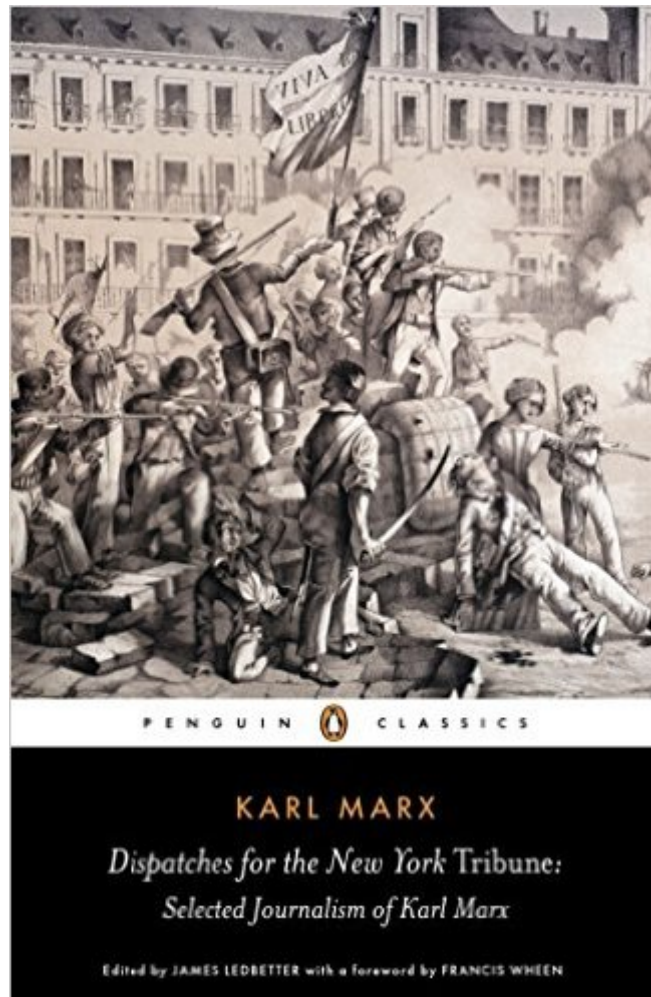


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Dispatches For The New York Tribune: Selected Journalism Of Karl Marx (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Karl Marx (1818-1883) is arguably the most famous political philosopher of all time, but he was also one of the great foreign correspondents of the nineteenth century. During his eleven years writing for the New York Tribune (their collaboration began in 1852), Marx tackled an abundance of topics, from issues of class and the state to world affairs. Particularly moving pieces highlight social inequality and starvation in Britain, while others explore his groundbreaking views on the slave and opium trades - Marx believed Western powers relied on these and would stop at nothing to protect their interests. Above all, Marx's fresh perspective on nineteenth-century events encouraged his readers to think, and his writing is surprisingly relevant today. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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These articles, on a huge range of subjects, were written and published between 1852 and 1861. The Tribune's circulation at the time was 200,000, the world's largest. There are nine articles on China, covering the British state's Opium Wars and its atrocities there. The British state produced

opium in India, forced it on China by unprovoked attacks, and then turned round and accused the Chinese of attacking Britain, with "the flimsy pretence that English life and property are endangered by the aggressive acts of the Chinese." Marx also produced nine articles on wars, revolutions and counter-revolutions in Europe, particularly Greece, Italy, Prussia and Spain. Nine articles examined events in India, mainly the 1857 revolt in India and changes in imperial finances. Marx wrote that capitalist progress "will neither emancipate nor materially mend the social condition of the mass of the people, depending not only on the development of the productive powers, but on their appropriation by the people." He showed how vicious imperial rule was, citing Lord Dalhousie, India's governor general from 1848 to 1856, "torture in one shape or other is practised by the lower subordinates in every British province." In eight articles, Marx analysed the struggles in the USA, the British government's role in the slave trade, the mill owners' and The Times' support for the slaveholding South in the American civil war. The mill workers, by contrast, supported the North and abolition, at great cost to themselves. Marx showed how the slave trade was integral to capitalism. He also produced 14 articles on British politics and society, several elections, 'a venal and reckless press', starvation and the Highland clearances, and 11 on poverty, riches and inequality, against global free trade and its promises of peace and prosperity, the financial panic of 1857 with its failing dodgy banks, and the condition of the working class.

when i was in college, i read some of marx's political and economic essays, but the ones i enjoyed the most were the historical essays, e.g. "the eighteenth brumaire of louis bonaparte". my regret, however, was that there were very few of them. in this little volume, ledbetter and wheen (the author of the best short biography of marx) have collected the dispatches written in the 1850's and '60's for the new york tribune. these cover crucial topics of nineteenth century foreign affairs, including the opium war in china, the crimean war in the near east, british politics, the credit mobilier crisis in france, the mutiny against the raj in india, and the american civil war and the british cotton trade. what could be more important? while marx's english is awkward (he had used it for only a few years), the assiduous analysis and penetrating criticism is there for all to see and read. this book is a treasure that still educates us 150 years later.

Marx always wrote as a revolutionary and as a socialist, but not necessarily as a philosopher. This volume collects some of the more accessible journalism that he wrote for the New York Tribune from 1852-61. It is divided into sections that deal with British Imperialism in China and India, the aftermath of the Revolutions of 1848, British and French Politics and Economy, and the American

Civil War. As a general rule he had two purposes in each of these articles. The first was to explain a facet of the European political scene to an American audience, and the second was to heap scorn and ridicule on the powers that be. There are at least three things that stand out about almost every one of these pieces. The first is the sheer vituperation involved. Marx heartily hated most of the people he was writing about, and he wanted his readers to hate them too. No doubt many of them deserved it. Politicians and financiers have always been rich targets for black comedy, but once the laughter has died away we are left with a fairly bleak picture of the world. It seems there are only two types of people on Marx's horizon - the rich, powerful, foolish and corrupt on the one hand, and the suffering, innocent, oppressed, and powerless on the other. It's not an especially attractive view of the world, either from an intellectual standpoint (things can't be that simple) or from a practical one (if the rich and powerful are all fools, why are they rich and powerful?) Another thing that stands out about these pieces is the author's erudition. It's clear that Marx was an immensely-learned commentator, and well-able to perceive the essential issues involved in complex political questions. Marx's articles on the causes of the American Civil War are particularly illustrative. They can be read in an hour or two, and explain the issues involved far more succinctly and accurately than many text books. The economic interpretation of history is an immensely powerful tool for interpreting complex events, and, at least to me, seems more or less self-evident. While Marx's particular system of class struggle, revolution, and economics has been shown to have been at best inadequate, and at worst total nonsense, it shouldn't require any particular strain of the intellect to understand that the prospect of making or losing money is a powerful motivation to virtually all political actors. Probably a more powerful motivation than religion, morality, freedom, "civilization," or any of the other fine phrases that have been used to cloak self-interest throughout the centuries. That's not to say that these concepts are completely meaningless - but the world would be a very different place if the great and powerful believed in them with half the conviction they show in asserting their financial interest. As a practical matter, justice and idealism usually only enter into official calculations when they can be combined with some financial or security interest. The lust of politicians for power at any cost, and through any means, has been an open secret since Machiavelli, but it remained for Marx to point out that the industrial revolution had brought financial interests to the forefront for the first time. The insight is as valid today as it was in the 1850's. The last thing that stands out about these pieces is the tone of moral indignation in which they are written. Marx amply and vividly illustrates the barbarism of European imperialism in Asia, the callous indifference of "civilized" Europeans to the massive scale of misery and want which surrounded them, the desperation of the poor, the cruel brutality of the police, and the hypocrisy and stupidity of

the great and powerful. Disraeli, Palmerston, and Napoleon III came in for particular and repeated abuse. Indeed, Marx was against pretty much all the governments of his day. The only one he had a kind word for was the Federal government of the United States, but that had more to do with its struggle against "the slavocracy" than any love of bourgeois republics as such. Rather, he saw the northern industrial economy as "historically progressive" in so much as it represented an advance as against the southern agrarian economy, and toward the inevitable future status of all industrial economies - i.e. communism. At least for me, the value of these pieces was the opportunity to listen to an eloquent exponent of 19th century radicalism as he explained his point of view on then-current events. It helped me to understand how he saw the world, and what kind of assumptions he made about it. When reading a book like this, it's hard to keep from one's mind the knowledge of how his own political philosophy turned out. It's important to remember, though - at least if one wants to give the author a fair hearing - that in the 1850's the Soviet Union hadn't happened yet. Marx couldn't have known the future, any more than you or I can. Certainly he couldn't have known that it would be used to perpetrate crimes far worse than those which he was writing about. What he was focused on wasn't the theoretical iniquities of the future, but rather the real and tangible crimes of his present. Perhaps he erred, as radicals often do, in focusing so much on removing the old regime that they fail to make adequate preparations for the new. As a general rule revolutions make things worse, rather than better - but again, at the time he wrote, that hadn't become clear yet. The great progress of his own time - that toward democracy and industrialization - had come about as a direct cause of revolution (i.e. the French Revolution.) It wasn't unreasonable to expect that the trend would continue into the future. In any case, the reader doesn't have to subscribe to Marx's weird eschatological notions of class struggle and the stateless society in order to appreciate these pieces. They capture an authentic voice from the past, and a very influential one at that. For people who really want to understand modern history, it's worth the trouble of giving him a fair hearing.

A great way to get introduced to Marx - meant for the general public, this collection of columns from the New York Herald Tribune are easy to read and we can see a great many parallels to what is going on in our world today with crisis in Syria, Ukraine, Iraq, and elsewhere.

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