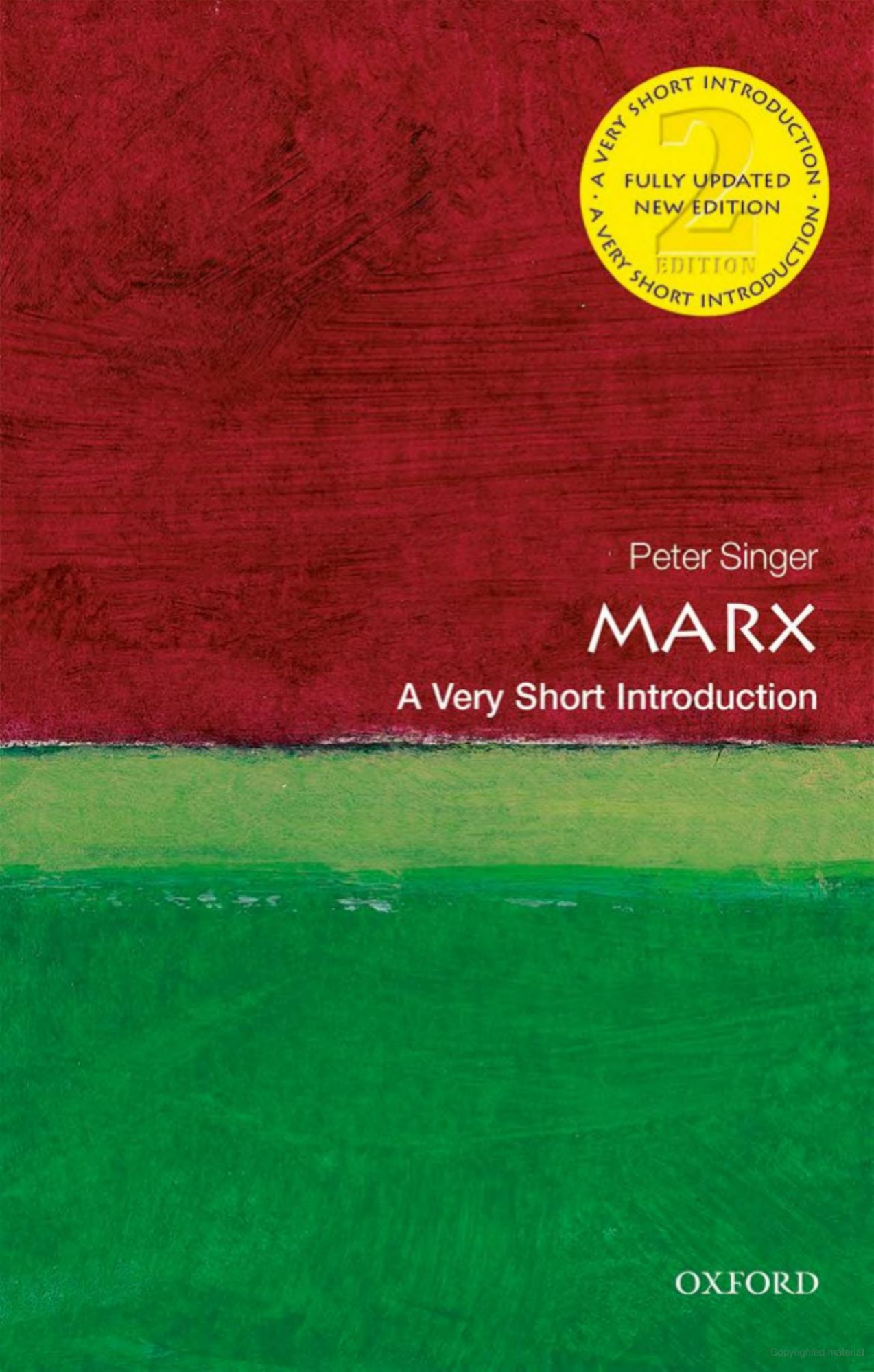

Peter Singer

MARX

A Very Short Introduction

SECOND EDITION

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Preface

The 200th anniversary of Karl Marx's birth is an occasion for a reassessment of his place in history. Was he a 19th-century thinker whose ideas became immensely influential in the 20th century, but have now been discredited? Or did Marx, like Darwin or Einstein, advance our understanding of reality by discovering a truth that still holds today? Perhaps a proper assessment of his significance lies somewhere between those extremes? One of the aims of this book is to answer these questions. My other aim, which is in any case a prerequisite for establishing Marx's significance, is to set out, briefly and clearly, his central ideas. There is now such an abundant literature on Marx that one should think twice before adding another book, even a very slim one, to the stack. I wrote this book because there is a unifying vision that underlies Marx's voluminous work, and I did not know of any other work that presented it in a manner comprehensible to general readers with little or no previous knowledge of Marx's writings. The success of the book's original edition suggests that it did fill a gap in the literature. More recent scholarly work on Marx's ideas has added some additional details and insights. This new edition therefore incorporates this more recent scholarship while giving additional space to evaluating the relevance of Marx's ideas today.

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the University of Melbourne

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For biographical details of Marx's life, I am indebted to David McLellan's *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought: A Biography*, 4th edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), and Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016). For the first edition of this book, I received helpful comments from G. A. Cohen, Robert Heilbroner, Renata Singer, and Marilyn Weltz. The second edition benefited from comments from Charles Bresler, Iason Gabriel, and, especially, Karsten Struhl. Jonathon Catlin assisted me in updating the sources and translations of quotations used in the earlier editions, and made many valuable suggestions that have improved the text. Zusong Lu and Yaqi Liu helped me to understand the significance of Marxism in China today. Justin Maiman told me how many Marxists it takes to change a lightbulb.

The first edition was written in response to an invitation from Keith Thomas and Oxford University Press's Henry Hardy. This edition was suggested by Andrea Keegan, in her capacity as editor responsible for the Very Short Introductions series. I thank her for stimulating me to think again about Marx in the 21st century and I also thank Jenny Nugee of Oxford University Press and Elakkia Bharathi of SPi Global for overseeing the book's production.

List of illustrations

Abbreviations

References in the text to Marx's writings are generally given by an abbreviation of the title, followed by a page reference. Unless otherwise indicated below, these page references are to David McLellan (ed.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

B	'On Bakunin's *Statism and Anarchy*'
C I	*Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, volume I, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990)
C III	*Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, volume III, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1993)
CM	*Communist Manifesto*
D	Doctoral Thesis
EB	*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*
EPM	*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*
G	*Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1993)
GI	*The German Ideology*
GP	'Critique of the Gotha Programme'
HF	*The Holy Family*
I	'Towards a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction'
J	'On the Jewish Question'
M	'On James Mill' (notebook)

MC	Letters and miscellaneous writings cited in David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought: A Biography*, 4th edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)
P	Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*
PP	*The Poverty of Philosophy*
R	Correspondence with Ruge of 1843
T	'Theses on Feuerbach'
VPP	'Value, Price and Profit' (in *Wage-Labour and Capital & Value, Price and Profit* (New York: International Publishers, 1975))
WLC	*Wage-Labour and Capital*

Chapter 1
A life and its legacy

Marx's impact

Marx's influence can be compared to that of major religious figures like Jesus or Muhammad. For much of the second half of the 20th century, nearly four out of every ten people on earth lived under governments that considered themselves Marxist and claimed to follow his ideas in deciding what policies they should implement. In these countries Marx was almost a secular deity. His image was everywhere reverently displayed and his words were considered the ultimate source of truth and authority. Political leaders and their opponents sought to interpret them in ways that suited their political leanings, and the fate of those who lost was similar to that of heretics. The lives of hundreds of millions of people were transformed, for better or for worse, by Marx's legacy.

This influence has not been limited to communist societies. Conservative, liberal, and democratic socialist governments have established social welfare systems to cut the ground from under revolutionary Marxist opposition movements. Other opponents of Marxism have reacted in less benign ways: Mussolini and Hitler were aided in their rise to power by conservative forces that saw them as the most promising way of combating the Marxist threat. Even in countries like the United States, where there was no real

prospect of Marxists gaining power, the existence of a foreign Marxist enemy served to justify governments in restricting individual rights, increasing arms spending, and pursuing a bellicose foreign policy that led to the overthrow of popularly elected governments and the disastrous intervention in Vietnam.

Marx's ideas are now part of the backdrop to our thinking about society and the role played by class and economic forces. His ideas transformed the study of history and sociology, and profoundly affected philosophy, literature, and the arts. In this sense of the term we are all Marxists now.

What were the ideas that had such far-reaching effects? That is the subject of this book. But first, a little about the man from whom they came.

Origins, study, marriage

Karl Marx was born in Trier, in the German Rhineland, in 1818. His parents, Heinrich and Henrietta, came from Jewish families. Heinrich qualified as a lawyer in 1814, when the Rhineland was under French administration. After Napoleon's defeat in 1815 the Rhineland came under Prussian rule, and Jews were no longer allowed to practise law. Heinrich and his family became Lutherans, at least nominally. The family was comfortably off without being wealthy; they held liberal, but not radical, views on religion and politics.

Marx's intellectual career began badly when, at the age of 17, he went to study law at the University of Bonn. Within a year he had been imprisoned for drunkenness and slightly wounded in a duel. He also wrote love poems to his childhood sweetheart, Jenny von Westphalen. His father had soon had enough of this 'wild rampaging' as he called it, and decided that Karl should transfer to the more serious University of Berlin (see Figure 1).

1. Karl Marx in 1836, aged 18.

In Berlin Marx turned from law to philosophy. This did not impress his father: 'degeneration in a learned dressing-gown with uncombed hair has replaced degeneration with a beer glass,' he wrote in a reproving letter (MC 27). It was, however, the death rather than the reproaches of his father that forced Marx to think seriously about a career—for without his father's income the family could not afford to support him indefinitely. Marx therefore began work on a doctoral thesis with a view to getting a university lectureship. The thesis itself was on a remote and scholarly topic—some contrasts in the philosophies of nature of Democritus and Epicurus—but Marx saw a parallel between these ancient disputes and the debate about the interpretation of the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel, which was at that time a meeting ground for divergent political views in German thought.

The thesis was accepted in 1841, but no university lectureship was offered. Marx became interested in journalism. He wrote on social, political, and philosophical issues for a newly founded liberal newspaper, the *Rhenish Gazette* (*Rheinische Zeitung*). His articles were appreciated and his contacts with the newspaper increased to such an extent that when the editor resigned late in 1842, Marx was the obvious replacement, even though he was only 22 years old.

Through no fault of his own, Marx's editorship was brief. As interest in the newspaper increased, so did the attentions of the Prussian government censor. A series of Marx's articles on the poverty of wine-growers in the Moselle valley may have been considered especially inflammatory; in any case, the government decided to suppress the paper.

2. Jenny Marx (neé Jenny von Westphalen).

Marx was not sorry that the authorities had, as he put it in a letter to a friend, 'given me back my liberty' (MC 50). Freed from editorial duties, he began work on a critical study of Hegel's political philosophy. He also had a more pressing concern: to marry Jenny, to whom he had now been engaged for seven years (see Figure 2). And he wanted to leave Prussia, where he could not express himself freely. The problem was that he needed money to get married, and now he was again unemployed. But his reputation as a promising young writer stood him in good stead; he was invited to become co-editor of a new publication, the *German–French Annals* (*Deutsch–Französische Jahrbücher*). This provided him with enough income to marry and also settled the question of where to go—for, as its name implies, the new publication was supposed to draw French as well as German writers and readers.

Revolutionary ideas

Karl and Jenny Marx arrived in Paris in the autumn of 1843 and soon began mixing with the radicals and socialists who congregated in this centre of progressive thought. Marx wrote two articles for the *Annals*. The publication was, however, even more short-lived than the *Rhenish Gazette* had been. The first issue failed to attract any French contributors and so was scarcely noticed in Paris, while copies sent to Prussia were confiscated by the authorities. The financial backers of the venture withdrew. Meanwhile, in view of the communist and revolutionary ideas expressed in the confiscated first issue, the Prussian government issued a warrant for the arrest of the editors. Now Marx could not return to Prussia; he was a political refugee. Luckily he received a sizeable amount of money from the former shareholders of the *Rhenish Gazette*, so he had no need of a job.

Throughout 1844 Marx worked at articulating his philosophical position. This was philosophy in a very broad sense, including politics, economics, and a conception of the historical processes

at work in the world. By now Marx was prepared to call himself a communist—which was nothing very unusual in those days in Paris, where socialists and communists of all kinds could then be found.

In the same year the friendship between Marx and Engels began. Friedrich Engels (see Figure 6 on p. 51) was the son of a German industrialist who also owned a cotton factory in Manchester; but Engels had become, through contacts with the same German intellectual circles that Marx moved in, a revolutionary socialist. He contributed an article to the *Annals* that deeply affected Marx's own thinking about economics. So it was not surprising that when Engels visited Paris he and Marx should meet. Very soon they began to collaborate on a pamphlet—or rather Engels thought it was going to be a pamphlet. He left his contribution, about fifteen pages long, with Marx when he departed from Paris. The 'pamphlet' appeared under the title *The Holy Family* in 1845. Almost 300 pages long, it was Marx's first published book.

Meanwhile the Prussian government was putting pressure on the French to do something about the German communists living in Paris. An expulsion order was issued and the Marx family, which now included their first child, named Jenny like her mother, moved to Brussels.

To obtain permission to stay in Brussels, Marx had to promise not to take part in politics. He soon breached this commitment by organizing a Communist Correspondence Committee, intended to keep communists in different countries in touch with each other. Nevertheless, Marx was able to stay in Brussels for three years. He signed a contract with a publisher to produce a book consisting of a critical analysis of economics and politics. The contract called for the book to be ready by the summer of 1845. That was the first of many deadlines Marx missed for the book that was to become *Capital*. The publisher had, no doubt to his lasting regret, undertaken to pay royalties in advance of receiving the

manuscript. (The contract was eventually cancelled, and the unfortunate man was still trying to get his money back in 1871.) Engels now began to help Marx financially, so the family had enough to live on.

Marx and Engels saw a good deal of each other. Engels came to Brussels, and then the two of them travelled to England for six weeks to study economics in Manchester, the heart of the new industrial age. (Meanwhile Jenny was bearing Marx their second daughter, Laura.) On his return Marx decided to postpone his book on economics. Before setting forth his own positive theory, he wanted to demolish alternative ideas then fashionable in German philosophical and socialist circles. The outcome was *The German Ideology*, a long and often turgid volume which was turned down by at least seven publishers and finally abandoned, as Marx later wrote, 'to the gnawing criticism of the mice' (P 426).

In addition to writing *The German Ideology*, Marx spent much of his time in Brussels attacking those who might have been his allies in a broader struggle against capitalism. He wrote another polemical work attacking the leading French socialist, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Though theoretically opposed to what he called 'a superstitious attitude to authority' (MC 157), Marx was so convinced of the importance of his own ideas that he had little tolerance for opinions different from his own. This led to frequent rows in the Communist Correspondence Committee and in the Communist League that followed it.

Marx had an opportunity to make his own ideas the basis of communist activities when he went to London in December 1847 to attend a Congress of the newly formed Communist League. In lengthy debates he defended his view of how communism would come about, and in the end he and Engels were given the task of putting down the doctrines of the League in simple language. The result was *The Communist Manifesto*, published in February 1848. It was to become the classic outline of Marx's theory.