

# How to Read Marx's Capital

## by Louis Althusser

*Capital* appeared a century ago (in 1867). It retains all its freshness and is more relevant and actual than ever. Bourgeois ideologists, whether they be "economists", "historians", or "philosophers" have spent the greater part of the last century trying to refute it. They have declared the theories of the value of labour power, of surplus value and of the law of value to be "metaphysical" theses which have nothing whatever to do with "political economy". The latest of these ideologists to re-hash the old arguments while purporting to advance something new<sup>1</sup> is M. Raymond Aron.

The workers who read *Capital* can understand it far more easily than all the bourgeois specialists however learned and eminent they may be. Why? Because *Capital* deals quite simply with capitalist exploitation of which they are the victims. *Capital* singles out and outlines the mechanisms of this exploitation, under which the workers live all their lives and of all the various forms in which the bourgeoisie realizes this exploitation--increases in working hours, in productivity, in the rhythm of work, wage cuts, unemployment, etc. *Capital* is therefore, above all, their class bible.

Apart from proletarians, there are other readers who take *Capital* seriously--salaried workers, employees and in general, certain sections of what are called "intellectual workers" (teachers, research workers, technicians, doctors, architects, etc.) not to mention university and high school students. All these, eager to know, want to understand the mechanisms of capitalist society in order to be able to find their bearings in the class struggle. They read *Capital*--which is both a scientific and revolutionary work and which explains the capitalist world. They read Lenin, who has continued Marx's work and who explains that capitalism has reached its highest and last stage--imperialism.

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<sup>1</sup>This article first appeared in *L'Humanite* on April 21st, 1969, and is reprinted from *Marxism Today*, October 1969.

## Two Difficulties

This said, it should be added that it is not easy for everyone to read and to understand *Capital*. We should face the fact that reading it presents two great difficulties--(1) a political difficulty, the main one, and (2) a theoretical one, which is subsidiary. As stated, the first difficulty is the political one. To understand *Capital* it is necessary either to have direct first-hand experience of capitalist exploitation (like the workers) or (like the revolutionary militants, whether they be workers or intellectuals) to have made the necessary effort to arrive at "the standpoint of the working class". Those who are neither workers nor revolutionary militants--no matter how learned they may be (like the "economists", "historians" and "philosophers")--have to understand that the price they have to pay for achieving such an understanding is a revolution in their outlook which is dominated enormously by bourgeois prejudices and preconceptions.

The second difficulty is the theoretical one. It is subsidiary to the first but it is nevertheless a real one. Those accustomed to theoretical work, above all in the field of theoretical science, less in the exact sciences (the "humanities" are 80 per cent falsifications of science, products of bourgeois ideology) are able to overcome this difficulty due to the fact that *Capital* is a book of pure theory. Others, workers for example, who are unaccustomed to pure theory, must make a sustained effort, work patiently and consistently to make advances in theory. We will help them. And they will soon see that they will be able to overcome this difficulty.

All they need to know for the present is:

- (1) That *Capital* is a work of pure theory, that it deals with the theory of "the capitalist mode of production, the conditions of production and exchange corresponding to that mode" (Marx) and that *Capital* therefore deals with something "abstract" (something which cannot be touched with one's hands), that it is not therefore a book which deals with concrete history or empirical economics, as the "historians" and "economists" imagine it ought to do.
- (2) That all theory is characterised both by the abstraction and the vigorous systemisation of its concepts, that it is therefore necessary to acquire the practice of abstraction and of vigorous systemisation. Abstract concepts and vigorous systems are not idle fantasies but instruments for the production of scientific knowledge, just as tools, machines and their precision systems are instruments for the production of material products (motor-cars, transistors, aeroplanes, etc.).

If this is borne in mind, the following elementary practical ideas for reading Volume 1 may be helpful.

The greatest difficulties--theoretical and otherwise--standing in the way of reading Volume 1 easily are unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately) all to be found right at the beginning of Volume 1, more precisely in Chapter 1 of Part I, which deals with "commodities and money". My advice therefore is--begin by reading Part II of Volume 1 entitled "The Transformation of Money into Capital". It is not possible in my view to begin (and only to begin) to understand Part I without having read and re-read the whole of Volume 1 from Part II onwards.

This is more than a piece of advice. It is a recommendation, one which I regard as imperative. Everyone can confirm it by practical experience.

If one begins to read Volume I from the very beginning, that is, from Part I, one can get bogged down and tend to give up. Or, one can think one understands and this is even worse, for one can end up understanding something totally different from what one is trying to understand.

From Part II (the transformation of money into capital) onwards things are very clear. The reader is now able to get right to the heart and core of Volume I.

This is the law of surplus value which workers are able to grasp without the slightest difficulty because, quite simply, it is the scientific theory, the force of which they experience every day, namely class exploitation.

Parts III and IV, both very weighty but very clear, are of decisive relevance to the class struggle today. They deal with the two fundamental forms of surplus value with which the capitalists can carry through the maximum possible exploitation of the working class--what Marx calls absolute and relative surplus value.

Absolute surplus value (see Part III) is related to the length of the working day. Marx explains that the capitalist class strives inexorably to extend the length of the working day as much as possible and that one of the aims of working class struggle for well over a century has been to secure a reduction in the working day.

The historical stages of this fierce struggle are well known. They were for the 12 hour, then the 10 hour and then for the 8 hour day and finally at the time of the Popular Front (1936) for the 40 hour week. Unfortunately, it is equally well known that the capitalist class uses all its power and every possible means--legal and not quite legal--to extend the length of the real working day (hours actually worked) even where they are obliged to limit the legal working day as a result of laws won by large-scale working class struggle (e.g. 1936).

In actual practice, the working week varies between 45-54 hours and the employers have discovered the swindle of "overtime". There is also so-called "black work" beyond "regular" hours.

A word about "overtime". According to agreements it is paid for at 25 per cent, 50 per cent and even 100 per cent above that of "normal" rates. This would seem to mean that such work is very costly for the employers. But in reality it is very advantageous to them. For it enables the capitalists to keep expensive machinery running 24 hours out of 24 so that it depreciates as quickly as possible before being made obsolete by the new, even more efficient machines which modern technology is ceaselessly producing. For the workers, overtime earnings, are anything but free gifts presented to them by the employers. These earnings do of course mean something extra for the workers which they can do with, but it ruins their health. Despite its deceptive appearance, overtime means nothing more than additional exploitation for the workers.

Let us now pass on to Part IV (Production of relative surplus value). This is a burning question.

Relative surplus value is the prime form of exploitation today. It is also much more subtle. It is bound up with the increased use of machinery in industry (and in agriculture) and with the consequent increase in productivity. This increase in productivity (which has been spectacular during the past 10-15 years) is due not only to the introduction of more and more complex machinery which makes it possible to produce the same amount of products in half, a third, or even a quarter of the time formerly taken, but also to intensify the work flow.

All this is discussed by Marx in Part IV. He outlines the mechanisms of exploitation involved in the increase in productivity in their concrete forms. And he demonstrates that increases in productivity never automatically benefit the working class since its result is precisely to increase its exploitation.

What the workers have to do is the same as they did with regard to working hours; they have to fight against the characteristic forms of exploitation connected with productivity, to limit the effects of these forms (struggle against the intensified rhythm of labour, against the elimination of certain jobs, i.e. against redundancy caused by increased productivity etc.). Marx illustrates in an absolutely irrefutable fashion that the workers cannot hope to benefit permanently from increases in productivity before they and their allies conquer power, that until then, all they can do is to fight to limit its effects, that is to fight against their exploitation, which is part of the aim of the intense class struggle which they are waging.

If necessary, the reader can omit Part V (the production of absolute and relative surplus values), for the time being, for it is very technical, and pass on directly to Part VI which is concerned with wages.

### Productivity and Class Struggle

Here again the workers are literally *at home*, for Marx ignoring the bourgeois mystification which asserts that "the labour" of the workers is "paid for at its value", examines the different *kinds* of wage rates--time rates, piece rates etc., that is the different traps set by the bourgeoisie to deceive the workers and to destroy their will to wage the class struggle.

In this part, the workers can recognise that the question of wages or, as the bourgeois ideologists say, the question of the "standard of living" is in the last analysis, a *question of class struggle* (and not a question of increasing "productivity" from which the workers are "naturally" bound to benefit).

After finishing Parts II--VI, workers will realise that their economic struggle can only be a class struggle against the two principal forms of exploitation which are an inevitable tendency of the capitalist system.

These are:

- (1) For *increases* in the working day
- (2) For cuts in wages.

The two fundamental objectives (and watchwords) of the economic struggle waged by the working class are therefore *directly* opposed to the objectives of the struggle waged by the capitalist class for they are directed:

- (1) Against any lengthening of the working day
- (2) Against wage cuts.

Although I have emphasised that the essence of the economic struggle waged by the working class is the struggle against increased working hours and against wage cuts, it is as well to note the following three fundamental principles.

(1) An illusion spread by the reformists is aimed at making people think that under capitalism, wages can be increased simply because productivity increases. This camouflages the inevitable tendency of capitalism to *reduce* wages. Communists must explain this tendency to their workmates. Under capitalism, all wage struggles are directed against this tendency. Of course, it goes without saying that all struggles against wage cuts are, at the same time, also struggles *for increases* in existing wages.

(2) The reformists seek to hide this fact because they want to conjure the class struggle out of existence. The struggle *against* increases in working hours and *against* wage-cuts is not a matter of increasing productivity but a question of class struggle--in this case class struggle on the *economic* front.

(3) The *economic* struggle is a limited one because it is a defensive one against the *tendency*, inevitable under capitalism, to *increase economic exploitation*. The only struggle waged by the working class which can transform the defensive economic struggle (*against* speed up and the intensification of the work rhythm, *against* wage cuts, *against* elimination of jobs, *against* arbitrary fixing of bonuses), into an offensive struggle is working class struggle on the political plane. This political struggle waged by the working class has as its ultimate objective--*socialist revolution*. This political struggle includes the economic struggle and this is the kind of political struggle waged by the communists--the struggle for the socialist revolution.

All this is made perfectly plain in *Capital* even though the difference between the *economic* and the *political* aspects of the class struggle are not dealt with in any great detail. This is done, with great clarity by the followers of Marx, above all by Lenin (in *What is to be Done*), and by all the revolutionary leaders (Maurice Thorez always emphasised this). No revolutionary perspective is possible without the primacy of the political struggle over the simple economic struggle. For a political economic struggle leads to economism, that is to class collaboration, while on the other hand, pure concentration on the political struggle, neglect of, scorn for, the economic struggle, leads to voluntarism, i.e. to adventurism.

The class struggle must be conducted on a national scale, taking into account the special circumstances of the situation in the given society, but, at the same time, as part of the struggle of the working class internationally.

## "Snowballs" and Massacres

After Part VI, on wages, readers should go on to Part VII (The accumulation of capital), which is very clear. Here Marx explains that the tendency of capitalism is ceaselessly to transform the surplus value extracted from the workers into *capital*, for capital never ceases to "snowball" i.e. to reproduce (surplus value) from the workers. This thesis is splendidly illustrated by the concrete example of Britain during the years 1846-1866. Lenin showed that from the end of the 19th century, this reproduction of capital assumed the form of *Imperialism*--fusion of banking and industrial capital to form finance capital and the direct super-exploitation of "the rest of the world" in the form of colonialism, unleashing of colonial wars, then inter-imperialist wars, which revealed to everybody in the clearest possible way that Imperialism had now entered on its death-throes, since the two world wars resulted amongst other things, in the 1917 Revolution in Russia, the establishment of the People's Democracies, and then in the Chinese Revolution (1949).

Part VIII (primitive accumulation) with which Vol. 1 concludes, contains a discovery of very great importance. In it, Marx explodes bourgeois mystification about the birth of capitalism which seeks to explain it by the thrift of the first capitalists who worked hard and saved their money in order to provide themselves with the first kind of capital. Marx shows that, in reality, capitalism only began to develop in Western Countries after there had been an enormous "accumulation" of wealth in the hands of a number of patricians, and that this accumulation was the brutal result of centuries of piracy, raids, pillage, rapine and the massacres of whole peoples (e.g. of the descendants of the Incas and other inhabitants of fabulous Peru, rich in gold mines).

But this Marxist thesis concerning the historical *origins* of capitalism remains a burning reality today. For if capitalism in the "metropolitan countries" today operates without massacres, it continues to practise the same methods of thievery, brigandage, violence and massacres in the "outlying parts", in those countries which are called the "Third World"--Latin America, Africa, Asia. The massacres perpetrated by the Americans in Vietnam are proof today of what Marx wrote when describing the origins of capitalism in Part VIII of Volume 1.

But the situation has changed completely. The peoples are no longer allowing themselves to be massacred. They have begun to organise and to defend themselves because, amongst other reasons, Marx and Lenin and their successors have educated militant revolutionary fighters in the class struggle. That is why the Vietnamese people will be victorious over the strongest military power in the world, thanks to the *People's War*, led by the organisations which the people have created.

If we want to read *Capital* we should read Lenin (especially the last part of *Left Wing Communism*--"Some Conclusions"--in which Lenin discussed especially the conditions for the socialist revolution in the *Western Capitalist* countries). This will teach us that in our lifetime, many of us will see that the revolution will triumph in our own country.

## Golden Rule

I will sum up my advice as to how to read *Capital*, as follows:

1. Leave Part I, to begin with.
2. Begin with Part II.
3. Read Parts II, III, IV, VII and VIII, with the greatest attention (Leave Part V for later reading.)
4. Then try to read Part I by itself knowing that it is extremely difficult and requires much detailed explanation.<sup>2</sup>

This said I would also advise readers of *Capital* to precede their study of Marx's master work by reading the two following little books which serve as an excellent introduction.

1. *Wage, Labour and Capital* (1847) by Marx.
2. *On "Capital"* by Engels which outlines the essential ideas contained in Volume 1 admirably.

If it is desired to understand certain important conclusions deriving from Volume 1 presented in a clear and simple fashion, readers are advised, after reading Volume 1 to go on to read Marx's *Wages, Price and Profit* (1865). These two small works, *Wage Labour and Capital* and *Wages, Price and Profit* are lectures by Marx, one delivered very early on (in 1847) and the other much later (in 1865). The first was given to a meeting of workers, the second to the General Council of the First International.

Reading them, one can grasp the kind of language which Marx felt it necessary to use when speaking to workers and to militants of the labour movement. Marx knew how to speak simply, clearly and directly but, at the same time he made not the slightest concession with regard to the scientific content of his theories. He believed that the workers had a right to science and that they were perfectly capable of mastering the difficulties normal in any real scientific expression. This golden rule is--and remains--a lesson for us all.

## ENDNOTES:

1. Croce, the Italian philosopher, advanced the most "perfect" of such arguments I know--before World War I.
2. Here I can only provide a brief note regarding the theoretical difficulties which prevent a rapid reading of Vol. 1 of *Capital* (Marx corrected it at least ten times before giving it its final form--and not only because of questions of exposition).  
A word or two to help cope with these difficulties.
  - i. The theory of the value of labour power is only comprehensible as a special case from which Marx and Engels derived the law of value. This very formula--law of value--itself creates difficulties.

ii. The theory of surplus value is only one special aspect--of a most extensive theory, that of surplus labour which exists in all societies but which is appropriated in all class societies. This theory of surplus labour is not however dealt with itself in all its generality in Volume 1.

Volume 1 thus presents the special peculiarity that it contains solutions to problems which are only posed in Volumes 2, 3 and 4 and certain problems the solutions to which are only contained in the succeeding volumes.

What is essential is this character of "suspense" in "anticipation" which the difficulties in reading Volume 1 give rise to. One should be aware of this and take account of it, that is, read Volume 1 bearing in mind the existence of Volumes 2, 3 and 4.

Secondly, and this is not negligible by any means, certain difficulties in Volume 1 especially the terminology in certain passages of Chapter 1, Part I, and the theory of "fetishism" are relics of his Hegelian inheritance, "flirting" (*koketierend*) with which, Marx confessed to be one of his weaknesses.

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