



In the Tracks of Marx's Capital: Debates in Marxian Political Economy and Lessons for 21st Century Capitalism, Sungur Savran and E. Ahmet Tonak, 2024, Palgrave Macmillan.

The continuing relevance of Marx's *Capital*¹

Charles Post

Karl Marx labored for twenty-five years on his analysis of the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production. For Marx, this was not merely an intellectual enterprise, but a political one—to provide a rigorous historical and theoretical ex-

¹ The article “The Continuing Relevance of Marx’s Capital”, a review of Sungur Savran and E. Ahmet Tonak’s book *In the Tracks of Marx’s Capital*, was originally published in *Spectre* journal, <https://spectrejournal.com/the-continuing-relevance-of-marxs-capital/>, and is here being reproduced with the permission of its author.

planation of why capitalism was a fundamentally unreformable social system based on exploitation, accumulation, and competition, and was doomed to periodic crises that make hopes of reforming the system utopian. While Marx prepared only the first volume of *Capital* for publication, his friend and comrade Friedrich Engels edited his extensive notes for the second and third volume. Their pupil, Karl Kautsky, prepared the fourth volume, *Theories of Surplus-Value*, after Engels' death. Despite never finishing his work, *Capital* and *Theories* remain the highpoint of Marx's scientific achievements. Marx not only settled accounts with the classical political economists (in particular, Smith and Ricardo) but provided an analysis of the necessary relations and processes of capitalist society. Despite numerous, and often deliberate, misrepresentations by purported friends and foes alike, Marx's arguments in *Capital* have remained the focal point of the continuing debates on the origins, dynamics, and future of capitalism. For those working in Marx's tradition, *Capital* is neither a mere "historical text" applicable only to one phase in the history of capitalism, nor a sacred text that must be defended blindly. Instead, it continues to inspire theoretical and *empirical* research on capitalism as a distinct form of social organization.²

It is in this context that Sungur Savran and E. Ahmet Tonak's collection of essays, *In the Tracks of Marx's Capital*, present an excellent and timely contribution to our understanding of Marx's work, especially as capitalism remains mired in depressed profitability and stagnant accumulation since the 2008 global financial crisis. The two Turkish economists, longtime comrades and collaborators, have made important contributions to Marxist analysis over the last four decades. Savran participated in the debates on Sraffa's neo-Ricardian critique of Marx's value theory in the 1980s, along with Anwar Shaikh and the late Ernest Mandel, while maintaining political and intellectual activity in Turkey despite state repression.³ Tonak, who studied at the New School for Social Research with Shaikh and coauthored the seminal *Measuring the Wealth of Nations: The Political Economy of National Accounts*, has taught and published extensively in both the United States and Turkey.⁴

This collection of essays (many previously unpublished in English) is a vigorous defense and elaboration of Marx's method, theory, and ability to explain the concrete history of capitalism. The essays are grouped into four sections on different

2 Clearly, it is not possible to cite the enormous literature shaped by Marx's *Capital*, but we can highlight the contributions of economists like Anwar Shaikh and Michael Roberts, historians such as Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood, and theorists of the working class (Howard Botwinick), gender (Lise Vogel), and racial oppression (W. E. B. DuBois).

3 Ernest Mandel and Alan Freeman (eds.), *Ricardo, Marx, Sraffa: The Langston Memorial Volume*, London: Verso, 1984.

4 Anwar M. Shaikh and E. Ahmet Tonak, *Measuring the Wealth of Nations: The Political Economy of National Accounts*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

aspects of *Capital*. The first section contains six essays discussing *Capital's* place in the history of economic theory and Marx's own theoretical and political evolution. There, they defend a Hegelian reading of *Capital* against more mechanical interpretations (Althusser, Analytic Marxism) that are unable to grasp either the historicity of capitalism or its turbulent laws of motion. The second and third sections provide a rich theoretical and empirical case that Marx's analysis is not limited to one "stage" or "type" of capitalism but allows us to grasp the basic dynamics of the system throughout its history. Four essays *operationalize* the categories of *Capital* demonstrating, counter to the claims of David Harvey and others, that Marx's value theory is not too "abstract" to explain the concrete historical reality of capitalist development. Using the methods he and Shaikh developed to convert national income accounts into Marxian categories, Tonak and his collaborators explore "profit on alienation," the net social wage, the exploitation of unproductive workers, and the relative vulnerabilities of capitalist economies to crises of profitability. Finally, four essays deploy *Capital* to analyze such diverse aspects of twenty-first century capitalism as the production of surplus value by digital platforms like Facebook, the reorganization of work through lean production, contemporary imperialism, and the roots of the current capitalist crisis.⁵

In Tonak's lucid essays discussing the *Grundrisse*—the notebooks Marx drafted between 1857 and 1858 in preparation for *Capital*—and in Savran's introduction of the three volumes of *Capital*, the authors argue that Marx's "scientific theory that explains the mechanisms through which the modern economy works" emerges from a "critique of political economy" (33). Put another way, Marx's contributions to economic theory emerge through an engagement with—and transcendence of—the works of Smith, Ricardo, and the classical tradition in economics. Smith, Ricardo, and their contemporaries attempted to produce a *scientific* account of modern society that "did not make do with the outward manifestation" of capitalist social relations (59), unlike those whom Marx labelled "vulgar economists" (the founders of "neo-classical economics") who idealized the workings of the market. However, Marx located the limits of the classical tradition in their treatment of capitalism as an "eternal form of production" (40) that was "adequate to human nature" (63).⁶

5 For reasons of space and because the disagreements between Marxists and neo-Ricardians are no longer a central focus of Marxian and radical debate, I will not discuss Savran's brilliant critiques of the neo-Ricardian economists. The decline of neo-Ricardian influence took place, in large part, because the neo-Ricardian theory of capitalist crisis, in which worker militancy produces a "profit squeeze," is clearly inadequate to explain the current crises of profitability after forty years of working-class retreat.

6 Brenner and Wood make a similar criticism of the classical traditions, in particular Smith's account of the origins of capitalism. Robert Brenner, "The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism" *New Left Review* I/104, July-August 1977, p. 25-92; Ellen

Only by historicizing capitalism as a social form with an origin and possible endpoint could Marx resolve the varied contradictions in the classical tradition on the nature of value, the origins of profit, the dynamics of accumulation, and the determinants of crises of profitability.

Savran and Tonak also convincingly argue that Marx's critique and transcendence of classical political economy in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* was only possible because of his critical appropriation of Hegel's dialectical method. While the German idealist viewed human history as the increasingly seamless unfolding of the "absolute spirit," Marx, the militant materialist, rooted the dialectic in contradictory social production and reproduction as a whole. Only by understanding the contradictory nature of capitalist social relations in their totality could Marx grasp the *possibility* of the transcendence of this social form. As other, Hegelian-influenced readings argue, Tonak and Savran point to how Marx's materialist dialectic of essence and appearance allowed him to move beyond a simple debunking of erroneous theories, but to grasp why capitalism appears as "an indispensable technological factor of the production process in all forms of social organization," rather than a historically constituted "relation of production" (77). Capitalist social relations subordinate the direct producers to the dominance of the commodity, producing "commodity fetishism"—the inversion of subject and object that makes the social interdependence of producers necessarily appear as the interactions of commodities. By grasping the duality of capitalist production—as both a concrete labor process and an abstract valorization process—Marx can explain why all social relations under capitalism, including the relationship between capital and labor, appear as relationships between abstractly equal commodity-owners without resorting to notions of "false consciousness" and ideological manipulation.

The section on *Capital* ends with a lucid clarification of Marx's distinction between productive and unproductive labor. While Savran and Tonak's main targets were the neo-Ricardian economists, this essay is essential to those attempting to navigate debates between Marxist and autonomist feminists over the place of "domestic labor" under capitalism.⁷ Beginning with a specification of productive labor in general—labor that produces goods and services rather than that which distributes them among individuals or reproduces the relations of production—they argue, first, that capitalist productive labor is labor-power purchased with surplus-value (rather than revenue—the personal income of capitalists) and, second, that it produces commodities that contain surplus-value. From this perspective, all workers

Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995, Part I.

⁷ Paula Varela, "Social Reproduction in Dispute: A Debate Between Autonomists and Marxists" *Spectre* 4, Fall 2021: <https://spectrejournal.com/social-reproduction-in-dispute/>.

producing *both* “material” goods (including transport and storage as phases of the production process) and “immaterial” services that add value (private education, health care, food preparation, and personal grooming) are productive workers. Not only are nonwage laborers (peasants, the self-employed, paid and unpaid domestic laborers) *unproductive* in this sense, so are waged and salaried workers in the finance, insurance, and real estate industries. So are store clerks in their role of ensuring that goods are not taken without payment, as are the vast majority of state employees. In a later essay, Tonak makes the case that while unproductive, non-supervisory workers (clerical workers, state employees, and so on) do not produce surplus value, they are exploited because they sell their labor power to capital and are forced to perform surplus labor like other workers. Put simply, the working class includes *both* productive and unproductive wage workers under the command of capital.⁸

The section on “operationalizing *Capital*” begins with an essay on the concept of “profit on alienation” (POA) by Tonak. To explain the noncorrespondence between the masses of surplus-value and profits under capitalism, Shaikh identifies a secondary source of profits under capitalism—POA.⁹ Although Shaikh insists that without surplus labor there would be no profits under capitalism, some of his critics see POA as a concession to Piero Sraffa’s neo-Ricardian theory of value.¹⁰ Tonak, following Shaikh, defines POA as profit that “arise from transfers between the circuit of capital and other institutions or spheres of social life, including households and the state” (167). Along with coauthor Alper Duman, he produces a careful, empirical measurement of two key sources of POA in Turkey—the sale of public land and other assets to private investors and the interest on consumer loans to workers. The essay is a very original contribution to the discussion of neoliberal “privatization” and to the growth of working-class debt. It also begins to identify the *limits* on POA in a capitalist society—the process of transformation of state assets and means of production into capital, and the depression of wages below the socially determined value of labor power in a given society. Both have clear limits: on the one hand, the confining of state owned enterprises to unprofitable lines of production and the rapidly disappearing noncapitalist forms of production; and on the other, the need to insure the reproduction of the “special commodity,” labor power.

8 This insight raises serious doubts about Nicos Poulantzas’s claim that the productive-unproductive labor distinction was the boundary between the “new petty bourgeoisie” and the working class in Nicos Poulantzas, “Productive and Unproductive Labor: The New Petty Bourgeoisie and the Working Class” in *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, London: Verso, 1978.

9 Anwar Shaikh, *Capitalism, Conflict, Crises*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 208–12.

10 Michael Roberts, “Real Capitalism: Turbulent and Antagonistic, But Not Imperfect” *International Socialism* 2, no. 152, 2016: <https://isj.org.uk/real-capitalism-turbulent/>.

Tonak, together with Shaikh, first addressed the “social wage”—capitalist state welfare spending—in debates with “profit squeeze” theorists in the late 1970s and 1980s who claimed that workers’ successful struggles on one hand against the intensification of production (“speed-up”), and on the other to increase real wages and social benefits, led to falling profits in the 1970s.¹¹

Tonak returns to this issue in a study of the net social wage in Turkey since 1980. As he and Shaikh found in the 1980s for the United States and other parts of the global North, the net social wage—the difference between the taxes paid by workers (both productive and unproductive) and welfare payments—in Turkey are *negative*. In other words, taxation on the working class is greater than state expenditures on social reproduction. Thus, the *net surplus-value* available to capital in the form of taxation *increases*, acting as a countertendency to the falling rate of profit. As a result, social welfare austerity increases the rate of surplus value both through increasing the mass of surplus value available to capital, and exacerbating labor-market competition as workers’ meagre “social safety net” is unraveled, allowing capitalists to depress wages and intensify production. In the final essay in this section, Tonak provides a new analysis of input-output networks, which measure the exchange of intermediate goods among firms, to specify the centrality of different branches of production and distribution in a given national economy. The relative weight of these sectors allows them to analyze why some branches—finance, housing construction, real estate, and so forth—are more susceptible to the impact of falling profits than others.

The final section on “*Capital* in the 21st century” begins with Tonak’s insightful essay on how the digital sector—in particular, web platforms like Facebook and Google—produces surplus-value. Against those who argue that the profitability of these sectors invalidates Marxian analysis of capitalism, Tonak notes that digital platforms buy means of production such as software and hardware and purchase the labor-power of software engineers, coders and the like, who then produce a digital “environment for social interaction” (260) to users without charge. These users, as independent producers, create “content” (including their consumer preferences) that is then sold to advertisers. Savran’s lengthy analysis of lean production—the hyperfragmentation of tasks, work intensification, and “just-in-time” inventories—as the “highest stage of Taylorism” draws on the work of both Harry Braverman and the labor intellectuals around *Labor Notes* to analyze how the reorganization of production over the past four decades has attempted to whet capital’s appetite “for surplus-value by constantly pushing up the pace of work...forcing the limits of

11 Shaikh and E.A. Tonak “The Welfare State and the Myth of the Social Wage” in *The Imperiled Economy*, Book 1, ed. R. Cherry, et al., New York: Union for Radical Political Economy, 1987.

what is humanly possible" (305).¹² Tonak's pathbreaking essay on imperialism as "moribund competitive capitalism" provides a powerful alternative to most Marxist theories that view the global uneven and combined development of capitalism as the result of "unequal exchange," "superexploitation," or "monopoly"—explanations that are both theoretically and empirically flawed.¹³ Drawing on Shaikh's theory of *real capitalist competition*, Tonak argues that imperialism and the division between the global North and South is the historical product of competition.¹⁴

In the final essay in this section, "The World in Crisis: The Twilight of Capitalism," Savran and Tonak bring together varied themes explored throughout the volume. First, they navigate the various mainstream and Marxian explanations of capitalist crises. In a lucid explication of three of the most important alternatives to Marx's theory—"creative destruction" (Schumpeter), "underconsumption," or lack of effective demand (Keynes, Sweezy) and "profit-squeeze" (neo-Ricardians)—Savran and Tonak elaborate their numerous logical and historical shortcomings. In the place of these inadequate explanations, they defend Marx's theory of crisis—the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall—while acknowledging powerful countertendencies to this law, such as increasing the rate of exploitation, the export of capital to less developed regions, and so on. Marx insisted that periodic crises of profitability were a necessary consequence of capitalist accumulation and competition and the rising organic composition of capital. Second, Savran and Tonak, expanding upon Savran's arguments in the earlier "*Capital: The Book of Communism*," outline how capitalism at the dawn of the twenty-first century has created the objective conditions for a global transition from crisis-ridden capitalism to a democratic, collectivist social order—that is, socialism. Specifically, they highlight

12 Savran cites Parker and Slaughter's *Choosing Sides*, but does not draw on Kim Moody's more explicitly Marxist work on this topic, in particular Moody's seminal *Workers in a Lean World*. Mike Parker and Jane Slaughter, *Choosing Sides: Unions and the Team Concept*, Boston: South End Press, 1988; Kim Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy*, London: Verso, 1997. Most likely written before the global COVID-19 pandemic, Savran does not address the moves away from "just-in-time" inventorying and other aspects of lean production. Kim Moody, "The End of Lean Production... and What's Ahead" *Labor Notes* May 2, 2024, accessed April 29, 2025, <https://labornotes.org/2024/05/end-lean-production-and-whats-ahead>; Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the 20th Century*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974.

13 I drew heavily on an earlier version of Tonak's essay. Charles Post, "Explaining Imperialism Today: An Alternative Analysis," *Spectre* 7, 2023, p. 54–69, <https://spectrejournal.com/explaining-imperialism-today/>.

14 Shaikh, *Capitalism*, Chapters 7–11. Savran, in his essay on lean production, uses the term "monopoly capital" several times. In personal correspondence, Savran explains that he agrees with Shaikh and Tonak that competition intensifies in the "imperialist epoch" of large-scale, capital-intensive production, but insists on a "rigid distinction between the levels of abstraction in the first and third volumes of *Capital*." S. Savran to C. Post (email) April 25, 2025.

how the dominance of cooperative labor processes, the socialization and internationalization of production, the centralization of the means of production, and the application of science to production all make socialism possible.

This brilliant collection of essays could easily be criticized for its failure to take into account a variety of issues, in particular the impending capitalist ecological crisis.¹⁵ In a volume that is already over four hundred pages in length, one can understand why many issues would not be discussed. However, there are two important problems with Savran and Tonak's insightful analyses. First, the authors focus solely on the ways in which capitalism creates a *potentially* revolutionary subject—the working class. Their emphasis is solely on the ways in which, in the words of Kim Moody, capitalism “pushed together” workers through the creation of a cooperative labor process and the internationalization and socialization of production.¹⁶ However, they do not address how capitalist accumulation and competition pull apart the working class. This is especially unfortunate given that one of their co-thinkers, Howard Botwinick, has deployed Shaikh's analyses of competition and accumulation to demonstrate how capitalism constantly produces and reproduces *heterogeneity* among both capitalists and workers.¹⁷ A clearer discussion of the *contradictory* impact of capitalist development on the working class would have further insulated Savran and Tonak's arguments against common accusations that Marx envisioned an *automatic* transition to socialism.

Second, and of greater consequence, is Savran and Tonak's embrace of a “productive forces” theory of history. The author's embrace Marx's famous formulations in the 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that argues there is a *transhistorical* tendency for the development of the “material forces of production”—tools, instruments and methods of production.¹⁸

However, there are a number of reasons Marxists should jettison the histori-

15 This is unfortunate because a classical Marxian understanding of capitalist accumulation and competition provides a more robust theoretical underpinning for contemporary discussions of capitalism and the “metabolic rift” than theories based on notions of monopoly and the like.

16 Moody, *Workers in a Lean World*, Chapter 7.

17 Howard Botwinick, *Persistent Inequalities: Wage Disparity Under Capitalist Competition*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018.

18 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977, available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>. The crises of any form of social labor are the result of the development of the forces of production coming “into conflict with the existing relations of production”—class relations. The resulting crisis makes possible a social revolution which creates new relations of production that allow the continued development of the productive forces. Clearly, Tonak and Savran reject the conclusion, shared by both pre-1914 “orthodox Marxists” like Kautsky and Stalinist “communists,” that the development of the productive forces across history makes the victory of socialism “inevitable.”

cal narrative in the 1859 Preface. First, there are significant questions about the scientific status of the Preface. As the Marxologist Arthur Prinz has argued, the Preface was not intended to be a codification of Marx's social theory, but an attempt to evade Prussian censorship by de-emphasizing class struggle as the "motor of history."¹⁹ Even more importantly, the productive forces thesis projects the historically specific dynamics of capitalism onto all of human history and is historically inaccurate.²⁰ As Savran and Tonak demonstrate convincingly, capitalist crises are rooted in the contradiction between the development of the productive forces (the rising organic composition of capital) and capitalist productive relations (the rate of profit). Capitalist crises appear as the growth of the relative surplus population and the overproduction of both means of production and consumption.

By contrast, crises in *precapitalist* modes of production arise from the overall stagnation of the productive forces in these societies. While there is evidence of *episodic* development of the objects and instruments of production before capitalism, usually corresponding to the movement of these societies to new frontiers or the introduction of new crops, the relationship between lords and peasants (organized locally as in feudalism or centrally in various tributary modes) prevents the systematic reinvestment of surpluses in improved methods of production characteristic of capitalism. Precapitalist crisis results from falling labor productivity and appears as absolute shortages of foodstuffs and population collapse.

Finally, there is no necessary tendency for these crises to be resolved through the appearance of new, more productive forms of social labor. The general crises of feudalism in the fourteenth century had diverse results—the recharging of classical feudalism in Eastern Europe ("the second serfdom"), and the emergence of a legally free peasantry secure in their possession of landed property as long as they paid relatively stable rents to local lords and taxes to the centralized monarchy (Absolutism). Only in England did capitalism emerge, as the result of the historically contingent ability of the peasantry to end serfdom and the lords to impose commercial-capitalist ground rent on their tenant-farmers, who, in turn, were compelled to specialize output, introduce labor-saving methods of production, and accumulate capital in order to "sell to survive." In other words, the crisis of any given mode of production can give rise to a *variety* of solutions—not all of which enhance the productivity of human labor.

These criticisms, we hope, highlight the importance of Tonak and Savran's central argument: that *Capital* provides a firm theoretical basis for understanding and

19 Arthur M. Prinz, "Background and Ulterior Motive of Marx's 'Preface' of 1859," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 30, no.3, 1969, p. 437–50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708568>.

20 This argument is based on Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism and The Origins of Capitalism: A Longer View*, London: Verso, 2017.

analyzing capitalism as a *historically specific form of social labor*. Unlike all previous forms of human society, capitalism's dynamism is rooted in the *unique* capacity of its social relations of production to foster the near continuous development of the productivity of labor through improved means and methods of production. Capitalism's unique dynamism is also the root of its *necessary* crises as the increasing capitalization of production leads to declining profitability. The necessity of crisis means that any concessions and reforms wrested from capital by mass, militant workers' struggles are at best transitory and will be attacked whenever profits decline. Capitalism also produces a social class—the working class—that has both the objective social power and potential interest in transcending this mode of production and initiating a transition to a classless and stateless society based on the democratic and collective appropriation of human productive capacity. At the same time, *Capital* provides us with tools to grasp the *historical* survival of capitalism. For Marx, there was no “final” economic crisis of capitalism. *Capital* outlines the way in which capitalism can produce the conditions for renewed profitability and accumulation—the massive destruction of fixed capital and human labor. Nor is the victory of workers' struggles for socialism guaranteed. Capitalism spontaneously produces fetishized forms of consciousness among both capitalists and workers, and also generates tendencies that divide workers amongst themselves. It is only through workers' collective self-activity and self-organization—through mass struggle and independent class organization—that workers can achieve their self-emancipation.