

Writing the Life of Karl Marx: A Comparative Study of Marx Biographies by Mehring and Riazanov

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This study compares the biographies of Karl Marx by Franz Mehring and David Riazanov, highlighting three key differences in their portrayal of Marx's life and ideology. Riazanov emphasized Marx's Jewish background, criticized Mehring's oversimplification of Marx's father's conversion to Christianity, and offered a nuanced view of Marx's engagement with Jewish issues. Contrary to Mehring's defense of Bakunin, Riazanov acknowledged Bakunin's revolutionary zeal but critiqued his effectiveness and responsibility in the Nechayev affair. Lastly, Riazanov provided an in-depth analysis of Marx's later years, challenging Mehring's limited coverage and recognizing the significance of Marx's late works and contributions to the labor movement.

Keywords: biographical research, Marxism, Riazanov, history of Marxism

Introduction

Biographical research encompasses various approaches such as life history writing, intellectual biography, and narrative biography. Scholars engage in biographical research to study individuals' lives within social contexts, focusing on aspects like historical significance, theoretical constructs, and social interactions.

The academic value of biographical research lies in its profound ability to offer unique insights into individual lives, which, in turn, illuminate broader historical, social, and cultural contexts (Backscheider, 1997). Through the detailed study of an individual's life story, biographical research provides a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between personal experiences and the larger societal forces at work. This methodology allows scholars to explore the multifaceted dimensions of human behavior, motivations, and the impact of individual agency within specific historical periods.

Biographical studies contribute significantly to the depth and richness of historical narratives by adding personal perspectives and experiences that are often overlooked in more traditional research approaches (Roberts, 2002). They enable a more empathetic and comprehensive understanding of historical figures, shedding light on their contributions, struggles, and the challenges they faced. This personalized approach to history helps demystify abstract historical processes, making them more relatable and understandable to contemporary audiences.

Furthermore, biographical research fosters interdisciplinary collaboration, drawing from fields such as sociology, psychology, literature, and cultural studies, to provide a more holistic view of an individual's life. It

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challenges researchers to consider multiple sources and types of evidence, from archival documents to personal letters, diaries, and even material culture, thereby enriching the analytical framework used to interpret past and present phenomena.

In essence, the academic value of biographical research lies in its ability to humanize history, contributes to our understanding of individual and collective identities, and offers comprehensive insights into the intricate tapestry of human society and culture.

Building on the academic value of biographical research, the study of Marx's biography holds a unique and irreplaceable position within the Marxist theoretical framework. Marx biography studies constitute an independent field of research within the Marxist theory system, focusing on the life of the founders of scientific socialism as its subject. This field is intricately linked to the broader Marxist theoretical system, serving as both a significant component of Marxist theory research and a subject matter in its own right.

The scientific biographical approach provides a comprehensive panorama of the thinker's life and ideological system, allowing readers to appreciate the unique personal charisma of the thinker while gaining a holistic understanding of their ideological system. As such, biographies are often both introductory texts for those new to a particular figure, ideological school, or discipline, and works of significant academic value.

Marx's biography is no exception. It offers insights not only into Marx's personal life and character but also into the development of his critical theories, including his critique of political economy, his historical materialism, and his theories of class struggle and social change (Ruhle, 1943). By studying Marx's biography, researchers and readers can gain a deeper understanding of the socio-historical context in which Marx developed his theories, the personal experiences that influenced his work, and the impact of his ideas on subsequent generations of thinkers and activists (Sayers, 2021).

In this way, the study of Marx's biography is not merely an academic exercise but a crucial lens through which the foundational principles of Marxism can be explored and understood. It underscores the interconnection between the individual and the collective, the personal and the political, providing a rich, nuanced perspective on one of the most influential figures in modern history.

David Riazanov and His *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*

David Riazanov is recognized as a foundational figure in the field of Marx biography studies. He was among the first to advocate for the creation of a scientific biography of Marx, proposing that Marx's biography be included in the collected works of Marx and Engels and integrated into the realm of Marxist studies. Riazanov actualized his advocacy through concrete actions, notably by writing *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: An Introduction to Their Lives and Work* during his research on Marxism and its editions. This work distinguished itself from previous biographies of Marx by employing Marx's own methodological approach and situating the lives of Marx and Engels within the context of European labor movement history. Unlike Franz Mehring's *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life*,¹ which covered significant events and issues in the lives of Marx and Engels but suffered from subjective and sometimes erroneous interpretations due to various factors, Riazanov engaged in

¹ Franz Mehring's *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life* is considered the classical biography of Marx, offering a comprehensive and interesting historical study of his life. Written in 1918 and later translated into English, this work has been acknowledged by scholars like David McLellan as the definitive biography of Marx, albeit now viewed as slightly hagiographical and outdated. Louis Althusser, a notable philosopher, praised it for being the most comprehensive historical study of Marx available at the time. The biography has been translated into multiple languages, underscoring its wide influence and significance in Marxist scholarship.

vigorous debates over biographical issues concerning Marx, correcting errors in Mehring's work and largely resolving issues related to understanding and evaluating significant events in the lives of Marx and Engels.

Riazanov's and Mehring's efforts laid the foundational framework for Marx biographies, with subsequent works building upon this framework without fundamentally changing the understanding and evaluation of key events and issues. In this sense, Riazanov's *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels* serves as a pivotal contribution to the development of Marx biography, bridging past and future works.

Following its publication, *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels* was swiftly translated into various languages and disseminated globally, including several Chinese translations, marking it as the first comprehensive Marx biography in Chinese. This work played a pioneering role in introducing foreign Marx biographies to China, facilitating the localization and popularization of Marxism in the country. This study focuses specifically on the text of Marx's biography.

As the proponent of including Marx's biography in the collected works of Marx and Engels, Riazanov established the theoretical foundation for Marx biography studies. At the time, the necessary conditions for creating a scientific Marx biography, as Riazanov envisioned, were not yet met due to the absence of published collections like *The Marx-Engels Collected Works* and the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA). However, with the commencement of these publications, the prerequisites for a scientific biography of Marx began to materialize. *An Outline of the History of Marxism*, closely related to *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*, is a collection of articles deeply connected to the lives of Marx and Engels, covering extensive new materials and research findings on Marx's life, which served as preparatory material for Riazanov's writing.

Prior to the publication of Riazanov's work, classic biographies such as Mehring's *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life* and Gustav Mayer's *Engels: A Biography* have already been published. These works discussed significant events and contributions in the lives of Marx and Engels, addressing major issues to some extent. However, their interpretations and evaluations of Marx and Engels' ideas were not entirely objective. While acknowledging the contributions of these authors to Marx biography studies, Riazanov pointed out inaccuracies in their works, arguing that they failed to meet the standards of a scientific biography of Marx and Engels as he envisioned, necessitating the creation of a work that adhered to these scientific standards. This led to the publication of *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*.

Each version of Marx's biography claims to adhere to scientific and objective principles, attempting to faithfully represent the historical Marx. However, due to differences in the authors' perspectives, positions, and material selections, different versions present varying images of Marx. Riazanov's edition stands out for two main reasons: It employs Marx's methodology in biographical writing, interpreting the development of Marx and Engels' thoughts and actions within the context of their environment and historical conditions, and it enriches the narrative with detailed dialectical analysis and historical context, providing a comprehensive overview of the intellectual, political, economic, and personal histories of the 19th century (Riazanov, 1923).

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels by Riazanov is not only suitable for beginners to Marxist theory, offering an accessible and clear narrative, but also holds significant importance for theorists seeking to understand the historical background behind the development of Marx's ideas. Riazanov emphasizes the historical context and social conditions of each stage in the development of Marx's thought, advocating that history is made under specific conditions, and thus, the ideological development of historical figures must be studied and evaluated historically, comprehensively, and concretely. In the first chapter, Riazanov distinctly states,

We shall attempt to discern the conditions and the surroundings in which Marx and Engels grew and developed. Everyone is a product of a definite social milieu. Every genius creating something new does so on the basis of what has been accomplished before him. He does not emerge from a vacuum. Furthermore, to truly determine the magnitude of a genius, one must first ascertain the preceding achievements, the degree of intellectual development of society, the social forms into which this genius was born, and from which he drew his psychological and physical sustenance. And so, to understand Marx—and this is a practical application of Marx's own method—we shall first proceed to study the historical background of his period and its influence upon him. (Riazanov, 1974)

Spanning nine chapters, the book *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels* meticulously elaborates on the era, revolutionary movements, and social conditions experienced by Marx and Engels, facilitating an evaluation of Marx within the entire developmental process of society.

However, due to the nature of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels as lecture notes by Riazanov at the Socialist Academy, there are certain limitations in depth of thought. For instance, there is a tendency to focus on the political conditions and social movements of the time, emphasizing Marx's role as a revolutionary and organizer, while neglecting significant ideas from his middle and later years, especially undervaluing the theoretical and practical activities in Marx's last decade, which Riazanov dismissively refers to as "unforgivable pedantry". Additionally, Engels' contributions to the development of scientific communist theory are also overlooked.

A Comparative Study of Marx Biographies by Mehring and Riazanov

Riazanov not only advocated for the independent publication of a biography of Marx, but also proposed many important editing principles and plans. His *Marx-Engels Archive* is vivid and rich in materials, emphasizing the introduction of historical background, and provides researchers with a comprehensive and complete picture of the life and thought of Marx and Engels. Compared with Mehring's Marx biography, there are several differences:

Firstly, Riazanov placed special emphasis on Marx's Jewish background, believing that many biographies had overlooked this aspect. In particular, he criticized Mehring's assertion that Marx's father converted to Christianity solely for social status in the educated Christian society.

In all the biographies about Marx, Riazanov was the first to realize the impact of Marx's Jewish background on his ideology and fate. In the first chapter of *Marx-Engels Archive*, when introducing Marx's family background, Riazanov proposed that writing Marx's biography cannot completely deny his Jewish background.

Marx was also a Jew. One of the questions that invariably presents itself is the extent to which Marx's subsequent fate was affected by the circumstances of his being a Jew. The fact is that in the history of the German intelligentsia, in the history of German thought, four Jews played a monumental part. They were: Marx, Lassalle, Heine and Borne. More names could be enumerated, but these were the most notable. It must be stated that the fact that Marx as well as Heine were Jews had a good deal to do with the direction of their political development. (Riazanov, 1974)

Compared to Mehring's claim about Marx's father converting to Christianity, Riazanov provided a more comprehensive, detailed, and accurate analysis.

Franz Mehring (1846-1919) in his biography of Marx tried to prove that this conversion had been motivated by the elder Marx's determination to gain the right to enter the more cultured Gentile society. This is only partly true. The desire to avoid the new persecutions which fell upon the Jews since 1815, when the Rhine province was returned to Germany, must have had its influence. We should note that Marx himself, though spiritually not in the least attached to Judaism, took a great interest in the Jewish question during his early years. He retained some contact with the Jewish community at Treves. In

endless petitions the Jews had been importuning the government that one or another form of oppression be removed. In one case we know that Marx's close relatives and the rest of the Jewish community turned to him and asked him to write a petition for them. This happened when he was twenty-four years old. (Riazanov, 1974)

In his book *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life*, Mehring defended Bakunin (1814-1896) and his anarchism in many places, praising Bakunin as a thorough revolutionary who, like Marx and Lassalle (1825-1864), had the genius to make people listen to his opinions. Mehring completely denied that Bakunin had engaged in various conspiracies before and after the Basel Congress, citing lengthy quotes from Bakunin in an attempt to prove that Bakunin never denied Marx's immortal achievements as the founder and leader of the International, and that it was only out of necessity that Bakunin struggled against Marx. Mehring vigorously denied the sectarian nature of Bakunin and his supporters and defended Bakunin without principle.

In *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*, Riazanov expressed a different opinion from Mehring and sharply refuted many of Mehring's remarks about Bakunin. Riazanov agreed that Bakunin was an extremely loyal revolutionary but an incompetent person. In contrast to Mehring's exoneration of Bakunin's responsibility for the Nechayev incident, Riazanov argued that Bakunin was largely responsible. Riazanov delved into the reasons for the sharp differences in opinion between Bakunin and Marx on revolutionary methods, but due to the limited length of the book, his refutation of Mehring was not thorough enough.

Riazanov criticizes Mehring for his misinterpretation of Marx's opposition to Lassalle and the Lassallean faction, deeming Mehring's defense of Bakunin, support for Schweitzer and his policies, and underestimation of the significance of "Herr Vogt" as misguided. Mehring not only places Marx, Engels, and Lassalle on the same level but even reproaches Marx for being biased against Lassalle. He further asserts that Marx and Engels were detached from the practical realities of Germany, inferior to Lassalle's policies. Mehring consistently defends Lassalle, approaching Marx's biography through a Lassallean lens. In contrast, Riazanov delves into the essence of Lassalle, critiquing his errors and illuminating the shortcomings in Lassalle's approach.

In the last chapter "The Last Decade" of his book, Mehring used only about 2,300 words to discuss Marx's later years, without mentioning the significance of Marx's late notes and lacking an understanding of Marx's contribution in his later years. Despite this, Mehring did not share the view of some that Marx's last 10 years of life were a "slow death". Instead, he pointed out that in his later years, Marx fought against illness to complete his major scientific works, pursued his research with selfless dedication, and significantly expanded his research scope. At the same time, Marx did not stop his activities in the labor movement in Europe and America. He communicated with labor leaders, offered advice to those who sought it, and increasingly became a consultant to the revolutionary proletariat. Marx worked tirelessly until midnight every day, "working for the world" and neglecting his own rest and diet. Mehring acknowledged Marx's literary talent, but believed that in the last five years of his life, Marx's work on his major works was largely halted due to the recurrence of old illnesses. For the last 15 months of his life, Mehring even described it as a "slow death". Due to a lack of information, Mehring overlooked the significant value of Marx's late notes, and failed to recognize the philosophical innovation achieved by Marx in his later years.

Riazanov also discussed Marx's thoughts and practical activities in his later years, and believed that the study of Marx's late notes was "unforgivably scholarly". Riazanov used more than 13,000 words to describe Marx's thoughts and practical activities in his later years. Riazanov mentioned that as long as his health permitted, Marx continued to work on "Capital" and even wrote a chapter for Engels' "Anti-Dühring". After 1878, as his

condition worsened, Marx could only write some notes and maintain contact with the international labor movement organization.

Conclusion

The biographical studies of Karl Marx by Franz Mehring and David Riazanov provide distinct lenses through which to view the life and work of one of history's most pivotal figures. Riazanov's exploration into Marx's Jewish heritage and its influence offers a depth that Mehring's narrative lacks, presenting a more nuanced perspective on Marx's identity and its impact on his theoretical framework. Moreover, Riazanov's critical take on Mehring's portrayal of Bakunin and the complex ideological rift between Marx and Bakunin enriches our understanding of the intellectual battles of their time. Riazanov's detailed account of Marx's later years, emphasizing his ongoing intellectual contributions, contrasts with Mehring's somewhat diminished portrayal, highlighting the evolving nature of Marx scholarship and its appreciation for the breadth of Marx's work.

This comparative study underscores a paradigm shift in Marxian biographical research towards a more intricate examination of Marx's personal background and its influence on his theoretical contributions. The contrast between Riazanov's comprehensive approach and Mehring's traditional narrative signals a broader, more critical perspective in contemporary scholarship. This shift reflects an increasing fascination with the complexities of Marx's life and ideology, moving beyond conventional narratives to embrace a fuller picture of his contributions and their implications.

Looking ahead, the trajectory of Marx biographical research is poised for further expansion and depth. It aims to enhance our understanding of Marx's life, refine our interpretations of his seminal works, and illuminate the enduring relevance of his ideas in addressing the challenges of the contemporary world. By integrating innovative research methodologies, interdisciplinary approaches, and addressing the complexities of the modern era, future studies are set to continue uncovering the rich and multifaceted legacy of Karl Marx. This ongoing research endeavor not only contributes to a deeper understanding of Marx as an individual but also provides valuable insights into the transformative power of his ideas in shaping the world we live in today.

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