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ESSAY ARTICLE

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The French edition of *Capital*, 100 years after

With every new capitalist crisis Marx's greatest theoretical work, *Capital*, comes ever alive. This has been especially true in recent years when the myriad world economic-political crises coincided both with the transcription of the last writings from Marx's pen—*The Ethnological Notebooks*¹—and a new translation of Marx's *Capital*.² Naturally this was supposed to have taken into consideration the authentic French translation which had been edited by Marx himself. Unfortunately, that is not true. It is quite shocking to realize that over 100 years after the publication of the German and French editions of *Capital*, and after several different English translations, that we still do not have in English (or apparently in any other language) the complete text of *Capital*, Vol. I.

I. THE ENGELS EDITION

Despite the claim of the newest English translation by Ben Fowkes to have restored philosophical language omitted by Engels (who supervised the first English translation in 1886), Fowkes in most respects follows Engels slavishly and acts as if the task was to restore "whole sentences omitted by Engels" for the English-speaking public by consulting not the French edition edited by Marx but Engels' Fourth German Edition as rendered with a few additions in the East German edition of *Capital*, Vol. I (Marx-Engels Werke, Vol. 23, 1962). Fowkes takes the East German edition to be definitive and appears to translate innocently from it, without consulting the French edition directly. While he may thus include some passages not in previous English editions, he appears in his preface to view the French edition as a mere "popularization".

As a result, we still end up with an incomplete English edition of *Capital*. This means that whole pages are left out of sections such as from the chapter on "The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation". In addition, there are many places where Marx has alternate sentences or paragraphs for material included in the German editions. In many cases these alternate texts appear to be later and more polished formulations, but in any case we do not have these alternative texts to compare. Finally, in a few cases, we lose phrases or sentences from the French edition (and presumably from Engels' editions) which had previously appeared in English. In every case I examined, Fowkes seemed to accept unquestioningly the East German edition.

In citing a few examples of the rich differences in the French edition, we must never forget that the French edition was no mere translation. Not only did Marx, in editing it himself, make more precise many basic formulations but greatly expanded some sections, especially the crucial section of Accumulation of Capital as well as the most discussed Fetishism of Commodities.³ In the Postface Marx called attention to the changes he made, singling out the sections on Accumulation of Capital and Fetishism of Commodities and concluding that the French edition "possesses a scientific value, independent of the original and should be consulted even by readers familiar with German." Marx left with Engels the task of incorporating the changes from the French into a new German edition on which he was working on his deathbed. When Engels issued the Fourth German Edition in 1890 he said he scrupulously followed Marx, and it was so accepted by the post-Marx Marxists. But Engels was not only hampered in the task by his own earlier attitude of preference for the earlier German edition, but he did not, in fact, incorporate all of Marx's changes. As he wrote after reading one chapter of the French:

"Despite all my respect for the artistry with which it has been turned into elegant French, I'm very upset by this pretty chapter . . . It would be in my eyes a big mistake to take the French as the basis of the English translation . . ." (Engels to Marx, Nov. 29, 1873).

Marx replied immediately to Engels that if he were to read "further" in the French text, he would find those parts that were "better than in German" (Marx to Engels, Nov. 30, 1873).

Earlier, Marx had given his view of this matter: "Even though the French edition . . . may be the work of someone quite knowledgeable in the two languages, he (the translator) often translated too literally. I was therefore compelled to edit anew, in French, whole passages which I wanted to make readable . . . Later it will be all the easier to translate the whole from French into English and the romance languages." (Marx to Danielson, May 28, 1872).

In the more than a century since the appearance of the French edition, it is these two sections on Accumulation and on Fetishism of Commodities which have become pivotal. The objective economic development of capitalism as well as post-World War II debates on alienation have made them so. In a word, the significance of the translation is not only an academic question but one that affects contemporary analyses.

An examination of the long chapter on "The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation" reveals whole paragraphs and pages that have yet to be included in any English or German edition. Fowkes' translation does include one key paragraph from the French edition which has finally made its appearance in English, some 100 years after Marx first included it in the French edition of *Capital*, but it appears as footnote rather than within the text as Marx had written it:

1 Karl Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks*, transcribed and introduced by Lawrence Krader. (Humanities Press 1972).

2 See English translation by Ben Fowkes, Penguin Press, 1976.

3 The philosophical importance of these changes and their relationships to the Paris Commune have been discussed in Chapter 6 of *Science and Freedom* by Raya Dunayevskaya. As for the more recent debate with Jean-Paul Sartre on the fetishism of Commodities, Dunayevskaya's critique is in Chapter 2 of *Philosophy and Revolution*.

"But only after the mechanical industry had struck root so deeply that it exerted a preponderant influence on the whole of national production; only after foreign trade began to predominate over internal trade, thanks to mechanical industry; only after the world market had successively annexed extensive areas of the New World, Asia and Australia; and finally, only after a sufficient number of industrial nations had entered the arena—only after all this had happened can one date the repeated self-perpetuating cycles, whose successive phases embrace years, and always culminate in a general crisis, which is the end of one cycle and the starting-point of another . . ." (p. 786).

II. THE FOWKES TRANSLATION

Should we be so glad that the growth of a whole new Third World and the debates over imperialism since 1909 have finally forced that paragraph out into English, that we forget that Fowkes apparently includes it only because the "official" East German edition now does so? (Marx-Engels Werke, Vol. 23, p. 682).

Had he examined the passages nearby in the French edition, he would have noted immediately whole paragraphs and pages on the rise of the unemployed army, still to be included from the French edition, for example:

"We have just shown that the accumulation, which makes social capital grow, simultaneously reduces the relative size of its variable part and so diminishes the relative demand for labor. Now, what is the effect of this movement on the wage-earning class?"⁴

Marx continues for several pages to describe this "effect", but none of this material is included in the English (or the German) edition. While this may not be as "new" as the above-cited paragraph on the world market, surely it is high time we had it in English so that readers could decide for themselves.

The entire deleted section would appear quite relevant to any discussion of unemployment and the current capitalist crisis. Marx related this edition to the working class movement of 1875. It was completed at the same time as the Critique of the Gotha Program. In the letter which accompanied that Critique to Germany, Marx wrote: "I shall be sending you in the near future the last parts of the French edition of Capital."⁵ This was because, as we pointed out above, Marx emphasized only a week earlier, "it (the French edition) possesses a scientific value independent of the original and should be consulted even by readers familiar with German."

That Engels did not follow the advice as scrupulously as he thought is clear from a scrutiny which shows fairly quickly that Engels' edition has some limits, as whole sentences and even paragraphs are still "missing" from the current English and German editions of Capital, Vol. I. The why of this is amazing since Engels' contribution was both prodigious and painstaking. No other Marxist could have given us Volumes II and III of Capital from Marx's notes as did Engels.

But it is also true that no other Marxist or non-Marxist was ever shown the page proofs of Capital for comment before its first publication in 1887. And while

the letters between Marx and Engels in 1867 show a great theoretic gulf between the two men, it is also clear that Engels was of some help in achieving a more "popular" presentation of the material. The fact, however, which hits you from their correspondence is the very small extent to which Marx had a serious theoretic dialogue in the actual working out of Capital. Even Engels was, as late as 1867, asking the most elementary questions about Capital.

III. ALTERNATE TEXTS IN THE FRENCH EDITION OF CAPITAL, VOL. I

The Fowkes translation follows the German edition in several points where the French edition appears to offer a more fully dialectical view by Marx of the same problem. For example, in the concluding section on the "Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation", the English (and German) text describes independent artisan production thusly: "The private property of the worker in his means of production is the foundation of small-scale industry" (p. 927). The French text has this type of private property as the "corollary of small-scale industry" (p. 1237), a formulation which de-emphasizes the category of private property and sees social relations as a totality.

In the section of the chapter on "Machinery and Large-Scale Industry" entitled "The Factory", the English (and German) edition states: "All work at a machine requires the worker to be taught from childhood upwards, in order that he may learn to adapt his own movements to the uniform and unceasing motion of an automaton" (p. 546). At precisely the same point in the text the French edition reads: "Any child learns very easily to adapt his movements to the continuous and uniform motion of the automation." (p. 953) This formulation from the French edition seems more in keeping both with the experiences of workers in modern capitalism and with Marx's own statement a few sentences later (in all editions that: "Lastly, the speed with which machine work is learnt by young people does away with the need to bring up a special class of worker for exclusive employment by industry."

But the very next sentences are rendered again quite differently in the two texts. The English (and German) version appears to see some positive effects on the working class from machinery:

"The work of those people who are merely attendants' can, to some extent, be replaced in the factory by the use of machines. In addition to this, the very simplicity of the work allows a rapid and constant turnover of the individuals burdened with this drudgery." (p. 547)

Here the French text reads:

"As to the jobs performed in the factory with simple operations, the machine can for the most part take their place and, because of their simplicity, these jobs permit the periodic and rapid turnover of the people performing them." (p. 954)

Here the focus is on the "freedom" gained by the capitalist over the worker and not on any possible "benefit" to the worker from machinery. This is in keeping with the footnote to this very sentence in both texts, where Marx quotes a factory inspector who states that "perhaps self-acting mules are as dangerous as any other kind" to the working class, after describing some accidents with modern machinery.

⁴ Marx, *Quevres*, I, ed. by M. Rubel, Paris: Gallimard, 1963-68, p. 1141, my translation.

⁵ Marx to Engels, May 2, 1875.

None of these alternate texts have yet appeared, even as footnotes, in any English edition of *Capital*. Fowkes also carries his "literalness" in translating from the East German edition so far as to remove from his English text several passages which had been in previous English editions and which are also in the French edition. This is true of the famous phrase also in the section "The Factory" where Marx comments on the boring and dehumanizing character of capitalist production by stating that modern machinery "deprives the work of all interest."⁶ Here Fowkes gives us the word "content" rather than "interest" making the whole passage more abstract, but dutifully following his East German "original."

Inexplicably, we lose a whole sentence from the section on commodity fetishism: "The religious world is but the reflex of the real world"⁷. Fowkes removes this sentence completely, as does the East German edition. I hope to return to this soon so that we should finally know the whole of the French edition in English. Here I wished to single out the most important changes that have most relevance for our age. What is of equal importance is to take issue with the attitude of the post-Marx Marxists who, beginning with Mehring, and including Ryazanov, behaved as if the last decade of Marx's life was nothing but "a slow death." The truth is the exact opposite. On every subject from philosophy to organization, from the "Woman Question" to the latest economic developments, including colonialism, Marx was his most creative self.

The last decade of Marx's life, 1873-1883, was a tremendously productive period for him, both philosophically and organizationally. While this period saw the decline and demise of the International Workingmen's Association, Marx had no such narrow concept of proletarian organization as to limit it to a formal party or association. As he wrote to an American comrade years after the break-up of the International:

⁶ French, p. 956; Kerr edition of 1909, p. 462.

⁷ French, p. 612; Kerr, p. 71.

"Things are going splendidly on the whole (I mean by this the general development in Europe), as well as within the really revolutionary party on the Continent."⁸

A few months later, he and Engels made the following points in a declaration on the tenth anniversary of the Paris Commune:

"... the Continental governments, who after the fall of the Commune by their persecutions compelled the International Workingmen's Association to give up its formal, external organization... little did they think that ten years later that same International Labor Movement, more powerful than ever... would bind them together into a new and greater spontaneous International, outgrowing more and more all external forms of organization."

The last decade also saw Marx's concept of organization as critique of existing "half-dialectical" concepts as in his famous Critique of the Gotha Program (1875). Only with the belated (1972) publication of his Ethnological Notebooks, have we been able to see the full extent of the deep theoretical probing into non-Western and primitive society, into relationships of peasant to worker, and of man to woman.

We can see this attitude even in "personal" letters such as the one he wrote from Algiers to his daughter Jenny Longuet (March 27, 1882) just a year before his death: "I wish that on a beautiful day I could waft Johnny (her son) over here with a magic cape; how my little darling would be amazed to see the Moors, the Arabs, Berbers, Turks, Negroes... and the costumes (most of them poetic) in this oriental world, mixed in with the 'civilized' French (and so forth) and the tedious British." But these ideas were hardly kept only for Marx's private notebooks.

He gave a very new and interesting theoretical answer to Russian Marxists who thought the only, the "inevitable" way was that Russia follow the developments outlined in *Capital*, Vol. I rather than possibly passing in a different way toward a new society from their agrarian commune:

"Now the question is: can the Russian obshchina, though greatly undermined, yet a form of the primeval common ownership of land, pass directly to the higher form of communist common ownership? Or on the contrary, must it first pass through the same process of dissolution as constitutes the historical evolution of the West?"

"If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that both complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development."

That he wrote this not in a private letter but in nothing less than the 1882 Preface to the Russian edition of the Communist Manifesto, and the fact that that Preface also devoted considerable discussion to the United States, none of this prevented all Marxists since, Russian and "Western," from ignoring it. It is high time to grapple with the totality of Marx's works, especially his final years, from the French edition of *Capital*, through the Gotha Program to the Ethnological Notebooks.

⁸ Marx to Sorge, Nov. 3, 1880.

⁹ Marx and Engels to the Chairman of the Slavonic Meeting, March 21, 1881, in celebration of the anniversary of the Paris Commune.