

Louis Althusser 1971
Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays

Preface to *Capital* Volume One

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Now, for the first time in the history of French publishing, *Capital* Volume One is available to a mass audience.

What is *Capital*?

It is Marx's greatest work, the one to which he devoted his whole life after 1850, and to which he sacrificed the better part of his personal and family existence in bitter tribulation.

This work is the one by which Marx has to be *judged*. By it alone, and not by his still idealist 'Early Works' (1841-1844); not by still very ambiguous works like *The German Ideology*,^[1] or even the *Grundrisse*, drafts which have been translated into French under the erroneous title '*Fondements de la Critique de l'Économie Politique*' (Foundations of the critique of political economy);^[2] not even by the famous *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*,^[3] where Marx defines the 'dialectic' of the 'correspondence and non-correspondence' between the Productive Forces and the Relations of Production in very ambiguous (because Hegelian) terms.

Capital, a mighty work, contains what is simply one of the three great scientific discoveries of the whole of human history: the discovery of the system of concepts (and therefore of the *scientific theory*) which opens up to scientific knowledge what can be called the 'Continent of History'. Before Marx, two 'continents' of comparable importance had been 'opened up' to scientific knowledge: the Continent of Mathematics, by the Greeks in the fifth century B.C., and the Continent of Physics, by Galileo.

We are still very far from having assessed the extent of this decisive discovery and drawn all the theoretical conclusions from it. In particular, the specialists who work in the domains of the 'Human Sciences' and of the Social Sciences (a smaller domain), i.e. economists, historians, sociologists, social psychologists, psychologists, historians of art and literature, of religious and other ideologies – and even linguists and psychoanalysts, all these specialists ought to know that they cannot produce truly scientific knowledges in their specializations unless they recognize the indispensability of the

theory Marx founded. For it is, in principle, the theory which 'opens up' to scientific knowledge the 'continent' in which they work, in which they have so far only produced a few preliminary knowledges (linguistics, psycho-analysis) or a few elements or rudiments of knowledge (the occasional chapter of history, sociology and economics) or illusions pure and simple, illegitimately called knowledges.

Only the militants of the proletarian class struggle have drawn the conclusions from *Capital*: they have recognized its account of the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation, and grouped themselves in the organizations of the economic class struggle (the trade unions) and of the political class struggle (the Socialist, then Communist Parties), which apply a mass 'line' of struggle for the seizure of State Power, a 'line' based on 'the concrete analysis of the concrete situation' (Lenin) in which they have to fight (this 'analysis' being achieved by a correct application of Marx's scientific concepts to the 'concrete situation').

It is paradoxical that highly 'cultivated' intellectual specialists have not understood a book which contains the Theory which they need in their 'disciplines' and that, inversely, the militants of the Workers' Movement have understood this same Book, despite its great difficulties. The paradox is easy to explain, and the explanation of it is given word for word by Marx in *Capital* and by Lenin in his works.^[4]

If the workers have 'understood' *Capital* so easily it is because it speaks in scientific terms of the everyday reality with which they are concerned: the exploitation which they suffer because of the capitalist system. That is why *Capital* so rapidly became the 'Bible' of the International Workers' Movement, as Engels said in 1886. Inversely, the specialists in history, political economy, sociology, psychology, etc., have had and still have such trouble 'understanding' *Capital* because they are subject to the ruling ideology (the ideology of the ruling class) which intervenes directly in their 'scientific' practice, falsifying their objects, their theories and their methods. With a few exceptions, they do not suspect, they cannot suspect the extraordinary power and variety of the ideological grip to which they are subject in their 'practice' itself. With a few exceptions, they are not in a position to criticize for themselves the illusions in which they live and to whose maintenance they contribute, because they are literally blinded by them. With a few exceptions, they are not in a position to carry out the ideological and theoretical *revolution* which is necessary if they are to recognize in Marx's theory the very theory their practice needs in order to become at last scientific.

When we speak of the difficulty of *Capital*, it is therefore essential to apply a distinction of the greatest importance. Reading *Capital* in fact presents two types of difficulty which have nothing to do with each other.

Difficulty No. 1, absolutely and massively determinant, is an ideological difficulty, and therefore in the last resort a *political* difficulty.

Two sorts of readers confront *Capital*: those who have direct experience of capitalist exploitation (above all the proletarians or wage-labourers in direct production, but also, with nuances according to their place in the production system, the non-proletarian wage-labourers); and those who have no direct experience of capitalist exploitation, but who are, on the contrary, ruled in their practices and consciousness by the ideology of the ruling class, bourgeois ideology. The first have no ideologico-political difficulty in understanding *Capital* since it is a straightforward discussion of their concrete lives. The second have great difficulty in understanding *Capital* (even if they are very 'scholarly', I would go so far as to say, especially if they are very 'scholarly'), because there is a *political incompatibility* between the theoretical content of *Capital* and the ideas they carry in their heads, ideas which they 'rediscover' in their practices (because they put them there in the first place). That is why Difficulty No. 1 of *Capital* is in the last instance a *political* difficulty.

But *Capital* presents another difficulty which has absolutely nothing to do with the first: *Difficulty No. 2*, or the *theoretical* difficulty.

Faced with this difficulty, the same readers divide into two new groups. Those who are used to *theoretical* thought (i.e. the real scientists) do not or should not have any difficulty in reading a *theoretical* book like *Capital*. Those who are not used to practising works of theory (the workers, and many intellectuals who, although they may be 'cultured' are not *theoretically* cultured) must or ought to have great difficulty in reading a book of pure theory like *Capital*.

As the reader will have noted, I have used conditionals (should not ... should ...). I have done so in order to stress something even more paradoxical than what I have just discussed: the fact that even individuals without practice in theoretical texts (such as workers) have had less difficulty with *Capital* than individuals disciplined in the practice of pure theory (such as scientists, or very 'cultivated' pseudo-scientists).

This cannot excuse us from saying something about the very special type of difficulty presented by *Capital* as a work of *pure theory*, although we must bear in mind the fundamental fact that it is not the theoretical difficulties but the *political* difficulties which are really determinant in the last instance for every reading of *Capital* and its first volume.

Everyone knows that without a corresponding scientific *theory* there can be no scientific practice, i.e. no practice producing new scientific knowledges. All science therefore depends on its own theory. The fact that this theory changes and is progressively complicated and modified with the development of the science in question makes no difference to this.

Now, what is this theory which is indispensable to every science? It is a *system of basic scientific concepts*. The mere formulation of this simple definition brings out

two essential aspects of every scientific theory: (1) the basic concepts, and (2) their system.

These concepts are concepts, i.e. *abstract* notions. First difficulty of the theory: to get used to the practice of *abstraction*. This apprenticeship, for it really is an apprenticeship (comparable with the apprenticeship in any other practice, e.g. as a lock-smith), is primarily provided, in our education system, by mathematics and philosophy. Even in the *Preface to Capital Volume One*, Marx warns us that abstraction is not just the existence of theory, but also the method of his analysis. The experimental sciences have the 'microscope', Marxist science has no 'microscope': it has to use abstraction to 'replace' it.

Beware: scientific abstraction is not at all 'abstract', quite the contrary. E.g., when Marx speaks of the total social capital, no one can 'touch it with his hands'; when Marx speaks of the 'total surplus-value', no one can touch it with his hands or count it: and yet these two abstract concepts designate actually existing realities. What makes abstraction scientific is precisely the fact that it designates a concrete reality which certainly exists but which it is impossible to 'touch with one's hands' or 'see with one's eyes'. Every abstract concept therefore provides knowledge of a reality whose existence it reveals: an 'abstract concept' then means a formula which is apparently abstract but really terribly concrete, because of the object it designates. This object is terribly concrete in that it is infinitely more concrete, more effective than the objects one can 'touch with one's hands' or 'see with one's eyes' – and yet one cannot touch it with one's hands or see it with one's eyes. Thus the concept of exchange value, the concept of the total social capital, the concept of socially necessary labour, etc. All this is easy to explain.

The second point: the basic concepts exist in the form of a *system*, and that is what makes them a theory. A theory is indeed a *rigorous* system of basic scientific concepts. In a scientific theory, the basic concepts do not exist in any given order, but in a rigorous order. It is therefore necessary to know this order, and to learn the practice of rigour step by step. Rigour (systematic rigour) is not a fantasy, nor is it a formal luxury, but a vital necessity for all science, for every scientific practice. It is what Marx in his 'Afterword' calls the rigour of the '*method of presentation*' of a scientific theory.

Having said this, we have to know what the object of *Capital* is, in other words, what is the object analysed in *Capital Volume One*. Marx tells us: it is '*the capitalist mode of production and the relations of production and exchange corresponding to that mode*'. This is itself an *abstract* object. Indeed, despite appearances, Marx does not analyse any 'concrete society', not even England which he mentions constantly in Volume One, but the **capitalist mode of production** and nothing else. This object is an abstract one: which means that it is terribly real and that it never exists in the pure state, since it only exists in capitalist societies. Simply speaking: in order to be able to analyse these concrete capitalist societies (England, France, Russia, etc.), it is essential

to know that they are dominated by that terribly concrete reality, the capitalist mode of production, which is 'invisible' (to the naked eye). 'Invisible', i.e. *abstract*.

Of course, this does not deal with every misunderstanding. We have to be extremely careful to avoid the false difficulties raised by these misunderstandings. For example, we must not imagine that Marx is analysing the concrete situation in England when he discusses it. He only discusses it in order to 'illustrate' his (abstract) theory of the capitalist mode of production.

To sum up: there really is a difficulty in reading *Capital* which is a theoretical difficulty. It lies in the abstract and systematic nature of the basic concepts of the theory or theoretical analysis. It is essential to realize that this is a real difficulty that can only be surmounted by an apprenticeship in scientific abstraction and rigour. It is essential to realize that this apprenticeship is not quickly completed.

Hence a *first* piece of advice to the reader: always keep closely in mind the idea that *Capital* is a work of *theory*, and that its object is the mechanisms of the capitalist mode of production alone.

Hence a *second* piece of advice to the reader: do not look to *Capital* either for a book of 'concrete' history or for a book of 'empirical' political economy, in the sense in which historians and economists understand these terms. Instead, find in it a book of theory analysing the **capitalist mode of production**. History (concrete history) and economics (empirical economics) have other objects.

Hence a *third* piece of advice to the reader. When you encounter a difficulty of a theoretical order in your reading, realize the fact and take the necessary steps. Do not hurry, go back carefully and slowly and do not proceed until you have understood. Take note of the fact that an apprenticeship in theory is indispensable if you are to be able to read a theoretical work. Realize that *you can learn to walk by walking*, on condition that you scrupulously respect the above-mentioned conditions. Realize that you will not learn to walk in theory all at once, suddenly and definitively, but little by little, patiently and humbly. This is the price of success.

Practically, this means that it is impossible to understand Volume One except on condition of re-reading it four or five times in succession, i.e. the time it takes to learn to walk in theory.

The present preface is intended to guide the reader's first steps in the theory.

But before I turn to that, a word is needed on the audience who are going to read *Capital* Volume One.

Of whom is this audience likely to be composed?

1. Proletarians or wage-earners directly employed in the production of material goods.
2. Non-proletarian wage-labourers (from the simple white-collar worker to middle and higher executives, engineers and research workers, teachers, etc.).
3. Urban and rural artisans.
4. Members of the liberal professions.
5. Students at school and university.

Among the proletarians or wage-earners who will read *Capital* Volume One, there will naturally be men and women who have obtained a certain 'idea' of Marxist theory from the practice of the class struggle in their trade-union and political organizations. This idea may be more or less correct, as one passes from the proletarians to the non-proletarian wage-workers: it will not be fundamentally falsified.

Among the other categories who will read *Capital* Volume One, there will naturally be men and women who also have a certain 'idea' of Marxist theory in their heads. For example, academics, and particularly 'historians', 'economists' and a number of ideologists from various disciplines (for, as is well known, in the Human Sciences today, everyone claims to be a 'Marxist').

But nine-tenths of the ideas these intellectuals have in their heads about Marxism are false. These false ideas were expounded even in Marx's own lifetime and they have been tirelessly repeated ever since without any remarkable effort of the imagination. Every bourgeois or petty-bourgeois economist or ideologist^[5] for the last hundred years has manufactured and defended these false ideas in order to 'refute' Marxist theory.

These ideas have had no trouble 'winning' a wide audience, since the latter was 'won' to them in advance by its anti-socialist and anti-Marxist ideological prejudices.

This wide audience is primarily composed of intellectuals and not of workers, for, as Engels said, even when proletarians have not grasped the most abstract demonstrations in *Capital*, they do not allow themselves to be 'caught out'.

On the contrary, even the most generously 'revolutionary' intellectuals and students do allow themselves to be 'caught out' in one direction or another, since they are massively subject to the prejudices of petty-bourgeois ideology without the counterpoise of a direct experience of exploitation.

In this preface, I am therefore obliged to take conjointly into account:

1. the two orders of difficulties which I have already signalled (Difficulty No. 1 – political, Difficulty No. 2 – theoretical);
2. the distribution of the audience into two essential groups: the wage-labouring audience on the one hand, the intellectual audience on the other, it being understood that these two groups intersect at one of their boundaries (certain wage-earners are at the same time 'intellectual workers');

3. the existence on the ideological market of supposedly 'scientific' refutations of *Capital* which affect the various parts of this audience more or less profoundly according to their class origins.

Allowing for all these facts, my preface will take the following form:

Point I: Advice to the reader with the aim of avoiding the toughest of these difficulties for the time being. This point can be quickly and clearly dealt with. I hope that proletarians will read it because I have written it for them especially, although it is valid for everybody.

Point II: Suggestions as to the nature of the theoretical difficulties in *Capital* Volume One which provide a pretext for all the refutations of Marxist theory. This point will inevitably be much more arduous, given the nature of the theoretical difficulties in question, and the arguments of the 'refutations' of Marxist theory which are erected out of these difficulties.

Point I

The greatest difficulties, theoretical or otherwise, which are obstacles to an easy reading of *Capital* Volume One are unfortunately (or fortunately) concentrated *at the very beginning* of Volume One, to be precise, in its first Part, which deals with 'Commodities and Money'.

I therefore give the following advice: put **the whole of Part One aside for the time being** and **begin your reading with Part Two:** 'The Transformation of Money into Capital'.

In my opinion it is impossible to begin (even to begin) to understand Part I until you have read and re-read the whole of Volume One, *starting with Part II*.

This advice is more than advice: it is a recommendation that, notwithstanding all the respect I owe my readers, I am prepared to present as an *imperative*.

Everyone can try it out in practice for himself.

If you begin Volume One at the beginning, i.e. with Part I, either you do not understand it, and give up; or you think you understand it, but that is even more serious, for there is every chance that you will have understood something quite different from what there was to be understood.

From Part II (The Transformation of Money into Capital) on, things are luminous. You go straight into the heart of Volume One.

This heart is the theory of *surplus-value*, which proletarians will understand without any difficulty, because it is quite simply the scientific theory of something they

experience every day: *class exploitation*.

It is immediately followed by two very dense but very clear sections which are decisive for the class struggle *even today*: Parts III and IV. They deal with the two basic *forms of surplus-value* available to the capitalist class for it to push the exploitation of the working class to a maximum: what Marx calls *absolute* surplus-value (Part III) and *relative* surplus-value (Part IV).

Absolute surplus-value (Part III) concerns the length of the working day. Marx explains that the capitalist class inexorably presses for the lengthening of the working day and that the more than century-old workers' class struggle has as its aim a *reduction* of the working day by struggling **against** that lengthening.

The historical stages of that struggle are well known: the twelve-hour day, the ten-hour day, then the eight-hour day, and finally, under the Popular Front, the forty-hour week.

Every proletarian knows from experience what Marx demonstrates in Part III: the irresistible tendency of the capitalist system to increase exploitation as much as possible by lengthening the working day (or the working week). This result is obtained either despite existing legislation (the forty-hour week was never really enforced) or by means of existing legislation (e.g., 'overtime'). Overtime seems to 'cost the capitalists a great deal' since they pay time-and-a-quarter, time-and-a-half or even double time as compared with normal rates. But in reality it is to their advantage since it makes it possible to run the 'machines', which have a shorter life because of the rapidity of technological progress, twenty-four hours a day. In other words, overtime enables the capitalists to draw the maximum profit from 'productivity'. Marx showed that the capitalist class has never paid and will never pay the workers overtime rates to please them, or to allow them to supplement their incomes at the cost of their health, but only in order to exploit them more.

Relative surplus-value (Part IV), whose existence can be glimpsed in what I have just said about overtime, is undoubtedly the number-one form of contemporary exploitation. It is much more subtle because less directly visible than the lengthening of the working day. However, proletarians react instinctively if not against it, at least, as we shall see, against its effects.

Relative surplus-value deals in fact with the intensification of the mechanization of (industrial and agricultural) production, and thus with the resulting rise in productivity. At present it tends towards automation. To produce the maximum of commodities at the lowest price in order to get the highest profit, such is the irresistible tendency of capitalism. Naturally, it goes hand in hand with an increasing exploitation of labour power.

There is a tendency to talk about a ‘mutation’ or ‘revolution’ in contemporary technology. In reality, Marx claimed as early as the *Manifesto* and proved in *Capital* that the capitalist mode of production is characterized by its ‘constantly revolutionizing the means of production’, above all, the instruments of production (technology). What has happened in the last ten to fifteen years is described in grandiose statements as ‘unprecedented’, and it is true that in the last few years things have gone quicker than before. But this is merely a difference of *degree*, not a difference of kind. The whole history of capitalism is the history of a fantastic growth of productivity, through the development of technology.

The result at the moment, as in the past, is the introduction of more and more perfected machines into the labour process – making it possible to produce the same quantity of products as before in one half, one third or one quarter of the time – i.e. a manifest growth in productivity. But correlatively, the result is certain effects of the aggravation of the exploitation of labour power (speed-up, the elimination of blue- and white-collar jobs) not only for proletarians but also for non-proletarian wage-labourers, including certain technicians and executives, even in the higher grades, who can no longer ‘keep up’ with technical progress and therefore have no more market value, hence the subsequent unemployment.

Marx deals with all these things with great rigour and precision in Part IV (Relative Surplus-Value).

He dismantles the mechanisms of exploitation deriving from the growth of productivity in its concrete forms. He shows thereby that *the growth of productivity is never spontaneously to the advantage of the working class*, quite the contrary, since it is precisely introduced to increase its exploitation. Marx thus proves irrefutably that the working class cannot hope to gain from the modern growth of productivity before it has overthrown capitalism and seized State power in a socialist revolution. He proves that from here to the revolutionary seizure of power which opens the road to socialism, the working class can have no other objective, and hence no other resource, than to struggle *against* the effects of exploitation produced by the growth of productivity, in order to *limit* these effects (struggle *against* speed-up, *against* arbitrary productivity bonuses, *against* overtime, *against* redundancies, *against* ‘automation unemployment’). An essentially *defensive*, not an offensive struggle.

I then advise the reader who has reached the end of Part IV to leave Part V (The Production of Absolute and Relative Surplus-Value) for the moment, and to move directly on to Part VI, on Wages, which is perfectly clear.

Here, too, proletarians are literally *at home* since, besides examining the bourgeois mystification which declares that the worker’s ‘labour’ is ‘paid at its value’, Marx looks at the different *forms* of wages: time-wages first of all, then piece-rates, i.e. the different *traps* the bourgeoisie sets for the workers’ consciousness, hoping to destroy in it all an organized class’s will to struggle. Here proletarians will recognize that their

class struggle cannot but *be opposed in an antagonistic way to the tendency for capitalist exploitation to increase.*

Here, on the plane of wages, or as cabinet ministers and their economists say, on the plane of the 'standard of living' or of 'income' respectively, they will recognize that the economic class struggle of the proletarians and other wage-earners can have only one meaning: a *defensive* struggle against the objective tendency of the capitalist system to increase exploitation in all its forms.

I say a defensive struggle and therefore a struggle *against* the fall in wages. Of course, any struggle *against* a fall in wages is at the same time also a struggle *for* a rise in the existing wages. But to speak only of a struggle *for* a rise would be to describe the effect of the struggle while running the risk of masking its cause and its objective. As capitalism tends inexorably to reduce wages, the struggle for wage increases is therefore, in principle, *a defensive struggle against the tendency of capitalism to reduce wages.*

It is therefore perfectly clear, as Marx emphasizes in Part VI, that the question of wages certainly cannot be *settled 'by itself' by 'sharing out' the 'gains' from even a spectacular growth in productivity among the proletarians and other labourers.* The question of wages is a question of class struggle. It is not settled 'by itself', but by class struggle: above all by the different forms of strike, eventually leading to general strike.

Such a general strike is purely economic and therefore defensive ('a defence of the material and moral interests of the labourers', a struggle *against* the double capitalist tendency to increase labour-time and reduce wages) or takes a political and therefore offensive form (struggle for the conquest of State power, socialist revolution and the construction of socialism); all those who know the distinctions made by Marx, Engels and Lenin know the difference between the political class struggle and the economic class struggle.

The economic (trade-union) class struggle remains a defensive one because it is economic (*against* the two great tendencies of capitalism). The political class struggle is offensive because it is political (*for* the seizure of power by the working class and its allies).

These two struggles must be carefully distinguished; although in reality they always encroach upon one another: more or less, according to the conjuncture.

One thing is certain, and the analysis which Marx makes of the economic class struggles in England in Volume One shows it: a class struggle which is *deliberately restricted* to the domain of economic struggle alone has always remained and will always remain a defensive one, i.e. one with no hope of ever overthrowing the capitalist regime. This is the great temptation of the reformists, Fabians, and trade unionists

whom Marx discusses, and in a general way of the Social-Democratic tradition of the Second International. Only a political struggle can ‘reverse steam’ and go beyond these limits, thereby ceasing to be a defensive struggle and becoming an offensive one. This conclusion is legible between the lines in *Capital*, and it can be read in so many words in the political texts of Marx himself, of Engels and of Lenin. It has been the number-one question of the International Workers’ Movement since it ‘fused’ with Marxist theory.

Readers can then go on to Part VII (The Accumulation of Capital), which is very clear. There Marx explains that it is the tendency of capitalism to reproduce and expand the very basis of capital, since this tendency is the transformation into capital of the surplus-value extorted from the proletariat, and therefore that capital constantly ‘snowballs’, constantly extorting more surplus labour (surplus-value) from the proletarians. And Marx shows this in a magnificent concrete ‘illustration’: that of England from 1846 to 1866.

As for Part VIII (The So-called Primitive Accumulation), which brings Volume One to an end, it contains the second of Marx’s greatest discoveries. The first was the discovery of ‘surplus-value’. The second is the discovery of the incredible means used to achieve the ‘primitive accumulation’ thanks to which capitalism was ‘born’ and grew in Western societies, helped also by the existence of a mass of ‘free labourers’ (i.e. labourers stripped of means of labour) and technological discoveries. This means was the most brutal violence: the thefts and massacres which cleared capitalism’s royal road into human history. This last chapter contains a prodigious wealth which has not yet been exploited: in particular the thesis (which we shall have to develop) that capitalism has always used and, in the ‘margins’ of its metropolitan existence – i.e. in the colonial and ex-colonial countries – is still using well into the twentieth century, *the most brutally violent means*.

I therefore urge on the reader the following method of reading:

1. Leave Part I (Commodities and Money) deliberately on one side in a first reading.
2. Begin reading Volume One with its Part II (The Transformation of Money into Capital).
3. Read carefully Parts II, III (The Production of Absolute Surplus-Value) and IV (The Production of Relative Surplus-Value).
4. Leave Part V (The Production of Relative and Absolute Surplus-Value) on one side.
5. Read carefully Parts VI (Wages), VII (The Accumulation of Capital) and VIII (The So-called Primitive Accumulation).

6. Finally, begin to read Part I (Commodities and Money) with infinite caution, knowing that it will always be extremely difficult to understand, even after several readings of the other Parts, without the help of a certain number of deeper explanations.

I guarantee that those readers who are prepared to observe this order of reading scrupulously, remembering what I have said about the political and theoretical difficulties of every reading of *Capital*, will not regret it.

Point II

I now come to the theoretical difficulties which are obstacles to a quick reading, and even at certain points even to a very careful reading of *Capital* Volume One.

Let me remind the reader that it is by building on these difficulties that bourgeois ideology attempts to convince itself – but does it really succeed? – that it has long since ‘refuted’ Marx’s theory.

The first difficulty is of a very general kind. It derives from the simple fact that Volume One is only the *first* volume in a book containing *four*.

I say four. Most people know about Volumes One, Two and Three, but even those who had read them usually ignore Volume Four, even supposing that they suspect its existence.

The ‘mystery’ of Volume Four is only a mystery for those who think Marx was one of a number of ‘historians’, the author of a *History of Economic Doctrines*, since this is the aberrant title that Molitor has given to his translation,^[6] if that word is applicable, of a certain profoundly theoretical work really called *Theories of Surplus-Value*.

Certainly *Capital* Volume One is the only one Marx published in his lifetime, Volumes Two and Three having been published after his death in 1883 by Engels, and Volume Four by Kautsky.^[7] In 1886, in his preface to the English edition, Engels could say that Volume One ‘is in a great measure a whole in itself’. Indeed, when the following volumes were not available, it had to ‘rank as an independent work’.

This is not the case today. All four volumes are available, in German,^[8] and in French.^[9] To those who read German, I suggest that they have much to gain by referring constantly to the German text to check the French translations, not just of Volume Four (which is riddled with serious errors), but also of Volumes Two and Three (certain terminological difficulties have not always been solved) and even of Volume One, translated by Roy, in a version which Marx personally completely revised, correcting and even appreciably expanding certain passages. For Marx, who was

uncertain of the theoretical capacities of his French readers,^[10] sometimes dangerously compromised the precision of the original conceptual expressions.^[11]

Knowledge of the other three Volumes makes it possible to remove a certain number of the very serious theoretical difficulties of Volume One, especially those concentrated in the notorious Part I (Commodities and Money) around the famous ‘labour theory of value’.

In the grip of a Hegelian conception of science (for Hegel, all science is philosophical and therefore every true science *has to found its own beginnings*), Marx then thought that the principle that ‘every beginning is difficult ... holds in all sciences’. In fact, Volume One Part I follows a method of presentation whose difficulty largely derives from this Hegelian prejudice. Moreover, Marx redrafted this beginning a dozen times before giving it its ‘definitive’ form – as if he was struggling with a difficulty which was not just one of presentation – and with good reason.

Let me very briefly give the principles of a solution.

Marx’s ‘labour theory of value’ which all bourgeois ‘economists’ and ideologists have used against him in their scornful condemnations, is intelligible, but only as a special case of a theory which Marx and Engels called the ‘*law of value*’ or the law of the distribution of the available labour power between the various branches of production, a distribution indispensable to the *reproduction* of the conditions of production. ‘Every child’ could understand it, says Marx in 1868, in terms which thus deny the inevitable ‘difficult beginning’ of every science. On the nature of this law I refer the reader to Marx’s letters to Kugelmann on 6 March and 11 July 1868, among other texts.^[12]

The ‘labour theory of value’ is not the only point which causes difficulty in Volume One. We must of course mention the theory of *surplus-value*, the *bête noire* of bourgeois economists and ideologists who attack it as ‘metaphysical’, ‘Aristotelian’, ‘non-operational’, etc. Now this theory of surplus-value, too, is intelligible only as a special case of a wider theory: the theory of *surplus labour*.

Surplus labour exists in every ‘society’. In classless societies, once the portion necessary for the reproduction of the conditions of production has been set aside, it is *shared* between the members of the ‘community’ (the primitive or communist community). In class societies, once the portion necessary for the reproduction of the conditions of production has been set aside, it is *extorted* from the exploited classes by the ruling classes. In capitalist class society, in which labour power becomes a *commodity* for the first time in history, the extorted surplus labour takes the form of *surplus-value*.

Here again, I shall go no further: I am content to suggest the principles of the solution whose proof would demand detailed argument.

Volume One contains further theoretical difficulties, linked to the preceding ones or to other problems.

For example, the theory of the distinction which has to be introduced between *value* and the *value-form*; for example, the theory of the *socially necessary* quantity of labour; for example, the theory of *simple* and *compound* labour; for example, the theory of *social needs*, etc. For example, the theory of the *organic composition of capital*. For example, the famous theory of the '*fetishism*' of commodities and its later generalization.

All these questions – and many others – constitute real, objective difficulties to which Volume One gives either provisional or partial solutions. Why this incompleteness?

We must realize that when Marx published Volume One of *Capital*, he had already written Volume Two and part of Volume Three (the latter in note form). At any rate, as his correspondence with Engels proves,^[13] he had it 'all in his head', at least *in principle*. But there was no question of Marx being materially able to put it 'all on paper' in the first volume of a work which was to contain four. In addition, if Marx did have it 'all in his head', he did not yet have answers to all the questions he had in his head – and at certain points this can be detected in Volume One. It is no accident that it was only in 1868, i.e. a year after the publication of Volume One, that Marx wrote that it was within the reach of 'every child' to understand the 'law of value' on which depends an understanding of Part I.

The reader of Volume One must therefore convince himself of one thing, which is completely comprehensible once he is prepared to consider the fact that Marx was advancing for the first time in the history of human knowledge in a virgin continent: Volume One contains certain solutions to problems which were only to be posed in Volumes Two, Three and Four – and certain problems whose solutions were only to be demonstrated in Volumes Two, Three and Four.

Essentially, most of the objective difficulties of Volume One derive from this 'suspended', or if you like, 'anticipatory' character. Hence it is essential to realize this and to draw the conclusions: i.e. to read Volume One taking Volumes Two, Three and Four into account.

Nevertheless, there is also a second kind of difficulty constituting a real obstacle to a reading of Volume One. These difficulties no longer derive from the fact that *Capital* has four volumes, but from survivals in Marx's language and even in his thought of the influence of Hegel's thought.

As the reader may know, I have previously attempted to defend the idea that Marx's thought is basically different from that of Hegel, and that there was therefore a true break or rupture, if you prefer, between Marx and Hegel.^[14] The further I go, the more

I think this thesis is correct. However, I must admit that I have given a much too abrupt idea of this thesis in advancing the idea that it was possible to locate this rupture in 1845 (the *Theses on Feuerbach, The German Ideology*). Something decisive really does begin in 1845, but Marx needed a very long period of revolutionary *work* before he managed to register the rupture he had made with Hegel's thought in really new concepts. The famous *Preface* of 1859 (to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*) is still profoundly Hegelian-evolutionist. The 'Grundrisse', which date from the years 1857-59, are themselves profoundly marked by Hegel's thought, for in 1858 Marx had re-read the *Great Logic* with amazement.

When *Capital* Volume One appeared (1867), traces of the Hegelian influence still remained. Only later did they disappear *completely*: the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875)^[15] as well as the *Marginal Notes on Wagner's 'Lehrbuch der Politischen Ökonomie'* (1882)^[16] are *totally and definitively exempt* from any trace of Hegelian influence.

It is therefore of the first importance for us to know *where Marx started*: he began with the neo-Hegelianism which was a retreat from Hegel to Kant and Fichte, then with pure Feuerbachianism, then with Feuerbachianism with a Hegelian injection (the *1844 Manuscripts*)^[17] before rediscovering Hegel in 1858.

It is also important to know *where he was going*. The *tendency* of his thought drove him irresistibly to the *radical* abandonment of every shade of Hegelian influence, as can be seen from the 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Programme* and the 1882 *Notes on Wagner*. While remorselessly abandoning all Hegel's influence, Marx continued to recognize an important debt to him: the fact that he was the first to conceive of history as a 'process without a subject'.

By taking this tendency into account we can appreciate the traces of Hegelian influence which remain in Volume One as survivals on the way to supersession.

I have already noted these traces in the typically Hegelian problem of the 'difficult beginning' to every science, whose striking manifestation is Part I of Volume One. This Hegelian influence can be located very precisely in the *vocabulary* Marx uses in Part I: in the fact that he speaks of two *completely* different things, the social usefulness of products on the one hand and the exchange value of the same products on the other, in terms which in fact have *a word in common*, the word 'value': on the one hand *use-value*, and on the other exchange *value*. Marx pillories a man named Wagner (that *vir obscurus*) with his customary vigour in the *Marginal Notes* of 1882, because Wagner seems to believe that since Marx uses the same word, *value*, in both cases, use-value and exchange value are the result of a (Hegelian) division of the concept of 'value'. The fact is that Marx had not taken the precaution of eliminating the word *value* from the expression 'use-value' and of speaking as he should have done simply of the *social usefulness* of the *products*. That is why in 1873, in the *Afterword* to the second German

edition of *Capital*, we find Marx retreating from his earlier positions and recognizing that he had even dared to 'coquett' (*kokettieren*) 'with the modes of expression peculiar' to Hegel 'in the chapter on the theory of value' (precisely, Part I). We ought to draw the conclusions from this, which means ultimately that we ought to *rewrite Part I of Capital*, so that it becomes a 'beginning' which is no longer at all 'difficult', but rather simple and easy.

The same Hegelian influence comes to light in the imprudent formulation in Chapter 32 of Volume One Part VIII, where Marx, discussing the 'expropriation of the expropriators', declares, '*It is the negation of the negation*'. Imprudent, since its ravages have not yet come to an end, despite the fact that Stalin was right, for once, to suppress 'the negation of the negation' from the laws of the dialectic, it must be said to the advantage of other, even more serious errors.

A last trace of Hegelian influence, this time a flagrant and extremely harmful one (since all the theoreticians of 'reification' and 'alienation' have found in it the 'foundation' for their idealist interpretations of Marx's thought): the theory of *fetishism* (*The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof*, Part I, Chapter 1, Section 4).

The reader will realize that I cannot go into these different points, each of which demands a whole demonstration to itself. Nevertheless, I have signalled them, for, along with the very ambiguous and (alas!) famous Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), the Hegelianism and evolutionism (evolutionism being a poor man's Hegelianism) in which they are steeped have made ravages in the history of the Marxist Workers' Movement. I note that Lenin did not give in to the influence of these Hegelian-evolutionist pages *for a single moment*, for otherwise he could not have fought the betrayal of the Second International, built up the Bolshevik Party, conquered State power at the head of the mass of the Russian people in order to install the dictatorship of the proletariat, or begun the construction of socialism.

I note also that, unfortunately for the same International Communist Movement, Stalin made the 1859 Preface *his reference text*, as can be observed in the chapter of the *History of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik)* entitled *Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism* (1938) which undoubtedly explains many of the things called by a name which is not at all Marxist, the 'period of the cult of personality'. I shall return to this question elsewhere.

Let me add one further comment, to forestall the possibility of a very serious misunderstanding for the reader of Volume One, one which no longer has anything to do with the difficulties which I have just raised, but relates to the necessity of reading Marx's text *very closely*.

This misunderstanding concerns the object which is in question from the beginning of Part II of Volume One (The Transformation of Money into Capital). In fact, Marx

there discusses the organic composition of capital, saying that in capitalist production there is in every given capital a fraction (say 40 per cent) which constitutes the constant capital (raw material, buildings, machines, tools) and another fraction (in this case 60 per cent) which constitutes the variable capital (the costs of purchasing labour power). The constant capital is so called because it remains constant in the process of capitalist production: it produces no new value, so it remains constant. The variable capital is called variable because it produces a new value, higher than its former value, by the action of the extortion of surplus-value (which takes place in the use of labour power).

Now, the vast majority of readers, including of course the ‘economists’ who are, if I may say so, destined to this ‘oversight’ by their professional distortion as technicians of bourgeois political economy, believe that when he discusses the organic composition of capital, Marx is constructing a theory of the firm, or, to use Marxist terms, a theory of the unit of production. However, Marx says quite the opposite: he always discusses the composition of the *total* social capital, but in the form of an apparently concrete example for which he *gives figures* (e.g. out of 100 million, constant capital = 40 millions – 40 per cent – and variable capital = 60 millions – 60 per cent). In this *arithmetical* example, Marx is thus not talking about one firm or another, but of a ‘fraction of the total capital’. For the convenience of the reader and in order to ‘crystallize his ideas’, he argues around a ‘concrete’ (i.e. arithmetical) example, but this concrete example simply provides him with an example so that he can talk about the *total* social capital.

In this perspective, let me signal the fact that nowhere in *Capital* is there any theory of the capitalist unit of production or of the capitalist unit of consumption. On these two points, Marx’s theory thus has still to be complemented.

I also note the *political* importance of this confusion, which was definitively dealt with by Lenin in his theory of Imperialism.^[18] As we know, Marx planned to discuss the ‘world market’ in *Capital*, i.e. the tendential expansion of the capitalist relations of production throughout the world. This ‘tendency’ found its final form in Imperialism. It is very important to grasp the decisive political importance of this fact, which Marx and the First International saw very clearly.

In fact, if capitalist exploitation (the extortion of surplus-value) exists *in* the capitalist firms where wage-workers are employed (and the workers are its victims and therefore its direct witnesses), this *local* exploitation only exists as a simple part of a *generalized* system of exploitation which steadily expands from the great urban industrial enterprises to agricultural capitalist enterprises, then to the complex forms of the other sectors (urban and rural artisanat: ‘one-family agricultural’ units, white-collar workers and officials, etc.), not only in *one* capitalist country, but in the *ensemble* of capitalist countries, and eventually in *all the rest of the world* (by means of *direct*

colonial exploitation based on military occupation: colonialism; then *indirect* colonial exploitation, without military occupation: neo-colonialism).

There is in fact, therefore, a real capitalist International, which has been an Imperialist International since the end of the nineteenth century, to which the Workers' Movement and its great leaders (Marx, then Lenin) responded with a Workers' International (the First, Second, and Third Internationals). Working-class militants recognize this fact in their practice of Proletarian Internationalism. Concretely this means that they know very well:

1. that they are directly exploited in the capitalist firm (unit of production) in which they work;
2. that they cannot conduct the struggle solely at the level of their own firm, but must also conduct it at the level of their national production (engineering, building and transport trade-union federations, etc.), then at the level of the national set of different branches of production (e.g. in the *Confédération Générale de Travail* – the General Confederation of Labour – in France), and finally at the world level (e.g. the World Federation of Trade Unions).

This where the economic class struggle is concerned.

The same is naturally the case, despite the disappearance of a formal International, where the political class struggle is concerned. That is why Volume One must be read *in the light* not only of the *Communist Manifesto* ('Workers of *all countries* unite!'), but also of the Statutes of the First, Second and Third Internationals, and of course, *in the light* of the Leninist theory of imperialism.

To say this is not at all to *leave* Volume One of *Capital* to make 'political propaganda' with respect to a book which, it would seem, deals only with 'political economy'. Quite the contrary, it is to take seriously the fact that Marx has opened to scientific knowledge and to men's conscious practice a new continent, the Continent of History, by an amazing discovery, and that, like the discovery of every new science, this discovery extends into the history of this science and into the political practice of the men who have recognized themselves in it. Marx was not able to write the projected chapter of *Capital* with the title 'The World Market' as a foundation for proletarian Internationalism, in response to the capitalist, later imperialist International, but the First International, which Marx founded in 1864, had already begun to write this same chapter in the facts, three years before the appearance of *Capital* Volume One, and Lenin wrote the continuation of it not only in his book *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, but also in the foundation of the Third International (1919).

All this is, of course, if not incomprehensible, at least very hard to understand if one is an 'economist' or even a 'historian', *a fortiori* if one is a mere 'ideologist' of the

bourgeoisie. On the contrary, it is all very easy to understand if one is a proletarian, i.e. a wage-labourer 'employed' in capitalist production (urban or agricultural).

Why this difficulty? Why this relative ease? I believe that I have been able to explain it by following some of Marx's own texts and the clarifications that Lenin provides in his commentaries on Marx's *Capital* in the first volumes of his *Collected Works*. It is because bourgeois and petty bourgeois intellectuals have a bourgeois (or petty-bourgeois) 'class instinct', whereas proletarians have a proletarian class instinct. The former, blinded by bourgeois ideology which does everything it can to cover up class exploitation, cannot *see* capitalist exploitation. The latter, on the contrary, despite the terrible weight of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideology they carry, cannot *fail to see* this exploitation, since it constitutes their daily life.

To understand *Capital*, and therefore its first volume, it is necessary to take up 'proletarian class positions', i.e. to adopt the only viewpoint which makes *visible* the reality of the exploitation of wage labour power, which constitutes the whole of capitalism.

This is, proportionately speaking, on condition that they struggle against the influence of the burden of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideology that they carry, relatively easy for workers. As 'by nature' they have a 'class instinct' formed by the harsh school of daily exploitation, all they need is a supplementary political and theoretical education in order to understand objectively what they feel subjectively, instinctively. *Capital* gives them this supplementary theoretical education in the form of objective explanations and proofs, which helps them to move from a proletarian class instinct to an (objective) proletarian class position.

But it is extremely difficult for specialists and other bourgeois and petty-bourgeois 'intellectuals' (including students). For a mere *education* of their consciousness is not enough, nor a mere reading of *Capital*. They must also make a real *rupture*, a real *revolution* in their consciousness, in order to move from their necessarily bourgeois or petty-bourgeois class instinct to proletarian class positions. It is extremely difficult, but not absolutely impossible. The proof: Marx himself, who was the scion of a good liberal bourgeoisie (his father was a lawyer), and Engels, who came from the big capitalist bourgeoisie and was himself a capitalist in Manchester for twenty years. Marx's whole intellectual history can and must be understood in this way: as a long, difficult and painful rupture by which he moved from his petty-bourgeois class instinct to proletarian class positions, to whose definitions he contributed decisively in *Capital*.

This is an example which can and must be meditated upon, bearing in mind other illustrious examples: above all Lenin, the son of an enlightened petty bourgeois (a progressive teacher), who became the leader of the October Revolution and the world proletariat, in the stage of Imperialism, the supreme, i.e. the last stage of capitalism. [19]

Notes

1. 1845. A work which remained unpublished in Marx's lifetime. English language translation published by International Publishers, New York, 1947.
2. The 'Grundrisse', manuscripts written by Marx in 1857-59. French translation published by Éditions Anthropos, Paris.
3. *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), published by International Publishers, New York, 1971.
4. See for example the beginning of Lenin's *State and Revolution*, in *Selected Works*, International Publishers, New York, 1967.
5. These are not polemical phrases, but scientific concepts from the pen of Marx himself in *Capital*.
6. Karl Marx, *Histoire des doctrines économiques*, 8 volumes, Éditions Costes, Paris, 1924-36.
7. Volume Two in 1885, Volume Three in 1894, Volume Four in 1905.
8. Dietz Verlag, Berlin.
9. Éditions Sociales, Paris, for Volumes One to Three, Éditions Costes for Volume Four [in English, Progress Publishers, Moscow, for Volumes One to Three and *Theories of Surplus-Value* Parts I and II – Part III forthcoming].
10. See the text of Marx's letter to La Châtre, his French publisher, in *Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 21.
11. The English translation of Volume One, by Moore and Aveling, was checked and approved by Engels. All the other translations in the Progress Publishers editions, including that of Volume Four, were done under the supervision of the Marx-Engels Institute, Moscow. Despite this, however, many of Althusser's strictures could be applied to the English translations too.
12. *Selected Correspondence*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1955, pp. 199 and 208.
13. See *Selected Correspondence*, op. cit.
14. *For Marx*, Vintage Books, New York, 1970.
15. *Selected Works*, International Publishers, New York, 1968, pp. 315-35.
16. No English translation.
17. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, International Publishers, New York, 1964.
18. *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, in *Selected Works*, op. cit.
19. Engels gave a brilliant summary of *Capital* in an article which appeared in 1868 in the *Leipzig Demokratisches Wochenblatt*. An English translation can be found in Friedrich Engels, *On Marx's Capital*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1956, pp. 13-20.

