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Economic inequality, Marxist theory, and Swedish-language working-class literature

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ABSTRACT

The conference ‘Is Economic Inequality also a Literary Problem?’ held at Uppsala University, Sweden, in 2017 raised the following questions: What does literature have to do with inequality? Does it contribute to its reproduction, or can it be a force of resistance? Is it fair to even ask of literature and literary studies that they address the problem of economic inequality? This essay claims the answers to these questions are conditioned by the historical contexts of the critics grappling with them and the literatures that they study. Employing an analysis of the theme of poverty in contemporary Swedish-language working-class literature, I argue that the consecration of this literature as an important strand in Swedish national literature has allowed it to express radical critique of the economic inequalities lying at the heart of capitalism. Furthermore, I argue that this insight could be used as a starting-point for challenging some of the more pessimistic views expressed by critics of working-class literature regarding its political potentials.

‘Thanks for this Magnus. We were hoping to hear from you’. This was the reply I got from the organisers of ‘Is Economic Inequality also a Literary Problem? An International Conference on Culture, Society, and Economy’ after having submitted an abstract of the paper that eventually became this essay. It was of course very nice to hear that the conference organisers were hoping to hear from me. That they expected to do so was, however, hardly surprising. After all, I am a Marxist scholar specialising in the study of working-class literature. Thus, I should be, and indeed am, interested in the questions addressed by the conference: What does literature have to do with inequality? Does it contribute to its reproduction, or can it be a force of resistance? Is it fair to even ask of literature and literary studies that they address the problem of economic inequality?

However, my commitment to Marxist theory and my interest in (especially Swedish-language) working-class literature do not just make me interested in these questions; they also make me understand and answer them in specific ways. These specificities are the topic of this essay. I will first demonstrate how the phenomenon of economic inequality should be conceptualised within a Marxist theoretical framework. Then, I will analyse how it is represented in some contemporary examples of Swedish-language working-class literature. Thereafter, I will discuss how the phenomenon of working-class literature can

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be understood from the perspective of Marxist literary criticism and how my understanding of it is conditioned by my interest in Swedish-language working-class literature. My hope is that this will provide valuable input to the continued discussion of the questions addressed at the above-mentioned conference.

Inequality and Marxist theory

Even if Marxists are generally critical of economic inequality and committed to combating it, the concept of inequality is not especially prominent in Marxist theory. However, a fundamental feature in the Marxist analysis of capitalism is the identification of a very specific form of economic inequality – namely that important parts of the economic infrastructure (what Marxists usually refer to as the means of production) are the property of, or controlled by, the few (the capitalists), whereas the many (the workers, a.k.a. the working class or the proletariat) only own their labour power. Consequently, Marxists argue, workers have to become wage labourers and sell their labour power to the capitalists. Another important feature of capitalism is that the commodities and services produced by workers when employed by a capitalist are the latter’s property; Marxist theory says this allows capitalists to exploit workers. Capitalist exploitation means that workers are paid wages that allow them to reproduce their labour power while capitalists appropriate the new values created in the production process, thereby increasing their capital or their wealth. When this results in capital accumulation, the fundamental economic inequality of capitalism – that between capitalists, who own the means of production, and the workers, who are exploited by them – increases: The capitalists’ capital grows, which means they can take control over more means of production and exploit more workers, whereas the rest of the population have as little access as before, or sometimes even less, to these means of production, and more people are forced into wage labour. As Marx (2000: 880) writes in Capital, ‘reproduction on a progressive scale, i.e. accumulation, reproduces the capital relation on a progressive scale, more capitalists or larger capitalists at this pole, more wage workers at that’. When capitalists use their profits not to expand their capital but to increase their wealth, this results in inequality of another kind, which is perhaps the one we usually associate with the concept of economic inequality – inequality regarding access to commodities on markets. To put it simply, capitalists get rich, while workers remain relatively poor. This kind of inequality is monitored by Oxfam, who recently demonstrated that one percent of the world’s population bagged 82 percent of the wealth created last year while those who – according to Marxist theory – created it had to split the rest between them, and half of the world’s population got nothing at all (see Oxfam 2018).

Accordingly, Marxist theory highlights that capitalism is founded on and generates economic inequalities. It also emphasises that these inequalities are conditioned by struggles over, for example, wages or the organisation of the labour process, as well as by cultural ideas about what constitutes an acceptable standard of living and, hence, fair pay for work and reasonable working conditions. In Capital, Marx (2000: 380–434, 614) focuses mainly on describing struggles over the length of the working day and workers’ struggles against the use of machinery, which he interprets as revolts against ‘the material basis of the capitalist mode of production’. When successful in such struggles, workers can decrease economic inequalities regarding wealth and, hence, access to commodities on
markets. However, the fundamental inequality concerning the means of production is also conditioned by struggles between workers and capitalists. For example, since the length of the working day has consequences for the rate of surplus value and, consequently, for the rate of exploitation, successful struggles by workers that lead to a shorter working day will decrease what was referred to above as the reproduction of the capital relation on a progressive scale (see Marx 2000: 334). Of course, political class struggle – as distinct from the direct struggles in the sphere of production described by Marx in *Capital* – can also alter the relationship between the working class and the capitalist class. The socialist revolutions of the twentieth century, which led to radical reductions of private ownership of the means of production in large parts of the world, are good examples of this, as are the (counter-) revolutions that resulted in re-establishing capitalism in many formerly communist countries in recent decades, which have naturally had the opposite effect. There are also less spectacular examples of struggles over the capitalist class relation. For example, during the decades following World War II, the labour movements in social-democratic welfare states such as Sweden managed to reduce the capitalist sector of the economy substantially and instead increase state-controlled production of goods and services. One consequence of this was a radical decrease in economic inequality. In Sweden, for example, the Gini coefficient, which is the most commonly used measure of inequality, reached very low levels in the early 1980s. In 1981, the coefficient for disposable income per household was as low as 0.20 (Almqvist 2016: 13). As a comparison, according to the OECD, the Gini coefficient for household income in the USA in 2016 was 0.49, which means that economic inequality was more than twice as high, as was the case in Sweden 35 years earlier (see OECD 2018).

Thus, Marxist theory pays special attention to a particular kind of economic inequality, namely the uneven distribution under capitalism of the means of production between capitalists and workers. It also argues that other kinds of inequalities in capitalist societies, such as inequalities regarding access to commodities in markets, are closely related to the inequality regarding the means of production. Furthermore, Marxist theory stresses the connection between economic inequality and struggles between classes.

**Inequality in contemporary Swedish-language working-class literature**

During the last decade, a new generation of Swedish-language working-class writers has emerged, and the interest in and status of working-class literature has increased substantially in Sweden (see Nilsson 2014a: 115; 2017a: 115; Williams 2016: 212f.). This literature undoubtedly brings to the fore questions about class. In general, its representations of this phenomenon are complex and multi-facetted (see Nilsson 2014b: 111). Nevertheless, the economic dimensions of class are often accentuated, not least through representations of poverty.

That working-class writers write about poverty might not appear to be very surprising. After all, poverty is not a phenomenon unknown to workers. However, in Swedish-language working-class literature, it has not been a very important theme after World War II partly due to a national myth according to which the social-democratic welfare state had eradicated both poverty and class antagonism. Many working-class writers have been critical of this myth, but their critique has focused mainly on the claim that Sweden had ceased to be a class society. On the other hand, the idea that poverty was no longer
the lot of Swedish workers has often been accepted and presented as something that has made necessary the re-thinking of the very concept of class. A typical example of this can be found in the works of Folke Fridell, who after World War II innovated Swedish-language working-class literature by focusing on class injustices in the context of the emerging welfare state and modern industrial production (see Nilsson 2014a: 34–48). According to Fridell (1970: 24), the Swedish working-class writers of the 1930s – who often came from and wrote about the rural proletariat – had focused too much on poverty. Consequently, he argued, their works could be used to legitimise the claim that the welfare state, which did indeed reduce poverty among workers, had in fact eradicated class conflict (Fridell 1970: 25f.). Fridell expressed these ideas in literary programmes, but he also discussed them in his novels. In Död mans hand (Dead Man’s Hand) from 1946, for example, he let the protagonist – a worker in a textile factory – argue that workers ‘are not so poor anymore’ (Fridell 1946: 189). However, in this novel, Fridell also insisted, drawing on Marxist theory, that workers are still victims of class injustices in the form of exploitation and subjection to the capitalist work process (see Nilsson 2014a: 34f.). The novel’s critique of capitalist class relations in the Swedish welfare state is summed up in a comment by one of the protagonist’s workmates: ‘One should be allowed to share the profits and have a say. That would probably help’ (Fridell 1946: 131).

In the following decades, which are often viewed as the golden age of the Swedish welfare state, many working-class writers did as Fridell and focused on other aspects of working-class life than economic hardship. However, the generation of working-class writers emerging after the turn of the millennium – during what is sometimes considered the post-welfare-state era – has, as has already been mentioned, showed more interest in the theme of poverty.

One of the first signs of a revival for Swedish-language working-class literature in the new millennium was the publication in 2006 of Susanna Alakoski’s autobiographical novel Svinalängorna (The Swine Houses), which became a big success both among critics and readers and has later been adapted for both the stage and the screen. In this novel, poverty is described as an important aspect of working-class life during the golden age of the Swedish welfare state in the 1960s and 1970s. Among other things, the working-class families portrayed in the novel do not have enough money to clothe their children, and therefore have to accept handouts (Alakoski 2006: 68, 135). Poverty is also an important theme in Alakoski’s later works, particularly in Oktober i fattigsverige (October in Poverty-Sweden) from 2012, in which she returns to themes and motifs from Svinalängorna in a more documentary form.

Another important work from the very first stage of the new wave of Swedish-language working-class literature is Åsa Linderborg’s autobiographical novel Mig äger ingen (I am Owned by Nobody), which was published in 2007. It describes the author’s relationship during her childhood years in the 1970s with her father, the steelworker Leif Andersson, and like Svinalängorna, it depicts poverty as an important feature of working-class life in the Swedish welfare state. However, unlike Alakoski (at least in Svinalängorna), Linderborg also describes poverty as a contemporary phenomenon. For example, the novel opens with a description of the author’s father’s wallet at the time of his death. It contains almost no money, just a few coins and an ATM-card that is

1 All translations of Swedish quotes into English are my own.
connected to an account with the balance of 99 crowns, about twelve dollars (Linderborg 2007: 7). Thus, the first thing we learn about the father is that he died a poor man. His poverty is also highlighted in a passage towards the end of the novel, which states that after having worked nearly 40 years as a metal worker, he was not able to afford such luxuries as home insurance, a daily newspaper, a car, or even healthy food (Linderborg 2007: 248f.).

Other important works in contemporary Swedish working-class literature that focus on poverty include Kristian Lundberg’s novels Yarden (The Yard, 2009) and En hemstad (A Hometown, 2013) as well as Cecilia Persson’s poetic prose work Att äga sin egen kropp – en rapport (To Own One’s Own Body – A Report, 2013). However, few works in contemporary Swedish-language working-class literature give as much attention to poverty as the Finland-Swedish author Mathias Rosenlund’s autobiographical novel Kopparbergsvägen 20 (Kopparberg Road 20) from 2013. In fact, poverty is its main theme, as the narrating author illustrates with the following self-description, in which there are so many references to poverty that the passage becomes almost unreadable:

I am one of the three sons that my parents gave birth to in poverty, and who were then carried into a poor home by a mother and a father who did not have any money and who would raise their children in a home which would continue to be marked by poverty. I am the man who has given birth to two children in poverty. That is how it is: One is born in poverty and passes it on. (Rosenlund 2013: 81)

That poverty features prominently in contemporary Swedish-language working-class literature should be viewed as a response to economic developments in recent decades. When Fridell argued that the emergence of the welfare state meant that poverty was no longer a central aspect of class injustice in Sweden, he referred mainly to absolute poverty. The earlier quote from Död mans hand about workers not being so poor anymore continues as follows:

Not if you think about food and a bed to sleep in. It is not the wry-faced distress that holds us in a strangle-hold. … We have the right to vote and vitamin-rich food, but the poison gas of contempt advances on us, like an illness for which there is no cure. (Fridell 1946: 180)

In the so-called post-welfare-state era, too, Swedish workers have access to food and beds. However, in recent decades, Sweden and the other Nordic countries have seen a radical escalation of economic inequality. The OECD even argues that no other member country has had a more rapid increase in income inequality since the 1990s than Sweden (OECD 2017: 2). This increase in inequality has also resulted in an equally rapid increase of relative poverty, which is a measure precisely of inequality (see OECD 2017: 26). This development has conditioned the re-emergence of poverty as a theme in Swedish-language working-class literature.

Rosenlund (2013: 96) explicitly uses the term ‘relative poverty’ when discussing his experiences of economic hardship, for example, in connection with the following formulation, which resembles the quotation above from Fridell’s Död mans hand: ‘I will not die from starvation, but my poverty is nevertheless draining enough, disillusioning enough. My poverty is not life-threatening, but stigmatising’. He also claims that for poor people, the distinction between relative and absolute poverty is not always visible or relevant:
My poverty is not unique or even unusual in Finland today, but also this kind of relative poverty appears to the poor to be absolute, impossible to dislodge (Rosenlund 2013: 30f.).

Representing poverty as being relative means explicitly relating it to, or contrasting it with, its opposite: (relative) wealth. This is a common motif in contemporary Swedish-language working-class literature. For instance, the protagonist in Alakoski’s *Svinälängorna*, Leena, constantly compares her own situation with that of kids growing up in better-off neighbourhoods than her own (see Nilsson 2010: 164f.). Such comparisons are also very common in Rosenlund’s *Kopparbersvägen 20*. Already in the first paragraph of its prologue, the author tells us that he was born on the day the king of Sweden turned 35 (Rosenlund 2013: 9). Thus, the story about his own life in poverty is contrasted, from its very beginning, with a life in wealth. Later, Rosenlund repeatedly describes how his poverty alienates him from the world of the rich. One example of this is the following reflection regarding an invitation to dinner in an expensive restaurant, after having chaired a public discussion about literature:

I had to make sure that it is the organizer that pays for dinner, otherwise I would not have been able to join. We dine at Elite in Tölö. Dinner is 50 Euro. Soup. Steak with onion. Crème brûlée, whose caramel layer I crack with my spoon. I feel at home at the table with other authors and critics, with whom I share expert knowledge and competency, but at the same time, I feel a shame which I try to define and localize. Perhaps it is the knowledge that I am in a space that is not mine. Which I would not visit if I were not part of the group to which I have been invited for one evening. Which I cannot afford to visit. Which is not part of the Helsinki I have made my own. (Rosenlund 2013: 80)

A very interesting example of how contemporary Swedish-language working-class literature emphasises the relativity of poverty can be found in Daria Bogdanska’s autobiographical graphic novel, *Wage Slaves* (2016). When Bogdanska, who was born in Poland, comes to Sweden, she is shocked by the prices in the supermarket. A loaf of bread costs as much as her mother earns in one hour, working as a cleaner in Poland (Bogdanska 2016: 12). Therefore, she describes herself as a poor immigrant. However, when she leaves the supermarket, the first person she meets is a beggar. Thereby, her poverty – which could be described as being absolute since, for example, she has to steal winter clothes (Bogdanska 2016: 84) – is immediately related, not to wealth, but to someone else’s poverty. When Bogdanska starts working (illicitly) in a restaurant, she also relates her low wages to those of her workmates. The employer gives the lowest wages to those who are ‘the most desperate’:

those who did not come from Europe and could not get another job … Immigrants from Europe were also desperate, but we were closer to home, so we got somewhat higher wages. The Swedes got the highest wages of us all, even if they were also bad. (Bogdanska 2016: 39)

This putting-into-context of poverty through comparisons is sometimes more or less built into the narrative form. For example, Linderborg’s *Mig äger ingen* is narrated by the adult author, who has left the working-class world in which she grew up and become an intellectual. Thus, the poverty of the narrated world is contrasted with the narrator’s world, one in which poverty has been escaped. Alakoski also tells about working-class poverty from a temporal and economic distance, especially in *Oktober i fattigsvirge*. There, she also thematises how such distance makes poverty visible. For example, she
describes how it was not until she went to university that she realised her childhood experiences of poverty were not universal:

As a kid I never pondered over questions about class. Things were the way they were, and in the yard, there were other kids who also did not ski, play the piano, or sing in a choir. It was not until I went to university that the avalanche of class came. (Alakoski 2010: 181f.)

The discovery of poverty’s other – here, not wealth, but the mere absence of economic hardship – results in Alakoski being swept away by the avalanche of class or, in other words, in her becoming class conscious. But such consciousness is not the product of the sheer discovery of poverty. It also requires the understanding of the relationship between poverty and wealth as being unjust, as an aspect of economic injustice. And that is how this relationship is interpreted in contemporary Swedish-language working-class literature in general.

A good example of such an interpretation can be found in Henrik Johansson’s novel Raya from 2018, in which a worker says that he does not imagine heaven and hell as two separate places:

for the rich, heaven is a luxury restaurant, and for the poor, the failures, the sinners, heaven is the same restaurant, but they are not guests. They work there. … And then they see the wealth, they live beside it. … I mean, in a hell where everyone is tormented and equally fucked there is no one with whom to compare oneself. (Johansson 2018: 227)

Johansson has stated, in a private conversation, that these formulations were inspired by the first of Brecht’s ‘Hollywood Elegien’ from 1942, in which poverty is also described as something that turns heaven into hell:

The village of Hollywood was planned according to the notion
People in these parts have of heaven. In these parts
They have come to the conclusion that God
Requiring a heaven and hell, didn’t need to
Plan two establishments but
Just one: heaven. It
Serves the unprosperous unsuccessful
As hell. (Brecht 1976: 380)

Johansson’s re-writing of Brecht’s poem is interesting because it connects economic inequality with labour. For the poor, it is not just the fact that they are reminded of their relative poverty that turns heaven into hell, it is also the fact that they are working and that others enjoy the results of their labour. Thus, Johansson’s distinction between the poor and the rich is connected to the Marxist distinction between workers and capitalists.

Bogdanska also connects poverty to labour. After all, the poverty she describes in Wage Slaves is – as the title indicates – that of poor workers, especially those who work in restaurants. Like Johansson, she highlights that some people’s toil results in other people’s pleasure: ‘Some must work so that others can party’ (Bogdanska 2016: 70).

Rosenlund emphasises that his parents’ poverty is not a result of them not having worked:

They have been working for the main part of their lives. Mom started working when she was sixteen, and has been struggling to get along ever since. Dad has been working since his early
teens. Is that not enough? No, it is not enough. They have been making too little money. (Rosenlund 2013: 130)

Furthermore, he argues that poverty is a ‘structural’ phenomenon, which is connected to ‘the tyranny of the market’ and to ‘capitalism’ (Rosenlund 2013: 95). Accordingly, his descriptions of poverty, like Johansson’s, seem to gravitate towards a Marxist discourse. Even stronger links to Marxism can be found in Linderborg’s description of poverty.

A good example of this is a scene in which her father argues that the fruits of his labour have ended up in the pockets of the capitalist owning the steel plant where he worked – that is, he has been exploited, and his poverty is connected to the accumulation of capital by capitalists (Linderborg 2007: 94). Exploitation is also criticised in Johansson’s Raya, when the protagonist complains about her toil generating profits to the owners of the bakery where she works (see Johansson 2018: 145). The following discussion between some workers about whether it is acceptable to eat a few of the cupcakes they produce offers another example:

A Christian dude … argued that those who steal end up in hell. Iván argued that work itself was organized theft. That they were worth a lot higher wages. That they only took back crumbs. The Christian baker nodded. What Iván called capitalism he called greed, and suddenly they had found something to agree on. (Johansson 2018: 158)

Johansson also describes how the economic inequalities between workers and capitalists are conditioned by struggles. The management want to decrease wages in order to be able to make investments in modern machinery. If the workers do not agree, they will be laid off. Some workers buy the argument, but others protest:

‘Wage cuts! You must be kidding!’
‘Yes, they say that if we don’t accept that, they will have to save money in other ways, and then people will be laid off.’
‘Save money in other ways? They can take money from their fat profits instead of our meagre paychecks. Save on hookers and champagne.’ (Johansson 2018: 59f.)

Furthermore, Johansson describes how Iván, Raya, and their workmates get inspired by a series of wildcat strikes at other companies and realise that they have to fight for their rights. Bogdanska also thematises workers’ struggles, primarily by describing her experiences of trying to unionise the workers at the restaurant where she worked.

Such explicit descriptions of struggles over economic inequality are rather rare in contemporary Swedish-language working-class literature. In fact, it is more common to thematise the unwillingness or inability among workers to fight back. In Linderborg’s Mig äger ingen, for example, the steelworker Leif Andersson is explicitly characterised as someone who although realising he is being exploited does not fight (Linderborg 2007: 95). Personally, I find this characterisation somewhat strange, since Andersson is also described as someone who votes for the communists. Why, one wonders, should this not count as fighting against exploitation? After all, the Swedish communist party wanted to abolish the private ownership of the means of production that lie at the heart of capitalist class relations and, hence, of class inequalities in capitalist societies. They also supported the social-democratic reforms that resulted in a growth of the state-controlled sector in the Swedish economy during the decades after World War II as well as in decreasing economic inequality. However, even if one accepts Linderborg’s description of her father
as someone who does not fight, the account at least shows that fighting is an option and, thus, emphasises that the unequal distribution of the means of production under capitalism is not a given but could be altered, or even abolished, through struggle. The same thing is brought to the fore by the descriptions of how Leif Andersson dreams about a classless society (Linderborg 2007: 92f.).

**Marxist literary criticism and the historicity of Swedish-language working-class literature**

There are proximities between the representations discussed above of poverty in contemporary Swedish-language working-class literature and Marxist ideas about economic inequality. This fact contradicts a widespread view among critics of other working-class literatures, namely that the realm of literature is fundamentally bourgeois and that the possibilities of using it as a platform for the expression of socialist ideals are therefore very small.

A good illustration of this view can be found in Lawrence Hanley’s essay about proletarian literature in Nicholas Coles’ and Paul Lauter’s edited collection, *A history of American working-class literature* from 2017. According to Hanley, one central challenge faced by all of those involved in the proletarian literature movement is implicit in its very name: what is the relation between ‘literature’, as an institution central to bourgeois culture and status, and fiction and poetry written by, for, and about the proletariat? (Hanley 2017: 236)

It is not clear whether Hanley is describing views held by those who were ‘involved in the proletarian literature movement’ or if he, too, thinks that there is an inherent tension between the proletariat and literature. What is clear, however, is that the quote describes such a tension and that it emerges from ideas about the incompatibility of literature and the proletariat that make the very notion of proletarian or working-class literature problematic. According to Hanley, it was not only during the so-called proletarian moment in U.S. literature in the 1920s and 1930s that working-class authors faced the challenge of reconciling the seemingly incompatible entities of literature and the proletariat; rather, this is a general dilemma for working-class writers:

What does it mean to write working-class fictions that will be consumed and valued by middle-class audiences? What happens to representations of social difference? Who uses them and how are they used? How can the political aspirations of radical writing survive the social process that converts (working-class) writing into (bourgeois) literature? The engagement with these questions joins proletarian literature to a longer tradition of working-class fiction, a tradition shaped in large parts by anxieties about its own cultural legitimacy and value. (Hanley 2017: 247)

Another contributor to Coles’ and Lauter’s collection, Christopher Hager, makes a similar argument. In an essay about nineteenth-century U. S. working-class literature by women, he describes what he calls a ‘classic problem in the study of working-class literature’: ‘Is (or was) there an essential gentility in the realm of the literary that is alienated from or alienating to the working class?’ (Hager 2017: 64).

Similar views have also been expressed by critics of Swedish-language working-class literature. In the 1970s, for example, the (then) Marxist critic Arne Melberg (1973: 85, 101)
argued that Swedish working-class writers had been absorbed by bourgeois literary institutions and integrated into bourgeois forms of literary production. Melberg’s argument is founded in a Marxist sociology of literature according to which all literature existing in capitalist societies is determined by and expresses capitalist conditions (see Melberg 1975: 11). The centrality of this view in the tradition of Marxist literary criticism is highlighted by Terry Eagleton in his introduction to the anthology Marxist Literary Theory. ‘Culture for Marxism,’ Eagleton (2006: 7) writes, ‘is at once absolutely vital and distinctly secondary’. What makes it secondary is that – in Marx’s famous formulation in his foreword to A contribution to the critique of political economy from 1859 – it is considered to belong to society’s ‘superstructure’ and, thus, be determined by the ‘mode of production’ (i.e. the ‘sum total’ of the ‘relations of production’ or, in other words, the relations between classes) that conditions ‘intellectual life’ in general (Marx 2006: 31). What makes it vital, according to Eagleton (2006: 7), is that it reproduces those relations by constituting ‘the place where power is crystalized and submission bred’. More specifically, many Marxists have argued, literature’s contribution to the reproduction of capitalism consists in its obscuring of fundamental aspects of social life. In Eagleton’s (2006: 7) words, for Marxists, literature ‘risks papering over certain important conflicts and distinctions’, the most important of which are, of course, those between classes.

As has been demonstrated above, contemporary Swedish-language working-class literature does not paper over distinctions between rich and poor or conflicts between workers and capitalists. Therefore, this literature could be read as contradicting important ideas in Marxist literary criticism. However, this criticism is no monolith. Even if it is not hard to find support in Marx’s works for the conceptualisation of literature as a determined, ‘superstructural’ phenomenon belonging to a realm ‘where power is crystalized and submission bred’, it is also easy to find ideas there that seem to undermine such an understanding. For example, a fundamental aspect of Marxist thought is the insistence on conflict as a basic feature of social life, expressed in Marx and Engels’s classic claim in the Manifesto of the communist party that the ‘history of all society up to now is the history of class struggles’ (Marx & Engels 1998: 14). If society is characterised by conflict and struggle, why should this not be true of the realm of literature? Why should literature be viewed as something that contributes only to the reproduction of the existing class structures – for example, by making invisible class relations and injustices – and never to the challenging of these structures?

In fact, many passages in Marx’s works express a rather optimistic view of literature’s potential in the struggles over class relations. These have been highlighted and discussed by S. S. Prawer in his remarkable book Karl Marx and world literature (originally published in 1976 and re-published in 2011). Prawer argues that from the so-called Paris manuscripts onwards, Marx understood literature (like all the other arts) as ‘part of that universal creative activity through which man “transforms and creates the world and himself”’ (Prawer 2011: 144).

This human self-creation includes the creation of classes, Marx emphasises in The poverty of philosophy:

Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people [into] workers. The domination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle … this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests. (Marx & Engels 1976: 211)
Here, Marx stresses that classes are determined not by the economy alone but also by cultural processes.

Viewing literature as a part of the activity through which we create and change the world and ourselves means giving it a potential role – not only in the obscuring of class relations and injustices, but also as one of the means through which economic relations can be made visible and classes can materialise as social agents. For example, by representing economic inequality – especially the unequal distribution of the means of production – literature can contribute to the development of class consciousness and, thereby, to the formation of the working class as a political force fighting against such inequality.

Perhaps this is a good point at which to return to the question about struggle in Swedish-language working-class literature. Not all the works discussed above describe conflicts over phenomena such as wages, the length of the working day, or the ownership of the means of production, which could be interpreted as an example of how literature papers over ‘certain important conflicts’. However, if literature is viewed not as a reflection of reality, or as a means for its reproduction, but rather as ‘part of that universal creative activity through which man “transforms and creates the world and himself”’, then this critique loses much of its force. Then, it is less interesting to see whether working-class literature represents reality correctly (whatever that would mean) than to analyse which kinds of effects it could have, for example, as an instigator of conflicts. In other words, the relevant question becomes the following: Could the representation of economic inequality in Swedish-language working-class literature contribute to the emergence among workers of a class consciousness that makes it possible for them to become what Marx and Engels in the quote above call a class for itself?

However, as has already been demonstrated, the understanding of working-class literature as literature with the potential to contribute (in its capacity as literature) to working-class struggles is not shared by all critics. One important reason is probably the influence on criticism of working-class literature from the kind of Marxist literary theories described by Eagleton – the kind that conceptualises literature as a determined and superstructural phenomenon contributing chiefly to the reproduction of existing class structures. But these theories might, in turn, be conditioned by the contexts in which they have been developed.

As Eagleton (2006: 7) points out, different kinds of Marxist literary criticism correspond to different historical periods. In other words, they are not (only) products of different interpretations of the Marxist theoretical oeuvre but also of the conditions under which these interpretations have been made. For example, the ‘ideological’ strand of Marxist literary criticism – to which belongs the entire contemporary canon of Western Marxist literary critics, such as Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Louis Althusser, and Fredric Jameson – is conditioned by the political failures of Marxism in the Western World, Eagleton (2006: 10f.) argues. But it may also be conditioned, I would like to add, by the failure of radical literature.

In his introduction to Marxist Literary Theory, Drew Milne (2006: 27) argues that Marxists and other radical literary critics have shown ‘meagre respect’ for ‘the aspirations and struggles which continue to be expressed through literature’ by oppressed groups such as workers. Here, Adorno might serve as a good example. In the article ‘Culture industry reconsidered’, he informs his readers that in the drafts to their Dialectic of enlightenment,
Horkheimer and he ‘spoke of “mass culture”’ (Adorno 1975: 12). Later, however, they chose to use a different terminology:

We replaced that expression with ‘culture industry’ in order to exclude from the outset the interpretation agreeable to its advocates: that it is a matter of something like a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of popular art. From the latter the culture industry must be distinguished in the extreme. (Adorno 1975: 12)

It is obvious that the concept of ‘culture industry’ works better than that of ‘mass culture’ in Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis of commercial popular culture. But the notion of a ‘contemporary equivalent of “popular art”’ – an art that would be of, rather than for, the masses – is excluded not only from that analysis but also from Adorno’s work on capitalism and culture in general.

One reason for Adorno’s lack of interest in popular-radical culture might be that he, quite simply, liked ‘elitist’ or ‘highbrow’ art forms better. It may also be that there was not too much of popular-radical culture around to gain his interest. For example, during the Weimar Republic, German working-class literature remained a marginalised phenomenon, and during the Nazi dictatorship, it nearly ceased to exist (see Nilsson 2014a: 65–69). Further, when Adorno developed his ideas about culture and politics during his exile in the USA, he did so in a context in which the culture industry undoubtedly played a much more important role than, for example, proletarian literature. ‘For a brief moment in the mid 1930s’, Hanley (2017: 233) writes, ‘radicals … moved proletarian literature from the margins to the center of contemporary American culture and exalted in their success at “proletarianizing” American literature’. However, this moment seems to have been very brief, ending already in 1935. According to Hanley (2017: 246),

Some writers associated with proletarian literature, such as Steinbeck and Wright, launched successful careers from within the early 1930s. But renunciation and silence were more common fates for proletarian writers after 1935.

In Sweden, on the other hand, the tradition of working-class literature has been recognised as a central strand in national literature (see Furuland & Svedjedal 2006: 25; Tenngart 2016: 500). Among other things, several working-class writers have been elected members of the Swedish Academy, and in 1974, two of them – Harry Martinson and Eyvind Johnson – even received the Nobel Prize in literature. Swedish working-class writers have also been able to reach out to working-class readers to a higher extent than most of their colleagues in other countries. According to Hanley (2017: 237), U.S. proletarian literature ‘was definitely not part of working-class culture’. In Sweden, on the other hand, the working-class writers of the 1930s were able to both gain critical recognition and reach a mass readership among workers. During the decades after World War II, for example, cheap editions of many working-class novels from the 1930s were sold to workers by commissioners in the workplaces (see Furuland & Svedjedal 2006: 507–515). Still today, working-class novels can become very popular. For instance, both Alakoski’s Svinalängorna and Linderborg’s Mig äger ingen have sold very well and also reached non-book-reading audiences through filmatizations.
As a result of this consecration – which is unique to Sweden (see Furuland & Svedjedal 2006: 15, 25; Nilsson 2014a: 18–19) – the radical critique of capitalism found in much working-class literature has been recognised as a legitimate thematic in literature. Thus, the potential for working-class writers to use the realm of literature as a foundation for the formulation of radical class politics might very well be much bigger in Sweden than in many other countries (see Nilsson 2014a: 151).

Consequently, scholars studying working-class literature in Sweden are confronting a situation very different from that in which other critics have developed their understandings of this kind of literature. This has been recognised by Lars Furuland, who was professor in the sociology of literature at Uppsala University, as well as the most important researcher on Swedish working-class literature of all time. He argued that the very realm of literature was different in Sweden than in other countries and that this meant that theoretical models developed in other countries could not always be applied there. Above all, Furuland argued that the idea about literature being a bourgeois phenomenon was not applicable in a Swedish context. In Sweden, he wrote, ‘the bourgeois public sphere was indeed also dominant, but not so totally hegemonic, and also not so homogenous’ as was the case in other countries (Furuland 1982: 50).

What Furuland brings to the fore here is that literature itself is a historical phenomenon. In U.S. literary history, for example, working-class literature is a relatively marginal phenomenon. Therefore, it makes perfect sense for critics such as Hanley – or indeed the working-class authors themselves – to conceptualise the working class and the realm of literature as being relatively incompatible entities. On the other hand, in Sweden – where working-class literature is indeed a central part of literary history – things look, and are, different. Accordingly, the idea about literature being a bourgeois phenomenon makes less sense there.

Nevertheless, these historic specificities are seldom made explicit. For instance, critics of U.S. working-class literature seldom argue that literature is a bourgeois phenomenon in their context. Instead, they present the incompatibility of the realms of aesthetics and the working class as a given (see Nilsson 2018: 6).2 So do the many Marxist critics that argue that all literature in capitalist societies is determined by and expresses capitalist ideology.

Comparing working-class literatures from different countries can help us realise that literature is a historical phenomenon and, hence, encourage us to move away from this kind of determinism (see Nilsson 2018). Such comparisons can also help us develop an alternative understanding of literature and its relationship to class and ideology. A comparison between Swedish and U.S. working-class literatures, for example, may very well lead to the conclusion that this relationship is conditioned by what I have called cultural class struggle in the site of literature (see Nilsson 2014a 17f.) or, to use a simpler formulation, literary class struggle.

The consecration of Swedish-language working-class literature as a central strand in national literature has been a result of continuous struggles (see Nilsson 2017c). In the late

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2This is, of course, not a problem only in U.S. research on working-class literature. For example, I have argued elsewhere that Jacques Rancière’s understanding of proletarian literature is characterised by an essentializing of conditions specific to French literary history (Nilsson 2017b: 19–20). And of course, Furuland is not the only one to emphasise that the phenomenon of literature is historically specific. An interesting example can be found in Martin Walser’s foreword to one of the most well-known examples of West-German proletarian literature: Erika Runge’s Bottroper Protokolle from 1968. ‘Alle Literatur ist bürgerlich’, Walser (1968: 8) writes, but then immediately continues: ‘Bei uns’.
1920s, for example, Sven Stolpe, then a leading bourgeois critic, launched a series of attacks against working-class literature (see Nordmark 1978: 17). His central argument was that workers – because of their lacking education and Bildung, as well as their lacking ‘spiritual resources’ in general – cannot create great literary artworks (Stolpe 1928). Stolpe (1928) claims it is obvious that

a thoroughly cultivated observer, who has been well trained in the study of the problems of the soul, will see more deeply and accurately, than the man of practical life.

In other words, for Stolpe, the realm of literature was bourgeois through and through, and he wanted it to remain so. However, several working-class authors replied to Stolpe’s attacks (see Nordmark 1978: 18; Vulovic 2009: 128f.; Nilsson 2017c: 102). Furthermore, in the 1930s, literary critics affiliated with the labour movement, such as the Marxist Erik Blomberg, promoted working-class literature as a phenomenon of great aesthetic value, thereby contributing to its consecration (See Nilsson 2017: 103f.). This counterattack was evidently successful: in a book about contemporary Swedish literature published in 1938, Stolpe celebrates the working-class literature that he denounced a decade earlier. In fact, at least nine of the eighteen authors portrayed by Stolpe are working-class writers. One of them is Rudolf Värnlund, who was the main target for Stolpe’s assault on working-class literature in the 1920s. Now, however, Stolpe (1938: 181) calls his proletarian novel Vandrare till intet (Wanderer to Nothingness) from 1926 ‘a great novel’.

This example indicates that the question about the relationship between literature and society’s class structure is not a given but determined by struggles. In the USA, as well as in many other countries, the realm of literature may have remained bourgeois. In Sweden, however, workers managed to gain access to it and, thereby, to transform it.

**Conclusion**

I have now come to a point where I can start presenting my answers to the questions listed in the introduction: What does literature have to do with inequality? Does it contribute to its reproduction, or can it be a force of resistance? Is it fair to even ask of literature and literary studies that they address the problem of economic inequality?

Regarding the first of these questions – the fundamental one about what literature has to do with inequality – I hope that I have made it clear that my answer is ‘a lot’. As a Marxist scholar, I view literature as, among other things, something we use to understand, or even create, ourselves and the societies we live in. Since the history of all society up to now has been the history of class struggles, this involves understanding the economic inequalities that lie at the heart of class conflicts.

I also hope that I have made my position clear regarding the question of whether literature contributes to the reproduction of inequality or constitutes a force of resistance. My answer is, both of the above. It is certainly not hard to find literature that obscures, or even celebrates, economic inequality. But there are also writers that try to challenge inequality. This is especially visible in Swedish literary history, where working-class literature – as a result of literary class struggle – has been consecrated as an important strand in national literature.

Finally, there is the question of whether it is it fair to ask literature and literary studies to address the problem of economic inequality. Not all working-class writers write about
such inequality, and it is certainly not the critics’ job to tell them to do so. Nevertheless, much working-class literature does thematise and criticise economic inequalities – and that is a good thing, at least according to those of us who think that such inequalities should be done away with. However, as I have argued above, working-class literature’s ability to contribute to political struggles over inequality is conditioned by external factors, including the status of working-class literature itself. And these external factors are not a given. For example, the strength of the tradition of working-class literature in Sweden is the result of struggles that have involved writers, critics, publishers, and readers but also scholars. Doing research on working-class literature does not just produce knowledge about it; it also transforms it, for example, by increasing its status or making it more accessible to readers. Further, since this is a factor that literary scholars can affect, we too have a chance to participate in the challenging of economic inequality. I, for one, think that we should do so.

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