
Review

Marx's Inferno: The political theory of capital

William Claire Roberts

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Marx's Inferno reads *Capital* as political theory and rejects large parts of the 20th Century's Hegelian tradition of appropriating Marx's book. In the introduction, the author argues that Marx's critique of political economy cannot simply be understood as overcoming classical economists; instead, he claims that *Capital* should be read as an exchange with Marx's contemporaries (p. 14). Roberts claims that Marx's terms should be contextualized and read within the larger debates about socialism in the 19th Century, arguing that most terms Marx uses are not fresh inventions, but, instead, "integral to ... older patterns of thinking" (p. 32). As such this is not a new claim, but Roberts offers fresh perspectives with surprising results, for example, his claim that Marx's critique of capitalism leads him to embrace an extended version of Owen's concept of socialism (p. 254). The consequence of this approach will be difficult to accept for most readers, since Roberts sidelines important conceptual questions, including that of how to understand the categorical structure of the concept of capital, as well as the entire framework of Marx's broader philosophical and social-economic ideas. However, although broader metaphysical and conceptual questions are declared to be "irrelevant" (p. 76) for the political reading of *Capital*, Roberts' understanding of *Capital* is based on important (newer) scholarship on the book, such as the German tradition in value form theory, as well as work in critical theory, with its emphasis on capital as social domination.

Roberts focuses exclusively on volume one of *Capital*, which he justifies by arguing that only this volume was actually authorized by Marx himself and that we do not learn how Marx positions himself normatively from volumes two and three, i.e., we do not learn "what, according to Marx, *is wrong with Capitalism*" (p. 16). Reading *Capital* politically, then, is supposed to fill this gap. However, instead of arguing morally, according to Roberts, Marx demonstrates "that political economy is nothing but the self-consciousness of novel institutions of domination" (p. 17). Accordingly, reading *Capital* politically means to read Marx as a (republican)



socialist and not as a moralist, an economist, or philosopher. According to Roberts, the republican background of Marx's thinking is the proper background for modern readings within the structuralist and critical theory traditions (p. 58). Making *Capital* political again does not mean interpreting it through the lens of what is usually taken to be the core of political Marxism, namely its class theory; rather, it requires tracing theoretical readings of Marx back to their underlying socialist assumptions. In fact, Roberts claims that his reading leads to a "recovery of the political theory" as "the obscure origin of 'Western Marxism'" (p. 83). Unfortunately, he does not offer any explicit defense of his position in light of counterarguments that take class or "antagonisms" as the political center of Marx's theory.

Chapter two reconstructs important theoretical implications of Marx's deviation from earlier socialist theorizing. Roberts' reconstruction of Marx's relation to Proudhonism is particularly enlightening. He argues that Marx shares with Proudhon (in contrast to most other contemporaries of Marx) the conviction that socialism must engage with political economy to understand, as Engels put it, "the real character of society" (p. 47). Seen in this light, Proudhon remains too uncritical of classical political economy and does not reach a proper conceptual understanding of reality (p. 53).

Chapter three reconstructs Marx's position within the larger historical horizon of thinking about the market and its impact on individual agents, virtues, and liberty. Roberts characterizes Marx's own position as highlighting the "objective dependence" (p. 57) and "impersonal domination" (p. 68) of agents by the capitalist market, moving away from the traditional socialist claim that capitalist markets are anarchic and immoral. "Commerce does not *hide* the exercise of arbitrary power, it is itself the exercise of arbitrary power, 'an alien social power' produced by the individuals in the market but 'standing above them'" (p. 58). In this vein, Roberts' contextualization of the "mysteries" that Marx discusses within the fetishism chapter of *Capital* is especially instructive (pp. 70–78). Here, Roberts' explanation that Marx uses terms he took over from existing discourses is highly suggestive. In his reconstruction of *Capital* as a theory of social domination, Roberts follows recent readings, which underline that Marx's concept of fetishism is not epistemological: instead, it should be understood as a precursor to concepts proposed by thinkers like Lukács and Postone, especially those of reification, abstract rationality, and impersonal domination. These are forms of domination through which we become dependent on the system as such, and less on specific agents or groups. It is here that Roberts prepares the reader for a discursive concept of political deliberation, which he favors. As he puts it, "the problem is not that individuals cannot do exactly what they each want to do, but that they cannot get together and talk about what sorts of things should and should not be done, and what sorts of reasons should and should not count as good reasons" (p. 96). This



“retools the republican criticism of domination for the modern situation of expanding markets” (p. 101).

Chapter four re-examines the concept of exploitation. Roberts argues that Marx’s re-envisioning of exploitation in *Capital* must be seen in its deviation from feudalist structures of exploitation by not only presenting a de-personalized concept thereof (p. 132), but also by “tying the concept of exploitation into an Aristotelian moral language that links force to the violation of nature, and that therefore condemns capitalist exploitation as an unnatural seizure and use of the laboring body” (p. 121). This latter move is not very convincing, as it brings back a concept of human authenticity that the structuralist and critical theory discourses (which the author supports) have for a long time rejected. In addition, Roberts underestimates Marx’s positive view of the technological and scientific powers of capitalist social organization, which no longer allow us to operate with a teleological concept of human “nature.” Finally, the author’s reduction of the body is not justified, given that Marx introduces labor power to cover the *entirety* of human capacities, always already socially formed.

Following from chapter four, chapter five argues that capitalism, according to Marx, is not based on personal fraud; instead, it is based on its own internal surplus logic and rationality. The main problem is the collective aspect of labor. Marx thus implies that a future communist or socialist society must be based on the “need for a new form of cooperative production” (p. 184).

Chapter six, finally, introduces Roberts’ conclusion that Marx’s analysis in *Capital* offers a concept of socialism based on a mix of Owen’s cooperative labor and free political deliberation and discourse. Accordingly, Marx does not favor, as most other socialists, a concept of independence; rather, he proposes “*a republic without independence*” (p. 192), going against romantic socialist positions which assume that it is possible to return to a historical stage before primitive accumulation. “Their fantasy of independence,” as Roberts puts it, “is wholly internal to the Hell they seek to escape” (p. 192); in addition, it presupposes “independent petty production” (p. 201). Roberts argues that Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation is directed at “British working-class radicals” (p. 197), insofar as he opposes any form of “providentialism” (p. 209).

Focusing on impersonal domination, Roberts concludes that Marx’s vision of a socialist society is based on free discourse and cooperative labor, meaning that Marx is more interested in liberty and emancipation than in justice and material equality. Thus, Roberts argues against Cohen (p. 237), who claims the reverse. According to Roberts, capitalism leads to the “felt need for large-scale, cooperative production” (p. 241) based on “free and cooperative self-government” (p. 255).

Overall, Roberts’ book is a lucid interpretation of volume one of *Capital*, and it adds many insights to contemporary Marxist debates. To be sure, his positioning Marx within the broader horizon of republican socialism offers substantially new ideas to anyone interested in Marx’s critique of political economy. Roberts’ claim



that *Capital* is based on “rewriting” Dante’s *Inferno* (pp. 1, 18, 183) is intellectually stimulating and opens a new horizon for an enriched reading of *Capital*. However, these “resemblances” (p. 24) do not add much to the author’s attempt to read *Capital* politically or to understand Marx’s deeper systematic claims and concepts.

A final critical remark might be in order, however. Roberts’ reduction of Marx’s critique of political economy to volume one of *Capital* remains controversial, since it removes class theory and all the elements that explain the totality of social relations from Marx’s theory. Although the reduction of volume one to the republican socialist aspects might add an important aspect to the discussion of Marx’s masterwork, it is too reductive to function as the “background” for the entirety of Western Marxism. Finally, the focus on Marx’s relation to republicanism, the concept of impersonal domination, and the inner rationality of capitalist production eliminate too many aspects from an account of the political *as* a dialectical, and hence, social concept. Such a social determination of the political would include concepts such as distribution, technology, global temporal and spatial dynamics, colonialism, the general intellect, ecology, as well as the larger conceptual underpinnings of *Capital*.

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