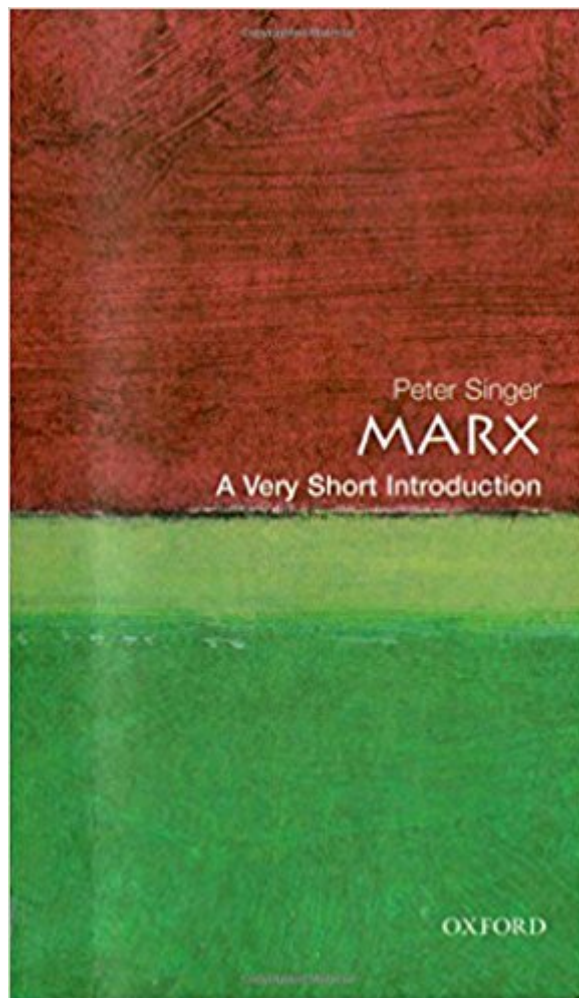


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Marx: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

In *Marx: A Very Short Introduction*, Peter Singer identifies the central vision that unifies Marx's thought, enabling us to grasp Marx's views as a whole. He sees him as a philosopher primarily concerned with human freedom, rather than as an economist or a social scientist. In plain English, he explains alienation, historical materialism, the economic theory of Capital, and Marx's ideas of communism, and concludes with an assessment of Marx's legacy. About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

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Customer Reviews

"I always recommend that undergraduates should read Singer's book to get an overview. I find it a very useful introduction: succinct and sophisticated."--Professor Diana Coole, University of California, Irvine
"[An] excellent brief presentation of Marx and his teachings, written with clarity and conciseness; up-to-date in its sources, dispassionate in its approach to [Marx] and balanced in its assessment."--Peter McConville, University of San Francisco
"Clear, concise, insightful, and even-handed."--Susan Armstrong-Buck, Humboldt State University

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It's difficult, perhaps even impossible, to summarize the prodigious output and major intellectual, socio-political and economics impact of Karl Marx in a single volume and to attempt such in a highly abbreviated work stretches credibility. Nonetheless, the topics selected for the Oxford series are of similar depth and the books are deliberately constrained to this format to make for digestible and understandable reading. Given these parameters, Peter Singer does a credible job, particularly as he attempts to factor in various biographical details, as well as summarizing Marx's work. Is this book "better" than potential competitors (such as Berlin's classic study)? Does it supplant more detailed expositions? Those are, of course, rhetorical questions but the likely answer to both is no. Perhaps there is too much emphasis on biography for such a short work. Perhaps the effort to provide context (by providing information on Hegel and other influences) distracts from the work of Marx, himself. Perhaps some deliberate elisions made by Singer (e.g., Marx on the "Jewish question") detract from the remainder of the book. Maybe the complexities inherent in a philosopher explaining another's work resulted in unneeded complexity. For whatever reason (or reasons), I found this book simultaneously more difficult and more shallow than anticipated. Given the option, I recommend Berlin's book as an introduction to to Marx and Marxism.

This is a remarkably clear introduction to the thought of Karl Marx. I was a little dubious when I picked it up (I read 3 or 4 of the Very Short Introduction books each year), since most of my knowledge of Singer is through his work either on Animal Ethics, Utilitarianism, or his critique of George W. Bush. In fact, I became a vegetarian 25 years ago after reading Singer and Gandhi at the same time. Marx, though, is a horse of a different color. I was simply not confident that he would write as well on the founder of Marxism as well as he did on practical ethics. If anything, he turned out to write even more clearly on Marx than anything else I've read. The problem with Marx is that he wrote so much, much of it in advanced draft form, that one can extract several different Marx's from his pages. It isn't that he is inconsistent that his thinking is constantly in flux as he considers one or another aspect of the issues surrounding capitalism. There truly is no final version of Marx's thought, but rather interim versions. The various books and manuscripts almost serve as commentaries on the other books and manuscripts. The trick is to extract the core of what Marx thought without unduly distorting his work as a whole and without reducing him to a caricature. Singer does a great job of highlighting major themes and trends in Marx's thought while not losing the sense of the difficult of determining with finality precisely what Marx wrote. The importance of a

book like this cannot be overstressed. Anyone who knows anything at all about Marx knows that he would have been appalled at the Communist revolutions of the twentieth century. As Singer rightly points out, Marx would unquestionably have been a victim of one of the purges. Whatever complicity Marx had with the excesses of Lenin, Stalin, and Mao is tenuous and debatable (though given that all three cited Marx as their inspiration means that Marx's responsibility for what followed can be legitimately discussed, even if he is exonerated). Not everything he wrote about Capitalism (a term he invented) has proven to be true (though a great deal that he wrote remains shockingly relevant). Those who in 1989 delightedly proclaimed that history had refuted Marx got it all wrong. The fact is that all of us today, even political and economic conservatives, have had our consciousness completely altered by Marx. Nearly all history is done today with unexamined assumptions that we took from Marx. No one would undertake a study of any historical topic without a consideration of the socio-economic factors involved. Sociology, philosophy, political science, economics, and virtually every subject one can consider has been deeply informed by Marxist ideas. Those proclaiming Marx the loser in 1989 got it all wrong: he had won way before then. He has shaped the modern mind as fully as Freud, Martin Luther, Newton, or Darwin. We think through Marxist categories, even when we oppose him. This is just one reason why it is so important to understand what he was about. There are many other very good elementary intros to Marx's thought. Robert Heilbroner's book on Marx is a great one. Ernest Mandel has an excellent short introduction to Marx's economic theory. But I would put Singer's book up there with those. If you are looking for a clear first introduction to Marx, you can do far worse than this.

A wonderfully succinct and to-the-point overview of the late Karl Marx. I'd known little of his thoughts and still more less of his life aside from the derogatory stigmas that chase him around thanks to the Marxist mutations found in the likes of Stalin and Lenin. Getting a more true to form portrait of the man and his grievances against capitalism in general alongside his concerns regarding human alienation in particular was both enjoyable and insightful. This was, in no small part, due to Singer's wise navigation through Marx's life, philosophical development, and large output of ideas. Unlike other books in this series ("A Very Short Introduction"), I was never bored or hoping that the already terse journey would come to an end. Overall: helpful, thought provoking, and enjoyable.

overall this is a good book. It is not great, in my opinion, but it is good. It is very suitable for beginners and leads the reader along nicely.

The first thing that ought to be noted is that Peter Singer's contribution to the Very Short Introduction series is really a recycling of a volume he wrote way back in 1980 for the old Past Master's series. So far as I can tell, the only revision in the book is a few changes in tense to bring this edition beyond the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was something of a shock--or at least a surprise--to realize that what I thought was a new book was in fact an old one. Notwithstanding, Singer's Marx is a very good introduction. After a brief biographical sketch of Marx--which dispels the myth of his living and dying in penury, by the way--Singer examines his early flirtation with Hegelianism, his reflections on alienation and history, and his political economy. It's in his discussion of the last two topics that Singer excels. I've found no better text for introducing concepts such as "species being" and "labor theory of value" to my undergraduate students. Singer returns to Marx's understanding of human nature and its relationship to alienating modes of production in his final chapter, "Assessment," and concludes that human nature probably isn't as pliable as Marx supposed. But it's also clear that Singer is sympathetic with Marx's critique of capitalism. A good introduction for absolute newcomers to Marx--which, these days, is probably everyone under 30.

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