

Rolf Hosfeld, *Karl Marx. An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013)

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The book by Rolf Hosfeld is a sophisticated exploration into the intellectual and historical context in which Karl Marx developed his thought and work. A scholar with a broad and highly interdisciplinary cultural background, the author effectively combines the history of political and philosophical ideas, political and intellectual history and the attention to the world of literary works to cast light upon the multiple sources and internal developments of Marx’s ideas. Unlike most of the literature that developed around the Marxian world, he provides both a thorough analysis of philosophical issues and an enjoyable portrait of events and intellectuals; at the same time, he focuses on Marx ‘the philosopher’ as well as on Marx ‘the man’, underlying the intimate connection between the public and the private sphere in the way he shaped his own thought throughout his life.

From such a perspective, this book is an excellent tool for those who want to familiarize themselves with the main concepts in the writings of Marx (and Engels) as well as a useful reminder of the complexity of their thought to those who are already well acquainted with their ideas. In fact, the clash of ideological interpretations that developed around their work has predominantly conveyed a narrow perspective of their theoretical and practical visions; yet, as Hosfeld shows, the philosophical and political grammar they developed throughout their writings was not new. Rather, it originated from a very personal and critical engagement with a variety of authors – Hegel most importantly – and their conceptual framework. The book consists of four main parts – “Ideas”, “Deeds”, “Discoveries” and “Consequences” – which offer a chronological account of Marx’s life and thought throughout the century and follow his movements across Europe – from his childhood in Trier and his Hegelian education in Bonn (1818-’42) to his early career as a journalist in Cologne (1842-’43), from his years in Paris (1843-’45) and Brussels (1845-’47) to the choice to move to London, where he spent the rest of his life until 1883. Therefore, Hosfeld offers an accurate overview of the successes and failures of Marx’s life-long project to interpret and change the reality of his time. His intellectual biography becomes the story of both his own ideas in motion and their intrinsic tension between theory and practice.

Over the four chapters Hosfeld successfully sheds light upon the philosophical background that progressively shaped the work and thought by Marx (and later also by Engels); he also provides a refined, yet accessible, synopsis of the historical events that urged the authors of the *Communist Manifesto* to constantly question their own beliefs. At this level, Graeme Duncan’s contention that Marx, as well as

John Stuart Mill, failed to emancipate himself from his European and Eurocentric perspective should be rephrased. Marx was a European intellectual who progressively developed a systematic attention to the revolutionary phenomena of his era: his life as well as his genius turned him, from a Prussian student fascinated by philosophy and law, into a truly cosmopolitan thinker. He understood the similarity of events occurring in different geo-political contexts – from France and England to Russia and the United States – and encouraged his contemporaries to appreciate their interconnection as well as their national and global implications. As a political journalist, philosopher, historian and economist, he always tried to employ the “weapons of criticism”, that is, to view the present critically in order to understand, and solve, the intimate contradictions of his time.

One of the most illuminating parts of the book is the first chapter, in which Hosfeld provides his readers with the five basic ideas of Marx’s thought. This overview of his theoretical vocabulary pursues a threefold goal: it sketches the intellectual and philosophical context in which the young Marx critically engaged with the work of Hegel; it offers the background for understanding the persistence of a number of recurring themes in his later thought and writings; it makes Marx’s work accessible to a non-specialized, yet intellectually curious, public. According to Hosfeld’s hermeneutics, ‘criticism’, ‘historical materialism’, ‘modernity’, ‘simplicity’ and ‘necessity’ emerge as the five cornerstones of Marx’s interpretation of history and politics. All these five concepts are closely intertwined insofar as they originate from a passionate and critical reading of Hegelianism through the influence of the Left Hegelians. However, the education of the German philosopher was shaped by a variety of intellectual sources, political ideologies and personal experiences. As a student of the theologian Bruno Bauer – the most dominant figure of the Berlin Doctor Club, namely a circle of heterodox students of Hegel – throughout the 1830s he developed a strong interest in ancient philosophy and devoted his doctoral dissertation to examining similarities and differences between the natural philosophy of Democritus and Epicurus.

At the same time, also under the influence of Bauer himself, he was fascinated by the critique of the French Enlightenment’s atheism and the Hegelian reading of Christology proposed by David Friedrich Strauß in his widely debated *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*. As Hosfeld recalls, these theological debates constitute one of the most important matrixes of Marx’s later conceptualization of politics and economics. Yet, after his experience as a political journalist for the *Rheinische Zeitung* in the early 1840s, he felt the need to critically engage with Hegel’s legal philosophy and test it vis-à-vis the real world, its contradictions and tensions. Such a dissatisfaction with Hegel’s constitutional law led Marx to call into question the whole realm of representative politics, which he dismissed as obsolete and incapable to produce an effective mediation between the interests of the ‘State’ and those of ‘civil society’.

Contrary to what Hegel had taught, Marx suggested that man, rather than the State, should become the starting point of a renewed science of politics. As he argued in the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, "just as it is not religion that creates man but man who creates religion, so it is not the constitution that creates the people but the people which creates the constitution". Accordingly, the contestation of Hegel's legal and political theory resulted in the refusal of any mediation, either political or institutional, and the idea that true democracy could reconcile State and society only through a direct kind of politics. This Copernican revolution, which was grounded in Feuerbach's dialectical critique of religion and ideology as well as in his break with Hegel's speculative philosophy, led Marx to focus his attention on real humanity, rather than personified abstractions, as the main actor of history, politics and economics. The historical materialism he progressively developed was the direct outgrowth of this critical engagement with the thought of Hegel.

As Hosfeld accurately explains, Marx's critique of the constitutional State as a repressive institution of the ruling class and his conceptualization of the proletariat's dictatorship as necessary stage in the dialectical development of history were both grounded in a secularized reading of modernity and the dismissal of any "spiritualistic-democratic" illusion. The whole intellectual trajectory of Marx – from his early philosophical writings to his later work with Engels and their reading of the social and economic struggles both in Europe and outside Europe – should thus be read through the lenses of the critical re-reading of his own cultural background and the capacity to always combine a variety of sources and influences. This is definitely one of the main reasons why Hosfeld's book is worth reading.