

## Article

## Key Elements of Marx's Political Economy: A Perspective

Paul Zarembka

Marx was a profound thinker and activist who left much for us. One or two percent of the necessity? Five percent? What a fantastic contribution!

I don't think Marx over-estimated himself as he approached his own end. I think Engels did so, or wanted others to do so. Lenin, even more so, but not Luxemburg.

Marx is reported to have said that the greatest of intellectual virtues is "doubt". Surely "doubt" is the finest posture to take toward all "explanations" of the ruling classes for its practices. Still, what are strengths and certain weaknesses of Marx's political economy, his own *Capital* for sure, but also going beyond that work?

Abstract labor and labor power are absolutely essential concepts as footprints for the social theory under capitalism that Marx developed. Both are connected to the concept of value. But it is much too easy to slide into Ricardo's "value" that can enable a path to theoretical counter-revolution against Marx's theory and his socialist platform. Abstract labor means capitalists buy the workers' efforts and only they decide what the workers do, not the workers, at the pain of possible job loss. In other words, workers take orders. This becomes decisive, experienced hourly, daily, weekly, monthly, yearly. It is so much the case that both sides might take it for granted that that is "just the way it is". It is taken for granted until the oppression of workers reaches some type of breaking point. While abstract labor as a concept arose for Marx in 1859, his concept of labor power came later, about 1865, as he broke fully with Ricardian "labor" which has no concern for workers being required to take orders. Thus, Marx broke with Ricardian evisceration of the life experience of workers.

Conceptually, labor power is directly connected to abstract labor; they go together, even though they did not come together full-blown in a flash. In his 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *Volume I* of *Capital*, Marx added a twelve-page discussion of the fetishism of commodities, reminding us from another angle that abstraction is taking place.

In the introduction to the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of *Volume I*, Engels said that Marx's greatest achievement was in explaining the concept of surplus value, comparable to Lavoisier's discovery of oxygen. I myself have accepted that, but we have to be careful. When we provisionally accept abstracting from the lives of workers in production and "only" want to con-

sider their working hours, it is quite handy. And it seems easy enough to present to workers in an initial exposure to Marx's greatest work. Indeed, Marx has over 300 pages in *Volume I* elaborating on the productions of absolute and relative surplus value in very illuminating discussions, only occasionally breaking into the workers' living experiences. Those pages help explain the behaviors of capitalists who exploit without concern for the lives of workers. But they do less to understand workers as their lives are being conditioned, hour after hour, to perform well enough the duties assigned to them, but not allowed to be creative themselves, let alone engage in community solidarity.

Hours of work, as well as hours needed to reproduce workers' lives (including family), are suitable to quantification, more so, if we pass over speed-ups of work. As such, surplus value is simply the difference between working hours and the portion returned to workers for their sustenance and reproduction. Marx's discussion of primitive accumulation is quite different, however, as it is about the process of replacing pre-capitalist society and initially establishing the capitalist mode of production. Notably, it includes open force and violence in its establishment. This is quite different than could be incorporated in classical political economy. Louis Althusser considered it of extreme importance.<sup>1)</sup> This process of incorporation is not subject to quantification, except perhaps to express results as to how many people have been successfully proletarianized.

Recognizing quantification as having a large importance in Marx's *Capital* is consistent with understanding that this work is focused from the side of capital, the side unconcerned with either the actual nature of the product produced nor the lives of workers. Only of concern are the profits generated in ever greater fashion, profits arising out of surplus value in production. That is, the abstraction capitalism sustains with the labor power it employs is itself an abstraction from lived reality.

Since my own background within economics included econometrics, I must have been attracted to possibilities of quantification. Where does quantification appear most vividly within Marx's own materials, and becomes a danger of over-emphasis? One location seems to me to be in the micro-economic questions of the relationship (transformation) of commodity values in the market to labor values in production. Bourgeois economics attempted to destroy Marx on this basis, although Marx's discussion was only in draft material for *Volume III* of *Capital*, presented to the world by Engels. Marxist economists provided various sorts of responses I don't need to discuss.

Another focus on details of quantification has come to be on the so-called composition of capital, following Marx's elaboration at the beginning pages of the French edition of *Volume I*, carried over by Engels into the German 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> editions (an elaboration not in the 2<sup>nd</sup> German edition). It is often connected to discussion of a tendency of the overall rate of profit in the capitalist economy to fall, which was considered by Marx for *Volume III*, but never completed by him. This topic will have more discussion later in this article,

but is not terribly germane to my current focus on quantification itself. For now, I note that, in the French edition, composition of capital connects more to employment levels than it had in the 2<sup>nd</sup> German edition, or will it in Engels' rendering of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> edition.

Staying with examining the quantification aspect of Marx's work, let us go to productions of absolute and of relative surplus value in *Volume I*. Both are condensed around the length and fraction of the working day returned to workers against the portion retained by capital. The simplest of graphs are provided there for illustrations. The rate and mass of surplus value are also quantifications in a separate chapter. Another chapter refers to changes in "magnitude" of the "price of labor-power". And, yet another refers to "various formula" for the rate of surplus value. In other words, all of these seems to appear as Marx's revolution in political economy in the footsteps of a Newton or a Leibniz in another intellectual terrain. This portion of Marx's work appears as Enlightenment intellectual work, about a society of humans living in a particular social formation, capitalism. It is not even about how human society got there (except to a very, very limited extent). If you want, Marx's *Capital* is a "critical analysis"; the subtitle says so.

Perhaps we can say that Marx wants to offer laws of motion for capitalism and provide a basis for understanding its crises. And crises are dramatic. One example: Across the world from Marx, my great-great grandfather experienced it in 1837, living in Perryville, New York, with the family business being one of making wagons, carriages and sleighs in a rural area:

Bright as all appeared a storm of disappointment was hovering over them and descended like avalanche of destruction in 1837 when a financial panic swept over the entire country. The whole country was deluged with wreck and ruin and the accumulations of years was swept away leaving penniless and destitute almost the entire population ... I at that time was old enough to remember the fearful expression of my mother's face as she looked on her beloved children and sought in vain to find food and raiment. (Private recounting by Albert Judd Blakeslee, 1896).

What are the contexts which lead to crises, i.e., consequences of laws of motion being offered by Marx? If we truly understand context, it would seem also possible to consider agency or agencies to avert, ameliorate, or end such types of crises. Yet, crises occur, and are often said to be occurring even when not so obvious. I need, the word may be over-used as a subtle measure of hope that a house of cards is collapsing without a deeply engaged agency (workers?).

Rosa Luxemburg intervened against relying on hope. For her, agency was everything (or nearly so). Her *Accumulation of Capital* was misread as a theory of collapse of capitalism, and despised for arguing that Marx had gotten something wrong for treating capitalism too often as a closed system. Basically, Luxemburg (1913) argues that positing a closed system is too simplistic and actually logically erroneous within Marx's thought. In actuality,

capitalism has a constant realization problem because it is suppressing the wages of the working class, while it needs markets for its surplus value. Investing and investing, over and over, for more and more means of production would not have enough buyers for the products that could be produced. It is a contradiction within the *raison d'être* already expressed in Marx's analysis of accumulation of capital. It would be avoidable only in a limited manner, absent further discussion.

Marx's discussion of "so-called primitive accumulation" implicitly retained his underlying closed system perspective. He is quite clear at the beginning of Part VIII of *Volume I* that he is considering there the more limited question of how capitalism arose in the first place, "an accumulation not the result of the capitalist mode of production, but its starting point." Indeed, it is a very important question regarding how capitalism arose at all. I would recommend staying with the use of the concept "primitive accumulation" to refer only to this historical question of Marx.

In my view, too much of Marxist political economy is conditioned by the perspective that "accumulation of capital" refers to more means of production (more investment). This amounts to adopting the Ricardian perspective (see Zarembka 2023). At the end of *Volume I* addressing colonialism, Marx actually notes that means of production are *not* necessarily capital at all! Indeed, Marx's political economy is fundamentally about class relations, and strengthening the capitalist class means having more surplus value. Thus, it would be far better to substitute and use, I would argue, "Marxist accumulation of capital" as the concept to mean, front-and-center, more workers producing more surplus value, along with required means of production. This is so even as Marx's text has ambiguities, and his schemes of reproduction in *Volume II* have limitations. For those interested, I have offered an algebraic model that can incorporate this understanding and thus move beyond Marx's schemes of reproduction (Zarembka, 2021, pp.119-123). Capitalism penetrating, or attempting to penetrate, non-capitalist relations of production would no longer be an aside, but central. If central, of course it has limits in the total employable world population. Luxemburg knew this.

There is another seeming answer to the realization problem: Destroy means of production, and produce their replacements, perhaps with changed technology. Wars can do this massively (as can earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes, but more limitedly). To drive the point home, imagine a world pretty much conquered by capitalism but, somehow, even under John Lennon's "Imagine" of no religion and no nationalism. Surplus value would have nowhere to go apart from luxury consumption of the small minority. If more value were to go to workers, it would not be surplus value at all. Isn't the capitalist mode of production different from feudalism? More fundamentally, if destructive wars are to be the answer of capital to its problem, humanity, as Luxemburg said, has a very grave outcome, barbarism, if it does not move to a socialism for the people.

In my opinion, the history of Marxist theory and Marxism itself would have been different if Engels were treated independently of Marx, and also Engels had more carefully followed fully the obligations of editing another's work. It was presumed that he fully complied – after all, he had said so. If we look closely, however, there are deviations that cannot be just excused away. For example, Marx wanted a new Part division for *Volume I of Capital*, namely, a Part VIII. This Part was, for the first time, in the French edition, separated out from Part VII, “The Accumulation of Capital”. Its titling was “The So-called Primitive Accumulation”. Sections thereafter in the 2<sup>nd</sup> German were to become chapters in the 3<sup>rd</sup> German. Yet, to this day, none of the German editions demark a Part VIII, although Marx had introduced that Part into his French edition and did want it for subsequent editions.<sup>2)</sup>

Marx wanted the entire text for “The Secret of Primitive Accumulation” changed from the 2<sup>nd</sup> German. Engels, nevertheless, used his editorial position after Marx's death to incorporate all changes *except* the final important paragraph. That final paragraph in the French revised what Marx had written in his 2<sup>nd</sup> German edition to refer only to Western Europe in presenting his theory. The 2<sup>nd</sup> edition language had referred the entire world, thus, including such large countries as Russia, India, and China. Marx had become increasingly aware of the complexities of social realities. He studied Russia considerably with more than a hundred books on the country in his library. These included an 1869 book published by the Russian N. Flerovsky that Marx told Engels was the most important after Engels' 1845 book *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. By leaving in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition language, Engels did not want to recognize Marx's new delimitation, even while claiming that he Engels never deviated from what Marx wanted.

There are other problems with Engels' editing. Another example is leaving within Part V reference to “subjection” (German: *Subsumption*) of labor that Marx wanted removed. The concept was to get considerable attention when the Penguin edition of *Volume I* included much text on it, claiming it to be “missing” from what Marx published. Yet, Marx had *removed* all but one such reference when he prepared the 2<sup>nd</sup> German, compared to the 1<sup>st</sup> German, and he wanted that final mention to be deleted. More involved is Marx' changed character of the chapter on “The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation”. Engels left in from the 2<sup>nd</sup> German the focus on the “concentration” of capital while neglecting “centralization” in the French. In the French and wanting incorporation into the subsequent German edition, Marx had more emphasis on employment of labor.

I have provided text in English of what Marx had wanted for his 3<sup>rd</sup> edition chapter on “The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation” (Zarembka, 2021, Chapter 4). Thereby, we come pretty close to having in English what Marx's own 3<sup>rd</sup> German edition would likely have contained had Engels followed instructions fully. I think it is important to have *Volume I* as close as possible to what Marx intended in his full maturity. This would also

avoid the matter of debating whether French is somehow a “lesser” language for communicating Marx’s theory, an opinion that Engels expressed. (Could not one make the opposite case, while offering some type of explanation?) It permits the English language reader to accept the Moore and Aveling translation for most of the text, albeit not necessarily Engels’ editing of it.

In the French edition there is new text that is important for the elaborating the issue of quantification. It concerns the “composition of capital” that now begins the entire chapter on “The General Law”. Engels did incorporate the change into his 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> editions of *Volume I*. It needs elaboration, although technical, both for the misuse of composition of capital that has occurred, and also because Marx never got it fully correct. Rather than elaborate here, I would invite the interested reader to examine in Zarembka (2021, Chapter 8) the problems involved, both for the theoretical issues and empirical estimations.

There is curious history I want to mention. Marx is so widely recognized everywhere for his importance, I would have thought that anyone who had read Marx’s *Volume I* within Marx’s own lifetime and whom Marx read and acknowledged would have led to careful study of that person. Such a person was Nikolai Sieber. Writing in Russian, not only was Sieber not translated until very recently, he also escaped attention (so far as I know, particularly outside Russia), until the very important book by James White (1996) appeared. A further curiosity is that this work still remains mostly uncited, unaddressed. There is a lot to learn from it and from results of further research. For one example, Sieber was reading the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of *Volume I* and he criticized Marx for his use of Hegel. Marx, after learning Russian, read Sieber’s 1871 book. Marx had already prepared his 2<sup>nd</sup> German edition, an edition that had already reduced citations to Hegel. Perhaps consistent with his own declining interest in Hegel, Marx never expressed concern with this criticism by Sieber and continued to recommend Sieber’s work to the end of his life as a faithful introduction to his own work. I should mention that Sieber had other concerns as well, such as Marx’s focus on production when, for Sieber, consumption ought to be included as a requirement to sustain human life. Marx did not object to this concern, but it may have seemed of lesser importance and open to consideration.

While there is no doubt about Hegel’s early influence on Marx, there is little or no evidence in the last decade of his life that Marx wanted to defend Hegel as important for his own understanding of social theory, or how he wanted Hegel’s legacy to be understood. A leading occasion would have been with regard to Sieber, but Marx passed, and he didn’t take advantage of other opportunities that could have used in his last decade should he have thought it important enough.

The first translation of Marx’s *Volume I* was into Russian by Nikolai Danielson (with others). It was completed before Marx’s 2<sup>nd</sup> German edition and thus was based upon the 1<sup>st</sup> edition. The next Russian translation, also by Danielson (who corresponded a lot with

Marx), was not until 1898. So, those in Russia reading the Russian translation until near the end of the century were reading the 1<sup>st</sup> edition, even though the 2<sup>nd</sup> German edition and then the French edition, had considerable improvements by Marx. For those who would approve of more “Hegelian” language, of Hegelian dialectics, that was all to the good. I include Georgi Plekhanov, considered the founder of Russian Marxism.<sup>3)</sup>

Moving away from *Capital*, Marx's other contributions are quite wide. Leaving aside organizing for the elimination of capitalism, gender issues, and whether he had prejudices, I will stay with a few other consequential analyses he made. It is well-known that he predicted in published articles of 1861-1862 the outcome of the U. S. Civil War. While we can discuss the character of his analyses that the slave question was indeed the fulcrum of the outcome, yet it needs mentioning also that the war against native Americans did not receive similar attention. Further, he and Engels had ignored Lincoln's questioning about the U. S. responsibility for the Mexican-American War when Lincoln was a member of the House and they had expressed support for the U. S. side. Only later was the war's connection to slavery incorporated, there by undermining or changing their prior position.

In these works, Marx is not engaging in the quantification discussed above regarding *Capital*. I now turn to issues of the state and of nationalism which are also not engaging in quantification. It has seemed to me that a main message from Marx is that the ruling class will do anything to maintain itself in power (a blood bath after the Paris Commune being one example). The specter of an alternative frightens capital so much that it sometimes over-reacts to perceived threats.

I have been surprised that analyses of the U.S. state offered by quite a few Marxists cannot consider that an event like September 11<sup>th</sup> could be a conspiracy by a certain sector of the state. The Bush administration's proffered alternative — itself a weak conspiracy theory — escapes critique too often. Conspiracy happens and should not be in question. They are not open, announced, and advertised, and therefore need a particular type of studying. Marx provided an example in 1852 with his *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. While this analysis should not be any type of template, his is a very careful analysis making no concessions to power.

Careful analysis should be case for such events as the Mukden (Manchurian) incident and the Reichstag fire before World War II, and such later events as the Kennedy and King assassinations dramatically affecting the United States in the mid-1960s (the latter even had a jury trial conviction for governmental conspiracy). September 11<sup>th</sup>? It is not reasonable that a plane could fly hundreds of miles, then be allowed to go into the Pentagon without being fired upon, after the events in New York City. The burden must be on those (George Bush, et al.; the mainstream media) who would deny the obvious, and the clear evidence that the claimed American Airlines plane was not, in fact, responsible. Two New York buildings had planes flown into them and collapsed, then, one more building col-

lapsed although not even being hit by a plane; yet, for those we are offered stories about office fires<sup>4)</sup>?

I want to argue that Marxists have every right and obligation to consider conspiracies. This does not mean to take anything proffered as the truth without careful consideration of evidence. It certainly does not mean that a political reason for a conspiracy allegation could itself be the basis to judge the accuracy of the allegation. I am afraid the latter is the case too frequently.

Turning to other concerns, a Marxist approach surely entails effort to be international in outlook. Nationalisms, however, can get in the way in spite of intentions. Hervey Allen's 1936 novel *Anthony Adverse* has a wonderful reference to "the insult of truth" (p.1212). When personally raised with a nationalism, "my nation" cannot be insulted with too much truth else I feel personally insulted. While Marx, Lenin, and Luxemburg had major writings about nationalism, it nevertheless remains a very complex historical, cultural, language, and propaganda topic and needs much consideration in improving the practice of internationalism.

Of course, the same complexity is true about race issues, gender and gender identifications, religious convictions or lack thereof, laboring skills or lack thereof, precarious work, disabilities, being imprisoned, etc., as we work for solidarity against oppressions. Complexity also includes "simple", yet major, individual events (perhaps tragedies) that conditions a person's relationship to his or her community; all of us know, or know of, persons with such experiences.

The future of humanity and the planet is at very great risk, for many reasons...not least for climate neglect, and use of nuclear weapons deliberately (twice already) or a result of accident (but for one Soviet Admiral during the Cuban missile crisis, a Soviet submarine would have launched nuclear armed missiles aimed at the enemy). On the one hand, we must be firm, working positively with agencies to overcome major obstacles. Marx's work is very important demonstrating how workers are brought together within capitalism as agents for socialism. On other hand, we must be very careful. There are no assured answers, but there are possibilities for well-informed practices.

#### Notes

- 1) Althusser (1969, p.85), cited in Zarembka (2021, p.88). The present article connects to chapters in the latter book, but is not intended as a summary, but rather as a reflection and adding of new concerns.
- 2) See Zarembka (2021, Chapters 3). Part 8 does appear in the English edition, even though edited by Engels, and this exception is discussed (pp.89-91).
- 3) If Sieber had not fallen into serious illness, dying young, it would have been much harder to ignore him. As to Danielson, he lived until 1918 and more history about him would be desirable. We do know that Engels thought more highly of Plekhanov.



- 4) A recent, simpler case to consider would be to ask who blew up the Nord Stream pipelines. Listen to the Jeffrey Sachs interview for Unherd, "Who really blew up the Nord Stream 2 pipeline?" at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_Fv\\_nKyF\\_5g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Fv_nKyF_5g), February 15, 2023. Much more difficult would be mRNA Covid-19 vaccine benefits *vis-à-vis* evidence of medical damages caused to recipients of these vaccines.

#### References

- Althusser, Louis (1969), "Preface to *Capital*, Volume One", in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster, London: New Left Books, 1971 and 1977 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, pp. 69-101.
- Luxemburg, Rosa. (1913), *The Accumulation of Capital: A Contribution to the Economic Theory of Imperialism*, in *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg, Volume II: Economic Writings 2*, P. Hudis and P. Le Blanc, eds., translated by N. Gray, London and Brooklyn, Verso, 2015, pp. 1-342.
- White, James (1996), *Karl Marx and the Intellectual Origins of Dialectical Materialism*, Houndmills, U. K.: Macmillan and New York: St. Martin's.
- Zarembka, Paul (2021), *Key Elements of Social Theory Revolutionized by Marx*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, and (paperback) Chicago: Haymarket.
- Zarembka, Paul (2023), "A capital question: How did Marx identify accumulation of capital?", *Research Outreach*, 138, at <https://researchoutreach.org/articles/capital-question-marx-identify-accumulation-capital>.