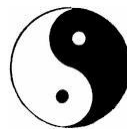


*Two Centuries of Karl Marx Biographies:  
An Overview*

by Angelo Segrillo

LEA Working Paper Series  
No. 4, March 2019



LEA WORKING PAPER SERIES  
Laboratório de Estudos da Ásia (LEA)  
History Department  
University of São Paulo  
Brazil

## **TWO CENTURIES OF KARL MARX BIOGRAPHIES: AN OVERVIEW<sup>1</sup>**

Angelo Segrillo<sup>2</sup>

There is extensive literature about Marx's *works*. But there is one kind of bibliographic assessment that has not yet been made: an overview of the books written about Marx's *life*. That is what I propose to initiate here.<sup>3</sup>

The beginning of the twenty-first century is a good observation point for such a task. Not only do we have a retrospective view of the nineteenth century — when Marxist socialism was only a theoretical vision — but we also experienced the so-called real socialism in the twentieth century, its (partial, but significant) collapse at the end of the century and now we live in an admirable and ironic new “post-Berlin Wall” world in which “socialism is over,” but the most dynamic core of the world economy (with the possibility of soon having the largest GDP in the world) is ... a socialist country: China. It is interesting to see how the various biographies about Marx, and their projected vision of this thinker, were affected by the climate of the times in which the biographers lived themselves through all these different historical experiences.

A question arises right from the start: are there many biographies on Marx? I believe that most people (even those familiar with Marxism) would hesitate, in doubt about this question. And the answer is: it depends on the definition we use for “biography.” Karl Marx is one of the most studied thinkers and there is a myriad of books about him and his work. However, “biography” is a study of the “life” of an author, not necessarily about his work. Of course, especially with Marx, it is difficult to separate the author's life from his work. But this differentiation is important so that we can sort out the biographies (*stricto sensu*) of this character from the huge amount of books that exist about his theory and works.

The task becomes more complex because of the existence of the so-called intellectual biographies. They are books that may describe (usually in a brief manner) biographical aspects of Marx's life, but focus primarily on the formation and development of his thought and works. The most famous of these intellectual biographies was written by the philosopher Isaiah Berlin in 1939: *Karl Marx: His Life and*

---

<sup>1</sup> This is the second modified and updated version of Angelo Segrillo's article “Karl Marx: um balanço biográfico” published in Portuguese in the Brazilian journal *Estudos Ibero-Americanos* (vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 601-611, Sept.-Dec. 2017). We thank the editors of *Estudos Ibero-Americanos* for the permission to reproduce the content here. This essay will also appear as a chapter (pages 11-32) in the book *Karl Marx and Russia* which can be read online at <http://lea.vitis.uspnet.usp.br/arquivos/karlmarxandrussia.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Angelo Segrillo is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Sao Paulo (Brazil) and author of *Karl Marx: uma biografia dialética* (Curitiba: Prismas/Appris, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> A review of Marx's biographies can be seen in Goller (2007), but it only covers the works published until 1938. In this review, I will focus on the specific biographies of Marx individually. There are a number of other interesting biographies of Marx with other people but, for reasons of space, they will not be analyzed here, for example, the biography of the couple Karl and Jenny Marx in Gabriel (2013) and the combined biography of Marx and Engels in Cornu (1955-1970). In addition, there are biographies about people close to Marx that also help to illuminate the life of the German thinker, such as Jenny Marx's biography by F. Giroud (1992) or Marx's great-grandson's writings about him in Longuet (1997). Although they fall outside the scope of this article, they may be of interest to readers and researchers.

*Environment*.<sup>4</sup> A few intellectual biographies practically omit the factual part of Marx's life, being devoted almost exclusively to the analysis (of the evolution) of his thought. This is the case of the book *Karl Marx*, written by the German theorist Karl Korsch in 1938.

Thus, if we count the so-called intellectual biographies, there is a considerable number of biographies of Marx. Not to mention various other types of “frontier” works, such as commemorative political texts describing or discussing aspects of Marx’s life (for example, *Karl Marx und Sein Lebenswerk* by the German Communist leader Klara Zetkin in 1913). But if we adopt a *stricto sensu* definition of biography as being primarily devoted to Marx’s *life*, and moreover, fulfilling the academic demands of rigorous use and referencing of primary sources and original documents that validate what is being narrated, then the number is more limited. With some exceptions, we might even say that this kind of biography with strict referencing of primary sources for events in Marx's life is a relatively new phenomenon, from the second half of the twentieth century onward. Marx's earliest biographies in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century were more adequate when referencing his theoretical side — indicating the textual sources of their quoted passages, for example — but they were far less rigorous in describing the events of Marx's life, often using knowledge obtained via oral accounts by contemporaries or assuming that certain broadly disseminated versions of past events were true. In the second half of the twentieth century there appeared biographies such as those of David McLellan (1973, considered by many the best and most complete to date), Francis Wheen (1999), Jonathan Sperber (2013) and Gareth Stedman Jones (2016) which perfectly meet the strictest academic requirements for a biographical work from an historical point of view.

In this article, I will give an overview of how this differentiated mosaic of books that took the form of biographies of Marx appeared, showing the peculiar characteristics adopted by some of the most important biographers when describing the Moor. “Moor” was Marx's nickname among his adult friends and family due to the color of his skin.

Marx died on March 14, 1883. In 1885, the first biography (description of life) of that thinker was published in Leipzig. It was *Karl Marx: Eine Studie* by the professor of political economy of the University of Vienna, Gustav Gross. This first attempt foreshadowed the difficulties of separating the life of the Moor from his work. As the title itself denotes (“Karl Marx: a study”), the book, although narrating aspects of the Moor’s life in chronological order, mainly comments on his works. The author himself announced in the preface that the life of the German thinker was not known in detail and that he was not the person best suited to narrate it in depth. According to him the appropriate people for the task would be the executors of Marx's literary will: Engels and Eleanor (one of the Moor’s daughters). In the absence of biographies by them, his work might perhaps be useful. He announced that his goal was to comment on and elucidate aspects not so well known in Marx's work. It is important to note that this first biography was not written by a Marxist but rather by a liberal: Gustav Gross had an active political career in this field. In the preface, Gross (1885, p. VI) promised his “subjective preferences to suppress and keep criticism to a minimum.” Throughout the book, Gross attempts to describe Marx's actions and ideas in the most “objective” way possible, that

---

<sup>4</sup> The books mentioned in this article are listed in the BIBLIOGRAPHY at the end of the text.

is, in the way Marx himself exposed them and only after, and occasionally, criticize them from a liberal point of view.

This first biography foreshadowed the difficulty of future biographers to dwell on the description of the Moor's life without almost automatically jumping to the side of the “intellectual” biography, that is, a work of discussion of Marx's ideas. The controversial and combative character of the Marxian thought made it difficult to have an indifferent, “neutral” description of his ideas.

Another characteristic that this first biographical work evinced was the tendency of Marx's life to be described based on testimonies and notions passed orally through time (mainly in socialist circles) rather than on real research of primary sources and written documents. Most early biographies of Marx (say, up to the middle of the twentieth century) follow this general pattern. *Stricto sensu* biographies centered on Marx's life (not on his work) and using painstaking historical research from primary sources are characteristic of the second half of the twentieth century, with works such as those by David Mclellan, Francis Wheen, Jonathan Sperber, and Gareth Stedman Jones.

As previously mentioned, Marx's first “biography” was written by a non-Marxist. This situation could not last long or Marxism would risk “losing the race” for the memory of the Moor. Thus, soon a heavyweight from the Marxist camp prepared a book in this vein. In 1896, Wilhelm Liebknecht published his *Karl Marx zum Gedächtnis: ein Lebensabriss und Erinnerungen* (in the English version translated as *Karl Marx: Biographical Memoirs*). Liebknecht was one of the leaders of the Social Democratic party in Germany. He was close to Marx and his family, with whom he had been acquainted during their exile in London. In the foreword, Liebknecht warned that, due to the fact that he dedicated almost all his time to practical political activities in Germany, he had little time for theoretical work. When he was asked to write something biographical about Marx, the compromise he was able to make was to compose, instead of a biography of the Moor, an autobiographical book in which he would describe the many common events and experiences he had with Marx and his family. In this way, the readers would have a perspective on the intimate life of that great thinker. These opening words are important to understand the real purpose of the book, which has often been misunderstood. Contrary to Gustav Gross's already mentioned work, Liebknecht's book hardly ventured into explaining Marx's works or thought. After an initial brief chronological summary of Marx's life, the book describes passages from the life of the Moor that Liebknecht shared. Despite the remarkable interest of the work for historians, many observers (especially from the left) criticized the somewhat mundane character (formed of everyday episodes, without major political consequences) of several of the passages described. As Liebknecht's aim was to depict Marx in a sympathetic light, many did not understand why he inserted passages in which the Moor even seemed childish. For example, he described an episode in which he, Marx and Edgar Bauer heard words of criticism about Germany from some Englishmen in London. Then, overtaken by a sudden attack of patriotism, they decided to respond by defending the exploits of German artists and thinkers against the philosophical/political alienation of Englishmen. Moreover, having drunk a few beers, they later behaved like teenagers. Following Bauer's sardonic example, they picked up paving stones from the street and smashed street lamps before fleeing from the police. Many critics wondered why Liebknecht wasted time describing such infantile episodes that could even show Marx in a bad light. I have a hypothesis to

explain this kind of description by Liebknecht. It has to do with the political environment of the times when the book was written. In the 1890s, the so-called *Anti-Socialist Laws* were repealed in Germany and the German Social Democratic Party began its rise as a “respectable” and legitimate organization in the political competition. Liebknecht, in drafting a book in which he described Marx in his daily life as a loving father and a “normal” person (“like all others” despite his above average intellectual brilliance), tried to do with the image of the Moor what was happening with the Social Democratic party: becoming normal and respectable. Unlike the subversive, conspiratorial, “outlaw” Marx — as the Moor had hitherto been described by conservative governments — the prosaic episodes in Liebknecht's book conveyed the image of a more “human and playful” Marx, thus making him more acceptable in the legal political game they were now taking part in.

For the sake of doing justice to the biographer, it must be said that although the book was largely favorable to Marx, Liebknecht did not shy away from pointing out the moments when he had differences with the Moor, such as when he commented that Marx was not a good speaker or that Marx had been wrong in predicting the timing of certain capitalist crises to come. Within the spirit in which it was constructed — an “indirect” biography through the autobiography of the other author, both of whom were important political figures — the work certainly has historical relevance.

The next big step (for many, the *first* step) in the field of biographies of the Moor would come from the United States. It was the book *Karl Marx: His Life and Work*, by John Spargo, an intellectual from the Socialist Party of America. The above mention of the “first step” refers to the fact that some critics think that the first works described above did not constitute a *stricto sensu* biography of Marx — that of Liebknecht being a book of memoirs and that of Gustav Gross, for the most part, an intellectual biography. Spargo researched for 13 years (in the midst of his journalistic and political activities) to write the work, and really concentrated mostly on the life of Marx and not only on his works or ideas. It was a great qualitative leap for the time in terms of *stricto sensu* biography, but it had limitations because it was not written by a professional or academic historian. Like most of Marx's biographies until the first half of the twentieth century, the referencing of primary sources was erratic, most of the time with the facts being narrated without documentation, based on stories that were common currency in leftist circles, accepted at face value. In any case it can be considered the first big step toward *stricto sensu* biographies of Marx. It is interesting that Spargo — like Gustav Gross in his original work — was modest and said that he was not in the best position to write the definitive biography of Marx and indicated, as a potential candidate for such a task, the great historian of the German social democracy, Franz Mehring: a prophecy realized, for Mehring would later write a biography of Marx that would be considered the standard work for many decades, at least until David McLellan's in the 1970s. It is interesting to note the ideological course of Spargo's work. John Spargo was a moderate socialist, and yet he described the intellectual development of Marx and his role in the world socialist movement in a positive light. In spite of showing the radicalism of the Moor throughout the narrative, in the conclusion of the book he makes a reading of Marxian thought almost as if it were evolutionist (following the trends of history) rather than purely revolutionary. He illustrated this in the passage in which he described Marx's misguided prediction that capitalism would not withstand the impact of electricity (that is, of the

technological transformations brought about by electricity, which would revolutionize the world). Spargo wrote:

[...] Marx belongs with the great evolutionists of the nineteenth century [...] That electricity is revolutionizing the world has been a commonplace for a generation. Marx was right in regarding it as a great revolutionist, but he was rather mistaken as to the speed and duration of the revolution. Electricity very admirably typifies the “revolutionary evolution” which was the basis of Marx's profoundest thought. (Spargo, 2012, pp. 329-330)

Unlike Gustav Gross — another moderate politician who, despite a relatively sympathetic description of Marx, made it clear when he disagreed with his thinking — Spargo actually gave a somewhat contorted reading of Marx's philosophy and had the thinking of the German theorist closer to his own political philosophy.

As Spargo predicted, the politician and historian of German social democracy, Franz Mehring, in 1918 published a biography of Marx (*Karl Marx: Geschichte seines Lebens*) that would be considered the best for decades to come. This reputation may have to do with the intellectual/political profile of the author. Franz Mehring was an important German intellectual and politician who, after having begun his career in the liberal field, drifted to the left to become one of the great names of the German Social Democratic party until World War I. Disagreeing with the support the Social Democratic party lent to the war effort, he participated in the founding of the Spartacus League along with his good friend Klara Zetkin, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Consequently, in his final years, he belonged to the extreme left wing of Social Democracy, the one closest to Marxism. This, together with his status as a highly cultured intellectual, gave him an in-depth knowledge of theoretical Marxism, which allowed him to contextualize the everyday facts of Marx's life and to relate them to his intellectual development. The difficulties of the early biographers in understanding Marx's complicated theory were thus overcome. On the other hand, the fact that Mehring was originally from another political tradition (liberalism), and had never been an “orthodox” Marxist, allowed him latitude in occasionally criticizing the Moor himself. The book would not turn out to be mere hagiography about the Moor.

And that really was the profile of the book. In addition to emphasizing the facts of Marx's life, in his analysis of his thought — which also takes up a good portion of the book — his vision, although sympathetic in general, does not fail to present the contradictory or opposite side, sometimes supporting the contradictory side against Marx. A good example would be the relationship between Marx and the German labor leader Ferdinand Lassalle. Mehring occasionally defended Lassalle against Marx in his works. In addition to all the reasons mentioned above, the other reason to explain the prestige of Mehring's biography is that he had previous experience as an “historian,” since he wrote a famous *History of German Social Democracy*. Working with the primary sources from party archives gave him a strong theoretical and practical basis for the future biographical work on Marx.

The result was that his biography was widely recognized as the standard for a long time.

After Franz Mehring raised the level of biographical work on Marx, the 1920s saw the emergence of other works at a higher level. Very similar to Mehring's biography was the one written by Otto Rühle in 1926, *Karl Marx: Leben und Werk*. Rühle and Mehring had similar profiles: both were from the left wing of the German Social Democratic party and, during World War I, participated in the founding of the Spartacus League. The formal part of Rühle's biography was akin to that of Mehring: really describing the *life* of Marx but also analyzing the theoretical part of his works. However, perhaps reflecting the subtle differences in profile between the two authors — Mehring died shortly after World War I, whereas Rühle lived on until 1943 and developed a position similar to that of the so-called “council communists” critical of the centralist authoritarianism of the Soviet Leninist experience — Rühle, while also accepting the greatness of Marx's thought and action, exposed more criticism of the Moor in his book. In fact, his final conclusion is that Marx's extreme eagerness to overcome capitalism and capitalist vices was a way of compensating for his inferiority complex due to his early life as a Jew with health problems in an alien environment.

To summarize, we may say that the three characteristic features of Marx's individuality — poor health, Jewish origin, and the fact that he was firstborn — interact, and combine to produce an intensified sense of inferiority. The resulting compensation begins with the formulation of an aim. The lower the self-esteem, the higher the aim [...] Inferiority seeks compensation [...] Marx sought for spiritual compensation in the realm of ideas. His compensatory endeavour made him the founder of an economic theory, the creator of a new economic system [...] Unquestionably Marx was a neurotic [...] Had Marx, as a neurotic, been content with the semblance of achievement, his work would have crepitated in the void, and he himself would have been a figure tragical in its futility. As things were, however, he performed a supreme task in the history of his own time [...] (Rühle, 1929, pp. 187-196)

In the 1920s, a new reality emerged. The Soviet Union, a country founded on the basis of Marxism, after the destruction of the early period of the civil war of 1918-1921, was rebuilt and appeared to the world as a new center for the study of Marx's work (and life). There was not a specific major biography of Marx, but in 1927 David Riazanov wrote *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: an introduction to their lives and work*, a combined biography of Marx and Engels. The important thing here is not so much the form of the book, but the way it was written. David Riazanov founded the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow (1921) and was its director throughout the 1920s. The Marx-Engels Institute was commissioned to publish the complete works of Marx and Engels, a project that would continue despite political vicissitudes, interruptions and renewed starts over decades in different countries. It is the current *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels Historisch Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA, for short), a gigantic work in progress which will publish “everything” from Marx and Engels in approximately 114 volumes. The biography written by Riazanov could count on the initial foundations of this powerful project. In addition, this collective effort would be the basis of what in the post-World

War II period would become Marx's standard biography in the Soviet Union, the book *Karl Marks: Biografiya* ["Karl Marx: a biography"] published as a collective work of the *Institut Marksizma-Leninisma pri TsK KPSS* ["Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the Central Committee of the CPSU"], the new name of the former Marx-Engels Institute. This is one of the most underestimated books in the West. Although widely consulted and possibly one of the bases for many works by Western authors, it is often described as a dogmatic work typical of Soviet orthodox Marxism. Indeed, it is a somewhat stereotypical Soviet book, but it also constitutes the result of profound factual research by many experts, using a bibliographic base larger than that available to most Western authors. If the conclusions of the book can seem somewhat stereotyped and controversial, the factual part of it (data about the Moor's life, when certain concepts first appeared in Marx's texts, etc.) is very well grounded. It has the strength of a collective work, with many experts collaborating to deepen research grounded upon a powerful primary source base. And much of this powerful base of primary sources (including MEGA itself) has its origins in the pioneering spirit of Riazanov and his Marx-Engels Institute.

In the 1930s, biographical — or at least partially biographical, as in the case of "intellectual biographies" — work on Marx began to multiply. Three books stood out then: 1) *Karl Marx: Man and Fighter*, by Boris Nicolaevsky (1936); 2) *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, by Isaiah Berlin (1939); 3) *Karl Marx: A Study in Fanaticism*, by E. H. Carr (1934).

Boris Nicolaevsky was in a favorable position to do this kind of work. He was a Russian Menshevik who, after the Revolution of 1917, worked as a professional archivist. Departed from Soviet Russia in 1922, he moved to Berlin where he subsequently worked as an historian and archivist at the Marx-Engels Institute there, later becoming director of the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam (repository of archives related to socialist and labor movements). He, thus, had an enormous supply of primary sources available when writing his biography of Marx. It is a book that has characteristics similar to that of David Riazanov's: a biography of Marx based on archival research and documents (some unpublished) at a level well beyond that of the first writings on the life of the Moor. Indeed, the very fact that Nicolaevsky was writing in the 1930s, with access to the latest advanced research, facilitated the mention of important unpublished texts by Marx in his biography. For example, Marx's crucial book *The German Ideology* was first published by David Riazanov in 1932 in Moscow. Nicolaevsky was able to incorporate these previously unpublished texts into his biography, which represented a quality leap in relation to what existed before him. Nicolaevsky's biography was a step forward in the direction of a *stricto sensu* historical biography because, despite contextualizing and commenting on Marx's work, it mostly emphasized his life. In this sense, it surpassed previous (perhaps even Mehring's) biographies that generally stood on the side of intellectual biography in the sense that Marx's life was described more as a support for the contextualization of Marx's works than as an end in itself. Nicolaevsky emphasized the life of Marx and, within it, contextualized his works. Finally, it is interesting to note that Nicolaevsky's biography is very sympathetic to Marx, who is described as the greatest socialist theorist. This is surprising not only because Nicolaevsky was a Menshevik but also in the light of his later trajectory to more conservative post-World War II positions when he emigrated to the United States and became one of the founders of the field of kremlinology. In this



biography of the 1930s, Nicolaevsky still seemed to maintain his strongly socialist impetus of the 1920s when he had intellectual affinity with and organic connection to the socialist movement.

The fate of E.H. (Edward Hallett) Carr's book, *Karl Marx: A Study in Fanaticism* (1934), is paradoxical. E. H. Carr would become one of the greatest historians specialized in the USSR, with his monumental *A History of Soviet Russia* (14 volumes). And later he would evolve politically to the left, approaching socialism. But at the time of the publication of his biography of Marx, he held a political position that was more to the right and his book presented a rather unfavorable picture of the Moor (as suggested by the subtitle!). It was a well-crafted book (although not yet at the level of Carr's more mature historical works based on full mastery of the target language and original sources). However, when Carr later adopted leftist political positions, he decided to disavowal his biography of Marx and even banned its publication after the first edition sold out.

Finally, in the 1930s, the book *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, by Isaiah Berlin (1939) achieved a distinguished status. Considered by many to have been the best example of an intellectual biography of the Moor, it represented an interesting project for the philosopher Isaiah Berlin. Berlin is acknowledged to be one of the greatest authors in the field of the history of ideas. Jewish, born in Riga (capital of present-day Latvia, then part of the Russian empire) in 1909, he lived through the Revolution of 1917 before emigrating to the West and becoming one of the major intellectuals at Oxford University in England. Author of several works in the field of the history of ideas (many related to Russia), the biography of Marx commissioned by a publisher was, for him, an intellectual challenge. Since he was not a Marxist and until then had no special interest in the Moor's theory, writing the book for him was to have a personal encounter with Marxism. As previously mentioned, the book — despite chronologically describing Marx's life — was basically an intellectual biography centered on the analysis and discussion of the works and the evolution of the Moor's thinking. The result was an intellectual *tour de force*. Although Berlin did not agree (entirely or even basically) with Marx's ideas, he was able to describe them relatively freely and even sympathetically, without losing the ability to make critical, authoritative comments. After World War II, Berlin (2013, pp. XXV and 288), commenting on his biography written in 1939, considered it basically valid, but added some retrospective critiques. He said that, at the time of the publication of his biography, several previously unpublished writings of the “young Marx” — *i.e.*, Marx in his earlier phases, more concerned with philosophical themes such as alienation as opposed to the “mature Marx” who focused primarily on economics — were just coming to light and had not yet had the great influence they would subsequently have. Thus, the image of the Moor projected at his time was that of the Soviet “official” Marx, an image very much based on Engels' somewhat orthodox and simplistic texts. Berlin especially regretted that he had glossed over the importance of the then recently published *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, since he now believed that they showed the humanist face of Marx more clearly (curiously, Berlin underestimated *The German Ideology*, also published for the first time in the 1930s, in its capacity to also highlight this more “humanist” face of the German thinker).

It is interesting to note the irony of one of the final conclusions reached by Berlin (a philosopher who valued the history of ideas, a realm that Marx allegedly relegated to

the superstructure “determined” by the economic base): “[Marx ...] departed from the position of refuting the proposition that ideas decisively determine the course of history, but [his] own influence on human affairs weakened the force of this thesis.” (Berlin, 2013, p.265)

The biographies mentioned above were the most important until World War II. In the second half of the twentieth century, the methodological requirements for such works would be higher and biographies of Marx's life would appear which would fulfill all the requirements for professional historical biographies. The great outstanding name in this new context was that of David McLellan, with his *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought*, released in 1973. Considered by many to be the best biography of Marx to date — it has undergone revisions in successive editions — it was a landmark. McLellan achieved a rare balance in having both a highly documented description of Marx's life (biography *stricto sensu*) and high quality as an intellectual biography, describing the evolution of Marx's ideas within the context of his life. This is a difficult balance to reach. Usually, on the one hand, we have well documented biographies of Marx's life which describe his ideas and theories less brilliantly (*e.g.*, Wheen, 1999); on the other hand, we have high-level intellectual biographies (*e.g.*, Berlin, 1939) which, in the aspect of documentation of the day to day life of Marx, are not so strong. What McLellan did was to maintain high level on both sides of the equation. Not only did he investigate, in a precise methodological manner, aspects of the Moor's life (some not so studied before), but he also managed to make the reader follow the evolution of Marx's thought along its intricate path. In addition, he did a fairly balanced job, without succumbing to hagiography or demonology. In fact, McLellan, a professor of political science and disciple of the philosopher Isaiah Berlin, in his biography remedied the shortcoming that Berlin pointed out in his own work: having in the 1930s given a description of Marx based mostly on the canonical Soviet-Engelsian version without being able to explore the more humanistic version of the young Marx stemming from the unpublished texts of the Moor that were being published for the first time in that decade. McLellan explores the work of Marx in depth in these formerly unpublished texts, which lends his biography a greater balance between the humanist vision of the young Marx and the greater emphasis on economics of the mature Marx. Rejecting Althusser's idea of an “epistemological break” between the young Marx and the mature Marx, McLellan follows the evolution of the Moor's ideas through their twists and turns but concomitantly shows their internal concatenation and coherence. What Mehring's biography had been for the first half of the twentieth century — the standard thus far — McLellan's was for the second half (and probably even today). McLellan raised the bar of methodological requirements for biographical work on Marx. Thereafter, some authors rose to the challenge and met the new standards of documentation quality and use of primary sources (such as Wheen, 1999, and Sperber, 2013, who brought different new insights into the life of that German thinker), although arguably one can say that the rare balance achieved by McLellan in being excellent both as a biography *stricto sensu* as well as an intellectual biography has not been achieved again since.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Shortly after McLellan's book appeared, Fritz J. Raddatz published *Karl Marx: Eine politische Biographie* in 1975. It is a biography that emphasizes the political side of Marx's activities in an extremely provocative but well-documented manner. In my opinion, Raddatz sometimes loses himself in rather sterile discussions about aspects of Marx's activities based on his own personal prejudices, but, given that Raddatz had a

For the description of biographies about Marx from the second half of the twentieth century onward, perhaps the best methodology for us is to use the criterion of relevance — the most important or seminal ones first — instead of following the chronological order, as we have done so far.

In terms of advancement in the research of Marx's life (biography *stricto sensu*) one should mention *Karl Marx: A Life*, by the journalist Francis Wheen (1999). Being the first major biography of Marx after the end of the Cold War, the work reflects the time when it was written. Leaving aside the emphasis on Marx's thought of most biographies thus far — though he provides informed comments on this as well — Wheen goes very deep in his research into the life of the Moor, bringing new elements and new angles to the public. In addition — and probably reflecting the fact that Francis W. is a journalist — the reading is very fluid and enjoyable, with an intelligent humor that gives it a special charm. I died laughing, for example, on pages 84-85 of Wheen's book (2001, paperback edition), where he described the idiosyncrasies of Marx's relationship with Engels! The sardonic way he described aspects of Marx's life (including highlighting aspects of the Moor's humor) earned him criticism from certain quarters, especially from Marxists zealous in the pursuit of a “serious” image of the great German thinker. For the description of Marx's life, Wheen's book is very well researched.

Another cutting-edge work, which came close to McLellan's in terms of being good both in the aspect of *stricto sensu* biography and intellectual biography, is *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* by Jonathan Sperber (2013). Sperber, a professor of history at the University of Missouri and a specialist in nineteenth-century Germany, wrote what may have been the best biography of Marx in the post-Cold War era until the date of its publication. Using the greater wealth of primary sources that came with the end of the Soviet regimes in Eastern Europe, he not only explored Marx's life in detail but also deeply investigated Marx's thought to state a controversial thesis in the end: as the subtitle of the book indicates, the great Marx must be seen as a nineteenth-century figure and his thought must also be seen in that context. This means, on the one hand, that Marx should not be considered the “culprit” of what his Soviet followers did in the twentieth century. On the other hand, it also means that his thinking was valid for the nineteenth century, but is not the most appropriate one to illuminate the very different realities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Marx's actual ideas and political practice — developed in the matrix of the early nineteenth-century, the age of the French Revolution and its aftermath, of Hegel's philosophy and its Young Hegelian critics, of the early industrialization of Great Britain and the theories of political economy deriving from them — had, at most, only partial connections with the ones his latter-day friends and enemies found in his writings [...] Marx's life, his systems of thought, his political strivings and aspirations, belonged primarily to the nineteenth century, a period of human history that occupies a strange place in relation to the present: neither evidently distant and alien, like the Middle Ages, nor still within living memory as, for

---

clearly polemical purpose (against orthodox Marxism), his biography meets the higher level demanded for this type of work in the second half of the twentieth century.

instance, the world of the age of total war, or communist regimes of the Eastern bloc [... Critics] see Marx as a proponent of twentieth-century totalitarian terrorism [...] Defenders of Marx's ideas vigorously reject these assertions, often interpreting Marx as a democrat and proponent of emancipatory political change. Both these views project back onto the nineteenth century controversies of later times. Marx was a proponent of a violent revolution, perhaps even terrorist revolution, but one that had many more similarities with the actions of Robespierre than those of Stalin. In a similar way, adherents of contemporary economic orthodoxy, the so-called neoclassical economic theorists, dismiss Marx's economics as old-fashioned and unscientific, while his proponents suggest that Marx understood crucial characteristics of capitalism, such as regularly recurring economic crises, that Orthodox economists cannot explain. Marx certainly did understand crucial features of capitalism, but those of the capitalism that existed in the early decades of the nineteenth century, which both in its central elements and in the debates of political economists trying to understand it is distinctly removed from today's circumstances. (Sperber, 2013, pp. XVIII-XIX, 560)

Certainly a controversial thesis, but the book was beautifully written and documented.<sup>6</sup>

The works mentioned above are those which can be considered the main biographies of Karl Marx, or the most seminal ones, that somehow marked a new direction or a deepening in the quality of the biographical work itself. There are other books that did not impact the biographical field so much, but that also brought contributions to the knowledge of Marx's life. There are those more orthodox biographies written in the socialist countries (*e.g.*, Stepanova, 1956; Genkow *et al.*, 1968). There are also biographies (more or less *stricto sensu*) written by political activists (with various degrees of theoretical knowledge of Marxism), such as Lewis (1965). There are also biographical works that cover a specific period of life or a special theme related to Marx, such as Cornu (1934) or Monz (1964). *Marx*, by Vincent Barnett (2009), approaches this group (and the intellectual biography profile) by giving emphasis to the economic aspect of Marx's theories. The fact that these biographies were not mentioned together with the most important ones at the beginning of this text does not mean that some of these other biographers have not made their own special contributions, at least in certain specific aspects. For example, *Karl Marx. Eine Psychographie*, by Arnold Künzli (1966), is an interesting psychological biography of Marx, emphasizing his mental processes and using insights from the fields of psychology and psychiatry. Robert Payne, author of *Marx*

---

<sup>6</sup> A methodological approach similar to that of Sperber was adopted by Gareth Stedman Jones (2016) in his *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*, a top-notch work that tends toward the intellectual biography profile and whose stated objective is to situate Marx's ideas in their context in order to isolate them from the additions and later modifications brought forth by other Marxist thinkers (including Engels's own posthumous contributions). As Jones (2016, p. 5) put it: "The aim of this book is to put Marx back in his nineteenth-century surroundings, before all these posthumous elaborations of his character and achievements were constructed."

(released in 1968), was a prolific biographer in view of the number of biographies of different personages he wrote. What might be regarded with suspicion — slips and errors by authors not specialized in Marxist theory when attempting to describe Marx's complicated thought have become proverbial in the field — may have helped him to make the book more valuable in relation to the *factual* aspects of Marx's life. In addition to the salutary (from the point of view of *strict sensu* biographies) emphasis on the events of Marx's *life*, Payne carried out research that brought about original factual knowledge. For example, he was able to locate and for the first time publicly present some original documents (such as the birth certificate) of Marx's supposedly bastard son, Frederick Demuth. Similarly, works such as those of Schwarzschild (1954), Blumenberg (1962), Padover (1980), Körner (2008), Hosfeld (2009), Thomas (2012) and Liedman (2015), although not making breakthroughs in terms of documented knowledge of Marx's life, added idiosyncratic points of view which, in their own way, help us in the discussion of the complex thought and controversial life of Marx.

*Addendum: the bicentennial of Marx's birth in 2018*

The original text of this article in Portuguese was written at the end of 2016 and published in 2017. New biographies about Marx appeared around the bicentennial of his birth in 2018. At the end of 2017, *Marx: Der Unvollendete*, by Jürgen Neffe, was published in Munich. At the beginning of 2018, two new biographies appeared: *Karl Marx: uma biografia dialética* by Angelo Segrillo (in Brazil) and *Karl Marx und die Geburt der modernen Gesellschaft. Band 1: 1818-1843* (the first volume of a planned three-volume biography by the German author Michael Heinrich).

It is interesting to note that, in the period preceding the bicentennial, the last biographers (Jonathan Sperber and Gareth Stedman Jones) worked with the hypothesis that Marx's analyses were valid for nineteenth-century capitalism but lost vitality in explaining contemporary capitalism. The three biographies of the bicentennial go in the opposite direction: they attempt to rescue the validity of Marx's thought for the present conditions as well.

Jürgen Neffe found a clever way to achieve this. He describes the development of Marx's ideas in correlation with (using examples from) 21<sup>st</sup>-century capitalism instead of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century one. As the author quotes Marx's passages about globalization, alienation, creation of superfluous needs, commodity fetishism and so on, the readers have the eerie impression that these conceptual images are depicting their own contemporary experience. The title of Neffe's biography ("Marx Unfinished" in translation) refers primarily to the fact that the German thinker was not able to finish volumes II and III of *Das Kapital* during his life, but it also metaphorically implies the open character of Marx's theory, which can yield different (more libertarian) readings besides traditional orthodox Marxism.

The subtitle of the biography by Angelo Segrillo ("Karl Marx: A Dialectical Biography") refers to the fact that the author, after presenting an introductory overview of earlier biographies, describes Marx's life in constant dialogue with the descriptions and interpretations of previous biographers. It thus constitutes a kind of balance sheet of the biographical efforts on Marx thus far. Segrillo's book was the first *stricto sensu* biography of Marx written by a Latin American author.

Both Neffe's and Segrillo's works present interesting insights based on the different views and interpretations by these two authors, but they remain, so to speak, on the level (and under the general paradigm) of previous biographies.

The case is different with the first biographical volume written by Michael Heinrich. Heinrich's proposal is more ambitious and, if fully realized, will reach a new level and perhaps constitute a new (or rather, renewed) paradigm among the biographical works on Marx. This is due to some peculiarities.

First of all, Heinrich makes a devastating critique of (many of the leading) earlier biographers. With “mathematical” precision and detail — he is a mathematician by training — Heinrich points out different episodes in Marx's “life” that biographers accept as true at face value, without reliable primary sources to back them. As authors accept the versions of earlier biographers as true, “legends” about Marx are passed on (and sometimes magnified) in later works. Thus, in the first volume of his biography (dedicated to Marx's childhood and youth), Heinrich points out several of these long-standing “legends”: the erroneous dates of Marx's father's conversion to Protestantism, the would-be duel in which Marx was wounded as a university student, the erroneous dates given for his engagement, Eduard Gans' alleged influence on Marx, Franz Mehring's opinion (accepted uncritically by later biographers) that *all* of Marx's youth poems were artistically poor, the idea that participation in the so-called “Doctor's Club” induced Marx's transition to Hegelianism, etc. Using the advantage of having personally worked in the edition of MEGA (*Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*), the largest collection of Marx's texts and documents (including unpublished manuscripts), Heinrich uncovers these legends and shows — indicating the pages in the works of previous biographers where they committed these errors — how the primary sources tell a different story.

Heinrich's challenge to raise the level of biographical research on Marx's life can metaphorically (“mathematically”) be described as being 100% based on reliable primary sources. The author of this overview of Marx's biographies, a historian by profession, is highly appreciative of such appeal. It remains to be seen, however, how other biographers and analysts will react in these present times of postmodern mistrust about the very concept of credibility of “primary” sources.

Another important point about Heinrich's biography is that he proposes not only to describe Marx's life factually but also to make an analysis of the development of his intellectual work by temporally connecting these two aspects so that one can follow the continuities and changes in Marx's thought in a clear manner, avoiding conflation of different ideas and periods. From my own experience as a biographer of Marx, I consider this extremely important. Marx changed his ideas throughout his life and it is very important to follow the evolution of his ideas chronologically so as not to make a “salad” by mixing ideas from different periods and creating a Frankensteinish Marx composed of synchronically superimposed theories which in real life were actually diachronically refined, modified or simply discarded by the German revolutionary thinker. If Michael Heinrich succeeds in achieving this goal in all three volumes of his work, he may break David McLellan's “record” of having written a biography that was as excellent in describing Marx's personal life as in describing his ideas. Judging by the first volume, it is possible that Heinrich may “break this record” taking advantage of the fact that a multi-volume work provides more room for deeper analysis on both sides of the equation.

## Conclusion

Despite the existence of numerous bibliographic/theoretical writings on Marx's thought and work, we do not have an overview of the books written so far about Marx's *life*. One factor that complicates such a task is the existence of the so-called intellectual biographies, *i.e.*, books that, while often providing data on Marx's life, actually focus on the evolution of his thought and the discussion of his theories. Due to the interconnection between Marx's life and his work/theory, it is difficult to establish the boundary between the books that basically deal with his thought (describing his life additionally) and those that could be considered *stricto sensu* biographies of his life. In the present text, I tried to show the works that are closer to *stricto sensu* biographies. We note that it was difficult to cut the “umbilical cord” from the womb of “intellectual biographies”; the first biographies were generally of this type. In the first half of the twentieth century, even when we began to have more *stricto sensu* biographical works — such as those by Riazanov and Nicolaevsky (for even Mehring, the first great biographer, concentrated heavily on the analysis of Marx's thought) — these works (perhaps for the sake of saving space in the book) kept stricter bibliographic referencing in relation to Marx's thought (citing the pages from the original sources, and so on) than in relation to his life, which was described as if these episodes were common knowledge. It was as if Marx's “life” were somewhat less important and needed less methodological rigor than his thought and theory. To paraphrase what Marx said about *Das Kapital*, we can say that the method of investigation (research) was different from the method of presentation. Indeed, authors like Riazanov and Nicolaevsky clearly searched the various archives and documents available to them in order to narrate the factual episodes of Marx's life, but even they (let alone lesser biographers) tended to view as unnecessary minute referencing of primary sources in the passages of Marx's life considered to be well-known in Marxist or socialist circles. These methodological shortcomings would be remedied in the second half of the twentieth century with the appearance of biographies that meet the strictest academic requirements for historical biographical work.

And what final result do we have today with regard to this overview of Marx biographies? Certainly the factual knowledge of the Moor's life was deepened by constant research and the elevation of the methodological level of his biographies. As could be expected from such a controversial figure, no consensus was reached. I suspect that the reason is not only the controversial character of Marx's life and work. Each new age reads the previous ones with its own set of eyes. The Marx of flesh and blood was one, but the interpretations that were put forth about him in his time, in the years immediately after the Russian Revolution, in the years after the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that ended Stalin's cult of personality, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and today have varied enormously. And this not because the Moor turned in his grave, but because eyes contemplated him under varying circumstances...

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BARNETT, Vincent. *Marx*. London: Routledge, 2009

- BERLIN, Isaiah. *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*. London: Thornton Butterworth, 1939.
- BERLIN, Isaiah. *Karl Marx* (with a foreword by Alan Ryan; edited by Henry Hardy). 5th ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.
- BLUMENBERG, Werner: *Karl Marx in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1962.
- CARR, E.H. *Karl Marx: A Study in Fanaticism*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1934.
- CORNU, Auguste. *Karl Marx. L'homme et l'oeuvre. De l'hégélianisme au materialism historique 1818-1845*. Paris: Alcan, 1934.
- CORNU, Auguste. *Karl Marx et Frierich Engels: leur vie et leur oeuvre*. Paris: P.U.F., 1955/1958/1961/1970. 4 vols.
- FEDOSEYEV, P.N. *et al. Karl Marx: a Biography*. 4th. revised ed.. Moscou: Progress Publishers, 1989. Available online at:  
<https://ia600301.us.archive.org/23/items/KarlMarxABiography/Karl%20Marx%20A%20Biography.pdf>
- GABRIEL, Mary. *Love and Capital: Karl and Jenny Marx and the Birth of a Revolution*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011.
- GENKOW, Heinrich *et al. Karl Marx. Eine Biographie*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1968.
- GIROUD, Françoise. *Jenny Marx, ou la femme du diable*. Paris: Robert Laffont, 1992.
- GOLLER, Peter. Karl Marx-Biographien 1883-1938. In: GOLLER, Peter. *Marx und Engels in der bürgerlichen Ideologie und in der sozialistischen Theorie*. Vienna: Alfred Klahr Gesellschaft, 2007. Pp. 11-71.
- GROSS, Gustav. *Karl Marx: Eine Studie*. Leipzig: Verlag von Duncker & Humblot, 1885. Available online at:  
<https://ia802608.us.archive.org/0/items/karlmarxeinestu00grosgoog/karlmarxeinestu00grosgoog.pdf>
- HEINRICH, Marx. *Karl Marx and die Geburt der modern Gesellschaft: Biographie und Werkentwicklung. Band 1: 1818-1843*. Stuttgart: Schmetterling, 2018.
- HOSFELD, Rolf. *Die Geister, die er rief. Eine neue Karl-Marx-Biografie*. Munich: Piper, 2009.
- INSTITUT MARKSISMA-LENINIZMA PRI TsK KPSS. *Karl Marks: Biografiya*. 2nd ed. Moscow: Politizdat, 1973.
- JONES, Gareth Stedman. *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*. London: Allen Lane, 2016.
- KARL MARX, FRIEDRICH ENGELS; HISTORISCH KRITISCHE GESAMTAUSGABE (MEGA). Frankfurt a. M.: Marx-Engels Archiv; Berlin: Dietz Verlag; Amsterdam: Internationale Marx-Engels-Stiftung (IMES) *et al*, 1927-2025. 114 vols. planned.
- KÖRNER, Klaus. *Karl Marx*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag dtv, 2008.
- KORSCH, Karl. *Karl Marx*. Londres: Chapman & Hall, 1938. Also available online at:  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1938/karl-marx/>
- KÜNZLI, Arnold. *Karl Marx. Eine Psychographie*. Vienna: Europa Verlag, 1966.
- LEWIS, John. *The Life and Teaching of Karl Marx*. London: Lawrence & Wishart 1965.
- LIEBKNECHT, Wilhelm. *Karl Marx zum Gedächtnis: ein Lebensabriß und Erinnerungen*. Nürnberg: Wörlein, 1896.
- LIEBKNECHT, Wilhelm. *Karl Marx: Biographical Memoirs*. London: Journeyman Press, 1975. Also available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/liebknecht-w/1896/karl-marx.htm>



- LIEDMAN, Sven-Eric. *Karl Marx: En Biografi*. Stockholm: Bonnier, 2015.
- LONGUET, Robert-Jean. *Karl Marx: Mon Arrière-Grand-Père*. Paris: Editions Stock, 1977.
- MARX-ENGELS WERKE (MEW). *Karl Marx Friedrich Engels Werke*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1956-1977. 41 vols.
- McLELLAN, David. *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought*. London: Macmillan Press, 1973.
- McLELLAN, David. *Karl Marx: a Biography*. 4th. ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- MEGA (Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe): see KARL MARX, FRIEDRICH ENGELS; HISTORISCH KRITISCHE GESAMTAUSGABE.
- MEHRING, Franz. *Karl Marx: Geschichte seines Lebens*. Leipzig: Leipziger Buchdruckerei, 1918. Also available online at:  
[http://www.mlwerke.de/fm/fm03/fm03\\_000.htm](http://www.mlwerke.de/fm/fm03/fm03_000.htm)
- MEHRING, Franz. *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- MEW: see MARX-ENGELS WERKE.
- MONZ, Heinz. *Karl Marx und Trier. Verhältnisse, Beziehungen, Einflüsse*. Trier: Neu-Verlag, 1964.
- NEFFE, Jürgen. *Marx: Der Unvollendete*. Munich: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 2017.
- NICOLAEVSKY, Boris & MAENCHEN-HELFEN, Otto. *Karl Marx: Man and Fighter*. London: Methuen & Co., 1936. Also available online at:  
<https://ia800301.us.archive.org/4/items/karlmrxmanandfi029120mbp/karlmrxmanandfi029120mbp.pdf>
- PADOVER, Saul K. *Karl Marx: An Intimate Biography*. New York: New American Library, 1980.
- PAYNE, Robert. *Marx*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968.
- RADDATZ, Fritz J. *Karl Marx. Eine politische Biographie*. Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1975.
- RIAZANOV, David. *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: An Introduction to Their Lives and Work*. New York: International Publishers, 1927. Also available online at:  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/riazanov/works/1927-ma/index.htm>
- RUBEL, Maximilien. *Karl Marx. Essai de Biographie Intellectuelle*. Paris: Librairie Marcel Rivière et Cie, 1957.
- RUBEL, Maximilien & MANALE, Margaret. *Marx Without Myth: A Chronological Study of his Life and Work*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1975.
- RÜHLE, Otto. *Karl Marx: Leben und Werk*. Hellerau bei Dresden: Avalun-Verlag, 1926.
- RÜHLE, Otto. *Karl Marx: His Life and Works*. New York: The Viking Press, 1929. Available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/ruhle/1928/marx/index.htm>
- SCHWARZSCHILD, Leopold. *The Red Prussian: The Life and Legend of Karl Marx*. New York: Scribner, 1947
- SCHWARZSCHILD, Leopold. *Der rote Preuße. Leben und Legende von Karl Marx*. Stuttgart: Scherz & Goverts, 1954.
- SEGRILLO, Angelo. Karl Marx: um balanço biográfico. *Estudos Ibero-Americanos*, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 601-611, Sept.-Dec. 2017.
- SEGRILLO, Angelo. *Karl Marx: uma biografia dialética*. Curitiba: Prismas/Appris, 2018.

- SEGRILLO, Angelo (ed.) *Karl Marx and Russia: Pre-Socialist, Socialist and Post-Socialist Experiences and Visions*. São Paulo: FFLCH/USP, 2019.
- SPARGO, John. *Karl Marx: his life and work*. New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1910.
- SPARGO, John. *Karl Marx: his life and work*. 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1912. Available online at:  
<https://ia700400.us.archive.org/19/items/cu31924002310864/cu31924002310864.pdf>
- SPERBER, Jonathan. *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013.
- STEPANOVA, Evgeniya Akimovna. *Karl Marx: Short Biography*. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956.
- THOMAS, Paul. *Karl Marx*. London: Reaktion Books, 2012.
- WHEEN, Francis. *Karl Marx: A Life*. London: Fourth Estate, 1999.
- WHEEN, Francis. *Karl Marx: A Life*. New York: Norton Paperback (W.W. Norton & Company), 2001.
- ZETKIN, Klara. *Karl Marx und Sein Lebenswerk*. Elberfeld: Molkenbuhr & Co., 1913.