

The "Book on Wage-Labor" and Marxist Scholarship

Author(s): Michael A. Lebowitz

Source: *Science & Society*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Spring, 1993), pp. 66-73

Published by: Guilford Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40404640>

Accessed: 24-12-2017 03:58 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Guilford Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Science & Society*

◆

COMMUNICATION

Science & Society, Vol. 57, No. 1, Spring 1993, 66-78

THE "BOOK ON WAGE-LABOR" AND MARXIST SCHOLARSHIP

"What are the implications," Kenneth Lapidés (1992, 156) asks, "for our grasp of Marx's theoretical legacy if we take the view that there truly is a missing book on wage-labor? Where are we politically, in other words, if we accept the notion, as stated by Lebowitz, that *Capital* fails to provide 'an adequate basis for considering the struggle of workers to realize their own goals'?" While these are indeed important questions, it seems rather premature to pose them before considering and evaluating the evidence in question. Trepidations about the answers should not divert Marxist scholarship from the process of absorbing the information now available in such "new" work as the *Grundrisse*, "The Results of the Immediate Process of Production" and, most recently, *The Economic Manuscript of 1861-63*.

There is a long tradition which holds that Marx, in embarking upon *Capital*, decided to abandon the original six-book plan of his economics. Now, determined in particular to exorcise the spectre of a missing "Book on Wage-Labor," Lapidés has joined that tradition. Thus, in presenting Henryk Grossmann's theory as to how and why Marx abandoned his original plan, Lapidés declares (133) that *Capital* "represents Marx's complete analysis." And, yet, insofar as he himself identifies something significantly missing from *Capital*, his is a curious defense of that proposition.

Noting the "important new material on wage-labor" in the "Results of the Immediate Process of Production" and in *Value, Price and Profit*

(which together constituted Marx's "most detailed analysis of the economic aspects of trade unions, particularly their impact on wages"), Lapidès points out that this material was not, however, included in *Capital*. Was Marx "saving these writings for subsequent inclusion in a projected chapter on wage-labor?" Lapidès' guess (141-2) is yes, and its place was in the unfinished Volume III of *Capital*: "there is evidence to suggest that he may have intended concluding *Capital* with a section on the trade unions and the workers' wage struggle."

So, does Lapidès' attack (152) on the "mantra-like repetition" of references to "the Book on Wage-Labor" (which he finds in Roman Rosdolsky, Maximilien Rubel and the present writer) merely come down to a dispute over whether there is a missing "book" or just a missing "chapter"? Although Lapidès attaches great importance to the fact that after 1859 Marx referred not to a separate book but (repeatedly) to a "chapter" or "section" on wage labor or the theory of wages, variations in the specific terminology Marx used at different times are not a precise guide to length or significance.

Just as a "book" for Marx was not necessarily identical to a volume (which Lapidès indicates), so also was a "chapter" not necessarily to be understood as a brief treatment; Marx's reference (1973, 817) to his chapter on wage-labor in the *Grundrisse* (at the same time that he elsewhere was describing it as a separate book) occurred in the context of his "chapter" on capital, which comprises over 600 pages. In any event, what matters is the existence and significance of a missing treatment (however designated) of wage-labor, and to explore this requires a theoretical analysis rather than a mere playing with phrases.

Yet, at the level of theory, Lapidès' article has little to offer to Marxist scholarship. Not only does he appear to not understand (or acknowledge) what is present in the work he considers, but the centerpiece of his study (the 1929 article by Henryk Grossmann on the change in Marx's original plan) is both dated and fatally flawed. Grossmann argued that Marx scuttled his 1858 plan for six separate books by mid-1863 and did so because his new understanding of the process of reproduction of capital necessitated a new plan. Unfortunately for that argument, the new elements Grossmann identified ("individual functions of industrial capitals which are carried out during their circuit — the production process, the circulation process, the process as a whole") were *already* present in the *Grundrisse* (dating from 1857-8); they could not therefore explain a subsequent change in plan.¹ This is precisely why Rosdolsky (whose work was centered around a study of the *Grundrisse*) described Gross-

1 See the consideration of the *Grundrisse* discussion of the circuit of capital in Lebowitz, 1976.

mann's effort as a "complete failure" (Rosdolsky, 1977, 24-5, 25n).² There is, of course, a simple explanation for Grossmann's mistake: insofar as the *Grundrisse* was not available to him, he could not be expected to know its argument. The same excuse obviously cannot be made for Lapidès.

There are many such examples of theoretical lapses in Lapidès' article. Rather than pursue them, however, space limitations dictate a focus on the evidence for the significance of the "missing book."

A Pertinent Question

There is a simple question that must be answered by all those who view the analysis in *Capital* as complete. *Where did Marx remove the assumption that the standard of necessity for workers is constant?* Even though he was well aware of the historical and social element in the value of labor-power, Marx nevertheless assumed in *Capital* (Marx, 1977, 655) that "the quantity of the means of subsistence required is given at any particular epoch in any particular society, and can therefore be treated as a constant magnitude."

Now, unless one understands why Marx made this assumption in the first place, the significance of its appearance in *Capital* (and of the failure to remove it) will remain obscure. But, the evidence is there for anyone to see. As Marx (1973, 817) argued in the *Grundrisse*, it is necessary to make such fixed suppositions in order to focus first upon the theoretical questions immediately on hand: "only by holding them fast at the beginning is their development possible without confounding everything." Recognizing that the standard of necessary labor changed, however, he fully intended to relax this assumption: "To consider those changes themselves belongs altogether to the chapter treating of wage labor."³ The same point is apparent in the April 2, 1858 letter (Marx and Engels, 1983, 298) in which Marx told Engels about his six-book plan and where he explained that wages initially would be assumed to be at their minimum: "Movements in wages themselves and the rise and fall of the minimum will be considered under wage labor." Again, the reason offered was one of analytical method: "Only by this procedure is it possible to discuss one relation without discussing the rest."

The particular theoretical question on hand (which justified the assumption of a fixed set of necessities) was the need to understand the

2 Lapidès, who defends Grossmann's "brilliant insight" against Rosdolsky and argues (151) that the latter "disdains any examination of Grossmann's line of thought," characteristically does not mention the basis for Rosdolsky's position.

3 One can find in the *Grundrisse* here the basis for the observation by Rubel that Lapidès (155) claims was "pure invention."

nature of capital. Marx was very clear and consistent in his view that changes in the needs of workers were not properly part of the subject matter of *Capital*. That is now demonstrated by the recent publication of Marx's *Economic Manuscript of 1861-63*:

The problem of these movements in the level of the workers' needs, as also that of the rise and fall of the market price of labor capacity above or below this level, do not belong here, where the general capital-relation is to be developed, but in the doctrine of the wages of labor. . . . All questions relating to it [the level of workers' needs] as not a given but a variable magnitude belong to the investigation of wage labor in particular and do not touch its general relationship to capital. (Marx, 1988, 44-5.)⁴

To understand the nature of capital, in short, we do not need to explore variations in the level of workers' needs. Indeed, "the only thing of importance is that it [the level of workers' needs] should be viewed as given, determinate" (Marx, 1988, 45).⁵ As Marx subsequently noted in "The Results of the Immediate Process of Production," "for the analysis of capital it is a matter of complete indifference whether the level of the worker's needs is assumed to be high or low"; and, he once again indicated that consideration of variations in the standard of necessity belonged in the "investigation of wage labor in particular":

The level of the necessities of life whose total value constitutes the value of labor-power can itself rise or fall. The analysis of these variations, however, belongs not here but in the theory of wages. (Marx, 1977, 1068-69.)

We now have a consistent thread from the *Grundrisse* (1957-8) to the "Results" (1864-5). Does it extend as well to *Capital*? Well, we know that Marx did in *Capital* exactly what he planned to do: hold the standard of necessity constant. But, we know more than that. Marx very clearly indicated that the "investigation of wage labor in particular" was outside the scope of *Capital*. He did so at the beginning of Chapter 20 of Volume I of *Capital* when noting the various forms that wages take: "An exposition of all these forms belongs to *the special study of wage-labor, and not, therefore, to this work*" (Marx, 1977, 683, emphasis added). In short, there can be no question at all as to a missing work on wage-labor.

⁴ Lapidès proposes (140) that the new availability of this *Economic Manuscript of 1861-63* "has placed on the agenda a reevaluation of Marx's intentions as to his 'economics,'" but he does not seem to find any significance in these passages.

⁵ Marx (n.d., 44-5) made the same point in *Theories of Surplus Value* when commenting upon the Physiocratic analysis based upon a fixed standard of necessity.

On the Matter of the Lacuna

For Lapides, the idea that the "Book on Wage-Labor" was unwritten, leaving a significant "theoretical lacuna" (134) in Marx's economics, is sufficiently disturbing to require a defense of the merits of *Capital*. It is all somewhat besides the point. Once it is acknowledged that there was a special study of wage-labor which Marx saw as a work separate from *Capital*, the matter becomes one of attempting to determine the contents of that missing work. And, this is a process for which bibliographical evidence must be supplemented by theoretical understanding. Since this is the subject of my recent book (Lebowitz, 1992), the question obviously cannot be explored in any detail here. However, I can say one thing for certain: it is incontestable that the investigation of wage labor in particular was to be the place where the assumption that the standard of necessity is constant was to be removed and the analysis of its variations pursued.

A simple point, but the implications are major. For one, if a fixed standard of necessity is no longer assumed, then productivity increases in the production of necessities *in themselves* will not lead to a reduction in necessary labor and the value of labor-power. Instead, the effect of the falling value of necessities will be to increase what workers can purchase with their money-wages and, thus, the level of the necessities of life which become second nature to them. So, there is an obvious question for those who view the analysis in *Capital* as complete: what does it mean for Marx's discussion of relative surplus value if productivity increases produce corresponding increases in the standard of necessity? Clearly, the requisite conditions for the generation of relative surplus value must be explored much more precisely under these circumstances (Lebowitz, 1991, 1992).⁶

Removal of that fixed assumption which allowed Marx to explore the nature of capital "without confounding things" means we have to consider more closely the place of class struggle in determining the standard of necessity. Again, this is a question not explored in *Capital*, which has nothing to say about the struggle for higher wages. Although we understand quite well how and why capital struggles to "reduce wages to their physical minimum" (Marx, 1985, 146), there is no consideration in *Capital* of how (despite capital's own tendency) workers would not permit wages "to be reduced to the absolute minimum; on the contrary, they achieve a certain quantitative participation in the general growth of

6 Removal of the assumption of the fixed standard of necessity also has major significance for discussions of the "transformation problem" (Lebowitz, 1992, 96, 170).

wealth" (Marx, 1971, 312). There is, of course, a premise for workers making any such gains; it is that matters not be left to "isolated, individual bargaining."⁷ Accordingly, if the "investigation of wage labor in particular" is to analyze changes in the standard of necessity, it must include examination of the manner in which the unity of workers is critical to their ability to press "in the opposite direction" to capital (Marx, 1985, 146).⁸

Similarly, insofar as the problem of the "movements in the level of the workers' needs" was set aside, it is understandable that there is nothing in *Capital* about the manner in which new needs are constantly created for workers. Yet, we know that Marx consistently stressed that the very expansion of capitalist production provides the foundation for the growth of workers' needs. The creation of "new needs arising from society itself," he argued, is "a condition of production founded on capital" (1973, 409). And, that was not a merely incidental characteristic of capitalism. It is this creation of new needs for workers, Marx declared in the *Grundrisse*, "on which the historic justification, but also the contemporary power of capital rests" (1973, 287). As he commented in the "Results," the very growth of capital means that the worker's "subjective poverty, his need and dependence grow larger in proportion. His *deprivation* and its *plentitude* match each other exactly" (1977, 1062). Is it far-fetched, then, to suggest that the "doctrine of the wages of labor" includes within it the consideration of the growth of needs and the immiseration which lead workers to struggle for higher wages?

There is certainly much more which belonged not in *Capital* (where the general capital-relation was to be developed) but in the special study of wage-labor. In considering the standard of necessity and its changes, we are necessarily concerned with the question of the production and reproduction of the wage-laborer. There is some evidence that Marx intended this discussion to take place in the missing work. He explicitly noted (1973, 520-1), for example, that there was a second moment of production ("Moment IV"), which qualitatively differed from the moment of production falling within the circuit of capital; its place was

7 The General Council of the First International indicated in 1867 that "what the lot of the laboring population would be if everything was left to isolated, individual bargaining, may be easily foreseen"; in "trades without organization of the work-people," Engels later commented, "while the length of the working day more and more approaches the possible maximum, the wages come nearer to their absolute minimum" (Lebowitz, 1992, 66, 73).

8 For a discussion of the logic of the struggle against the separation and competition of workers, see the consideration of Marx's "political economy of the working class" in Lebowitz (1987, 1992).

clear: "Moment IV belongs in the section on wages etc."⁹ Of course, here as elsewhere, a convincing argument requires more than bibliographical evidence; it calls as well for theoretical demonstration.¹⁰ Nevertheless, even to raise this issue poses critical questions: if the production and reproduction of the wage-laborer, the necessary condition for the reproduction of capital, was itself specifically to be explored in the section never written, how can we argue (as Grossmann and Lapidès do) that *Capital* "constitutes in essentials a *self-contained* system" (Lapidès, 144)?

That there are theoretical lacunae which can be attributed to the missing study of "wage labor in particular" seems incontrovertible. How important these are, however, is a matter which can not be resolved here. Their consideration, on the other hand, would appear to deserve more attention than Lapidès was prepared to grant.

The Renewal of Marxist Scholarship

It is neither surprising nor unusual that the initial reaction to the proposition that something significant was lost because of the absence of the special study of wage labor is to worry about the political implications. "There is much at stake in this debate," Lapidès (158) tells us. Nevertheless, a conscientious study of Marx's theoretical legacy requires us to take seriously the material now available in the works that have recently become available to us. Just as the *Grundrisse* has allowed for significant new insights into the nature and development of Marx's thought, so also may a careful examination of the *Economic Manuscript of 1861-63* and the various draft materials for *Capital*. (In this respect, the apparent suspension of the publication of the *Collected Works of Marx and Engels* is a serious blow to Marxist scholarship everywhere.) There will be some, of course, who would prefer to hold on to the tradition of the Marx they know without any amendments. However, a more appropriate maxim for Marxist scholarship is that of the relentless criticism of all that exists, relentless in the sense that it is not afraid of the results it arrives at.

MICHAEL A. LEBOWITZ

Department of Economics
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada V5A 1S6

9 Among other things, this second moment of production includes the consideration of the activities "absolutely necessary in order to consume things" (classified as "costs of consumption"). For a discussion of these and of Marx's understanding of relations within the working-class household, see Lebowitz, 1992, Ch. 6.

10 The logical incompleteness of *Capital* by Marx's own methodological standards is explored in Lebowitz, 1982; 1992.

REFERENCES

- Lapides, Kenneth, 1992. "Henryk Grossmann and the Debate on the Theoretical Status of Marx's *Capital*." *Science & Society*, 56:2 (Summer).
- Lebowitz, Michael A. 1976. "Marx's Falling Rate of Profit: A Dialectical View." *Canadian Journal of Economics*, IX:2 (May).
- . 1982. "The One-Sidedness of *Capital*." *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 14:4 (Winter).
- . 1987. "The Political Economy of Wage-Labor." *Science & Society*, 51:3 (Fall).
- . 1991. "The Significance of Marx's Missing Book on Wage-Labor." *Rethinking Marxism*, 4:2 (Summer).
- . 1992. *Beyond Capital: Marx's Political Economy of the Working Class*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Marx, Karl. 1971. *Theories of Surplus Value*, Vol. III. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- . 1973. *Grundrisse*. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1977. *Capital*, Vol. I. New York: Vintage Books.
- . 1985. *Value, Price and Profit*. In *Collected Works of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 20. New York: International Publishers.
- . 1988. *Economic Manuscript of 1861-63*. In *Collected Works of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 30. New York: International Publishers.
- . n.d. *Theories of Surplus Value*, Vol. I. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House.
- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. 1983. *Collected Works of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 40. New York: International Publishers.
- Rosdolsky, Roman. 1977. *The Making of Marx's "Capital"*. London: Pluto Press.