The Change in the Original Plan for Marx’s Capital and Its Causes*

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As remarkable as it may seem, the set of problems concerning the structure of Marx’s chief work, as well as its relation to Theories of Surplus Value, on the one hand, and to the earlier publication A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, on the other, has never been the subject of an investigation. One can scarcely find another book that has shaped a whole century to the same extent, theoretically and practically, and which, despite its enormous importance, has been treated with a greater indifference with regard to its form, the history of its genesis and the logic of its structure!

It would be superfluous to speculate here about the reasons for the unsatisfactory state of research on Marx. Suffice it to say that – despite all the discussions about Marx that we have gone through over the past three decades, in the advanced capitalist countries of Europe – we still find ourselves only at the start of scientific research on Marx. Only the publication of Marx’s works announced by the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow will decisively change this situation.1

Regardless, it would be an inexcusable relapse into the mistakes of historicism to remain theoretically inactive until such a time. On the contrary, the following investigation attempts to critically evaluate the problem encompassed in the title on the basis of already-known source materials and to demonstrate that important insights can be gleaned from them.

The problem that arises here is twofold. The first concerns the preliminary question whose answer must precede any scientific analysis of Marx’s thought, the question of the completeness of the materials that have come down to us. That is, whether Capital, as it exists now – including Theories of Surplus Value

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1. [Grossman refers to Marx and Engels 1927–41, initially published under the direction of David Riazanov, twelve of whose planned 42 volumes appeared between 1927 and 1941 when the project was killed off by Stalin’s regime, as many of its German and Russian editors had been.]
Value – essentially comprises the whole thing, apart from individual gaps in its elaboration. Whether, consequently, Capital constitutes a complete system or whether we are dealing here with fragments of a larger work. The second, the real problem, concerns the methodological viewpoints, which were decisive in working up the material, in the arrangement of the work and in the organisation of its elements. Both problems, it will be shown, stand in close relation to each other.

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The first problem, of course, could only arise from the fact that Marx himself could only supervise the publication of the first volume; that the remaining volumes were published by Engels from the manuscripts left after Marx’s death, and, insofar as they dealt with the theories of surplus value, by Kautsky; that the history of the origins of this work, reckoned from 1859, the publication date of A Contribution to the Critique, the first treatment of the opening chapter of Capital, comprises a period of a half-century.

It is indicative of how little these problems have been considered that, on the question of the completeness of the existing materials, a cardinal and obvious preliminary question for all analysis of Marx, there prevails the most hair-raising lack of clarity, as the crassest example of which I want to cite the views expressed by Robert Wilbrandt. We know the material Marx wanted to deal with from the Preface to A Contribution to the Critique (1859), where the original plan for the work was specified: ‘I examine the system of bourgeois economy in the following order: capital, landed property, wage-labour; the state, foreign trade, world market.’ The sequel to the original work, as it exists in the three volumes of Capital, however, followed another plan. Already in 1897, on the occasion of the new edition of A Contribution to the Critique, Kautsky wrote: ‘Thus, the construction of Capital differed from that of the work whose first section was published by Marx in 1859. This is proved by a glance at the first lines of the Preface to the Critique and a comparison of the plan developed there with that actually followed in Capital.’ And although this can already be seen at a ‘first glance’, the fact of the change in the plan for Marx’s Capital escapes Professor Wilbrandt, despite his many bows toward this ‘extraordinary work’, which, so to speak, he is officially duty bound to make, as author of his

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2. [Marx 1987a.]
3. [Marx 1987a, p. 262.]
4. [Kautsky 1897, p. v. The translator of the first English edition, based on Kautsky’s 1897 German edition which does not include the Foreword, made the same point: cf. Stone 1904, p. 3.]