

CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE  
HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT



MARX  
*Later Political Writings*

# *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*

## Preface

I am surveying the bourgeois economic system in this sequence: *capital, landed property, wage-labour; the state, foreign trade, world market*. Under the first three headings I investigate the economic circumstances of the three great classes into which modern bourgeois society is divided; the relevance of the other three headings is obvious at a glance. The first instalment of the first book, which deals with capital, consists of the following chapters: (1) The Commodity; (2) Money or Simple Circulation; (3) Capital in General. The first two chapters form the content of the present volume. All the material lies before me in the form of monographs written at widely different times for my own self-clarification, not for publication, and their coherent exposition according to the plan above depends on the vagaries of circumstance.

I am omitting a general introduction [of 1857 to the *Grundrisse*] which I had dashed off, because on further reflection any anticipation of results yet to be proved seems disruptive, and the reader who wants to follow me at all must resolve to progress from the individual instance to the general case. At this point, however, a few remarks concerning the course of my own politico-economic studies would appear to be in order.

At university my major subject was jurisprudence, which I pursued as a subordinate course alongside philosophy and history. It was during the years 1842-3 as editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung* that I first encountered the embarrassment of having to discuss so-called

material interests. The debates of the Rhineland Assembly concerning wood-gathering rights in forests and land sales on country estates, the official polemic, which Herr [Edgar] von Schaper, then lord lieutenant of the Rhine Province, initiated with the *Rheinische Zeitung* concerning the circumstances of the Mosel peasantry, and finally the controversy concerning free trade and protective tariffs, provided the first occasions to pursue economic questions. On the other hand, as the desire 'to make progress' often outweighed factual knowledge at that time, an echo of French socialism and communism, faintly tinged with philosophy, made itself audible in the *Rheinische Zeitung*. I made clear my opposition to this botching, but at the same time frankly admitted in a controversy with the *Allgemeine Augsburger Zeitung* that my previous studies did not permit me to venture any kind of judgement on the content of the French movements themselves. So I eagerly made use of the illusion held by the backers of the *Rheinische Zeitung* – that it was possible to reverse the sentence of death passed on the paper by taking a weaker editorial line – to draw back from the public stage into the private study.

The first work undertaken to dispel the doubts which disturbed me was a critical examination of the Hegelian legal philosophy, the introduction to which appeared in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* published in Paris in 1844. The upshot of my investigation was that legal relationships as well as types of state are to be understood neither on their own terms nor in terms of the so-called general development of the human intellect, but are rather rooted in the material relations of life, the totality of which Hegel termed 'bourgeois society', following English and French practice of the eighteenth century, but that the anatomy of bourgeois society is to be sought in political economy. The investigation of the latter, which I began in Paris, I continued in Brussels, where I had migrated following an expulsion order issued by M. Guizot. The general conclusion that I reached and which, once attained, served as a guide for my studies, can be formulated briefly as follows: In the social production of their lives men enter into relations that are specific, necessary and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a specific stage of development of their material productive forces. The totality of these relations of production forms the economic structure of society, the real basis

from which rises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond specific forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life-process generally. It is not the consciousness of men that specifies their being, but on the contrary their social being that specifies their consciousness. At a certain level of their development the material productive forces of society come into contradiction with the already existing relations of production, or in what is merely a legal expression for this, with the property relations within which they had previously functioned. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then an epoch of social revolution commences. With the alteration of the economic foundation the whole colossal superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In examining such transformations one must always distinguish between the transformation in the economic conditions of production, to be established with the accuracy of physical science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophical, in short ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as one does not assess an individual by what he thinks of himself, so one does not assess such an epoch of transformation from its own consciousness, rather one must instead explain this consciousness from the contradictions of material life, from the already existing conflict between the forces of production and relations of production in society. A social formation never comes to an end before all the forces of production which it can accommodate are developed, and new, higher relations of production never come into place before the material conditions of their existence have gestated in the womb of the old society. Hence humanity only sets itself such problems as it can solve, for on careful consideration one always finds that the problems themselves only arise where the material conditions of their solution are known to be on hand or at least in the process of development. In broad outline Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic development of society. Bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production, antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism, rather of an antagonism growing out of the conditions of life in society for individuals, but at the same time the productive forces developing in the womb

of bourgeois society create the material conditions for the resolution of this antagonism. With that social formation the pre-history of human society draws to a close.

Friedrich Engels, with whom, since the appearance of his inspired sketch of a critique of the economic categories (in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*), I maintained a constant exchange of ideas by correspondence, had arrived at the same conclusion as I by another road (compare his *Condition of the Working Class in England*), and as he also settled in Brussels in the spring of 1845, we made up our minds to develop our viewpoint together in opposition to the ideological one of German philosophy, in fact to settle up with our former philosophical conscience. The intention was carried out in the form of a critique of post-Hegelian philosophy [*The German Ideology: Critique of the New German Philosophy . . . and Socialism*]. The manuscript, two stout octavo volumes, had long arrived at its place of publication in Westphalia when we received the news that changed circumstances did not permit printing it. We abandoned the manuscript to the gnawing criticism of the mice all the more willingly as we had accomplished our main purpose – self-clarification. Of the disparate works through which we laid our views before the public at one time or another, I mention only the Manifesto of the Communist Party composed by Engels and myself, and a 'Discourse on Free Trade' published by me. The distinguishing features of our view were first scientifically, though only polemically indicated in my *Poverty of Philosophy*, published in 1847 and directed against Proudhon. An excerpt on 'Wage-labour' written in German, in which I pieced together my lectures on the subject as delivered to the German Workers Association of Brussels, was discontinued in press by the February revolution and my consequent forced departure from Belgium.

Editing the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* in 1848 and 1849 and ensuing circumstances interrupted my economic studies, which could only be resumed in 1850 in London. The immense collections on the history of political economy in the British Museum, the convenience of London for observing bourgeois society, and finally the new stage of development which bourgeois society appears to have attained through the discovery of gold in California and Australia, made me resolved to begin again from the beginning and to work critically through the new material. In themselves these studies led

to seemingly remote subjects on which I had to work for shorter or longer periods. But the time available to me was really diminished through the harsh necessity of grubwork. My eight-year-long association with the first Anglo-American newspaper, the *New-York Tribune*, forced an extraordinary fragmentation of my studies, since only rarely was I engaged in journalism in the proper sense. Because articles on current economic conditions in England and on the Continent formed such a significant part of my output, it became necessary for me to make myself conversant with practical details which lie outside the scope of political economy proper.

This sketch of the course of my studies in the realm of political economy is intended merely to demonstrate that my views, however one may judge them, and however little they coincide with the interests and prejudices of the ruling classes, are the result of conscientious and lengthy research. But over the entrance to science, as over the entrance to hell, this demand must be registered:

Here you must leave all wariness behind;  
All trace of cowardice must be extinguished. (Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, III.14-15)

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London, January 1859