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 is H. 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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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 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 characterized both by the abstraction and the vigorous systematization of its concepts, that it is therefore necessary to acquire the practice of abstraction and of vigorous systematization. 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 I may be helpful.

The greatest difficulties—theoretical and otherwise—standing in the way of reading Volume I easily are unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately) all to be found right at the beginning of Volume I, more precisely in Chapter I of Part I, which deals with "commodities and money". My advice therefore is—begin by reading Part II of Volume I 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 I 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 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 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 inexcusably 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 legal and not quite legal—to extend the length of the day (hours actually worked) even where they are obliged to limit the 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 45-56 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 this would seem 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 are of course mean something extra for the workers. These earnings do not mean anything extra for the workers, SAN

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 new 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 cannot be a class struggle against the principal forms of exploitation which are an inevitable tendency of the capitalist system.
"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 an ever increasing scale in order to extract more surplus labour (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 liquidation of the communication in Russia, the establishment of the People's Democracies, and then in the Chinese Revolution (1949).

Part VIII (primitive accumulation) with which Vol. I concludes, contains a discovery of very great importance. In it, Marx explodes bourgeois mysticism about the birth of capitalism which seeks to explain it by the theft 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, that is, a very large number of people. This wealth was the brutal result of centuries of piracy, raids, pillage, rape, 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 there is today a "metropolitan" contradiction, i.e., a contradiction of a "First World"—Latin America, Africa, Asia, what Marx wrote when describing the origins of capitalism in Part VIII of Volume I.

But the situation has changed completely. The peoples are no longer allowed to defend themselves to be massacred. They have begun to organise and to defend themselves because, amongst other reasons, Marx and Lenin and their successors 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 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.

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 (1867) by Marx.
2. On Capital by Engels which outlines the essential ideas contained in Volume I admirably.

If it is desired to understand certain important conclusions deriving from Volume I presented in a clear and simple fashion, readers are advised, after reading Volume I 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 no 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. I 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.
1. 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 I. Volume I 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 that this character of "suspenza" in "anticipation" which the difficulties in reading Volume I give rise to. One should be aware of this and take account of it; that is, read Volume I bearing in mind the existence of Volumes 2, 3 and 4.

Secondly, and this is not negligible by any means, certain difficulties in Volume I 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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