

Getting started

Marx's *Capital*

Karl Marx, *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy, volume one, Capitalist Production*, Penguin, London, 1976; Everyman, London, 1930; Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1958; Dietz Verlag, Liepzig, 1962.

Where to start reading?

If there is no general agreement on where to start reading volume one, there is a broad consensus that chapter one is far from the best point of entry. Those opening pages are not difficult in themselves. Indeed, one problem is that they seem straightforward. That ease of access can blind the newcomer to the complexities beneath the surface. I have elsewhere taken 8,000 words to explicate the opening sentence of some thirty words, ('On Once More Looking into Marx's *Capital*', www.surplusvalue.org.au).

There can be no evading the chapters on the commodity and money. Those peaks have to be scaled but there is no need to begin one's mountaineering with an assault on the sheer face of the Matterhorn. Other tracks towards the summit train the explorer for the most difficult sections of our encounters with the dialectic.

A regular and sensible recommendation is to set out from the chapter on 'The Working Day' because it connects at once with the lived experience of working people. One drag is that the examples are now nearly 150 years old. In preparing a French translation in 1873, Marx consigned most of the details to an Appendix.

One alternative is to skip to the very end and study Chapter 33, 'The Modern Theory of Colonisation', a side-step which has six attractions. First, it is very funny, sparkling with ironies, refuting the libel that Marx is turgid and unreadable; secondly, it engages with Australia to the surprise of many; thirdly, and most significantly, it has the big theme of class conflict; fourthly, nothing even looks like mathematics, let alone algebra, so that the vast majority whose mis-education has left us maths-averse have nothing to fear; fifthly, the economics are descriptive, not at all intimidating; finally, the chapter is but ten pages long, not at all daunting but delivering a sense of achievement which encourages taking a second plunge.

The few traps for young players are easily overcome. They arise from not having read the previous 32 chapters – although many who have done so might well have forgotten these points. These difficulties are dealt with in the two sets of definitions and one correction below.

Where to stop writing?

Marx did not intend to write FINIS at page 940 in the Penguin. Indeed, that edition gave us the first English version of what had once been the concluding chapter – some additional 100 pages. Nonetheless, what is numbered chapter 33 in the Penguin and Moscow editions is a further instance of the end being in the

beginning, and vice versa. Nowhere is that clearer than in Marx's ultimate paragraph:

The only thing that interests us is the secret discovered in the New World by the political economy of the Old World, and loudly proclaimed by it: that the capitalist mode of production and accumulation, and therefore capitalist private property as well, have for their fundamental condition the annihilation of that private property which rests on the labour of the individual himself; in other words, the expropriation of the worker.

Here is the division into two great classes: those who own and control the means of production and those who do not; those who can live without working, and those who must work to have any kind of a life.