



MARX, ENGELS, AND MARXISMS

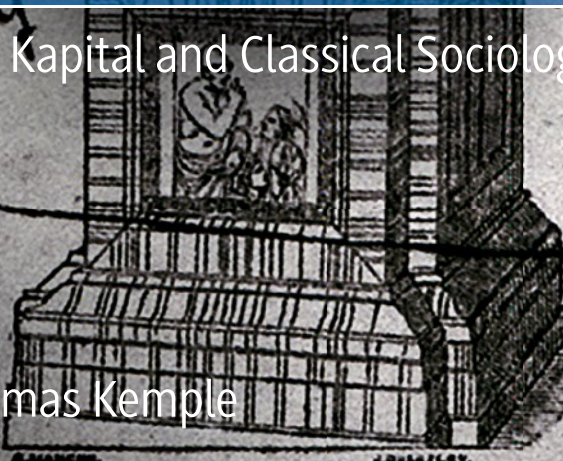


Marx's Wager

Das Kapital and Classical Sociology

Thomas Kemple

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Marx, Engels, and Marxisms

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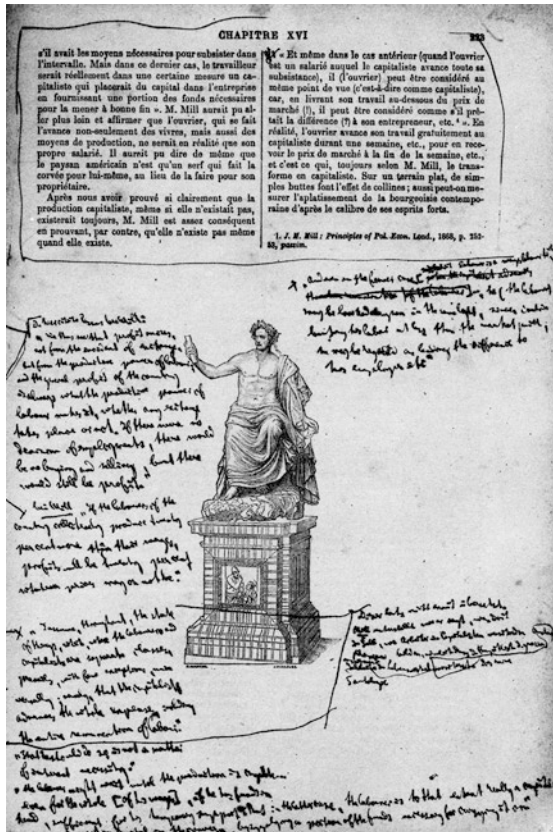
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Page 222 of the French version of *Capital*, with Marx's annotations and corrections in English and French. (Source: Karl Marx, *Le Capital*. Traduction de M. J. Roy, entièrement révisée par l'auteur. *Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe* II/7 Apparat. Berlin: Dietz Verlag. Page 746. Reproduced with permission from IMES Amsterdam)

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Each year in my social theory classes I present students with a mock quiz on Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Marxism, starting with this question:

Which of the following expressions did Marx use in his published writings?

- (A) dialectical materialism
- (B) historical materialism
- (C) commodity fetishism
- (D) capitalism
- (E) all of the above
- (F) none of the above.

Only a few students ever choose the correct answer (F), and most seem surprised that the other options all come from Marx's contemporaries or later commentators, including Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), who worked tirelessly in the last years of the nineteenth century to consolidate his friend and collaborator's legacy as a scholar and political writer. Many students are particularly astonished to learn that the term 'capitalism' was not in Marx's vocabulary, at least in the sense we use it today to refer to a variegated socio-economic system that arose from multiple cultural-economic sources. Although Marx is now known as the foremost critical theorist of capitalism, I explain that he used phrases like 'capitalist mode of production', 'bourgeois society', and on a few occasions '*capitalisme*' (in French) to refer to 'a group or class of capitalists' in contrast to 'wage-labourers' (*salariat*) (e.g. Marx 1989: 535; C: 763). Later classic sociologists, including Max Weber (1864–1920) and Georg Simmel (1858–1918),

would discuss ‘capitalism’ (*Kapitalismus*) in the sense we use it today, while Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) prefers the term ‘industrial society’ (*société industrielle*). My point with this exercise is less to expose students’ ignorance than to highlight the contrast, often ignored today, between what Marx wrote and thought and what often passes under the name of ‘Marxism’ in sociology and in public discussion. I also want to emphasize how most classical sociologists writing a generation *after* Marx were often responding to the emerging influence of his writings and the socialist movements of their own day. This book is my attempt to highlight the importance of these distinctions for social theory and political practice in their time and in ours.

Among the statements Marx actually did publish, and which profoundly affected the subsequent development of sociology and political science, was his summary of what he called ‘the general result’ and ‘guiding thread’ of his academic studies. In the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* published in 1859 he writes:

The totality of [...] relations of production makes up the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of human beings that determines their existence, but rather their social existence that determines their consciousness. (CW 29: 263)

Framed by a kind of ‘curriculum vitae’ where Marx tries to establish his scientific credentials by listing out his scholarly publications, this passage from the so-called 1859 Preface employs a topological metaphor for the whole of society consisting of a superstructure (*Überbau*), made up of legal and political institutions and ways of thinking, resting atop material relations that form an economic structure (*Struktur*) and social foundation (Lopez 2003: 51–2). This socio-economic base materializes or conditions (*bedingt*) cultural ideas and values just as social existence (*Sein*) shapes and determines (*bestimmt*) various forms of consciousness (*Bewußtsein*). Classical sociologists and social theorists in our own day would later struggle with these sentences in trying to reformulate ‘historical materialism’ (Engels’s phrase, not Marx’s), often arguing that religious, cultural, cognitive, moral, and metaphysical values are in some ways even more foundational to the rise of industrial capitalist society. Leaving

aside the question of whether Marx himself was fully committed to this scheme in 1859, I argue that he does not always follow this ‘guiding thread’ when weaving the text of *Capital*. In fact, by pursuing a wide range of topics, problems, and issues beyond strictly economic concerns, he creates his own sociology in the process.¹

Today capitalist forces and relations of production and consumption have taken on a paradoxical and painful character that can be characterized as both neo-liberal and neo-feudal. By reading how *Capital* was (or was not) taken up by the classical sociologists, I am also concerned with how this book addresses the capitalist accumulation processes of our own time. As I write these lines our world is still at grips with the SARS-COVID 19 pandemic, and signs are already evident that a new kind of ‘corona capitalism’ or ‘command capital’ is emerging in its wake. Many observers have been quick to treat these developments not just as exposing and accelerating the inner contradictions of capital but also as a sign of our capacity to overcome them (Mallett 2020; Foster et al. 2021; Humphreys 2020; Wallace et al. 2020). An old meme from ‘The skeletal hatter’, re-circulated on social media a few days after the World Health Organization declared the pandemic in March 2020, jokes about what many were wondering after the financial crash of 2008:

¹ In a footnote to Chapter 1 of *Capital*, Marx quotes these now famous words from the 1859 Preface to defend himself against a negative reviewer in a ‘German-American publication’, who misconstrues him to mean that material interests are *always* preponderant in *all* historical periods. Marx replies with a snide reminder that the Middle Ages could not live off Catholicism or Athens and Rome off politics any more than Don Quixote could survive for long on the illusions of knight errantry (C: 175–6n35). In other words, the social life of any epoch cannot be sustained by its ruling ideas or beliefs alone, but ultimately by its dominant mode of production, including property regimes and technological infrastructures, productive relations and productive forces. In Appendix A, I explain why a focus on the first volume of *Capital* should lead us to qualify or criticize such simplifications of Marx’s primary theses. Contemporary readers should also pay some attention to his posthumously published notebooks, such as the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and the *Grundrisse*, the unfinished drafts of the other three volumes of *Capital*, and the writings he is best known for, especially *The Communist Manifesto* which he co-authored with Engels, and his articles on America and British colonialism (Kemple 1995, 2000). Like Marx’s many asides in *Capital*, here and in the other footnotes to this book—33 in total (three in this Preface plus six in each of the five chapters), mirroring the 33 chapters of *Capital*—I trace the path of my own intellectual development in arriving at the arguments presented here, such as the Faustian thread that runs through my previous writings (Kemple 1995: 30–43, 2014: 45–59, 2018: 172–8, 2019).

Weird how the stock markets are plunging so much when no infrastructure has been destroyed and no natural resources have been depleted. Almost like all the value comes from people's labour. I wonder if anyone's written anything about this? (@DrStedx)

The punch line is a mock-up of the cover of the first English translation of *Capital*, now with a new title: '*I F*****g Warned You Dude, I Told You Bro: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, By Karl Marx'. Besides challenging assumptions about 'essential workers', 'free markets', and 'supply chains', the pandemic has exposed ecological and biological vulnerabilities on a global scale in ways that would have been as obvious to Marx as they are to us. In the posthumously published Volume 3 of *Capital* (written before Volume 1), he provides a telling anecdote about the 'colossal wastage' of capital: 'In London, for instance, one can do nothing better with the excrement produced by 4 ½ million human beings than to contaminate the Thames, at monstrous expense' (CW 37: 103). Writing these lines in the early 1860s, Marx could recall the Great Stink of the summer of 1858 when he was living in Soho and writing drafts of the *Contribution* in the British Library. The human waste and industrial effluent dumped into the river over many years had led to a cholera outbreak and forced officials to redesign the ageing sewer system, and yet they continued to neglect the need to recycle sewage into ecologically sustainable agriculture. This event demonstrated the importance to him of drainage, transportation, urban planning, and civil engineering in maintaining the physical and cultural infrastructure of the capitalist economy, as well as of any socialist alternative.

Capital is a book of many layers and complex parts, mixing philosophy with history, social science with literature. My approach to this text and its reception among the classical sociologists highlights its literary qualities along with its narrative structure. Thus, I pay special attention to the model Marx followed from his favourite German writer, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832). My interests are as much pedantic and aesthetic as they are ethical and analytical, since all these features of the work inform Marx's commitment to social change, political reform, and revolutionary action. He was deeply concerned with how to use empirically rigorous and scientifically valid knowledge of the capitalist mode of production in the service of struggles for a more human and just world. Marx shares this commitment with later classical sociologists in their efforts to translate social theory into political practice and to transform

scholarship into action. I call this literary aspect of Marx's work 'Faustian', after the title character of Goethe's great tragic epic drama of modernity. Sceptical of the antiquated spiritualist worldview, frustrated with his books, and exhausted with learning, the ageing Faust succumbs to the temptation to strike a bargain with satanic powers by submitting to a pact with Mephistopheles, the devil's advocate and earthly representative. I argue that the classical sociologists follow Marx's lead in acknowledging their own complicity with diabolical social, political, and economic forces in their efforts to be socially relevant and politically influential, or at least persuasive, enlightening, and entertaining to a reading public. Like Marx, many classical sociologists could recall scenes and passages from Goethe's famous play by heart, sometimes reciting or paraphrasing lines at strategic places in their work. Marx himself tends to treat the bourgeois economists as Faust does Mephistopheles, that is, as a guide to the earthly experiences and infernal worlds of capitalist society. Occasionally, the classical sociologists also explicitly cite or tacitly draw on this story to dramatize the issues of their own day, such as the unintended consequences of the Protestant Reformation (Weber), the infinite desires spurred on by the industrial order (Durkheim), and the divided subjectivities of the money economy (Simmel). As I try to show, Marx himself plays the role of Mephistopheles for the next generation of Faustian sociologists, tempting them to compromise their scholarly studies by cultivating socialist sympathies and by channelling their scientific ambitions towards social change.²

In *Capital* Marx ultimately resists the temptations of his own Mephistophelean guides, the political economists, and like Faust he chooses a tragic path of perpetual striving which ultimately leads to his salvation. Rather than submit to the diabolical pact (*Pakt*) that would lure him away from his studies, Marx comes up with his own version of the

² As Marx hints in his frequent allusions to fictional works (including Don Quixote invoked in the previous footnote), narrative models and literary flourishes are not merely ornamental but rather essential articulations of his critical aims and scientific ambitions. For this reason, we must attend not just to *reading Marx writing* insofar as we must also engage in the work of *writing Marx reading* (Barbour 2012: 100; Kemple 1995). Despite the obvious rhetorical character of *Capital*, only a few scholars have considered how he reads other writers or addressed his use of linguistic tropes in relation to his conceptual arguments (among them Hyman 1962; Ludovico 1971; Neocleous 2003; Roberts 2017; Stallybrass 1998; Whyte 2017; Wolff 1988). Despite the literary sophistication that Fredric Jameson (2011) develops in other writings, he mostly ignores these textual and rhetorical features of *Capital* in order to focus on problems of philosophical representation. In Appendix B, I outline the literary structure of *Capital* with respect to the grand narrative of the Faust story.

wager (*Wette*) that Faust makes with himself in the form of a promise to continue struggling and learning, even at the cost of immense suffering to himself and others. Before signing his soul away to Mephistopheles, Faust too pledges to resist the urge to rest on his achievements or to dwell on the beauty of any single moment, no matter how charming, enlightening, seductive, or pleasurable. Instead, he resolves to continue thinking, feeling, striving, and acting in the world to end of his days:

*Werd ich beruhigt je mich auf ein
Faulbett legen
So sei es gleich um mich getan!*

Should I ever take ease upon my leisure,
May that same moment mark my end!
(F: 1692–3)

What I call ‘Marx’s wager’ in the title of this book is a more severe version of Faust’s, since it entails patient understanding *and* vigorous action, an audacious imagination *and* disciplined attention to reality (Eagleton 1990: 170; Fracchia 2022: 16). Like Goethe’s resolve in dedicating his life to the completion of his masterpiece as the supreme expression of his life, Marx never wavers in his commitment to produce a work that maps the possible directions for human history and that also calls for social change.³ For Marx, the scholarly aspect of this wager lies in the risk of miscommunication and misunderstanding, while the political aspect lies in the danger of defeat and discontent. Like many of the classical and contemporary sociologists I discuss in this book, I too have been inspired by Faust’s restless strivings. However, my model is less Goethe’s life-long desire to transform his life into a work of art than Marx’s tireless efforts to create a literary representation of the capitalist world that might also contribute to its transformation.

³ ‘Marx’s wager’ is also a biographical reference to Marx’s notorious delays over many years in completing volume one of *Capital*. In a letter from July 1865, Engels reminds his friend of their bet to send the manuscript to the publisher by the end of the summer: ‘The ultimate and final date [*Ultimatissimal-Termin*] for completion was 1 September, and the price, you remember, is 12 bottles of wine’ (CW 42: 168; and in Wolff 1988: 6). In his reply, Marx concedes, in effect, that he will deliver no wine before its time, since his method prohibits him from going to print before all the parts lie before him: ‘the advantage of my writings is that they are an artistic whole’ (CW 42: 173). I argue that *Capital, Volume 1* is scientifically systematic as well as aesthetically complete, even though as a political project it had to remain unfinished within the lifetime of its author. In Appendix C, I situate the classical sociologists that concern me here not in Faust’s study but alongside Marx in the Reading Room of the British Museum.

Although I cannot fully account for all the debts that have accumulated over the years, I will start by thanking Babak Amini, a former undergraduate student, recent PhD from the London School of Economics, and current assistant editor of the Marx and Marxism(s) series who persuaded me over a few beers in Vancouver that I should submit the proposal that became this book. The editors and anonymous reviewers at Palgrave Macmillan gave me the encouragement and advice I needed to complete it during a tumultuous time. I am grateful to countless students, friends, and colleagues, among whom I shall name only a few (in alphabetical order): Moneeza Badat (the artist behind Figure 3.1), Gilles Beaudin, Sylvia Berryman, Terrell Carver, David Chacon, Leora Courtney-Wolfman, Wolf Draegestein, Mark Featherstone, Billy Flynn, Nick Gane, Heather Holroyd, Ulas Ince, Robert Jungmann, Simon Lafontaine, Bryan Leung, Jastej Luddu, Renisa Mawani, Fred Neufeld, Dean Ray, Tristan Nkoghe (who helped with the index), Scot Richie (the artist behind Figure 2.1), Olli Pyyhtinen, Sanjeev Routray, Ryan Stillwagon, Agnes Vashegyi, Ana Vivaldi, Rafa Wainer, Paul Woodhouse, and Yun Han Yap. My father Donald J. Kemple (1934–2022) listened patiently to versions of several chapters and offered his wise reflections and good humoured remarks over dinners and wine. This book is dedicated to my partner Stephen Guy-Bray, who shows me daily that I do not need to choose between beauty and truth, or between happiness and hard work.

I hope that these reflections on the world of the nineteenth century will hold a mirror—however convoluted—up to the life we live today and are struggling to realize for future generations. I ask readers to approach my efforts as Marx imagined *Capital*: despite the unfamiliar names, foreign words, and scholarly references, it is ‘a story about you’—‘*De te fabula narratur!*’ (C: 90; quoting Horace’s *Satires*). And like Marx, who takes the advice that the classical poet Virgil gives to the fourteenth-century Italian poet Dante in his Preface to *Capital*, I ask you to follow me on my path through *Capital*, although in the end you must ‘go on your way, and let the people talk’: ‘*Segui il tuo corso, e lascia dir le genti*’ (C: 93, quoting Dante’s *Purgatorio*). Despite Faust’s wager, I hope that together we might learn as we strive while enjoying the beauty we find in each of us:

Verweile doch, du bist so schön.

Tarry a while, you are so lovely.
(F: 1670)

My own wager (hypothesis) in this book is that *Faust* is one of the best guides to *Capital*, and that *Capital* is among our best guides to classical sociology and contemporary critical theory.

N.B.: I often modify existing English translations, drawing on German or French editions readily available online or from print sources. References to *Faust* are by line number as indicated in both English and German editions.

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ABBREVIATIONS USED

- C—Marx, Karl (1976). *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*. Ben Fowkes trans. Ernest Mandel intro. London: Penguin Books.
- CW—*The Collected Works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels 1844–1895*. 47 Volumes. New York: International Publishers. (Electronic Edition, Charlottesville, Virginia).
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