Among Marx’s critiques of Hegel’s work, some are not entirely clear, while others are debatable. On the contrary, Marx’s critique of Hegel’s ideas on the private property of land seems to us particularly clear and legitimate. For Hegel, the private ownership of land was more a relation between man and nature than one between men. In Hegel, the private ownership of land is an act of realisation of the individual’s will, an act by which the individual materialises his will. Marx criticises this by pointing out that if this is the case, then every man, in order to realise himself, would have to be a land-owner. Moreover, what would be the quantitative limit that the individual would set to the realisation of his will? One hectare, two hectares, or a whole country? Hegel himself raises this question. He persists to seek an answer in ‘positive right’, since, as he puts it, ‘one would no longer be able to deduce anything from the Notion’. The ‘Notion’ is in a deadlock for good, for it has taken a determined juridical and social form – land ownership – to be an absolute and transhistorical form inherent to the relation between man and nature. This ‘Notion’ has, almost explicitly, recognised its defeat, for it cannot grasp the real evolution of land ownership.¹

The originality of Marx’s approach, in comparison to Hegel’s, consists of a reversal of hierarchy. The private ownership of land – and ground rent – is, first of all,

a relation between men, and then a relation between man and nature. The latter relation stems from the former, and not the other way round. Both relations are hardly absolute or transhistorical.

The private ownership of land expresses a relation whose concrete forms of manifestation develop in parallel to the dominant social relations. Ground rent precedes the capitalist mode of production. In *Capital*, however, Marx only devotes a few pages to its pre-capitalist forms (rent in the form of labour, in kind, in money, and so forth). On the other hand, he considers what he calls ‘capitalist ground rent’ to be very important.

Pre-capitalist rent did not stem from the ground, but from surplus-labour in an obvious and unquestionable way. For example, when a farmer spends a number of days working on the plots of the landowner for free, no intellectual effort is necessary in understanding that the land is not the tree on which surplus-labour grows, and that the latter is a product not of the earth, but rather of society. Capital – a specific mode of appropriation of surplus-labour – does not modify its origin. Value is a relation between men, even if it implies a specific relation of man to nature. Consequently, the whole discussion about capitalist ground rent can only revolve around a central question: in what way is a fraction of social surplus-value transformed into capitalist ground rent?

In a system where the totality of social value is supposed to be transformed into profit and wages, where commodities are sold around their production prices (production cost plus average profit), it seems that there is no place for a new category that is neither profit nor wages. However, ground rent exists every bit as much as the class of landowners corresponding to it. At first sight, rent can only be a part of profit.

As a part of profit, it is ‘differential rent’. In a system based on the private ownership of land, it is natural that certain ‘natural factors’ – such as soil fertility, waterfalls and water abundance, favourable climatic conditions, and so on – are monopolised. Labour productivity depends not only on factors common to every capitalist organisation of living and dead labour, but also on these natural and monopolisable factors. The system of production prices and average or general profit does not at all exclude the possibility of realising surplus profits. For example, in a particular branch of production, the firm that produces at a lower production cost than the branch average can sell at a higher price than its production price (production cost plus average profit), thus realising a surplus profit. This production at a lesser cost is not generally monopolisable, for nothing prevents other capitals from introducing the same techniques that are responsible for the reduction to costs and the increase in profits. As soon as these techniques are generalised, surplus profit disappears by the same token. Here we are describing nothing other than the mechanism of extra surplus-value.