

Reflections on Sven-Eric Liedman's Marx-Biography "A World to Win: The Life and Works of Karl Marx"

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Abstract: The English translation of Sven-Eric Liedman's Marx-biography *A World to Win: The Life and Works of Karl Marx* was published two weeks before Marx's bicentenary. This article presents reflections on Liedman's book and asks how one should best write biographically about Marx. The paper compares Liedman's biography to the Marx-biographies written by Jonathan Sperber (*Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life*) and Gareth Stedman-Jones (*Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*). A biography is a way of repeating a person's life, works and age in a process of reconstruction and retelling. The question that arises is how to write a biography as a dialectical text.

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1. Introduction

Sven-Eric Liedman is professor emeritus of the history of ideas at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. He published his first Swedish book on Marx in 1968. It was focused on the young Marx. Fifty years later, Verso published his Marx-biography *A World to Win: The Life and Works of Karl Marx*. The book was first released in Swedish under the title *Karl Marx: en biografi* (*Karl Marx: A Biography*) in 2015. Jeffrey N. Skinner translated it from Swedish to English.

The English version of Liedman's biography was published eighteen days before a very special occasion: May 5, 2018, marks Karl Marx's bicentenary. As a consequence, lots of public attention is given to Marx's works and life in 2018, including new academic publications, novels, events, conferences, exhibitions, documentaries, films, monuments, discussions, reports on television and radio and in newspapers and magazines; memes, hashtags (#Marx200, #KarlMarx, #Marx) and postings on social media, etc. New Marx-biographies published in 2018, such as Sven-Eric Liedman's *World to Win: The Life and Thought of Karl Marx*, are therefore likely to receive significant attention.

Writings on Marx can broadly be categorised into introductions to his theory, updates of his works in respect to contemporary society, and biographies. Marx's collected works amount to 50 volumes in the English *Marx & Engels Collected Works*, 44 volumes in the German *Marx-Engels-Werke*, and 114 volumes in the ongoing publication of the German *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA²). Given such a voluminous oeuvre, it is a challenge to write about Marx. Updates of Marx's theory for 21st-century society necessarily have to limit themselves to specific aspects. Introductory works either have to provide brief introductions to a body of works (see for example Heinrich 2012) or have to focus on more in-depth discussions of specific works such as *Capital*

(see for example Harvey 2010; 2013; Fuchs 2016a) or *Grundrisse* (see for example Choat 2016; Negri 1991; Rosdolsky 1977). Given that Marx worked on a general theory of capitalism, it is possible to engage with his works without always discussing details of his life.

2. Jonathan Sperber's and Gareth Stedman Jones' Marx-Biographies

Writing Marx-biographies poses a different set of challenges. Given the political nature of Marx's life and works, it is not really possible to disentangle the discussion of his personal life from his writings, his political activities and the political and historical context. They need to be treated as a differentiated, dialectical unity that forms a biographical whole. Marx's works on critical political economy, society, politics and philosophy formed an integral aspect of his life. The personal situation of Marx and his family and political developments influenced his writings. But Marx-biographies do not always live up to the need of presenting Marx in such a dialectical manner, where intellectual works and personal and political life form a differentiated and integrated totality. Francis Wheen's (1999) widely acclaimed *Karl Marx* presents Marx's life without going into any detail of his works. In recent years, the two most widely read and discussed Marx-biographies have been Jonathan Sperber's (2013) *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* and Gareth Stedman Jones' (2016) *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*. Both books illustrate the problems of bourgeois Marx-biographies.

Sperber's (2013) goal is to put Marx in "his nineteenth-century context" (Ibid., xviii). He thinks that the study of Marx's ideas in themselves and Marxist theory are "useless pastimes" (Ibid., xviii). Consequentially, Sperber's book focuses much more on Marx's life than his works. And insofar as he engages with Marx's writings, the presentation remains extremely superficial and incomplete. For example, Sperber argues in Chapter Eleven (titled "The Economist") that Marx's economic theory is "framed by five conceptual distinctions" (Ibid., 427): use-value/exchange-value, exchange/accumulation, labour/labour-power, constant capital/variable capital, rate of surplus-value/rate of profit. But one can add many more dialectical relations that Marx focused on: concrete labour/abstract labour, simple form of value/expanded form of value, commodity/money, worker/means of production, necessary labour-time/surplus labour-time, single worker/collective worker, absolute/relative surplus-value production, formal/real subsumption, relations of production/productive forces, etc. (Fuchs 2016a). And these dialectics are not static, but result in sublations that constitute capitalism's dynamics and crisis-tendencies. But in Sperber's account, the dialectic is barely mentioned.

The goal of Stedman Jones' (2016) biography is to "pay as much attention to Marx's thought as to his life" because Marx's writings stand in "particular political and philosophical contexts" (Ibid., xv). But Stedman Jones' readings and interpretations of Marx are too superficial and not up to the standards of Marxian scholarship (see Fuchs 2016b for a more detailed discussion). To give just one of many examples, Stedman Jones (2016, 394) claims that the *Grundrisse*'s "[m]ention of wage labour was also sparse and unspecific". But the term "wage labour" is in the English Penguin-edition of *Grundrisse* used 163 times, Marx along with the category of surplus-value introduces the one of surplus labour, analyses capitalism's class contradiction as the one between capital on the one side and labour as "the real *not-capital*" on the other side (Marx 1857/58, 274), anticipates that in a free society the "measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather disposable time" (Ibid., 708), etc. What remains is a biography that is much more substantial in presenting Marx's life than works. Stedman Jones fails to achieve his self-set task of presenting the unity of Marx's thought and life. The reason why his Marx-biography is relatively successful has less

to do with its quality and more with the fact that Penguin-books tend to sell independent of their content because of this publisher's reputation and marketing efforts.

Sperber's and Stedman Jones' books share the approach of presenting Marx as a thinker whose influence and works are limited to the nineteenth century. Stedman Jones (2016, 5) writes that his aim is "to put Marx back in his nineteenth-century surroundings". Sperber (2013) claims that "Marx's life, his systems of thought, his political strivings and aspirations, belonged primarily to the nineteenth century" (Ibid., xviii), that Marx is "more a figure of the past than a prophet of the present" (Ibid., xix), and that one must see "Marx in his contemporary context, not ours" (Ibid., xx). Both authors historicise Marx based on an undialectical concept of history that conceives of history as closed and bounded process and disregards the fact that Marx simultaneously worked out an analysis of capitalism in general, capitalism's genesis and contradictory development logic, and 19th-century reality.

Sperber and Stedman Jones reproduce one of the most widely held prejudices against Marx, namely that his theory is outdated and has no relevance in 21st-century society. Terry Eagleton (2011, 1-11) argues that the claim of Marx's obsolescence is the first of ten common prejudices about Marx. He asks: "What if it were not Marxism that is outdated but capitalism itself? [...] There is thus something curiously static and repetitive about this most dynamic of all historical regimes. The fact that its underlying logic remains pretty constant is one reason why the Marxist critique of it remains largely valid" (Ibid., 9-10). Marx's categories are not limited to 19th-century capitalism, but invite their appropriation and development for the analysis of 21st-century capitalism based on a dialectic of historical continuity and change (Fuchs and Monticelli 2018).

3. Sven-Eric Liedman and Franz Mehring

By explaining "not only who Marx was in his time, but why he remains a vital source of inspiration today" (Liedman 2018, xii) and taking into account "the last few decades of intensive research concerning the *Grundrisse* and in particular *Capital*" (xi), Liedman takes an approach that is qualitatively different from Sperber and Stedman Jones. He conceives of history and biography not as closed, but open-ended, dialectical process. The book is comprised of 14 chapters on a total of 627 pages. It starts by not just setting out Marx's early years, but that he was "a child of the French Revolution 1789" and of "the Industrial Revolution" (21). And the biography does not simply end with Marx's death because Liedman is convinced that Marx's critical theory will continue to be relevant at least as long as capitalism exists. Liedman describes Marx's death in chapter 14, but the same chapter describes the history of Marx's theory in the 20th century by presenting both orthodox and unorthodox Marxian approaches. Liedman's book ends by saying that Marx "lives on as the great critic of capitalism", who presents "a possible utopia for our time as well" (627) and whose "entire toolbox of critical instruments" (625) continues to "inspire topical criticism of capitalism's latest achievements, the failings of politics, and the genuflection of the contemporary world of ideas before a fetish like the market" (626) so that Marx attracts "the people of the twenty-first" century (626).

One of the strengths of Sven-Eric Liedman's book is that he provides thorough introductions to Marx's works that he contextualises in Marx's life and politics, history, societies' development at the time of Marx, and the contradictions of capitalism. It shares the same methodological approach as Franz Mehring (2003/1918) uses in the Marx-biography *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life* that was published on the occasion of Marx's centenary in 1918. One hundred years later, on the occasion of Marx's bicen-

tenary, Liedman without a doubt published the 21st century's thus far best Marx-biography. Mehring's work was certainly the best Marx's biography available at the time of Marx's centenary. Mehring was together with the likes of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht a member of the group of people, who in 1914 in light of the Social Democratic Party of Germany's agreement to war credits founded the Gruppe Internationale that became the Spartacus League in 1916 and in December 1918 the Communist Party of Germany. Mehring knew Engels and Marx's daughter Laura. Rosa Luxemburg contributed a chapter on *Capital's* volumes 2 and 3 to his Marx-biography. Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* were first published in German in 1932. His *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* was (except for the famous introduction that Marx published in 1844 in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*) first released in German in 1927. In 1918, the part of the *German Ideology* that focuses on Feuerbach had not-yet been published. Marx's *Grundrisse* were first published in 1939-1941. Mehring's introduction to Marx's works and life was at the height of the time of Marx's centenary, but could not take into account important works that were unpublished at that time. One hundred years later, Sven-Eric Liedman provides a successful update that stands in the Mehring's tradition of writing Marx's biography based on a dialectic of intellectual works and personal and societal life.

Liedman devotes 28 pages to the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (Chapter 5, 133-160) and 24 pages to the *German Ideology* (172-196). He rejects Althusser's claim that there is an epistemological break between the young and the older Marx, but stresses at the same time the concepts such as alienation underwent some change in Marx's works. Marx shows in the *German Ideology* that consciousness "is inseparable from matter from the very beginning. Spirit is also directly linked to language, without which no intellectual communication or development is possible" (194). The *German Ideology* grounded the "materialist concept of history" (196). Liedman traces and documents the influence of Hegel's dialectical philosophy on Marx's works. Chapter 7 (219-266) situates the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* in the context of the revolutionary times of 1848/1849.

4. Capital and Grundrisse

Capital and *Grundrisse* are arguably two of Marx's most important works, which is why Liedman devotes 54 pages that form Chapter 10 to *Grundrisse* and the 72-page long Chapter 11 to *Capital*. In comparison, David McLellan (2006) in the fourth edition of *Karl Marx: A Biography* discusses the *Grundrisse* on seventeen pages (Ibid., 272-288) and *Capital* on sixteen pages (Ibid., 308-325).

Liedman's focus is on the text, context and prospects of these crucial writings. The basic distinction of answers to the question how *Grundrisse* and *Capital* relate to each other is one between those who see *Grundrisse* as a mere fragment and preparatory work that came to fruition in *Capital* and those who treat *Grundrisse* as an original work in itself that resisted the Soviet canonisation and orthodoxy of Marx built around *Capital*. Liedman's reading dialectically mediates both positions: "The *Grundrisse* points forward to *Capital*, but also contains much else that bears witness to Marx's entire multifarious world of ideas. It is both a preparatory work and a work in itself" (394).

Liedman's presentation of the *Grundrisse* focuses especially on the dialectic of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption; the difference between the *Grundrisse* (written in 1857/58) and *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (published in 1859) ("The *Grundrisse* is an adventure in reading. *A Contribution* is a

walk among a number of well-groomed concepts”: 380-381), forms which precede capitalism (with a special focus on the notion of the Asiatic mode of production and the transition to capitalism), work in capitalism and the realm of freedom.

Capital's three volumes are with their more than 2,000 pages simply too extensive in order to be covered in detail in any introduction to Marx's life and works. So for example, the *Marx-Engels-Werke* edition of *Capital* consists of 2,213 pages, excluding endnotes, indexes and the tables of content (Volume 1: 802 pages, Volume 2: 518 pages, Volume 3: 893 pages). Liedman provides a reasonable approach by focusing besides the book's context on *Capital's* structure, the commodity, concrete and abstract labour, money, commodity fetishism, surplus-value, constant and variable capital, the formula of capital, machinery, the circulation of capital, departments I and II, the transformation problem, the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, fictitious capital, crises, the trinity formula, and classes. Chapter 11 furthermore provides a brief overview of some of the interpretations of *Capital*. Liedman stresses in respect to *Capital* again the influence of Hegel's dialectics on Marx. He argues that *Capital* is based on the dialectics of essence and appearance, form and content, surface and depth.

5. Marx and Engels

Liedman gives special attention to the intellectual and personal relationship of Marx and Engels (125-131; 467-525). He shows that it is a mistake to assume that only Engels was interested in natural science and that Engels is to blame for the vulgar interpretation of Marxian dialectics. Marx himself engaged in in-depth studies of not just languages, philosophy, literature, economics, history, technology and anthropology, but also of the natural sciences and mathematics. The communist chemist Carl Schorlemmer was not just a friend of both Marx and Engels, but also influenced both intellectually. Also the chemist August Wilhelm von Hofmann's lectures in London influenced Marx's thinking. Liedman stresses that Marx based on insights from the natural sciences thought of development as transition from quantity into new qualities and processes of emergence. But it is clear that although nature and society are linked through human production, they are not one and the same because human work constitutes the *Aufhebung* of nature in society. So there is also an emergent leap between nature and society (Fuchs 2006).

Liedman argues that the schematic, orthodox, dogmatic interpretation of the dialectic was based on a reductionist interpretation of Engels' *Dialectics of Nature* and *Anti-Dühring* that disregarded that Engels spoke of the spiral form of development as the fourth dimension of the dialectic and focused on three dialectical laws. Liedman stresses that the three dialectical laws (the contradiction, the transition from quantity to quality, the negation of the negation) became a dogma, “but it can safely be said that no one has been drawn to the tradition from Marx, or even Engels, owing to these laws. They have become an extra burden that can only be defended with all sorts of more or less sophistic reasoning” (499). Both the orthodoxies of Stalinism and the reformist strand in the Second International were built on the interpretation of society's development as deterministic natural law of history that disregarded the dialectical difference between nature and society and therefore Marx's insight into the dialectics of agency and structures and of chance and necessity in society that he summarised in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: “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” (Marx 1852, 103).

Liedman does not mention that Stalin (1938) in his infamous catechism *Dialectical*

and Historical Materialism that was published in the Soviet “short course” on Bolshevism does not consider the negation of the negation and sublation (*Aufhebung*) as dialectical principles operating in society, but rather presents society as governed by natural laws. The same is true of Mao’s (1937) *On Contradiction*. Stalin and Mao reduced the dialectic in society to one natural law, the law of contradiction. “The law of contradiction in things, that is, the law of the unity of opposites, is the fundamental law of nature and of society and therefore also the fundamental law of thought” (Mao 1937, 311). As a consequence, it became possible to argue that the USSR and China had overcome capitalism and based on the “process of development from the lower to the higher” (Stalin 1938, 109) therefore constituted “a Socialist system” (Ibid., 119). Therefore, anyone questioning the socialist character of the Soviet or Chinese system or the authority of Stalin and Mao was considered a counter-revolutionary. The reductionist interpretation of the dialectic turned into an ideological method for justifying terror.

The dogmatic Stalinist dialectic dominated Soviet-inspired philosophy. Two examples shall illustrate this circumstance. In 1937, the Leningrad Institute of Philosophy’s (1937) *Textbook of Marxist Philosophy* in line with Stalin defined “the law of unity and conflict of opposites” as “the basic law of dialectic” (1937, 152), whereas the negation of the negation was denied separate relevance by being reduced to “one of the concrete forms of manifestation of the law of the unity of opposites” (Ibid., 359). Manfred Buhr and Georg Klaus argued in the *Philosophical Dictionary* of the German Democratic Republic that the negation of the negation “is not the fundamental law of the dialectic” (1964, 381). Against orthodox interpretations of Marx, Liedman stresses the heterodox approaches of for example Rosa Luxemburg, Ernst Bloch, Antonio Gramsci, Georg Lukács, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor W. Adorno, the Praxis Group, Agnes Heller, or Karel Kosík.

We need to think of the dialectic as complex and open process. The dialectic is the absolute recoil that posits its own preconditions (Žižek 2014). Self-reference and self-constitution as processes in which something returns into itself as something different that constitutes a new positive difference that makes a difference can only occur because the dialectic is a fire that needs to burn. The dialectical fire extinguishes a contradiction and thereby itself. This extinguishment is at the same time a self-kindling of the dialectic and the kindle of a new fire, in which the old is sublated as the new and constitutes a new contradiction. The dialectic is the absolute recoil in and through being a fire that continuously extinguishes and kindles itself. In society, human praxis is the dialectical fire of social change.

6. The General Intellect and Nationalism

Only a reader lacking intellectual depth will completely agree with all that is written in a particular book. So the present reader also identifies some shortcomings of Liedman’s *A World to Win*, of which two shall be mentioned.

Liedman discusses that Marx in the *Grundrisse* points out that in communism, work “must also become general” so that the individual becomes a “universally knowledgeable specialist” (392). But he misses to explicitly mention the concept of the general intellect and the importance of the notion of fixed capital in the *Grundrisse*. As a consequence, Liedman claims at the end of his book that “Marx underestimated the ability of capitalism to integrate new technologies” (617) and that he did not “imagine the third [technological] revolution – of electronics and biotechnology” (618). But when Marx writes in the *Grundrisse* that the “development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a direct force of production” (Marx 1857/58,

706), then he anticipates the emergence of a knowledge economy that is based on the technological revolution brought about by computing and microelectronics.

The Grundrisse's "Fragment on Machines" has influenced Marxist debates on technology and knowledge and should therefore form an essential part in an introduction to the *Grundrisse* (see Fuchs 2016a, 360-375). Marx sees the importance of science and knowledge in production emerging from the capitalist development of the productive forces that increases productivity in order to try to maximise profits. At a certain stage, the increasing role of science and knowledge's role in capitalism turns from quantity into the new quality of a knowledge economy as distinct mode of the organisation of labour and capital within capitalism, but at the same time creates new antagonistic forms.

Liedman argues that Marx "had not paid sufficient attention to the irrational sides of human life" (621), that "[h]e and his fellow thinkers did not see that nationalism was just as natural an element in modern society as its opposite, internationalism" (Ibid.), and that he was "blind to the nationalist overtones in the Second French Empire" (Ibid.).

Kevin B. Anderson (2016) shows in his meticulous study *Marx at the Margins. On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* that "Marx's critique of capitalism" is "far broader than is usually supposed. [...] he expended considerable time and energy on the analysis of non-Western societies, as well as that of race, ethnicity, and nationalism" (Ibid., 237). "Marx's theorization of nationalism, ethnicity, and class culminated in his 1869-70 writings on Ireland" (Ibid., 243). It is also not true that Marx disregarded the role of nationalism in Napoleon III's French Second Empire (1852-1870).

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx (1852) uses the term *Bonapartism* for analysing Napoleon III's dictatorial rule. Napoleon III staged a coup d'état and gained power in 1851. A feature of Bonapartism is that "the state seem[s] to have made itself completely independent" (Marx 1852, 186). In *The Civil War in France*, Marx argues that nationalism forms an important feature of Bonapartism at the ideological level: Bonapartism "professed to save the working class by breaking down Parliamentarism, and, with it, the undisguised subserviency of Government to the propertied classes. It professed to save the propertied classes by upholding their economic supremacy over the working class; and, finally, it professed to unite all classes by reviving for all the chimera of national glory" (Marx 1871, 330).

Marx stresses the role of nationalism as ideology that constructs a fictive national ethnicity in order to deflect political attention from the class contradiction. In the age of Donald Trump and new nationalisms, Marx's insights into nationalism form important foundations of a critical theory of nationalism and authoritarian capitalism (Fuchs 2018). Consider the following passage, in which Marx in 1870 analysed the role of ideology in distracting attention from class struggle and benefiting the ruling class:

"Ireland is the BULWARK of the *English landed aristocracy*. The exploitation of this country is not simply one of the main sources of their material wealth; it is their greatest *moral power*. [...] And most important of all! All industrial and commercial centres in England now have a working class *divided* into two *hostile* camps, English PROLETARIANS and Irish PROLETARIANS. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who forces down the STANDARD OF LIFE. In relation to the Irish worker, he feels himself to be a member of the *ruling nation* and, therefore, makes himself a tool of his aristocrats and capitalists *against Ireland*, thus strengthening their domination *over himself*. He harbours religious, social and national prejudices against him. [...] This antagonism is kept artificially alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit,

the comic papers, in short by all the means at the disposal of the ruling class. *This antagonism is the secret of the English working class's impotence, despite its organisation. It is the secret of the maintenance of power by the capitalist class. And the latter is fully aware of this*" (Marx 1870, 473; 474; 475; compare also Marx 1869).

Isn't Marx here precisely describing elements that are at the heart of today's new nationalisms? Nationalism's ideological separation of the working class into autochthonous workers and immigrant workers as two hostile camps, the strengthening of capital's power over labour through nationalism, the role of the media in the ideological spread of nationalist sentiments, nationalism as the exertion of the capitalist class' ideological power, etc.

7. Conclusion

Despite certain imprecisions in its conclusions, there is no doubt that Sven-Eric Liedman's (2018) *A World to Win: The Life and Works of Karl Marx* is a major achievement: It provides an excellent biographical account that dialectically integrates the presentation of (personal and societal) life and Marx's works. Two hundred years after Marx's birth, Sven-Eric Liedman renews the practice of dialectical Marx-biographies that was started on the occasion of Marx's centenary in 1918 by Franz Mehring's *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life*.

Recently, debates on Marx-biographies have often taken on the following typical form:

A: "What's the best newer Marx-biography that I should read? I heard about Gareth Stedman Jones' *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* and Jonathan Sperber's *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life*. Can you recommend these books? Which one should I read?"

B: "They are both bourgeois crap. Don't read any of the two".

A: "But what newer Marx-biography written in the 21st century should I then read? Which one do you recommend?"

Sven-Eric Liedman's main achievement is that answering the latter question has now become possible.

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