Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.' So wrote Karl Marx in 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte' in 1852.

It was not a comment directed to his own life, and certainly not to his daughter Eleanor who was not born until three years later, but it well may have been.

There have been many books written about the Marx family. Until now the centrepiece of such books has been, inevitably, Karl Marx.

Because Marx represents communism it is not unexpected that various biographers will present 'facts' according to their own viewpoints. This is not a method confined to presentation of Marx's theories but also the picture drawn of his living situation.

The more orthodox biographies when dealing with his life in exile have tended to stress the great personal sacrifice of Marx, his poverty, love for his wife and children, his relationship of equality and friendship with Helene Demuth and so on. Others, not always for reasons of objectivity, have pointed out that Marx always tended to live beyond his means, even when money was plentiful. In respect to his wife Jenny and his children, stress has been laid on their sacrifice and unhappiness. The fact that two of the three Marx children who survived to adulthood died at their own hands does not escape attention. The evidence that, in the midst of real poverty, Marx, in his relationship of equality and friendship with Helene Demuth and so on. Others, not always for reasons of objectivity, have pointed out that Marx always tended to live beyond his means, even when money was plentiful. In respect to his wife Jenny and his children, stress has been laid on their sacrifice and unhappiness. The fact that two of the three Marx children who survived to adulthood died at their own hands does not escape attention.

The evidence that, in the midst of real poverty, Marx insisted on private school education plus special extras - dancing, music and French - for his two elder daughters is used to 'prove' that he was an unrepentant bourgeois and hypocrite.

As for Helene Demuth she is usually the trump card for those who want to ignore that Marx was a poor man. How could a poor man keep a servant throughout his life? And then there is the spice of scandal, Helene Demuth's illegitimate son Freddie. Some biographers ignore him, others present him as the result of an affair years after the actual birthdate, some cling to the explanation that he was Engels' son - as if this were more acceptable - while others linger over the detail.

Now we are indebted to Yvonne Kapp for the most valid book yet written of the period which covers most of the years of exile of the Marx family.

The author explains why she chose to become the biographer of the youngest child of Karl and Jenny Marx...

'the seeds of this book were curiosity, aroused by tantalising glimpses of Eleanor Marx as she flitted in and out of other people's reminiscences and letters' (postscript).

Her curiosity has resulted in an exceptionally well researched book covering the years 1855 to 1883, the year of Eleanor's birth to the year in which Karl Marx died. This volume is appropriately subtitled 'Family Life.' A second volume is in preparation covering the last 15 years of Eleanor's life when she became an activist in the British working class movement.

It may only be coincidence that this volume appears at a time when the movement for the liberation of women is demanding and producing women's histories. Eleanor is not presented, as in so many biographies of her father, only through the personal reminiscences she penned about him, but as a person in her own right and one who offers insights for many feminists. She alone of the three sisters was determined to work and became a teacher, in 1873.

Her mother, then 60, who had fought for an education and way of life for her two elder daughters so that they need not work but might marry and escape the poverty which she had suffered, was nevertheless sympathetic to Eleanor's ambitions and echoed the sentiments of many feminists 100 years later:

'I alone understand how dearly you long for work and independence, the only two things that can help one over the sorrows and cares of present-day society.' (p.147)

Eleanor was, in some respects, a path-finder, but custom and tradition and particularly family loyalty weighed heavily upon her. She was actively interested in all things political from an early age. Her memoirs confirm a happy childhood. Her education was based on readings by her father from Homer, Shakespeare, Fenimore Cooper and others. At an early age she sought to dress up as a boy and go to sea, and her interest in the American Civil War led her into writing long letters of advice to President Lincoln on the conduct of the war.

At no time was she discouraged -- rather Marx, anticipating modern educationalists, lived up to his own philosophy that 'children should educate their parents.'

It is a tribute to Karl and Jenny Marx, as Yvonne Kapp records it, that Eleanor had such happy childhood memories. The family did live mostly in poverty and to the extent that they fought for a life style which their own upbringing had led them to expect they were constantly in debt. Both parents suffered the misery of the deaths and ill-health of several of their children, and considerable ill-health themselves, but it is clear that they created a home life of love, fun and intellectual endeavor.

These years were not only the most creative years for Marx, they were the years of great class battles. At the age of 14 Eleanor visited Ireland and this visit coincided with a new upsurge in the Irish liberation movement. She and mass demonstrations of up to 200,000 people and came home a staunch supporter of Ireland's cause. She
joined demonstrations in England, helped in petition campaigns and wrote articles.

It may be useful here to consider one more 'scandal,' often repeated in respect to Marx and Engels. Some would have it that Engels in his personal relationships with both Lizzie and Mary Burns acted improperly. The fact that the man lived with first one and then the other sister without benefit of marriage is somehow considered unfit to mention. Then there are tales that Jenny Marx, being bourgeois, would have nothing to do with the Burns sisters, and that Engels, for some snobbish reason, sought to prove that they were relations of Robbie Burns.

It is clear that Marx, insensitive and self-centred, almost caused a total breach with Engels when he failed to give comfort to Engels at the time of Mary's death, but all other speculations seem to be without validity. Engels seems to have constantly stressed the Irish lineage of the Burns sisters and it seems unlikely that Jenny Marx would have trusted her 14-year-old to Lizzie for a visit to Ireland if she had regarded her as a 'fallen woman' or that she herself would have spent holidays with her.

One may only speculate as to why Engels married Lizzie the evening before her death, but in doing so he made the fact widely known and her tombstone states 'In Memory of Lydia, wife of Frederick Engels.' There is little doubt that both Engels and Marx learnt much from the Burns sisters, both factory girls, of the conditions of the working class and that their concern for Ireland was enhanced through the activities of these two women.

It was not only Ireland which developed Eleanor's political concerns. The Paris Commune of 1871 affected the whole family. Some of their dearest friends met their working class and that their concern for Ireland was early deaths of three of her children. She recognised her poor spirits and constant ill-health. It is clear that Marx, insensitive and self-centred, almost caused a total breach with Engels when he failed to give comfort to Engels at the time of Mary's death, but all other speculations seem to be without validity. Engels seems to have constantly stressed the Irish lineage of the Burns sisters and it seems unlikely that Jenny Marx would have trusted her 14-year-old to Lizzie for a visit to Ireland if she had regarded her as a 'fallen woman' or that she herself would have spent holidays with her.

In the years to follow the Commune held a central place in Eleanor's life. Amongst the political refugees in England was Lissagaray, with whom she fell in love at 17 and to whom she remained engaged for nine years. If one wants an example of Karl Marx's patriarchal authority it is in respect to this engagement. He refused to recognise it. The situation moved from crisis to crisis. The mother gave sympathy, while Marx forbade Eleanor to see her lover. Both became ill as a result, and while letters record Eleanor's pleading with Marx, at no time does she seem determined to break with him in favor of Lissagaray. One testament to this love affair remains. Lissagaray, who returned to France in 1880, is remembered as the man who provided the eye-witness history of the Commune and it was Eleanor, with Marx's encouragement and assistance, who did the translation which 'provided countless English readers with the earliest and the fullest first-hand account of embattled Paris in the days of the Commune' (p.188).

This was not the only contribution that Eleanor made to revolutionary literature. She worked partly on her father's account as a researcher, wrote articles herself and assisted to prepare many of Marx's manuscripts for publication after his death.

Many introduced to marist political economy through 'Value, Price and Profit' may not know that the text originated as an answer provided by Marx to propositions on wages posed before the General Council of the International Workingmen's Association in 1865. His answer, given as an address, was found among his papers after his death and edited by Eleanor. It was first published shortly after her own death.

The contradictory aspects of their family life are continually illustrated in this book. Their life style is a mixture of middle-class habit amidst the dire poverty caused both through revolutionary choice and considerable mismanagement. The warmth, love and freedom of spirit extended to children is contradicted by the incredible posture that Marx took in respect to his daughters when marriage was under consideration. That Marx maintained patriarchal attitudes in practice, despite his theories, is not simply illustrated in respect to his daughters, but also in respect to his wife. While his letters and various contemporary memoirs bear testimony to his loving affection for her he clearly expresses little sympathy or understanding for her poor spirits and constant ill-health.

Mrs Marx, it seems certain, was a major support for her husband despite the suffering of constant childbirth and the early deaths of three of her children. She recognised the sad fate of herself and most women because 'while the men are invigorated by the fight of the world outside, strengthened by coming face to face with the enemy, be its numbers legion, we sit at home and darn stockings.' (p.42)

In 1861, she claimed to have 'given up hope' but partly under the influence of Eleanor's interest in theatre and with her daughter's aid she wrote and had published theatrical reviews as late as 1875. Her chief concern was that Marx should be able to do his work and not have to come to terms with everyday life, but she can be forgiven for thinking at times that he might have made some 'Capital' instead of just writing about it. Yvonne Kapp's conclusion that Mrs Marx 'met uncommonly trying circumstances with more than common fortitude' (p.40) is a fair summation of her life.

There is much else one may learn of this family's life. One wonders what those who choose to see 'violence' in every stance taken by revolutionaries can make of the fact that one of the Marx children was named for Guy Fawkes. And it may be of interest to know that the man who married Karl Marx's aunt founded the Philips Lamp Company in Holland in 1891. It is certainly ironic that an enterprise of so close a relative became a classic example of the expansionist capital which was the subject of Marx's main theoretical work.

What then of the child of Helene Demuth? The facts are
set out clearly. The conclusion is that 'there can be no reasonable doubt that he was Marx's son.' Frederick De-
muth became known to Eleanor only after her own pa-
rents had died. She held to the common assumption that he
was Engels' son and once wrote critically on the ne-
gnore he had suffered, stating that people seldom
practise what they preach.

Their friendship developed in the years that followed,
but Eleanor was shocked when she learned from Engels,
on the day he died, the truth of Freddie's parentage. As
Yvonne Kapp expresses it:

'At the time of this disclosure Eleanor had been living
with a man to whom she was not married and it was un-
likely that her prudery was outraged ... If she broke down
and wept, as she is said to have done, it was not because
Marx had begotten an illegitimate son but because he had
been unkind.' (p.292)

Demuth is important not because of any scandal, since
Marx's importance in revolutionary history can neith-
er be diminished nor enhanced because he fathered Freddie,
but because he became 'the closest and most loyal friend
of Eleanor Marx when her need was greatest.' It is not im-
portant, but interesting, that Freddie's son emigrated to
Australia. He did not succeed here and returned to Eng-
land.

Yvonne Kapp has turned in an exemplary piece of research
in a highly readable book. One may find her footnotes, de-
spite her explanation for her method, irritating, but one
cannot quarrel with her concern for a factual presentation.
Where there are doubts, she says so, and she does not pre-
sent her interpretations of fact as if they also are facts.

Her achievement is that she has evoked a detailed pic-
ture of the Marx family from the point(s) of view of its
women, particularly Eleanor. The support given by all
these women, Eleanor, her two elder sisters Jenny and
Laura, her mother and Helene Demuth, was clearly a
great contribution to Marx's work. Given the times and
Marx's own family background the fact that they also
made independent contributions, in varying degrees, and
recognised that it was the position of women in society
which restricted them, provides insights into the general
condition of women and the problems they face, with all
men -- revolutionaries not excepted -- in the long struggle
to achieve their liberation.

Eleanor was only 10 when she wrote her 'confession,'
but even then she represented the ambivalence of her
sex. To the question: Your favorite virtue in a man? she
wrote 'courage,' and to the same question concerning a
woman she left it blank. Marx on the other hand listed
his answers as strength and weakness, while Engels said
of man 'to mind his own business,' and of woman 'not
to mislay things.' These answers too are revealing.

Yvonne Kapp has had a long career in journalism and
socialist politics. She has been literary editor of Vogue, a
worker for refugees from nazi persecution, researcher of
the Amalgamated Engineering Union and the transla-
tor of Brecht, Ehrenburg and the correspondence of Engels and Paul and Laura Lafargue.

Her book is, unfortunately, expensive, but the photo-
graphs included from several sources and the biography
within the biography concerning Edward Aveling with
whom Eleanor Marx lived for the last 15 years of her
life, add to its importance.

The second volume of Yvonne Kapp's biography of
Eleanor Marx will be concerned with those years. She
gives an outline of her thesis in the last paragraph of
Volume 1.

'Eleanor's union with Aveling may have been, was, dis-
astrous in the long run; his character may have been, was,
deplorable. Nonetheless, from the time her life was joined
with his, it became purposeful. She does not doubt
where she is going, she goes. Her manner, unassuming
and frank as always, now takes on authority. She has
lost none of her humor or humanity -- on the contrary,
these qualities are deeper -- but she is a women complete:
responsible, fearless and supremely capable of using her
gifts to the full in the service of her fellowmen.' (p.289)

Volume 2 is awaited with anticipation.

-- MAVIS ROBERTSON.

* For a not too exhaustive list of different biographical
works illustrating different approaches see:

'Karl Marx: A Biography,' by Heinrich Gemkow and ot-
others, Institute of Marxism-Leninism, GDR, English

'Karl Marx: The Passionate Logician,' by Joel Carmi-
chael, Rapp and Whiting, 1968.

'To the Finland Station,' by Edmund Wilson, W. H. Al-
len, 1940, and Fontana editions after 1960.

'The Life and Teaching of Karl Marx,' by John Lewis,

'Karl Marx: His Life and Work,' by Otto Ruhle, origi-
nally published in German in 1928, English editions,
Viking Press, 1929-43.

'Karl Marx,' by Werner Blumenberg, originally published
in German in 1962, English edition, New Left Books, Lon-
don, 1972.
This book is the product of disillusionment -- disillusionment with the version of Marxism promulgated by the Communist Party of Australia for years past. 'It was once considered that capitalism would be overthrown because of the poverty of the majority,' writes Eric Aarons. 'But the fact is that, for large sections of the people, capitalism has "flourished" materially and this may well be an even greater reason for its overthrow, for its appalling emptiness in terms of human values becomes increasingly evident when seen against the background of its relatively luxuriant material growth.' (p.61).

The doctrine of economic reductionism has disappointed its supporters: '... The conception was that if the economy in particular was decisively changed, human relations and values would more or less follow suit as desired, since they were secondary and derivative. But today, while these issues (questions of ownership, economic exploitation, and political power) are no less pressing, it is increasingly apparent that the approach which places all emphasis on them cannot provide adequate motivation or sustain commitment, that it no longer stirs the blood and fires the mind.' (p.125).

Eric Aarons does not examine the precise relationship of the doctrines of economic reductionism and mass impoverishment to Marxist theory. In fact, he assumes that they are Marxist theory, and thus reaches the conclusion that Marxism cannot give an adequate account of the world today. Aarons' view of what Marxism is all about has evidently not changed since his Stalinist days. What has changed is his attitude towards it -- then he was satisfied with it, now he is not.

But far from being Marxism, the doctrines of economic reductionism and the view that revolution would follow automatically from poverty have traditionally been regarded by the great Marxists as serious misunderstandings.

They provoked Marx to his famous 'I am not a Marxist!' outburst. Engels warned his followers about these 'dangerous friends' of Marxism, and Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci, Mao and Althusser have all made similar statements.

Eric Aarons does not see the doctrine of economic reductionism as fundamentally incorrect, however. Rather, it is limited and inadequate; really it is all just a matter of emphasis. The old emphasis on objective, economic conditions now needs to be complemented by a new emphasis on inner, subjective conditions.

The outcome of this approach is not to eliminate the original error, but to compound it with another one. The result is eclecticism, confusion and inconsistency. At times Aarons adopts a position of idealism, of cultural reductionism. At one point he quotes with approval this passage from Talcott Parsons, high priest of bourgeois sociology: 'Moral standards constitute, as the focus of the evaluative aspect of the common culture, the core of the stabilising mechanisms of the system of social interactions.' (p.32).

Yet in all this confusion, there is an implicit structure and function. The 'materialist' components are subordinate to the idealist ones: the latter define the central concerns of the book, the former provide continuity with the past. Concern with economic conditions and the like was valid in the past, but now that capitalism has solved its economic problems, a new subjectivity is the order of the day -- this approach both legitimates the errors of the past, and paves the way for new ones.

The focus today, now that the 'economic problem' (poverty) has been overcome, must be on capitalism's 'appalling emptiness in terms of human values.' Capitalism is evidently not an intrinsically self-destructive system -- as Marx had argued -- but an immoral one, to be judged in ethical terms. Marxism is accordingly demoted from a science to a humanist ethic: 'Marxism regards man as the highest being, as the only subject in a world of objects, so that anything that demeans or diminishes him should be overthrown -- exploitation, privilege, alienation, servility, loss of human community. The central ethical command is to struggle to overthrow such conditions and to have confidence in the efficacy of human action to that end.' (p.39). Marxist humanism replaces the class-struggle with the moral development of (unitary) 'mankind.'

This approach defines both the problems Aarons deals with in his book, and the answers to them. We are dealing with the moral problems facing humanity as a whole, not the petty problems of history and social structure which preoccupied Marx, and old-fashioned, traditional Marxists. We are dealing with nothing less than the relation between Man and Nature (including, of course, Man's Nature) -- what else could the great problems of the day be, from this perspective, but ecology and alienation respectively? Further, given the plane on which the question was posed, what answer is possible, other than a call for a new set of values, a new philosophy -- a call for moral reformation? We must take a new attitude to nature, seeking to harmonise with it rather than dominate it. We must take a new attitude to people, seeking to behave in an authentic, human way, avoiding stereotyped artificial behavior, etc. Warm empathy must replace cold rationalism. At this point 'Marxism' collapses into all the familiar themes of romantic denunciations of modernity, currently so fashionable, and becomes useless for revolutionaries. Thus, when Aarons does discuss some contemporary issues (the great ecology scare, worker's control, women's liberation) he has depressingly little to say about them. He is content to unearth the single common essence of 'new values' behind the diverse phenomena.

Engrossed in his great moral drama, Aarons forgets con-
crete history. In a book devoted to updating Marxism, there is no discussion of the history of the socialist movement. Although he is in fact reacting against Stalinism, there is no discussion of this phenomenon — only an oblique reference to "... the restrictive influence of what is thought to be the "correct" position ... on those involved in a certain tradition ..." (p.110). Nor is there any explanation of how capitalism has achieved the miracle of solving its economic problems. Here the closest we come is this passage: "The dynamics of capitalism and its cycle have ... changed in complex ways from the period when accumulation of capital depended primarily on restricting, to the almost physical minimum, the consumption of the workers, this being aided by mass unemployment. Today, although the rich are enriching themselves at a still greater rate, the consumption of the people plays a very important part in the calculations of the employers and the State." (p.23). One would have liked a little more detail — especially in the midst of a recession, with the international monetary system teetering on the brink of collapse, all of which would seem to indicate that there is more than living standards involved in the contradictions of capitalism. One would also have liked some detail on imperialism, militarism and under-development. Certainly, this would have been better than re-hashing Malthusian population theory!

What are the practical consequences of all this? Quite simply that attempts to wage the class-struggle as effectively as possible, hopefully culminating in the overthrow of the capitalist class and the seizure of power by the working class, are to be replaced by endless, fruitless appeals to "the conscience of humanity" (i.e., to nothing). No concrete strategy emerges from 'Philosophy for an Exploding World' except reliance on 'good-will' in general. Under present circumstances, that can only be an appeal to the good-will of the existing ruling class — and surely Eric Aarons can see how futile that is.

— KELVIN ROWLEY.

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-- David Martin, The Age, Melbourne.

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