

***Das Kapital*: the book of communism**

Sungur Savran

14 September 2017 was exactly the 150th anniversary of the publication of Volume I of Karl Marx's *Capital*. It is fitting that this rounded anniversary also coincides with the centenary of the October revolution, the greatest proletarian revolution so far in history. The former was an attempt to make the working class conscious regarding the basis and the final solution of its daily struggle against capital. The latter was the embodiment of the moment of reckoning that *Capital* predicted would come. One relates to the other as theory to practice in a one to one correspondence. This article will try to show, among other things, that *Capital* is not only about capitalism: it is also the book of communism.

Invaluable though may be many of Karl Marx's writings, *Capital* certainly deserves pride of place within the corpus of his work. It is indisputably Marx's **chef d'oeuvre**. But more than that: it is the central instrument for understanding the modern world and therefore indispensable reading for even scholars that belong to schools of thought totally opposed to Marxism. It may rightfully be considered as one of the greatest achievements of the human mind not only in the modern age

but throughout all history, to be compared only to a handful of other masterpieces.

Yet it is also the case that there has never been another work upon which so much abuse has been heaped, which has been so grossly misunderstood, and which has been deliberately or unsuspectingly subjected to misrepresentation of such inconceivable proportions. Trying to understand certain modern-day debates on *Capital* requires the informed reader to clear up massive debris before even being able to start a discussion on the real question at hand. The epitome of this kind of systematic misunderstanding and misinterpretation is the voluminous literature on the notorious debate concerning the so-called “transformation problem”, which we will have a chance to touch upon further on.

Capital is certainly not easy reading. Marx himself apparently had mixed feelings about this: on the one hand, in his wildest moments, he imagined working class people studying his masterpiece and regarded the prospect of the French edition to be published in the form of a serial as an advantage since it would make the book “more accessible to the working class”; on the other hand, it is he who concluded the preface to that very same French edition of *Capital* with the following remark: “There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits.”

This is about *Capital* volume I, which was prepared for publication by the author himself. (Given that this famous remark is in the French edition, one should perhaps add that the translation into French was personally authorised by Marx.) Nonetheless even for volume I, there is a lot of difficulty that arises not only from the complexity of the subject matter, but also because this volume was the end result of a long series of drafts and sketches that culminated, at a first stage, in the *Grundrisse* (1857-58), which itself was published only posthumously, and the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). Then there was constant writing and rewriting in the 1860s, interrupted in this second stage by the burden of Marx’s political work in the First International. And even after volume I was published in 1867, Marx took the liberty of changing certain passages extensively, especially but not exclusively in the first part on value. Apart from Marx’s notorious perfectionism regarding his writing, which sometimes became the subject of well-meaning jibes from his friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels, the fundamental reason is not difficult to detect: *Capital* broke such new ground that in order to make the argument intelligible to as wide an audience as possible, the author had to wrestle unendingly with the form of presentation.

If this is the case for volume I, then one can imagine what problems volumes II and III would pose. These were not texts given final form by their author. It was Engels who went through the drafts that Marx had penned, deciphered his notoriously illegible handwriting, selected the relevant passages, reordered and edited and

finally published them, respectively, in 1885 and 1894. No other person would have been as authoritative an editor as Engels and we all owe him great debt for having completed this titanic task at the expense of his own original work that, as ever, waited to be written. However great our gratitude may be, though, it is nonetheless not to be forgotten that after all these were books produced out of texts left uncompleted by their author.

This is as true, if not even more so, for the so-called volume IV of *Capital*, edited and published by Karl Kautsky after Engels' death, on the basis of the incomplete notes that Marx left behind. The three tomes of the *Theories of Surplus Value* first saw the light of day between 1905 and 1910. However, this work has gone through successive reediting, to be republished in new form again and again in its original German and concomitantly its English translation.

Perhaps a minor point with respect to the difficulty of *Capital* has to do with the German censorship of the time. Marx lived his life as a revolutionary; more to the point, he had, along with Engels, fought the **ancien régime** during the 1848-1849 revolution on the continent and was no darling of the German state even well into the 1860s. This required him to be wary of explicit and extreme formulations regarding communism in the book. He had to have recourse to euphemisms and cryptic formulations in order to bypass the censorship, something he excelled in, especially because he had had a long-lasting tug-of-war with the German censors in 1842-43, when he was editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, and again during the revolution when he managed single-handedly the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, the main organ of the revolution. So, to take but the most salient example, the unsuspecting reader of *Capital* may construe the expression "community of associated producers" to mean something totally different when in fact it is a euphemism for "communism".

Finally, *Capital* presents difficulties to a certain type of educated reader. Being first and foremost an analysis of the capitalist economy, *Capital*, one might have assumed, will be more accessible to people who have studied economics than to readers who come from other walks of life. In truth, the more a reader is well-versed in standard bourgeois economics, the harder it may prove at the beginning for them to come to grips with the analysis presented in *Capital*, especially as far as the labour theory of value is concerned (this is the theory that holds that the value of a good or service is determined by the amount of labour socially necessary to produce that particular good or service). Accustomed, not to say conditioned, to think in terms of a multitude of "factors of production" all alike in contributing to the production of commodities and hence both adding value to those goods and, in the process, receiving in return as remuneration an amount equal to their marginal productivity, the economist reared in bourgeois economics has difficulty in coming to terms with the labour theory of value and, consequently, with the theory of surplus value that

is predicated on that very theory. Economists reading these lines would be well-advised to cast their well-entrenched received ideas in order to be able to view Marx's own procedure with fresh eyes.

Having dwelled on the difficulties of *Capital* for the lay reader, one should then hasten to add two caveats lest the potential reader give up the idea of reading that seminal work. First, it is a fact commonly agreed upon that the real difficulty lies at the beginning. Perhaps it was not fortuitous that Marx contrasted, in the above-quoted passage, "the fatiguing climb of its steep paths" with "its luminous summits". It is important to realise that Part 1 on "Commodities and Money", and in particular the discussion on "the form of value" and on the fetishism of commodities, presents the most serious problems in understanding the argument. Once the reader has tackled those sections and successfully appropriated the conclusions, the rest is really much easier reading, even before Marx's "luminous summits".

Secondly, it is probably a universal experience for teachers who teach courses on *Capital* or guide others in reading the book to witness how much more easily working class people will understand what Marx means than students or people of other backgrounds. This is, of course, once they get past the dialectical intricacies of Part 1 and goes especially for the comprehension of how surplus value is produced by the worker and pocketed by the capitalist.

The final counterpoint is this: for those who persevere despite the difficulties, the gratification is immense. Having grappled with the intricate structure and sophisticated conceptual framework of *Capital*, the reader will come out of the experience with a radically different vision of the modern capitalist world. Things that were perhaps difficult to make sense of or even seemed impenetrable before the appropriation of the insights provided by *Capital* will now seem ordinary aspects of the everyday functioning of modern society. Hence, whatever difficulty one experiences during the reading of *Capital* itself will be overly compensated by the ease offered in the comprehension of social phenomena in the aftermath of that reading.

A revolutionary science

Capital is certainly one of the peaks in the development of modern economic thinking, but is unlike any other work by any economist that has had a lasting impact. It is different in its aim, as well as in its scope as we shall see in the next section, from the writings of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Léon Walras, Alfred Marshall, John Maynard Keynes, Joseph Schumpeter, or Piero Sraffa, to cite some of the giants of economic thinking. These thinkers all conduct an inquiry into the functioning of the economy, trying to construct a scientific theory that explains the mechanisms through which the modern economy works. *Capital* was conceived as something beyond this. For its author, it is, first and foremost, an instrument of re-

volution, a work that provides the working classes with the consciousness necessary to carry through to victory the struggles they undertake. One should hasten to add that, for all this, the work is the product of a mind that does not permit an inch of deviation from a truthful depiction of the society at hand, i.e. capitalism. Marx had great contempt for others who bent and distorted the truth wilfully in order to be able to criticise the existing system and never resorted to such ploys in his critique of capitalism. His was a wholesale condemnation of the true system as it really was.

Despite this cool-headed approach to the object at hand, the reader is advised to understand well that the whole activity of Marx and his co-thinker Engels were devoted, from very early on, from around 1844 at the latest, to the end of their lives, to revolution, to proletarian power, to the abolition of private property, to the transition to a classless society, i.e. communism. This is true for their literary work as well as their practical efforts. Their return to Germany from exile in the heyday of the 1848 revolution was the epitome of this revolutionary work. Once the revolution was over, Marx turned to his research in the field of political economy, but he made it clear that this was in preparation for the next wave of the revolution, which he expected to erupt as a result of a new economic downturn, pretty much as the 1848 revolution, he thought, was a consequence of the 1847 crisis. That is why he was frantically trying to bring out a first product of his economic studies when confronted with the crisis of 1857, which, as it turned out, did *not* generate a new revolutionary wave, but was nonetheless instrumental in the composition of the *Grundrisse* in 1857-58 and the publication of the *Contribution* in 1859. Revolution did not in effect erupt until the Paris Commune of 1871, but Marx nonetheless did return to active politics in 1864 as one of the leaders of the International Workingmen's Association, which was to go down into history as the First International.

So the struggle for socialism (this word and communism were used interchangeably in the nineteenth century) was in the centre of everything that Marx and Engels did throughout their lives. What distinguished their brand of socialism from the prominent socialist thinkers that came before them was, however, that they were against detailed blueprints for socialism conceived by idealistic thinkers. They refused the voluntaristic programmes devised by great minds, whether these were democratic projects produced by the so-called young Hegelians of Germany or the forerunners of socialism such as Owen in Britain, or Fourier and Saint-Simon in France, or Proudhon and his so-called mutualism. Socialism, to their mind, was not going to be the product of the vision of any superior intellect, but of the struggle of that class of modern society, the proletariat, that was deprived of any means of survival and therefore had no other chance but to revolt against all existing conditions and to alter them radically. And so what really was necessary to make revolution self-conscious of the course it was bound to take was to understand the **real move-**

ment. *Capital* is the product of that very attempt to understand the real movement of society so as to help the demise of private property and establish communism.

Hence it is science and revolution simultaneously. It is an effort to understand capitalism so as to better strive to bring it down. It is perhaps one of the most elaborate systems in the social sciences to have been constructed, but becomes lifeless if divorced from the revolutionary import of the ideas put forth. It should thus not be counterposed to, but seen as part and parcel of, the criticism of the oppression and alienation suffered by the human being and the fight for total emancipation.

A critique of political economy

There has been considerable debate on the relation of Marx's work on the capitalist economy to the school of thought that preceded him, commonly labelled "classical political economy", the main representatives of which were Adam Smith, best-known for his work *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), and David Ricardo, whose main work is *The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817). The relation is a complicated one and can best be characterised as one of **aufhebung**, a central concept of the dialectic in Hegel and Marx, where there is a movement of supersession but also conservation. This relationship of Marx to classical political economy also bears a kinship to another debate on *Capital*, i.e. whether this work is one of economics in the proper sense of the term or has to be characterised differently.

In situating *Capital* within the history of ideas, one has to remember that Marx himself attributed great value to classical political economy. It was in the above-mentioned works that the labour theory of value, the cornerstone of the whole edifice of *Capital*, was developed. Moreover, as opposed to what Marx referred to as "vulgar economics" in his day and to the dominant school of thinking within the academia in our own day, that is, the so-called neoclassical school, classical political economy examined the capitalist economy as a series of relationships between the different social classes. These two alone would suffice to set classical political economy apart from all subsequent economics.

Nonetheless, it is also a fact of the highest importance that the two works Marx published in his lifetime on economics bear the concept "critique of political economy" in their title. Not only is his first work of 1859 directly called *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. *Capital* also bears the subtitle *A Critique of Political Economy*. At first sight, this is intriguing. *Capital*, after all, is a study of the anatomy of modern society and not a simple exercise in the critique of a school of thinking. And so one suspects there is something more to the concept of "critique of political economy" here than simply a critical evaluation of a school of economics. Let us dwell, then, a bit more on this concept.

The starting point must be Marx's assessment of classical political economy as a

science that reflects the true economic relations under capitalism, but one that does so within the limits of bourgeois thinking. These limits find their expression, first and foremost, in the manner in which classical political economy treats capitalism as an unchanging, even eternal form of production. Marx, on the contrary, **historicises** capitalism. He takes it up as one mode of production among many that humanity has developed throughout its history. This, in fact, is the main object of *Capital*. It seeks to understand and present the laws of motion of capitalism as a particular period of human history, as transitory as were others before it, such as the mode of production based on slavery or feudalism.

Having assumed the perennial nature of capitalism, classical political economy takes the economic forms and relations to be found under capitalism as **given**. These do not form an object of enquiry for the political economist. Marx, on the contrary, turns these forms and relations into a central focus of attention. He questions these forms and relations (the commodity, value, the commodity labour-power, surplus-value, capital itself, and all the more concrete forms), shows under what conditions they arise in the history of humanity, how they are reproduced, and how the laws of motion of capital itself undermine them and prepare the ground for the supersession of the capitalist mode of production. The whole analysis in *Capital* is suffused through and through with this analysis of the historically limited nature of capitalist forms and relations, not to the detriment of the study of the concrete forms of functioning of the capitalist economy, but in effect **through** the very study of these forms themselves. To cite a single example so as to clarify for the reader what we mean by this, the analysis of the accumulation of capital, a central aspect of the capitalist economy and therefore a focus of attention of the classicals as well, of course receives all the attention that it deserves from Marx. But this analysis is, simultaneously, an analysis of how the capital relation, i.e. the relationship between the capitalist and the wage-worker, is reproduced. Thus a central functioning mechanism of the capitalist economy becomes the site of developing an insight into the life process of the relations under capitalism.

Having disclosed through this analysis of forms and relations the specific nature of capitalist relations, Marx is then able to expose the manner in which the production of commodities creates a world turned upside down (a movement called by Marx “inversion”). The section on the fetishism of commodities, Part 1, volume I, shows that, due to the specific nature of the relations between the producers in this society, it is the products of labour that dominate the relations between the producers themselves. Relations between human agents necessarily take the form of relations between their products, i.e. commodities. This may not be immediately comprehensible, but if one remembers the very widespread contemporary line of the markets “buying” this or not “buying” that, one can understand what Marx meant by the

fetishism of commodities. A crystallisation of certain relations between the producers, the market, i.e. the sum total of the entire series of exchange of commodities and money and its derivatives in a given society at a given moment and all the institutions that serve as channels in all this exchange, dominates over the human element **as if** it were a product of natural laws. By reflecting this inversion as a most natural phenomenon, classical political economy reproduces in thought this upside down world. Marx then goes on, in later parts of *Capital*, to show that this fetishism appears in even more complex forms under the successive avatars of capital itself (reaching its apogee in the so-called category of “fictitious capital” in volume III).

Proceeding from the analysis of the commodity to that of capital, Marx arrives, through his exposition on the production of surplus-value and of capital itself, at conclusions almost diametrically opposed to those of political economy. The analysis makes clear that capital, far from leading an independent existence, is but the product of the surplus labour of the wage worker. Viewed as a series of successive rounds of the conversion of surplus-value into capital, accumulation lays bare the fact that capital is in fact surplus-value, the embodiment of the surplus labour of the worker, which then **confronts the worker as an alien force**. Marx’s discussion of alienation and alienated labour in the chapters on capital accumulation belies the idea that alienation was simply a youthful romantic idea which was then dropped by the mature Marx in favour of more “scientific” concepts. “Alienation” in Marx does not refer to some fleeting emotion, as some construe it, but is a perfectly scientific concept with a definite meaning. We also refer the reader to the idea that *Capital* is at once science and revolution.

This then forms the basis of the proposition put forward by Marx to the effect that the accumulation of capital, seen as reproduction, overturns the law of appropriation posited by political economy, i.e. that all property is the fruit of one’s labour, and converts this law, under capitalist relations, into its opposite, i.e. all property is the fruit of the labour of others.

Thus, the critique of political economy is not only a critique of a certain school of thinking. It is, in addition, a critique of a certain science, i.e. economics. Given the fact that classical political economy was, historically, the most honest and advanced school within economics, this science cannot but remain imprisoned within the confines of capitalist relations of production.

But not only that. **The critique of political economy is also a critique of the capitalist mode of production**, since political economy, in Marx’s opinion, simply reflects capitalist reality in a loyal manner. It is not, the reader should be warned, political economy that is guilty of perceiving an otherwise transparent system through fetishistic lenses, but capitalist reality itself that imposes its inverted perversity on political economy. It is not political economy that attributes the power born of the

labour of some to a separate entity called capital, but the existence of capital objectively as alienated labour that captivates political economy into thinking that the two are congenitally separate and distinct.

What has been said so far regarding *Capital* being a critique of political economy in particular and of economics in a more general sense should not be construed as meaning there is no economic analysis in Marx. The concept “critique of political economy”, so important in understanding Marx’s **oeuvre**, has often been misinterpreted in a manner that reduces *Capital* to an exclusive analysis of forms, the value-form to begin with, without due regard to the laws under which the capitalist economy functions and to the determination of quantitative magnitudes. This approach also errs through negligence of the concrete forms to be found in particular in volume III of *Capital*. It cannot be over-emphasised that Marx’s economic work is also very much down-to-earth. It is possibly the theory that can most successfully predict the concrete trajectory of the process of capital accumulation in the real world through its journey from boom to bust and from recovery to overheating.

The dialectical method of *Capital*

Capital owes as much debt to the German philosopher Hegel as it does to Smith and Ricardo. In a certain sense one can say that Marx utilised Hegel’s dialectical method to historicise and revolutionise classical political economy, while at the same time using political economy to lay a materialist basis to what is in Hegel an idealistic dialectics and thus to “discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell” (Afterword to Second German Edition of *Capital*). In that same Afterword, Marx pays his clearest tribute to Hegel. He also adds that he has “coquetted” in the chapter on value with “modes of expression peculiar to him”. It is true that this may have been a bit overdone in the chapter on value, but to conclude from this remark of Marx’s, as some have done, that dialectics is a relic in *Capital*, at most a rhetorical ploy, is to forget that the whole book is woven with the thread of dialectics. Let us try to see, briefly of course in the context of this introductory article, how this is so.

The main category of the dialectic, **contradiction**, that is to say the idea that an entity involves within itself its opposite, is the red thread that connects the whole book from beginning to end. *Capital* opens with the analysis of the commodity which is characterised as the unity of use value and value. This contradiction then assumes different forms such as the successive dualities between concrete labour and abstract labour, the commodity and money, production and circulation, the labour process and the valorisation process (or, what is the same thing in a different English translation, the process of the self-expansion of value), between the formal subsumption of labour to capital and its real subsumption etc. It is the tension

between and the interpenetration of these pairs that inevitably push the analysis forward at every stage. That this is not a merely formal procedure but relates to the whole content of *Capital* can only be made clear on the basis of an overall comprehension of the argument of the book.

The concept of **totality**, central to Hegel's dialectics, is also indispensable as a cornerstone of *Capital*. It is only on the basis of all three volumes that the pieces all fall together. Any treatment of any of these volumes or parts thereof that neglects its relations to the rest simply impoverishes, distorts or at times even leaves devoid of meaning the part thus isolated from the whole.

The contradictory relationship between **essence and appearance** is vital to understanding the true nature of the capitalist mode of production. Marx's whole treatment of capitalism is predicated upon the seeming incongruity between the true relations (e.g. value and surplus-value) and their forms of appearance or, what is the same thing, their phenomenal forms (e.g. price of production and profit). It is precisely this surprising divergence between essence and outward form that mystifies capitalist relations and hence stands in need of scientific demystification. Volume III (we will have opportunity to come back to this point) is replete with these phenomenal forms that conceal the essence of the relationship they represent. And yet these phenomenal forms are not at all figments of the imagination or phantoms created by ideology. They are the necessary outward forms of appearance of the inner forms that reveal the true nature of the relations in a society of commodity producers and in a mode of production that is based on wage labour.

The concepts of **mediation and immediacy**, so central to the Hegelian dialectic, are also vital to the analysis in *Capital*. Without the operation of these concepts, one cannot for instance understand how crisis is at once a disruption for capital accumulation, but at the same time the preparation of the conditions of another round of robust expansion of capital. Or, to take another example, without the concept of immediate unity, one cannot comprehend how the process of production under capitalism is **at once** a labour process and a valorisation process.

Last but certainly not least, the concept of **aufhebung** is operative in its fullest sense in Marx's work. From the *Communist Manifesto* through the *Grundrisse* to *Capital*, Marx elucidates how the material forces built up by capitalism and the "civilising mission" (*Grundrisse*) that it undertakes in its very process of development (e.g. by creating a unified world economy and politics) prepares the ground for communism. How it does this can only be studied in full on a reading of Marx's work, but what is important here is that communism **à la Marx** cannot be established but on the ground already prepared by capitalism. The abolition of capitalist private property and the establishment of new consciously ordained relations between the producers will certainly and irreversibly consign capitalism to the dustbin

of history, but the material achievements of capitalism and its civilising aspects will be preserved under the new mode of production. Thus the transition from capitalism to communism is in fact simultaneously supersession **and** conservation, in one single word **aufhebung**.

Denying the importance of the dialectical method that Marx employs in laying bare the secret of capitalism and explaining its powerful tendency to create a communist society will inevitably lead, at a certain stage, to a renunciation of the major insights of Marx into capitalism.

The subject matter of *Capital*

We have already established the particularity of *Capital* as a critique of political economy, that is to say, as a radical rejection of any theoretical stance that implies capitalism is immortal and eternal. Nonetheless, we also insisted on that occasion that *Capital* does subject capitalism to the most minute scrutiny in trying to find out how it works in practice, which immediately implies that the book comprehends an economic analysis as well, but one that differs from political economy in that it treats capitalism as still another transient mode of production in human history. But this still does not give us a full idea what the subject matter of *Capital* is. Is it economics? Is it a study of technological development? Is it sociology? Or is it political science?

The most correct answer to this series of questions would be all of them together. *Capital* is in fact the basis for a unified social science in the modern era. Of course, all of its propositions have to be elaborated upon and in all areas where it has remained silent new ideas have to be developed. However, *Capital* provides the framework within which all such theories can be developed and the basis on which can be erected a fuller social science of the modern world.

As a corrective to the widespread idea that *Capital* is a work of economics, full stop, let us remind the reader that when he first set out to study capitalism in the late forties and the early fifties, Marx clearly had a plan for a book which he characterised as a “critique of economics and politics”. The more elaborate plan of the period 1857-58 (when he was also feverishly preparing the manuscript that later was named the *Grundrisse*) included not only the subject matter of what we now have as *Capital*, but the state and the international system. The book was projected to consist of six volumes of which the last three necessarily had to take into consideration the state and politics. It was only the realities of life (in particular political engagements) and Marx’s extremely perfectionist character that convinced him to settle down with the plan that we have now, which was formulated in the period 1865-66, in the period immediately prior to the publication of volume I. It is true that *Capital* in the form we have it is focused mostly on what can justifiably be

called the economic sphere, but that is only due to practical necessity. Although the plan changed due to realism, there is nothing at all to imply that Marx did not, to the end of his life, consider it equally important to study the state and the international system. On the contrary, the importance of the analysis of crises to that of capitalism would require Marx to turn to the world market, for crises as the condensation of the contradictions of capitalism can, in his opinion, only be comprehended at the level of the world market (the “world economy” would sound more meaningful in our day and age). If that is granted, this means that *Capital* is really an unfinished work. And it can only be finished on the basis of the marriage of economics and politics.

What is even more important for us to understand than this discussion of whether it is a book of economics is that *Capital* is not solely an analysis of the capitalist mode of production. Perhaps even more importantly, and definitely more originally, it is **a book on communism**. We do not say this in the sense that Marx here draws out his blueprint for the communist society. He does not. As opposed to the Utopian Socialists, he carefully refrains from setting up lofty plans for the future society for reasons that we have already explained. But in a different sense the whole object of *Capital* is to show that in the womb of capitalist society there unfolds a process of gestation of a different society with a different set of relations of production, based not on private property and the market, but on communal property and conscious planning on the part of the “freely associated producers”. Thus the whole historical movement of capitalist society leads to the laying of the foundations of communist society. The proposition that capitalism leads inevitably to communism unless some historical factors hinder the transition is peculiar to Marx and is a wholesale challenge to the idea of all economic science that capitalism conforms to human nature and is, therefore, unalterable and eternal.

The architecture of *Capital*

The uninitiated reader may feel awed by the three thick volumes of *Capital*, even not counting the three additional tomes that go under the name *Theories of Surplus Value*. It is true that the task of comprehending a work of what adds up to several thousand pages seems overbearing—until one has a plan of the edifice that leads us from the ground floor of the abstract up the stairs all the way to the attic of the concrete. *Capital* has a structure akin in its rigour to a mathematical treatise and if the reader is aware of the different storeys that make up the different levels of abstraction, then the initial panic leaves its place to a serene kind of stroll through what becomes a much more familiar building with an admirable structure.

It is then very important to understand, in deciphering what Marx has to say in *Capital*, to understand the concept of abstraction and the relationship between the abstract and the concrete. But even before that, it is necessary to understand the

distinction that Marx makes between the **method of investigation** and the **method of presentation**. This is explained clearly in what is known as the “1858 Introduction”, which is a methodological preface of a kind written around the same time as the *Grundrisse* and published therein. The method of investigation is applied at that stage when scientific research has yet to collect, sort out, classify, categorise, put in order and relate to each other all the different elements of the endless empirical data that is there for the attention of the scholar. Only when scientific research has found out how and on the basis of what kind of logic to order and relate the different elements can the scholar then pass on to the procedure of abstraction. Given the sometimes abusive meanings heaped on the concept “abstract”, it is advisable to define it rigorously. Abstraction is the method used in the study of the forms or relationships that turn out, in the phase of investigation, to be determining for the totality in isolation from all incidental, extraneous, arbitrary, secondary or derivative elements so as to bring out the innermost structure of those central forms and relationships.

Hence, contrary to popular misperceptions, an abstract concept or statement is not necessarily good or bad in itself. It is only the context that determines whether it is good or bad. If the abstraction comes at the right moment and the object of study is chosen well, then an abstract category is not only an advantage, it is indispensable. For instance, *Capital* starts out with the commodity. This is because during his investigation into the empirical material available, Marx has hit a central truth: in a society based on the capital-wage labour relationship (the very gist of capitalism) labour power, i.e. the capacity to do work, has become a commodity, bought and sold in a certain specialised market (the so-called “labour market”) in the same manner as any other commodity. If that is true, this means that before one can understand the capital-wage labour relation, one has to understand the commodity as an economic category. This is what brings Marx to the commodity as the point of departure for an analysis of the capitalist mode of production. So a commodity is, in the first chapters of *Capital*, both a very concrete category (“the wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as —an immense accumulation of commodities”), but also very abstract in that it isolates the commodity even from the decisive relationship between capital and wage labour at a first stage.

This then is how the method of presentation works. Once abstract categories have been firmly grounded, the scientific presentation then moves on to more concrete categories, “rises from the abstract to the concrete” in Marx’s own words. Were one then to take into consideration only the presentation, one might be entitled to wonder how everything was in a certain sense deduced as from first principles. This is especially true in the case of Marx’s *Capital* because the analysis moves on the basis of contradictions, these then being solved by the only logically possible

resolution of the problem which takes us to a higher stage of concreteness. This is forgetting the phase of investigation, at which stage all the relations that are now presented in a seemingly deductive manner were really discovered in their true essence.

Capital is an edifice based on four grand levels of abstraction. (It is because within every level there may be other, more minor abstraction levels that we speak about “grand levels”.) Let us go through these in summary form.

1) **Production in general:** This level really lies outside the analysis of the capitalist mode of production proper, but is like a substratum on which that analysis rises. Production in general is a concept that represents the shared attributes of the production process under all modes of production in the history of humanity. As such, it forms the rock solid base of the materialist conception of history, most clearly elucidated in *The German Ideology* and the “Preface” to the *Contribution*. Since these attributes are necessarily present in every society, whatever its mode of production, capitalism also has to contain them. However, in trying to come to grips with the specific nature and laws of particular modes of production, production in general **in itself** provides us with no clue at all. So the relationship of this level of abstraction is like the foundation of a building. It is part of the building, but nonetheless outside of the habitable space. By itself it does not serve any immediate purposes, but without it the whole edifice would collapse.

2) **Exchange in general:** This is the first level of abstraction proper to *Capital*. It represents the conceptual counterpart to Marx’s analysis of the commodity. We have already indicated that the reason why Marx takes the commodity as his point of departure in analysing capitalism is that without an analysis of the commodity one simply cannot understand the more complex relationship of the purchase of labour power by capital. In other words, in order to understand the exchange (i.e. sale and purchase) of labour power, one needs to understand what exchange in general is and what laws apply to it as it becomes a systemic aspect of socio-economic life. This is what the analysis of exchange in general achieves for Marx in the first part of volume I on “Commodities and Money”. It isolates the relations that grow out of a situation where an advanced social division of labour coexists with private property in the means of production. This leads to a contradictory situation where the labours of the producers who make production decisions and carry them out independently from each other can only be socially validated on the market. Hence, the value relation and its multifarious forms. This is where Marx discovers the basis for the law of value (shorthand for the labour theory of value) and the inseparable ties between the commodity form and money as a universal equivalent. In other words, this level

of abstraction is the basis for Marx both of his theory of value and his theory of money, but only the basis, as these theories will receive further elaboration in subsequent parts and volumes of *Capital*.

3) **Capital in general**: Having studied the commodity or exchange at a level of abstraction that shuts out all disturbances outside of that relationship itself, Marx then passes to the study of the capital relation (short term for the relationship between the capitalist and the wage worker). Except for Part I, which, we have said, operates at the level of exchange in general, and Part II which acts as a transition from the former towards the next level of abstraction, Volumes I and II of *Capital* operate on the level of “capital in general”. By this is meant the study of the relationship between capital and wage labour **under isolation from all disturbing or secondary factors**. Foremost among the latter are relations between different fractions and units of capital. As opposed to some mistaken conceptions that imply that in Volumes I and II Marx assumes capitals of identical organic composition (that is an identical proportion of machines to living labour), what really makes it possible for Marx to study the capital-wage labour relationship in isolation is that he abstracts from the impact of competition between capitals. Once this is shunned, there remains no basis for the struggle between different fractions (industrial, commercial, financial, landed property etc.) of capital or between units of the same fraction. It is not that these are denied. They simply are held constant, frozen so to speak through the use of the instrument of abstraction. Hence, the relationship between the two main **dramatis personae** of the capitalist mode of production, that is, of the two major classes, can be studied **as if in a laboratory**, in isolation from every other relationship.

4) **Many capitals**: Once having completed the study of the production (volume I) and circulation (volume II) of capital **in its sole relation** to wage labour, Marx then relaxes in Volume III the constraint posed on the analysis. Competition between the different fractions and units of capital are brought into the analysis in Volume III of *Capital*. That is why he names this new level of abstraction “many capitals”, because as soon as that constraint is relaxed, there come into the picture a variety of relations, a variety of struggles even, between different fractions and units of capital. It is the interaction of the struggle between capital and wage labour, on the one hand, and the multitude of different forms and units of capital, on the other, that give us the concrete functioning of a capitalist society. That is why Marx can only now claim to be presenting “the process of capitalist production as a whole” (the title of volume III).

One aspect of this architecture is of vital importance, a point without which

one may fail, as many have before, to understand anything of *Capital* even if one has studied each and every section separately over and over again. In proceeding from volume I's abstract to volume III's concrete level, Marx does not abandon the former in favour of the more "realistic" depiction of the latter. The notorious "value system" and "price system" duality of the so-called "transformation problem" debate is a perfect example for this kind of misunderstanding of Marx's procedure. In this approach, two different realities, almost made up of two different substances, are posited. This is an entirely false representation of Marx's dialectical rise from the abstract to the concrete. Having brought in competition between capitals, volume III shows that this necessarily modifies the qualitative as well as quantitative relations analysed in volume I, established as these were in laboratory conditions, so to speak. Values determined by the amount of abstract labour socially necessary to produce commodities are now converted into "prices of production". Surplus value, identical to profit in volume I, resolves itself into profit of enterprise, commercial profit, interest, ground rent etc. These new forms conceal the relations established in volume I from the unsuspecting eye. This is the visible form of capitalist relations. Hence, we find out that it is only through a scientific analysis of capitalism that we can arrive at an understanding of the commodity and of capital and surplus value.

But that does not mean, quite the opposite, that the finished phenomenal forms are independent of the original more simple forms, which reveal the essential relations. The phenomenal forms are simply the modified forms of the essential ones. By tracing the law-bound modification undergone by each form, Marx has shown that it is the metamorphosis of the essential forms that generate the phenomenal forms. However, the transformation, the passage from the earlier forms to the more phenomenal ones does not abolish or repeal the essential ones. It subsumes them, conserves them (**aufhebung**), which grow thereby into another appearance.

Many bourgeois thinkers, to begin with some illustrious economists, attacked Marx by saying that after having posited the determination of values by labour time in volume I, Marx realised that, given the divergence of the composition of capitals regarding the proportion of machines to living labour, this would not do. So his transformation algorithm from values to prices of production, it was held, was an exercise in saving face. The pity of it all is that Marx wrote whatever sections of volume III in 1864-65, **before** publishing volume I in 1867. So he had full knowledge of the divergence of values and prices of production. This he knew from the beginning, but was bold enough to attempt to explain on the basis of the very structure of capitalism. The distinction between the different levels of abstraction gave him the opportunity to solve this problem, upon which the labour theory of value in Smith's and to a lesser extent Ricardo's work shipwrecked.

For Marx, this was not a “difficulty” in his theory. It was the contradictory structure of capitalist reality, where the completed forms dissimulate the essential ones. As Marx said, “if essence and appearance coincided, then all science would be superfluous”!

A work for the benefit of the 21st century

A small digression would be in order here to point out that *Capital* is not a study of capitalism as it was in the 19th century, but is really a work that has become more and more relevant to the analysis of capitalism as it has grown and developed over the centuries. This is necessary because liberals have always pointed to the fact that when *Capital* was written, capitalism was very different in its concrete forms from what it is today. On this 150th anniversary of the publication of volume 1, it is all the more necessary to counter these arguments.

We cannot, of course, enter into a discussion of substantive matters here. We do not, for instance, have space to refute the idea that the much trumpeted rise of “immaterial” labour has done away with the basis of the law of value. We do not, likewise, have the space to delve into a discussion of how to treat novelties such as software programming, informatics at large or working from the home within the terms of the labour theory of value and rebut the idea that these shun any talk of exploitation or the converse idea that all are now equally subject to exploitation, whether they work for capital or not. We will have to content ourselves by making two methodological comments, lest the reader be led astray by the many voices that proclaim “the end of capitalism as we knew it”.

First, one has to remember that, although he paid the utmost attention to the smallest empirical detail about the concrete functioning of capitalism in his day, i.e. in mid-nineteenth century England, reading an immense amount of material and drawing from the first-hand experience of his friend Engels, who worked at a factory in Manchester, Marx did not confine his analysis, and, less so his prognosis of the future tendencies of capitalism, to the concrete forms of manifestation the latter displayed at a certain moment in time. He was no empiricist. On the contrary, his legendary perceptiveness and predictive power lay in his thoroughgoing analysis of the potentials wielded by the categories he studied. That is how, for instance, he was able to foresee, at a very early stage of his analysis of capitalism, at the initial phase of his study of classical political economy in the 1840s, that capitalism was going to unify the world market more completely than ever seen in human history or that this mode of production had the propensity to turn everything it came into contact with, including moral values such as honour, into a saleable commodity. It was not his empirical observations but his approach of pushing to the very end, to their logical conclusions, so to speak, the tendencies displayed by the relations he

studied which permitted him to make so many startling predictions. Hence, as he was never tied down by the momentary appearance of things, there is no ground to say that his theory was only true for his day and must now have been superseded.

Secondly, it is the distinction between essential and phenomenal forms that Marx makes which makes it possible for *Capital* to survive the plethora of transformations that capitalism has experienced since his day. There is a very easy guide for the reader to ascertain whether a certain contemporary phenomenon that did not exist in Marx's time would impair the explanatory and predictive value of the theory exposed in *Capital*. The test is to see whether the novelty in question can be taken up in terms of volume I or volume III. (Bringing in volume II would divert us from the main task, but in principle that is no different.) If any new type or form of labour is organised under a capitalistic relationship, that is to say, on a large scale and on the basis of a wage contract, then whatever secondary modifications this may make necessary at the level of analysis of appearances, the essence of the relationship analysed by Marx can be said to have remained unchanged. It is only if the novelty radically alters the capital-wage labour relation that Marx studies in volume I that the validity of *Capital* can be called into question. Hence the beauty of the architecture of *Capital* in explaining the distinction between essential and phenomenal forms also facilitates the assessment of the evolution of capitalist forms with reference to the capitalist mode of production. So long as large-scale private property in the means of production and distribution and a class of direct producers of goods and services who have to sell their labour power because they themselves are deprived of the means to realise their labouring activity are the twin bases of the mode of production, capitalism rules OK and *Capital*, this monumental effort to understand it, is alive and well, despite all claims to the contrary.

The laws of motion of capital

In his Preface to the first edition of volume I, Marx writes explicitly that "it is the ultimate aim of this work to lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society." This is both revealing and intriguing. It is revealing because it makes clear unambiguously that what Marx is interested in is really the overall historical movement of capitalist society rather than the functioning of the economy in minute detail. But then it is intriguing that Marx should be talking about "the economic law of motion of modern society", as if there were only one law of motion. As a matter of fact, it would not be very difficult through a careful study of the three volumes to establish **many** laws of motion of capital. These are not explicitly characterised as such: there are no signposts to show us that such is the "law of motion no. 1" etc. But some effort would show that there are certain trends and tendencies of development of capitalist society that Marx establishes that may rightfully be called "laws

of motion of capital”. Such, for instance, to name but a few, are the tendency of capital to transform all products of labour into commodities; the tendency towards the proletarianisation of the working population; the tendency towards the concentration and centralisation of capital; the formation and reformation of a reserve army of labour (i.e. the creation of unemployment as a mechanism to ensure the unhampered development of capital accumulation); the tendency of the rate of profit to fall; the periodical recurrence of crises etc. etc.

All these and many others, clearly formulated in *Capital* as tendencies that flow from the nature of capitalist production, have been confirmed as real laws of motion of capital throughout the history of modern capitalist society. Let us go back to our original question then: why is it that Marx talks about “**the** economic law of motion of modern society”?

The only interpretation that makes sense in tune with the spirit of Marx’s work is that the author is here talking about that law of motion of capital which renders capital itself superfluous and creates the basis for a new society. This is the tendency of capitalist production to create an ever-increasing **socialisation of the production process**, defined as the growing technical and social interdependence of all producers upon each other. This ever-increasing socialisation comes into ever sharper contradiction with private appropriation in the sphere of relations of production. To put it differently, private decision-making concerning production comes into ever-increasing contradiction with a structure of production that cries out for planning. Let us now finish off by quoting from *Capital* itself.

The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production, which has sprung up and flourished along with, and under it. Centralization of the means of production and socialization of labour at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated.

This is towards the end of Chapter 32 of Volume I of *Capital* called the “Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation” (the penultimate chapter of the volume). Capitalism lays the basis for communism. This, then, is for Marx “**the** economic law of motion of modern society”. That is also why *Capital* is as much a book about communism as it is about capitalism.