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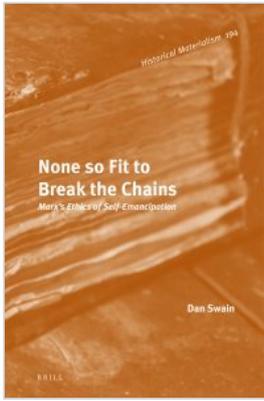
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Dan Swain

None So Fit to Break the Chains: Marx's Ethics of Self-Emancipation

Leiden, Brill, 2019. 224pp., €110.00 hb.

ISBN 9789004315778

Reviewed by **Paul Raekstad**

About the reviewer

Paul Raekstad has a PhD from the University of Cambridge on Marx's critique of capitalism. He ...

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Marx famously proclaimed that ‘the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves’ (Marx & Engels, 1955, p. 288), yet few thinkers go on to explore what that involves in detail. Dan Swain’s new book is an exception to this trend. Consistently clear and impressively wide-ranging, it offers an excellent resource for Marxists who take self-emancipation

seriously.

To understand how Marx thinks about self-emancipation, it makes sense to begin with his concept of freedom. Accordingly, the first main chapter reconstructs Marx’s positive concept of freedom which, Swain argues, has two necessary components: self-objectification through labour and (collective) self-direction of that activity. Chapter 2 discusses the origins and meaning of self-emancipation in Marx’s thought, emphasising a close reading of the third thesis on Feuerbach, which opposes an educator/educated model to Marx’s own conception of revolutionary praxis. These ideas are thereafter connected to ideas of prefigurative politics and critical pedagogy.

The emphasis on active working-class agency implied by revolutionary practices of self-emancipation might seem to fit oddly with classical discussions of historical materialism, which arguably deny a central role to self-emancipatory proletarian agency and any ethics that would seek to guide it (if not rejecting any such role altogether, at least denying it much importance). Swain agrees, and, on this basis, critiques attempts by Kautsky and Plekhanov as inadequate to solve this problem. Instead, he draws on Walter Benjamin and Daniel Bensaïd to develop an interpretation of Marx ‘which understands the theoretical

generalisations that Marx employs in terms of strategic hypotheses, indexed to the goal of self- emancipation' (8-9).

This sets the stage for Swain's re-interpretation of Marx's critique of utopian socialism in chapter 4, which he argues is motivated by the concern that their way of theorising future economic institutions is a threat to self-emancipation. By contrast, Swain argues that detailed proposals or blueprints for new social institutions must develop organically out of movements or resistance, rather than being imposed by intellectuals from the outside.

After these more methodological discussions, chapters 5 and 6 present Marx's critiques of capitalism in his theories of exploitation and alienation, respectively. Unlike a great many normative interpretations of Marx's theory of exploitation, Swain argues that the main bads involved therein are the relations of domination and vulnerability that they entail. In a way, chapter 6 seeks to rescue the critical force of Marx's theory of alienation from structuralist and post-structuralist concerns about substantive accounts of human nature. Here, Swain argues that the theory of alienation rests 'on a claim about the negative consequences of a particular mode of living', rather than on ideas of an 'identifiable nature' (147).

This claim strikes me as somewhat unnecessary in light of earlier chapters, especially its discussion of freedom as self-direction. First of all, if we know that X has negative consequences for human beings and want to remove them, we need some idea about why X has such consequences for us. Only then will we be able to say something concrete about what we need to do to remedy them – e.g. whether capitalist unfreedom can be (best, if at all) remedied by better 'team atmosphere' in the workplace, better labour laws, or communist revolution. To answer this why-question, we need to know something about what X (capitalism) is like and something about what the things X affects (us human beings) are like, because only the latter will be able to tell us why we (unlike, say, laptops or guide dogs) experience the negative implications of alienation from the labour process. This in turn requires some account of the relevant powers or capacities we possess that enable us to be affected in these ways – perhaps, as for Marx, in ways that other animals are not. And this will inevitably involve some account of human nature.

I would argue that Marx provides just such an account in both earlier and later work. For instance, in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, he writes that '[c]onscious life activity directly distinguishes man from animal life activity. Only because of that is he a species-being' (1992, p. 328). This idea is repeated in Volume I of *Capital*, where Marx (1990, p. 283-4) writes:

We presuppose labour in a form in which it is an exclusively human characteristic... [W]hat distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in the wax. (...) Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes [*verwirklicht*] his own purposes in those materials. And this is a purpose he is conscious of, it determines the mode of his activity with the rigidity of a law, and he must subordinate his will to it.

Marx (1990, p. 290) calls this part of ‘the universal condition for the metabolic interaction [*Stoffwechsel*] between man and nature, the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence, and it is therefore independent of every form of that existence, or rather it is common to all forms of society in which human beings live’.

This seems to be a claim about inherent human powers that distinguish humans from other animals, in ways that connect to his positive concept of freedom as consciously self-directed activity and theory of alienation. Indeed, Swain’s earlier chapters, which feature a very good discussion of this concept of freedom and Marx’s talk of capitalist unfreedom, contains virtually everything needed to resolve these issues, and I think the book would have been even better than it already is by making and further developing these connections.

With Marx’s method and critique of capitalism established, the book concludes with two chapters on Marx’s politics as the practice of self-emancipation, which are in my view the book’s most interesting. Chapter 7 thus discusses different conceptions of politics and the problems they pose both to readings of Marx and contemporary political action, emphasising that what we today call the sphere of politics cannot resolve social questions, but that working class struggles must nevertheless engage with it in ways that ‘necessarily expand and transform the narrow bounds of ‘politics as usual’ (173). On this view, revolutionary practice is politicising insofar as it reveals the political character of social and economic relations, and de-politicising insofar as it erodes any would-be clear-cut separation between ‘political’ and ‘non-political’ spheres of human life and activity. There’s also a very interesting discussion about the role of demands in building organs of class struggle, laying bare the role of workers in society, and in developing tools and capacities to think about alternatives. This naturally includes a discussion of their potential pitfalls, from voluntaristic demands unable to play such roles to reinforcing the capitalist state by appealing to it to solve our problems for us.

Finally, chapter 8 draws more concrete lessons for today’s struggles through a dialogue with the works of Leon Trotsky, Stephen D’Arcy, Georg Lukács, and Jane

McAlevey. From Trotsky, Swain reflects upon the role that self-emancipation plays both as an end and as a means of revolutionary organising, helping us to select tactics and action according to which they both further self-emancipation and realises and expresses it through their means. This is further developed through a reading of D'Arcy's work on militancy. For D'Arcy, militancy arises from grievances; it is adversarial in that it addresses an opponent who is unwilling to engage in reasoned argumentation; it is confrontational in that it seeks direct conflict with an adversary; and it is collective in that it is planned and carried out not alone, but with others. Importantly, good forms of militancy must meet a democratic standard with four elements:

1. The Opportunity Principle: 'it addresses substantive and pressing grievances; it effectively creates opportunities to hasten or facilitate the resolution of those grievances; and it proceeds only when nonmilitant tactics have proven fruitless, due to intransigent elites or unresponsive systems of power' (196).
2. The Agency Principle: Those most affected by a grievance should take the lead in the struggle to remedy it.
3. The Autonomy Principle: '[M]ilitancy should enhance the power of people to govern themselves through inclusive, reason-guided public discussion' (196).
4. The Accountability Principle: 'Militancy should limit itself to acts that can be defended publicly, plausibly, and in good faith as duly sensitive to the democratic values of common decency and the common good' (196-7).

This is followed by a discussion of Lukács on the actuality of revolution. Of particular importance here are the kinds of praxis needed to develop revolutionary communist consciousness and the forms of organising needed to empower self-emancipatory working-class organisation.

Finally, Swain further develops these ideas through a reading of McAlevey on whole worker organising. This begins from the realisation that workers, as living human beings, don't live their lives in a set of discrete, separate, compartmentalised social spheres. An important lesson to draw from this is that organisers should avoid reifying capitalist divisions, e.g. between economic, social, and political spheres, by restricting the activities and concerns of organisations to one sphere alone – as when unions, say, are told to leave politics to the party.

In a book as wide-ranging and engaging as this, it would be easy to mention a number of things that I would have loved for it to discuss, but whose absence make sense in light of the author's preferences and priorities. For instance, while the book focuses on Marx's 'ethics' of self-emancipation, and despite its

discussion of the conceptual challenges of politics, there is little discussion of Marx's approach to specifically political theorising, which would have strengthened the overall, and distinctly *political*, emphasis on self-emancipation in Marx.

Another example, with which I would like to finish, is that it avoids discussing one of the most important aspects of debates about self-emancipation from the First International onwards, especially within the Marxist tradition. This is the debate about the concrete organisational forms needed to achieve self-emancipation. Organs of self-emancipation will naturally depend on, and vary across, different social and historical contexts, and discussions about them have understandably concerned a great number of socialist thinkers. Marx's commitment to self-emancipation, far from being 'something that set him apart from most of his contemporaries' (37), was a pretty standard view in the First International, especially among its largest, federalist (often later labelled anarchist and/or proto-syndicalist) sections that put forward arguments for the necessity of prefigurative politics for achieving proletarian self-emancipation and about the decision-making structures that their organs of struggle needed for this to succeed. This partly makes sense in light of the book's chosen focus on Marx and the literature thereon. However, in a chapter that finds space to discuss the early Christian origins of the word prefiguration, the Egyptian Revolution, and pedagogy, it seems odd that there's no discussion of the socialist thinkers who developed and advocated these ideas in Marx's day or even the later strands of Marxism which have done the most work on them.

The past century of revolutions and uprisings have offered a variety of successes, failures, and lessons to learn from. This should and has led to a growing socialist literature seeking to reconstruct and re-appropriate their ideas for a new generation of revolutionaries. In that light, Swain's book is an important contribution to Marxist reflections on the question: How can we organise to achieve true working-class self-emancipation, rather than yet another intermediate stage between capitalism and capitalism?

10 September 2020

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