Marx’s Capital After 150 Years: Revolutionary Reflections

written by Kevin B. Anderson | December 16, 2017

What does it mean to celebrate and concretize for today Marx’s greatest work, *Capital*, Vol. I? Such a discussion is terribly important at this juncture, when we are in a new situation where even some sectors of the right have started to attack neoliberalism. The Brexit vote in the UK, the large vote for Le Pen in France despite her eventual defeat by a neoliberal candidate, and above all, the Trump campaign have placed on the agenda a new form of right-wing populism with neofascist overtones that breaks with some key features of neoliberalism, such as free trade pacts, somewhat more open borders, and “humanitarian” intervention. At the same time, Trump as president has put forth an incoherent agenda that contains major continuities with neoliberal austerity and old-style militarism, above all in the attempt to gut Obamacare.

The open racism, misogyny, Islamophobia, and nativism that marked the Trump campaign have if anything intensified, while his administration has made only fitful gestures toward the economic nationalism and protectionism that helped to win him a decisive swath of white working class voters. Whether we are on the cusp of a new era of capitalism, or whether this is more of a rhetorical turn, remains to be seen, especially in the case of Trump. But at the very least, the ideological underpinnings of capitalism seem to be undergoing an alteration. This makes it more urgent than ever that we on the left target capitalism as such, root and branch, not merely one form or another of it like neoliberalism.[1]

As we mark the 150th anniversary of *Capital I,* another ideological challenge to Marxism centers on gender and race, issues that have come to the fore even more since the election of Trump. Within progressive circles that have opposed neoliberalism, especially in academia, some of the most prominent critics of Marx have claimed that he says little or nothing of value on race or gender and that therefore he is not a thinker of our times. From the Marxist side, this is sometimes countered with a sort of economic and class reductionism, but neither of these positions captures what Marx was really about, including in *Capital*.

In response, I would note that Marx takes up gender in a revolutionary manner throughout his life, from the 1840s through his late *Ethnological Notebooks*. Here is what he says at one point in *Capital I*, referring to how capitalism undermines the family:

However terrible and disgusting the dissolution of the old family ties within the capitalist system may appear, large-scale industry, by assigning an important part in socially organized processes of production, outside the sphere of the domestic economy, to women, young persons, and children of both sexes, does nevertheless create a new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and of relations between the sexes. (Marx 1976, 620-21)

This “higher form” of the family is not the one that exists under capitalism, which does “terrible and

disgusting" things to the family; it is what would come about only after capitalism's transcendence. While this passage is remarkable for its dialectical treatment of the family in and beyond capitalism, it is far from the only place where Marx discusses working women in *Capital I*. As Heather Brown argues in her *Marx on Gender and the Family*, "while many feminists have criticized Marx for not adequately dealing with gender in his work," in the lengthy chapter on machinery, "Marx not only traces out the changing conditions of the male worker, but also gives significant emphasis to the role of women in this process" (2012, p. 90). Nor does Marx deal with gender only in terms of working women, for in his early essay/translation on suicide, he centers the discussion on women from the middle and upper classes who are driven to suicide by oppressive familial relations (Marx 1999).

Since the Black movement in the U.S. has never separated itself from Marxism to the extent that the modern feminist movement has — and the responsibility for that has to be shared by Marxists who ignored or minimized gender and sexuality — Marx's writings on race are somewhat better known. In *Capital*, the most dramatic passage concerning race is this one, written just after our Civil War:

In the United States of America, every independent workers' movement was paralyzed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic. Labor in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin. (Marx 1976, 414).

I have taken up these points in my *Marx at the Margins* (2010) and in a more recent *Jacobin* essay (Anderson 2017).

Two points follow from the above: 1) the frequent accusation that Marx writes only of the white male worker in *Capital* is demonstrably false; 2) everything I have to say from now on includes working people of all colors, genders, and sexualities. What, then, are some of the central points of *Capital I* and related writings from the same period, at least for a brief account like this?

Fetishism and Dehumanization

One core theme is the theory of commodity fetishism, which centers on the dehumanization of the worker – and really of all human relations – under capitalism. As we know, capitalism features waged and salaried labor, where capital not the worker owns and controls the means of production. This creates a subject-object reversal, where the inanimate production apparatus becomes the active subject and the worker the mere object. (It's as if the hoe, rather than being a tool controlled by the workers, jumped up and started hitting them, telling them to work faster.) Commodities produced in this manner have a "mystical character," as they take on a life of their own, interacting with other commodities once they are separated from their producers. What develops is a social relationship not between people, but rather "between the products of labor" (Marx 1976, 164). What we reach ultimately is a situation, really a whole society, of "material relations between persons and social relations between things" (166). And the location where this is most pervasive is the capitalist workplace itself, where technology in the service of capital rules over the workers. These material relations between people and social relations between things not only form a distorting lens, wherein capitalism forces us to view human relations this way; they also form an actual reality. For here, he writes, social relations "appear as what they are" (Marx 1976, 166).[2] This dehumanization is an actual reality that the system encourages us to view in a matter-of-fact manner, as nothing unusual.

But that is exactly the logic of capital that Marx wants to break us away from. How to do so? Obviously, we have to create a society beyond capitalism to escape its logic completely. However, we can also begin to transcend it theoretically, and it is very important to do so. It is important not only in terms of whether capitalism is permanent or can be replaced, but also because we don't want to replace it by something similar or even worse.

Taking account of the 20th century, long after Marx wrote, let me add that this dehumanization of the workers certainly does not change fundamentally if the capitalist production apparatus is controlled by the state rather than held as private property, as we saw in the Soviet Union and see today in China, or even in Cuba and Venezuela. Nor can dehumanization be eliminated by worker-owned coops, although these do point us in the right direction.

A Visionary Alternative to Capitalism

This takes us to the second point from *Capital I* that I want to single out here: Marx's visionary theoretical alternative to capitalism. We can of course transcend capitalism theoretically by looking at non-capitalist modes of production. Marx looks briefly at European feudalism, where the raw exploitation of the working people, the peasants, was not hidden behind formal political equality and formal freedom of choice of occupation. Under feudal rule there was no distorting lens and exploitation was clear, with the King Donalds openly calling themselves by those titles, and calling the people their beloved children who needed to love and obey them … or else.

Obviously, feudalism is not a positive alternative to capitalism. That positive form comes out of a type of dialectical imagination, where Marx takes revolutionary aspirations and trends inside the present order — like the Paris Commune of 1871 — and moves them much further, into a revolutionary communist future: "Let us finally imagine, for a change," he writes, "an association of free human beings [*Menschen*],[3] working with the means of production held in common…" (Marx 1976, 171). In contrast to capitalism's distorting lens of fetishism, "social relations … are here transparent in their simplicity" (Marx 1976, 172). Let me add parenthetically that linking transparency to justice and freedom is as old in philosophy as Plato's cave, in whose shadowy recesses one experienced both injustice and an obscuring of one's real situation. And of course Plato also advocated a form of communism, albeit a hierarchical and non-egalitarian one.

As for Marx, he writes in the fetishism section of *Capital* that the distorting and obscuring lens of capitalism "is not removed" until the production process changes, "until it becomes production by freely associated human beings, and stands under their conscious and planned control." That is communism in the positive sense.[4]

I cannot underline enough that Marx's critique of capitalism is forward-looking, from the vantage point of the not yet. In the same way, those who wanted to abolish slavery 200 years ago had to imagine an "impractical" future without slavery, given that the "great" civilizations of the past had exhibited mainly different varieties of slavery and unfree labor for the mass of the population, something that pro-slavery ideologists constantly mentioned.

Permanent Unemployment, Technology, and Economic Crisis

A third point I want to mention from *Capital I* that is particularly salient today is the massive unemployment that accompanies both the development and the continued existence of capitalism. As Raya Dunayevskaya argued, in lines that could have anticipated our recent electoral shock, "The failure to give 'full employment' to labor shakes the whole structure of capitalist society" (1988 [1958], 124). Marx develops this point at length in his discussion of the accumulation of capital.

As capitalism develops, he writes, the amount of capital invested in machinery and other inanimate aspects (constant capital) increases, compared to that invested in labor power, in living labor, which he calls variable capital. In other words, capitalism is constantly eliminating workers as it moves to ever more complex and expensive technology. This changes what he calls the organic composition of capital, toward an ever-higher ratio of constant capital (mainly machinery) to variable capital (labor power in the process of production). This in turn leads to mass unemployment even in non-

recessionary periods, creating what Marx calls “a relative surplus population” (Marx 1976, 789). This seldom means fewer hours of work, however, given “the condemnation of one part of the working class to enforced idleness by the over-work of the other part…” (Marx 1976, 789). The “industrial reserve army” of the unemployed, he writes, “weighs down the active army of workers; during the periods of over-production and feverish activity, it puts a curb on their pretensions” (Marx 1976, 792). However, beyond a certain point, as whole districts and neighborhoods are visited by mass unemployment, as the prisons fill up and homelessness increases, the situation can become explosive – even more so when, as now, the element of racial and ethnic oppression becomes part of the mix.

The change in the technical composition of capital also has other negative consequences, this time for capital itself, even if it can manage to stave off the social unrest resulting from mass unemployment. As Marx notes in the chapter on machinery, since living labor is the source of value, as capital’s composition changes to the point of less and less living labor power being incorporated into the process of production, this also undercuts its ceaseless quest for surplus value and ultimately, profit. Because living labor is the source of all value, “It is impossible, for instance, to squeeze as much surplus value out of two as out of twenty-four workers…. Hence there is an immanent contradiction in the application of machinery to the production of surplus value” (Marx 1976, 531). This brief discussion in *Capital I* is of course related to what he develops in Vol. III, the tendency of the rate of profit to decline over time as capitalism develops.[5] And this of course is at the root of economic crises like the great recession of 2008, the effects of which have not completely ended even now.

Globalization, Colonialism, and Capital Accumulation

The fourth point I would like to emphasize is how capital accumulation devastates the global environment and the world’s people: “Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets! Accumulation for accumulation’s sake, production for production’s sake” (Marx 1976, 742). It is a system that will literally die without this. Not only does it need to extract surplus value off the backs of the working people, but the rate of surplus value extraction also needs to increase for the system to function without stagnation. Hence the obsession with economic growth.

All this has particularly brutal effects in the colonies, as seen in Marx’s discussion of the accumulation of capital in Ireland by British capital. As the Irish were driven off their subsistence farms by British capitalist agriculture, the results were of genocidal proportions. Given the already precarious and worsening conditions faced by Irish peasants under the rule of British capital, when the potato famine struck in the 1840s, out of a population of only 8 million, 1 million died and 3 million emigrated.

Ireland was not only an oppressed nation dominated politically by a foreign power, Britain. It was also a victim of a particularly capitalist form of colonialism, which radically uproots the entire local economic system, dispossessing the peasantry. As Marx noted repeatedly in *Capital I*, this turned the island into an impoverished agricultural dependency of British capitalism, all in the service of capital accumulation.

Anti-Colonial Revolt and Working Class Revolution

This takes us to my fifth and last point, an example of Marx’s theory of revolution in the epoch of *Capital I*, but not in the text itself. In 1867-70, just after *Capital I* came off the press, Marx came out strongly in support of the Fenian movement, a progressive form of Irish nationalism based among the peasantry rather than the upper or middle classes, and which kept a degree of independence from the Roman Catholic Church.

In 1870, Marx wrote of how the Irish working people – both inside Britain as immigrant labor in capitalist factories and in in their home country under equally brutal colonial rule – were victimized by what would today be termed stereotyping and racism. This drove a wedge between English and Irish workers, to the benefit of capital, something he compares explicitly to race relations between the former slaves and the "poor whites" in the U.S. However, in a magnificent example of dialectical reason, Marx also saw an emancipatory side to these contradictions among the working classes. Thus, he wrote (in French) in early 1870 – in a little-known "Confidential Communication" of the First International – that an Irish agrarian uprising might serve as a "lever" to challenge the overwhelming power of the British ruling classes, which were the most powerful in the world at that time:

Although revolutionary initiative will probably come from France, England alone can serve as the lever for a serious economic Revolution. It is the only country where there are no more peasants and where landed property is concentrated in a few hands. It is the only country where *the capitalist form*, that is to say, combined labor on a large scale under the authority of capitalists, has seized hold of almost the whole of production. It is the only country where the *vast majority of the population consists of wage laborers*…. The English have all the *material* conditions for social revolution. What they lack is *a sense of generalization and revolutionary passion*. It is only the General Council [of the First International, which Marx effectively headed — KA] that can provide them with this, that can thus accelerate the truly revolutionary movement in this country, and consequently *everywhere*…. If England is the bulwark of landlordism and European capitalism, the only point where official England can be struck a great blow *is Ireland*" (Marx 1985, 118-19, trans. amended, emphasis in original).

Stressing that the British ruling class was composed of landlords as well as capitalists, he added:

In the first place, Ireland is the *bulwark* of English landlordism. If it fell in Ireland, it would fall in England. In Ireland this is a hundred times easier because *the economic struggle there is concentrated exclusively on landed property*, because this struggle is at the same time national, and because the people there are more revolutionary and angry than in England. (Marx 1975, 119, emphasis in the original)

Thus, a peasant revolution in Ireland sparks a working class revolution in England, somehow connected to revolutionary events in France. (Recall that Irish revolutionaries maintained close ties to France.) This agrarian revolution in Ireland would presumably spread to the English working class via Irish emigrant labor in the English industrial centers.

This is Marx's mature theory of revolution and capital accumulation at a specific juncture, Britain and Ireland in 1870. The argument about revolution emanating from Ireland is not taken up explicitly in *Capital I*. Instead, Marx's most prominent conceptualization of the process of revolution in *Capital I* is posed at a more general and abstract level,[6] where he focuses only on technologically developed countries like Britain in what many regard as the true conclusion[7] of *Capital I*:

Along with the constant decrease in the number of capitalist magnates, who usurp and monopolize all the advantages of this process of transformation, the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation and exploitation grows; but with this there also grows the revolt of the working class, a class constantly increasing in numbers and trained, united and organized by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production. (Marx 1976, 929)

Over time, all these developments of (1) productive forces and (2) a united working class become "incompatible with their capitalist integument." Next comes the death knell of "capitalist private

property" where "the expropriators are expropriated." In a nod to the Hegelian dialectic, he adds: "Capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a natural process, its own negation. This is the negation of the negation" (Marx 1976, 929).

Capital I thus ends with a dialectical thunderclap.

How might we reach that point today, when the various contradictions of capitalism that Marx writes about are deeper than ever, and yet so are the contradictions inside the movement against it? But that is why we need to undertake this type of discussion, not only on the nature of capital but also on its alternative in a positive sense, even as we hit the streets again and again in our expressions of discontent and revolutionary aspiration.

And we need to do so very concretely, not in the empirical but in the dialectically concrete sense. How can the universal of free and associated labor, of communism in the modern democratic sense, be achieved through the actions of a working class unified across all races, genders, and sexualities? And yet that universal form of anti-capitalist revolution will necessarily take on a different coloration depending upon the social, ethno-racial, and political context in which the expropriation of the capitalist magnates by the working classes can come onto the historical agenda and then actually fulfill its aims.

In my discussion of *Capital I* and related writings in this article, I have focused upon two main types of revolution, (1) the abstractly sketched notion of a united working class rising up against a centralized capitalist economic apparatus and (2) the notion of a British working class divided by the ethnic condescension of the English toward the Irish, but also connected, at least potentially, to the revolutionary aspirations of the Irish people. As I intend to argue in another study that will be a further development of this one, Marx discusses — or at least hints at — three other notions of revolution in *Capital I*: (3) revolution from both above and below during the Civil War and Reconstruction periods in the U.S., imbued with the dialectics of race and class, (4) revolution against the state and moving toward freely associated labor in the Paris Commune of 1871, and (5) agrarian revolutions in non-Western communal villages connecting to working class revolutions Western Europe.

Thus, there are multiple notions of revolution in *Capital I,* two of which have been taken up here.

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[1] I discuss these issues at somewhat greater length in a recent interview (Cutler et al. 2017). There have been several other discussions of these points, but would like to single out in particular Jacques (2016) and Hudis (2016).

[2] The German term Marx uses here for "appear" is *erscheinen*, a form of appearance that reflects a phenomenon's underlying essence, as opposed to *scheinen* — "appear" in the sense of "seem," with overtones of an appearance that is merely illusory (Marx 1962, 89).

[3] The two existing translations of *Capital I* were carried out before gender neutrality became the norm in intellectual discourse; therefore, translators rendered the gender-neutral German term *Mensch* as "man," when they could as easily (and more accurately) have written "human being," taking account of the fact that German has a distinct term for the male person: *Mann*.

[4] Several recent books have shown the centrality of this alternative to Marx's work as a whole, chief among them Peter Hudis, *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism*(2012) and Paresh Chattopadhyay, *Marx's Associated Mode of Production* (2016).

[5] Actually, Marx wrote the drafts of what is now Vol. III before Vol. I, but Vol. III was not published until over a decade after his death, by Engels in 1894.

[6] Bertell Ollman (1993) has underlined the various levels of abstraction Marx employs.

[7] The block quote that follows is from the last lines of chapter 31 of the present English edition; it is followed by the rather anodyne chapter 32, on white settlers in North America.

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