

The cost of rigor: Four theses on the explanatory power of Marx's *Capital*

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The new economic and political trends observed in Europe and the United States during the first post-World War II decades rendered temporarily less obvious some of the class features of capitalism. From 1980 onward, the new financial hegemony in Neoliberalism, restoring social dynamics fully targeted to the power and interests of capitalist classes, emphasized the class character of the mode of production¹. Retrospectively, Marx's analysis appears even more compelling.

The purpose of the four theses below is not the questioning of this basic relevance. The contention is that a reassessment of Marx's analysis—its explanatory power and limitations—is now required in order to prolong a living Marxist tradition, a combination of fundamentalism and revisionism.² Each thesis distinguishes between the main strong points (a) and limits (b) of Marx's framework:

1. The project and method in *Capital* must be understood in relation to Marx's theory of history. (a) The channel of appropriation (exploitation) of surplus-labor in production from a social group by another social group appears as the main "marker" (as the term is used in medicine) of a mode of production, defining these groups as classes; (b) This very strict approach does not account for all social hierarchies and gives to the notion of class a content tightly related to production.
2. The object of Marx's *Capital* is the analysis of capitalist production, its class nature and its inner tendencies (commanding its historical character). The method is the exploration of *the explanatory power of the concept of capital* (a concept in a science, political economy³). (a) This method confers on Marx's *Capital* its scientific character ("rigor"); (b) A consequence is, however, that capitalism, as a phase in the sequence of modes of production, is only approached ("the cost") in relation to the two aspects above (surplus-labor and tendencies). The historical dynamics of productive forces and relations of production, or class struggle, are not addressed as such, only within local developments strongly subordinated to the method above⁴.
3. Marx understood the importance of prevailing economic conditions (in particular the violence of crises) concerning class struggle and the fate of capitalism, and devoted great efforts to the concrete analysis of economic mechanisms (notably the tendencies of technical and distributional change and the crises of the late 1840s and 1850s). (a) Aspects of Marx's investigations appear in Volume III and may contribute to the understanding of crises in contemporary capitalism; (b) Marx was, however, never

¹ G. Duménil, D. Lévy, *The Crisis of Neoliberalism*, Harvard University Press, Boston, 2011.

² With Jacques Bidet, we denote this project as a « Neomarxism » or « Altermarxism » (Bidet J., Duménil G., 2007, *Altermarxisme. Un autre marxisme pour un autre monde*, Presses Universitaires de France, Quadrige, Essais-Débats, Paris).

³ *Capital* is a critique of existing political economy, but Marx built a new political economy of his own.

⁴ For example, class struggle is not addressed as such, only in the analysis of the struggle for the labor day in Volume I.

able to conclude concerning the roots of crises. First, the issue is highly complex, the data were poor and, as Marx understood, not a single explanation is involved; second, Marx's line of argument in *Capital* is determined by the main objective of demonstrating the class nature of capitalism (as in the theories of value and surplus-value) while the analysis of crises does not follow from such premises.

4. The important notion of the "socialization of labor" (or production) emerges in *Capital*. The process refers to the fact that production is gradually less the outcome of the activity of individuals (or well defined groups), but occurs within more complex networks (larger enterprises, extended markets, networks of financing, and the like). Policies are also involved. (a) Socialization points to a crucial transformation commanding the continuous metamorphosis of relations of production within capitalist production itself, and stresses the importance of *organization* (as in Marx's analysis of cooperation, manufacture and the great industry); (b) Marx was aware that organisation was gradually more performed by specific groups of salaried workers, and developed an analysis of modern corporations, anticipating on the managerial revolution. But Marx stopped at this point without contemplating the implications concerning class patterns.

Two categories of consequences follow as regards the analysis of contemporary capitalism:

- The basic interrogations concerning the historical dynamics of capitalism remain unresolved. A category of analysts seeks the ultimate factor of the final collapse of capitalism in the tendency for the profit rate to fall. Although at least two major crises (the structural crises of the 1890s and 1970s) were caused by actual declines of the profit rate, capitalism was able to restore the dynamics of accumulation. The Great Depression and the current crisis did not follow from this tendency. They were rather evocative of the pattern contemplated in the *Manifesto*, capitalist classes acting as apprentice sorcerers unable to master the effects of their magic. In our work (with Lévy), we favor the thesis of a gradual transformation of capitalism, with sudden phases of acceleration resulting from major crises and ensuing basic transformations of capitalism.
- Within this metamorphosis, we emphasize the emergence of a class of managers supporting the process of socialization (as organisers).⁵ Their position toward the means of production is not defined in terms of ownership but control (and the channel of appropriation of surplus-labor is the access to upper wages, not dividends or interest as capitalist classes). Although managers occupy a form of "intermediate" class position within capitalism, we believe they constitute a potential new ruling class. Thus, we refer to a threefold class pattern, namely capitalist classes, the classes of managers, and popular classes, to interpret the course of class struggle in capitalism since the beginning of the 20th century (the sequence of "social orders" and, notably, the class interpretation we gave of neoliberalism in the mid-1990s).
- The tight relationship between this class of managers and the social category of higher-ranking government officials suggests a common class position. This broadening raises difficult issues concerning Marx's theory of history based on the appropriation of surplus-labor in production. Marx's conception of class patterns is questioned and a reconsideration of Marx's theory of history is finally involved. These issues are the main object of the on-going debate with Jacques Bidet.

⁵ This is obviously not a new idea, the object of a long debate at the periphery of Marxism.

