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Introductory Lecture by F. Forest

AIM, STRUCTURE AND SCOPE OF VOL. I KARL  
MARX'S CAPITAL

"It is the ultimate aim of this work," writes Marx in the Preface (p.14) "to lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society."

To comprehend fully Marx's aim, structure and scope of his major theoretical work, it is necessary to have some idea of the place Marx's Capital occupies in the general development of political economy. In his preface Marx states that the American Revolution sounded the tocsin for the European middle class. 1776 is significant historically also because it is the year of publication of Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations. Along with the beginnings of the industrial revolution and the development of the bourgeois mode of production, we witness here also the development of political economy, on the mode of thought of the bourgeois mode of production, into a science. The discovery that labor was the source of all wealth marked a sharp break with the physiocratic and mercantilist schools which viewed wealth as something outside of man--the earth or precious metals; the elaboration of this discovery into the labor theory of value gave political economy its scientific credentials. In its bourgeois form, this theory reached its highest development in Ricardo, whose Political Economy was published in 1821. Marx states that these scientific examinations on the part of bourgeois ideologists was possible in that epoch because the class struggle was still latent.

However, with the full conquest of political power by the bourgeoisie during the revolutions of 1830, "the class struggle practically as well as theoretically.....p.19...apologetic." The period of 1820-1830 marks the close of the classical period. Marx characterized this period as the Disintegration of the Ricardian school, and in the seeds of that disintegration--Malthus, Senior and Say--are the germs of the present development and vulgarization of bourgeois economics as exemplified by the Marginal Utilitarian and Effective Demand theories.

The contradiction inherent in classical political economy--its inability to explain how it is that though labor was the source of all wealth, the laborer became relatively not the richer but the poorer with the expansion of so-called "national wealth"--could find its solution only in the theory of one who had no interest in preserving the capitalist system and thus could clearly discern its law of motion from a necessary stage in the development of human society at one historical period into an unnecessary stage at a different stage of the historical development of humanity. Marx was able to show that the equal exchange in the market was based on the unequal exchange in the process of production where the dominance of accumulated over living labor was manifested in the mastery of the capitalist over the worker. The law of value, Marx concluded, was a quantitative relationship--so much socially-necessary labor time incorporated in one commodity being exchanged for an equal amount of labor time in a commodity of a different use-value--but a qualitative, that is, a class relationship. The classicists could not draw the theory of surplus value from their theory of value though it logically flowed from it, because, as Marx put it, they could not get out of their "bourgeois skins".

Marxian economics is not merely an extension of bourgeois economics; it is a critique of the very principles of political economy which deals with economic categories, such as, commodities, wages, money, profits, as if they were mere things, instead of expressions of social relations. It is true that these relations are attached to things and appear as things, but these things belie instead of manifest the essence. To separate the essence--the social or class relationship--from the appearance--the exchange of commodities--required not merely a new political economy but a new science.

That science Marx developed by extracting the rational kernel from Hegelian dialectics and applying the dialectic materialist method to the developmental laws of capitalist society. In a letter to Engels, while he was working on one of the drafts of Capital, Marx writes (Marx-Engels Selected Correspondence, p.102) :

"I am getting some nice developments. For instance, I have thrown over the whole doctrine of profit as it has existed up to now. In the method of treatment the fact that by mere accident I have again glanced through Hegel's Logic has been of great service to me."

That Marx was able to find the rational kernel in Hegelian dialectics is due to the fact that Marx had already developed the materialist conception of history and thus discovered that (p.25) "the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind and translated into forms of thought." Dialectics, which is the "science of the general laws of motion both of the external world and of human thought" (Ludwig Feuerbach, p.54), was the theoretical prerequisite, states Engels, of the new (that is, Marxian) materialism which recognized "that the key to the understanding of the whole history of society lies in the historical development of labor." (L.F., p.70) In its rational form, then, dialectics, says Marx (p.26), "includes in its comprehension and affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up;...it regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence;...it lets nothing impose upon it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary."

Marx considered his original contribution to political economy to be the analysis of the two-fold nature of labor--concrete labor creating use-values and abstract labor creative of value. The contradiction between the use-value and value of labor power, which is the source of the surplus value of the capitalist, is the contradiction of capitalist society which will spell its doom. ~~It is impossible,~~ therefore, once the class struggle reveals itself in all its acuteness, for the bourgeois ideologists to continue the scientific analysis of the working mechanism of the capitalist system. It is this nevertheless which is the very "pivot around which a clear comprehension of political economy turns." (p.48) The importance of understanding the dual character of labor is once again emphasized by Marx in his letter to Engels, dated August 24, 1867: (Selected Correspondence, p.226) "The best points in my book are: (1) the double character of labor, according to whether it is expressed in use value or exchange value (all understanding of the facts depends upon this, it is emphasized immediately in the first chapter; (2) the treatment of surplus value independently of its particular form as profit, interest, ground rent, etc."

In the twenty years of work on political economy Marx had written various outline, and even the entire work, of Capital. The first complete draft was his Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, which contained 1,472 pages and which has never yet been published. The book that was published under that name contains only 2 chapters of that MS, which was completed between 1861-63. The rewritten form of it, handed down to us as Capital, was to have included besides Volume I, the only one fully completed and reedited by Marx (1867-75), Volume II, which was to include Book II, the process of capitalist circulation, and Book III, the process of capitalist production taken as a whole, which has been published as Vol. III. Volume was originally to have contained the Theories of Surplus Value, which has been published as four separate volumes. Despite the immensity of the material, Volume I, the process of capitalist production, is as Engels put it, (p.30) "in great measure a whole in itself."

Marx defines the scope of this great theoretical work, (p.13) "In this work I have to examine the capitalist mode of production and the conditions of production and exchange corresponding to that mode." In Volume I, where he analyzes the mode of production and analyzes its economic laws, he stresses that the use of England to illustrate his theoretical concepts does not absolve the other capitalist countries: (p.13) "Intrinsically, it is not a question of the higher or lower degree of development of the social antagonisms that result from the natural laws of capitalist production. It is a question of these laws themselves, of these tendencies working with iron necessity towards inevitable results. The country that is more developed industrially only shows to the less developed, the image of its own future."

Marx begins his analysis with the economic cell-forms of bourgeois society, commodities. "In the analysis of economic forms, he says, p.12, "neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use. The force of abstraction must replace both." It is necessary not to forget that the abstract method does not abstract from reality, but only from the incidental. For example, in this chapter on commodities, Marx makes an abstraction of the history of society from the moment when the product of labor first took on that form, that is, from the moment when there was a surplus of the products of labor in primitive communes, until its fully developed capitalist form when the very capacity to labor has become a commodity, But this abstraction is rooted in the concrete history of developing capitalism. As Engels explained Marx's dialectic method it is the historical method "only divested of its historic form and disturbing fortuities....." (L.F., p.99) And indeed Volume I, the most abstract of all Volumes of Capital, is full of historical and statistical data, which are used by Marx to illustrate his abstract theories.

Volume I consists of eight parts. The first two parts, Commodities and Money and the Transformation of Money into Capital, deal with the phenomenal form of bourgeois wealth, the buying and selling of commodities, including labor power. Because Marx here deals with appearances, he does not speak of class relations; ~~not~~ even when he discloses the Fetishism of Commodities, he still uses the expression, social, (not class) relations. The capitalist is still only a Mr. Moneybags and his relationship to the worker only the relationship of one commodity owner to another. Only when we leave this "noisy sphere....." pp.195-196...a hiding."





This part is also significant in that it anticipates both Vols. II and III. On page 647, he writes:

"The annual process of reproduction is easily understood so long as we keep in view merely the sum total of the year's production. But every single component of this product must be brought into the market as a commodity, and there the difficulty begins. The movements of the individual capitals and of the personal revenues cross and intermingle and are lost in the general change of places, in the circulation of the wealth of society; this dazes the sight and propounds very complicated problems for solution. In the third part of Book II I shall give the analysis of the real bearings of the facts."  
Volume I is indeed a whole in itself and contains all the essential laws of capitalist production, including the organic composition of capital, which, in its phenomenal form is not dealt with till Volume III, and though some of these laws are modified in their workings, as we learn in Volumes II and III, none of them are changed even after we learn all the facts of capitalist circulation. As to the impatience of those who would like to get to Volume III before they have finished studying the economic laws in their quintessence in Vol. I, Marx has a word of warning: (p.239, footnote)  
"We shall see, in Book III, that the rate of profit is no mystery, so soon as we know the laws of surplus value. If we reverse the process, we cannot comprehend either the one or the other."

Finally, we arrive at Part VIII dealing with the historical beginnings of capitalism and entitled The Primitive Accumulation of Capital. Since this is the easiest part to read, many persons wish to know why he didn't begin Vol. I with that section instead with the very difficult chapter on commodities. While it is true that it is much more understandable to read anything as concrete as primitive accumulation of capital as contrasted to anything as abstract as Part I, the validity of his own presentation will become clear to you after you have grasped the importance of the capitalist process of production. Read the section on primitive accumulation now, if you wish, then reread it in its order as Marx wrote it, and you will see that had Marx placed Part VIII as Part I, as an introduction rather than illustration of his work, it would have been no more than an interesting historic essay without having taught us to master his method of analysis since we would not have yet had an understanding of the foundation for the Marxian method of analysis--the developing process labor. We would have had a series of historic facts without a grasp of the method of analysis, and thus we would not have had a method of analyzing the phenomena of today. However, by placing Part VIII at the end of the theoretic study, we read this historic essay with the foreknowledge of his method and by seeing how he applied his theories to the study of concrete history, may strive to apply that method. If you are still not convinced why you must at the very beginning struggle with the most difficult part in the whole of capital, let me quote you Marx in explanation of his scientific method. "Science has no royal road, and only those who are not afraid of trying themselves by climbing its steep pathways have a chance of attaining the clear light of the sunsets." (p.841, D.T. edition)

One final word of introduction to this class. Marxist theory is not for the learned but for the revolutionary activists. "All philosophers have explained the world," wrote Marx, "The thing is to change it." That is why the conclusion to his primitive accumulation is the Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation where we learn that (p.837) "The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production.....The expropriators are expropriated."

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BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR FIRST SESSION OF CLASS IN KARL MARX'S CAPITAL, Vol. I.

I - Introductory - Aim, Structure and Scope of Volume I.

Required readings: Prefaces to Volume I.

Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy

Letters on Capital, incl. in Selected Correspondence

Additional readings: Engels on the Materialism and Dialectics of Marx, included in Feuerbach

Lenin: Teachings of Karl Marx

Trotsky: Living Thoughts of Karl Marx

Maurice Dobb: Political Economy and Capitalism, first three chapters.

Erich Roll: A History of Economic Thought, Ch. 5, The Classical System

II - Part I - Commodities and Money

Required reading: pp.41-162 of Vol. I. This part will be broken into nine assignments.

Additional reading: Wm. Blake: An American Looks at Karl Marx, Section 2.

III - Part II - The Transformation of Money into Capital

Required reading: pp.163-196, Vol. I. Each of the three chapters will be assigned to members of the class to report on.

IV - Part III - The Production of Absolute Surplus Value

Required reading: pp.197-342.

Additional reading: Blake, op. cit., pp.167-202

V - Part IV -

The Production of Relative Surplus Value

Required reading: pp.343-566. Nine assignments will be made of this part.

VI - Summary and Review

Parts I to IV will be reviewed and comparison made with the abstract of Capital made by Otto Ruhle under editorship of Leon Trotsky in Living Thoughts of Karl Marx, and with Synopsis of Capital by Engels. The class should also read the Introduction to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.