

The Logic of Capital

Interview with Chris Arthur

Luca Micaloni – Christopher J. Arthur

Bio-note: Christopher J. Arthur (1940 -) studied at the universities of Nottingham and Oxford. For 25 years he taught Philosophy at the University of Sussex, UK. He is the author of: *The New Dialectic and Marx's Capital* (2002), and of *Dialectics of Labour: Marx and his Relation to Hegel* (1986). He edited and introduced: *The German Ideology* by Marx and Engels (1970; revised 1974); *Law and Marxism* by E. B. Pashukanis (third imprint, 1989); *Engels Today: A Centenary Appreciation* (1996); and (with Geert Reuten) *The Circulation of Capital: Essays on Volume Two of Marx's Capital* (1998). He has also published (abridged, with an introduction) *Marx's Capital: A Student Edition* (1992, new edition 2018). He was one of the founders, and a member of the editorial collective for many years, of the journal *Radical Philosophy*. He also was a participant from the start of the *Conference of Socialist Economists*, and served as a member of the editorial collective of its journal «Capital & Class». He was a founder-member of *The International Symposium on Marxian Theory* and has attended all its working conference, and contributed to the resulting book collections. His recent research has been directed towards a renewal of the critique of political economy, drawing on the work of Marx and Hegel.

Q. In a famous essay written at the beginning of the 20th century, Benedetto Croce asked «What Is 'Living' and What Is 'Dead' in Hegel's Philosophy?». Since we are now in the Bicentennial of Marx's birth, I am tempted to start off by asking you a similar question about Marx. However, it could be even more interesting proposing again Croce's question and asking you what is "alive" of Hegel: which features of Hegelian philosophy can help us (and helped Marx) understanding the capitalist mode of production?

A. Much of Hegel is still alive, e.g. his riposte to Kant. But it is precisely the apparently most objectionable feature of his philosophy, namely his pan-logicism, that helps us to understand capital. As Riccardo Bellofiore has also argued, even if our reading of Hegel is contestable, it is precisely *this* Hegel that illuminates the absurd derangement of capital's logic.

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Q. *Many authors maintain that the Hegel-Marx connection is the doorway to a more thorough understanding of the structure of the critique of political economy. What is the specificity of your position within the context of past and current debates in Marxian theory regarding this issue? Does Marx really shape his “mode of presentation” on Hegel’s Science of Logic? You have also argued that Marx shares Hegel’s systematic effort: to what extent did Marx succeed in presenting his critique of political economy as a “system”? If he did not, is it only because Capital (let alone the “six books” plan) is an unfinished work, or is the Marxian deduction flawed in any crucial point?*

A. Each part of a system may itself have a systematic character. Thus Hegel’s logic has such merit independently of its place in his overall system. Likewise, Marx’s *Capital* aims at a systematic presentation of this part of his broader project. He did not base his project on Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. He had absorbed it, of course, so it influenced him unconsciously. But his text is “mixed” in that both Hegel and Ricardo are present, but not properly unified. One could clear out “Hegelian mysticism” and present Marx as perfecting Ricardo; but I think it is the Ricardian residues that need to go. In any event the way forward is to *reconstruct* Marx’s *Capital* in accordance with the protocols of systematic dialectic.

Q. *The so called «homology thesis» takes the Hegel-Marx connection a bit further: capitalism has the same onto-logical structure as philosophical Idealism, and that’s the reason why Hegel’s logic is particularly fit to grasp the practical inversions displayed by the capitalist mode of production. Such a thesis intersects the different – and perhaps not always compatible – uses of the term «abstraction» in Marxian theory. Are we really ruled by abstract forms?*

A. We are indeed ruled by self-acting abstraction incarnate in the capital-subject. You are right that Marx has various abstractions. I have to go into some detail.

Exchange sets up a most peculiar social relation, the value-form, radically other than the material form of commodities. While this form mediates the social division of labour its abstraction makes it completely general such that it is a form attached to a larger range of items than simply products of labour. Because of the importance of exchange in shaping the character and direction of social production, it is best to start the presentation with the *form* of exchange, bracketing for this purpose the origin of the objects of exchange in the meantime.

It is characteristic of the dialectical development of concepts that initial simple abstract definitions be replaced by successively more complex and concrete ones. My initial abstract definition of «value» is that it is «the power of exchange» intrinsic to a commodity. It may be claimed that reference to labour should be included even at the most abstract level of determination of the «value» concept, because the entire value-form problematic springs from the social division of labour with its consequent contradiction of a labour that has to be simultaneously private and social. The plausibility of this argument is undermined by the peculiarly abstract character of the value-form itself. In so far as it resolves the contradiction through an exchange system socially associating the products of dissociated producers within a universal form, it *overshoots* the parameters of the original problem. The commodity form is so empty of given content that it not only allows the exchange of heterogeneous goods produced in private enterprises, but the inscription of all sorts of other heterogeneous material. The most abstract level of analysis of the «value» concept is therefore that of a *pure* form of association, namely association through exchange, a form bare of content.

(It is interesting that with reference to his section on the forms of value, and money, Marx says in his *Preface* that it is difficult because the form here is empty, all content absented. The German here – *inhaltslos* – is mistranslated in Fowkes's standard English edition as «slight in content». In my view this insight of Marx's has more general application).

Hence it should be possible to present a value-form derivation of money and capital without simultaneous reference to the commensuration of labours. But later the requirement of concretion yields the theoretically argued identification of products of capital as the only content adequate to the self-determination of the value-form. Then we argue that the social ontology of living labour within capital gives good grounds for asserting a version of «the labour theory of value».

The *ontological* foundation of the capitalist system is the *reality* of that abstraction in exchange predicated on the *identification*, as «values», of *heterogeneous* commodities. This «practical abstraction» has a substantive reality quite independent of any methodological point about abstraction in theory construction. It produces an «inverted reality», in which commodities simply instantiate their abstract essence as values. The use-value character of the commodities concerned is “suspended” for the period of exchange. (This point is stressed by A. Sohn-Rethel. He talks of «real abstraction». Patrick Murray has pointed out that «practical abstraction» is better).

As a consequence of this abstraction the commodities acquire a new determination: the character of exchange-value. The different goods concerned play the role of *bearers* of this determination imposed on them while passing through this phase of their life-cycle. They become subject to the *value form*. They must be realised as values before they can be realised as use values. So the value form of the commodity creates a split, between value as the *identity* of commodities premised on equivalent exchange, and their material *diversity* differentiating them from each other as use-values.

Hegel's logic, too, starts with an abstraction from everything determinate. The «pure thoughts» spring from the evacuation of contingent empirical instantiations to leave the category as such. We see the same process in practical terms when a commodity acquires a value form which disregards its natural body. Just as Hegel's logic follows the self-movement of thought as it traverses the categorial universe, so the dialectic of exchange sets up a *form-determined system*. This gives rise to an *homologous structure* to logical forms, namely the value forms. Thus money, to take the most obvious case, stands in a *logical*, rather than *material*, relation to commodities. It makes present their universal aspect to them, namely their *identity* with each other as values ideally posited through exchange.

Here the formal structures are indeed «self-acting»; not just in the sense of being categorially connected by our thought process. Immediately, such formal-determination of the commodity posits a content that amounts to nothing more than the abstract possibility of place, a pure algebraic variable, a determinable with no particularly necessary determinate content. Moreover, since the human bearers of the structure of capital are likewise reduced to personifications of its categories, *the capitalist*, *the wage-labourer*, and so on, we find the same kind of *self-acting* forms as those in Hegel's logic. Of course, they cannot be forms of *thought* as they are in Hegel. Nonetheless I believe that the capitalist system does indeed consist in part of logical relations. At bottom this is because of the way exchange abstracts from the heterogeneity of commodities and treats them as instances of a universal, namely value.

Moreover, the form of value as such, which springs from exchange as a process of «abstraction», may be analysed regardless of any labour content. Indeed, *theoretical priority* must be accorded to “form-analysis” because it is the practice of exchange that establishes this necessary form of social synthesis in the first place before labours expended are commensurated in it.

What is at issue in the value-form abstraction is by no means the same sort of abstraction as natural science employs, when it studies mass, for example, and treats bodies under this description regardless of their other

properties. For mass is indeed a given property of the bodies concerned, inhering in each. But, as Marx says, value has «a purely social reality», not «an atom of matter» enters into it. Whereas in the mass case «the principle of abstraction» may quite properly be used to say that two bodies, balancing each other on a scale, share the same mass, in the case of value this principle operates in reverse so to speak: because we equate commodities in exchange we in practice impute to them the same value *as if* value were a property *inherent* in them. But the fetish-character so posited is an objective phenomenon, not a confusion of social consciousness. Abstraction is “out there”.

Conversely I interpret Hegel’s self-actualising Idea as the ontology *specific* to capital, because it has relevance only to an inverted reality reproduced by self-moving abstractions.

Yet, whereas Hegel abstracts from everything through the power of thought, exchange abstracts only from what is presented to it, a delimited sphere of use values. So we have in the dialectic of capital one that is less general than Hegel’s in its *scope*, but within its own terms equally *absolute* in so far as it is founded on all-round abstraction to leave quasi-logical forms. Hegel’s philosophy is encyclopaedic, and it has hundreds of categories accordingly. Capital, compared with the universe as a whole, is characterised by a poverty-stricken ontology, in which the qualitative is generally less prominent than the quantitative. This means that in the development of its categories I use only some of Hegel’s. (A trivial instance, in my project, is that under quantity I shall need «number» and «*ratio*» only, but not «degree». Value does not come in degrees, only in amounts).

Hegel’s view of system is *peculiar* in that he claims the «Concept» is the self-acting author of its own forms. I say the same of capital. Just as Hegel holds that thinking itself, devoid of personality, is “the productive subject”, so I take capital as a productive subject devoid of personality. (This view of capital as the epochal subject is also held by the late M. Postone, and by Riccardo Bellofiore).

The dialectical movement of such a Subject/Object identity rests on the activity of the Subject. It is the activity of the Subject that is *constitutive* of objectivity. Thus it finds itself in its *own* world. So here capital is the constitutive subject that builds a world for itself, but on material foundations, including human labour, that are in excess of its concept of itself, and potentially destabilising of it. The counter-subject, labour, is trapped in the capital relation, which is played out in a counterpoint such that it is the very same movement that engenders both the self-constitution of

capital and the self-negation of labour. (In 1844 Marx stresses the latter but in *Capital* the former).

Where should we begin? Do we follow the method of rising from abstract determinations to the concrete whole? The concrete as the unity of diverse determinations is then the result not the starting point. Or do we begin with something concrete, namely the commodity, because wealth presents itself to us immediately as «a heap of commodities»? Confusion on this point is resolved by taking account of two different meanings of «abstract and concrete». Marx speaks in his *Preface to Capital* of the power of abstraction by analogy with the microscope because it yields «the economic cell-form», the commodity. Here the «abstract» means that which is taken apart from the whole that supports it, and within which it gains its meaning; it is *separated* off from it. But, especially if the commodity is not understood as mediated in the whole, it may be taken in immediate *experience* as «concrete» in the sense of tangible. However, a more usual sense of the «abstract» is that which results from the most general way of thinking about anything, achieved by leaving aside all its specific characteristics so as to generate a simple immediacy for *thought*, namely a pure category not susceptible to analysis (as is the concrete of course). If this distinction is accepted then the presentation of capital has, correspondingly, *two* beginnings: analytic, and synthetic (or systematic). (J. Banaji made this point long ago).

In its first sense, «abstraction» means to separate something from the whole that produced it and within which it has sense, by analysing the whole into parts. Capital is the object but this is *analysable* into the movement of money, and money mediates commodity exchange. This makes the *analytical* starting point of the whole presentation the commodity, as the «cell» of the economic organism, abstracted from the context that gives it meaning. This same commodity is «posited» once it is grasped as the immediate product of capital.

In the second sense, «abstraction» signifies stripping away from the concrete all its determinacy, leaving it characterised only by a simple category. In the case of the commodity, we first distinguish its concrete usefulness and its universal exchangeableness. Once all its bodily qualities, supporting its use value, are left out of consideration, there remains only its social standing as a commodity exchangeable with others. It has, beside its use value its exchange value. But that the commodity has *value* is not branded on its body. Turn and twist it as we may, no value can be discerned in it.

So this is the *synthetical* starting point from which the concrete as a unity of many determinations is to be reconstructed by unfolding what is

implicit in it. It is a methodological premise of the systematic dialectical logic required for this enterprise that it moves from abstract to concrete. Although our analytical starting point, namely «the commodity produced by capital», appears as a concrete one, I argue that the *practical abstraction* imposed in exchange from every given feature of it leads to a systematic dialectic of exchange as «pure form» homologous with the «pure thoughts» of Hegel's logic. Thus the *synthetical* starting point is the highly speculative presupposition that commodities are intrinsically valuable.

(The two beginnings are not emphasized by Marx; but it seems implicit in what he does say in the *Preface* when he writes that we begin with «the commodity-form of the product of labour or the value-form of the commodity». It is obvious these are very different, simply from the different placing of the term «commodity». In the one case «commodity» is form, in the other it itself takes form namely value).

The value form is the abstract starting point for a *systematic* dialectical development of the concrete whole of capitalist production; value itself is shown to exist only as a result of the full development of capital, which, as self-valorising value, produces above all itself, but in so doing makes real its abstract moments. Likewise, that value is an abstract moment of capital is consistent with its presence in this very abstraction when commodities are thrown on the market as a mere heap of exchangeables. Indeed, capital «self-abstracts» (to use a phrase of T. Sekine's) when it throws up commodities for sale, unmarked by their context of production.

It is an important methodological point in our presentation that the movement of the presentation from abstract to concrete in truth models exactly such a hierarchy of form in the object itself. In market exchange the commodity is presented to it by capital in abstraction from its real ground, and hence functions there immediately as the bearer of a pure form. As the presentation develops capital, as it were, «recollects» that as a concrete whole it was the ground of all the pure shapes of its existence in these its abstract moments, commodity, money, profit and so forth.

A peculiar methodological difficulty I have is that I operate simultaneously with the most abstract logical terms, and with historically determinate ones. It is a general theme of historical materialism that very little is accomplished by ahistorical categories such as «mode of production». If then, we follow the method of rising from abstract to concrete we must beware of such a beginning; rather the beginning is to be made with a historically determinate abstraction. This would be very general with respect to this particular mode of production, but sufficiently specific to mark it out from others; «the commodity as the general form of the product»

is such a determinate abstraction. However, there is a complication: all round abstraction is precisely what is historically determinate in our case. The commodity, on analysis, dissolves under the force of abstraction — even abstraction from use-value — to leave an empty Form. As an empty universal the form of value imposed on the product seems abstract in a nugatory sense but in this case practice makes it real.

The *presentation* of the commodity-capitalist system is *at the same time a critique* of it because it is precisely the *applicability* of Hegel's logic that condemns the object as an inverted reality systematically alienated from its bearers, an object which in its "spiritualisation" of material interchange and practical activities into the heaven of pure forms virtually incarnates the Hegelian «Idea».

Q. *To what extent is your work indebted to the Neue Marx-Lektüre developed by authors like Hans-Georg Backhaus and Helmut Reichelt? Did French and Italian Marxism have any influence on your work?*

A. When I first seriously studied Marx, Althusserianism was the dominant interpretation; but I always rejected it. I found more congenial the Germans: Lukács, Adorno, Sohn-Rethel, Backhaus. Of the Italians, I was impressed by Colletti. Later I came into contact with Geert Reuten and Tony Smith. Then I had the great benefit of working with comrades of the *International Symposium on Marxian Theory*.

On the whole I think my research developed immanently, first I tried to see how Marx used Hegel. But then I decided he did not understand this himself, hence it was necessary to reconstruct his theory. In this I found myself in alignment with the «value-form analysis» of the *Neue Lektüre*. Of course, this project of "reconstruction" is shared by others, Geert Reuten and Riccardo Bellofiore, for example.

Q. *How do you address the issue regarding the periodization of Marx's work? Is the late Marx the only "scientific" one, as Louis Althusser believed? Or is there some sort of continuity between the early and the late Marx?*

A. There were two appropriations of Hegel by Marx: first his reading of the *Phenomenology* in the 1844 Manuscripts, transferring to labour the problematic of alienation and its supersession (see my *Dialectics of Labour* book.); then in 1857 the re-reading of Hegel's logic, evident in the *Grün-*

drisse. I think there is continuity between these projects; the *Capital* may be situated in the general framework of alienation. The main change is that the sole “subject” in 1844 appears to be labour; but later capital itself is presented as having a dynamic role is subsuming and expropriating labour (see my *New Dialectic*).

Q. *Is there a Marxian “science”? What are its distinguishing features and how should it be conceived of with regard to the methodological controversy between natural, human and social sciences?*

A. There is no Marxian science in general. There is simply the critique of political economy, a most peculiar object properly investigated with a most peculiar logical apparatus. As Reichelt says, this “science” disappears along with its object. The absurd result of trying to derive a scientific method from the *Capital* is to be seen in Ilyenkov’s claim that, just as «value» is the all-encompassing category in economics, so *protein* is in biology!

Q. *Can you give Italian readers an outline of your most recent research?*

A. I am engaged on writing a book to be called *The Spectre of Capital: Idea and Reality*. (The phrase «spectre of capital» I coined back in 2001 in the *Radical Philosophy* journal.) This supplies more detail on the «value form» categories, and goes on, more briefly, to situate the rest of Marx’s *Capital* as transformed by the systematic dialectical approach. However, I cut citations of Marx’s text to the bare minimum. I do not find it at all profitable to engage in further debate about what Marx “really meant”. I wish my argument to be taken in its own terms. As to Hegel, I have no compunction about revising, and re-ordering, his logical categories to suit my reading of value and capital.

There are two publications of mine that may be regarded as “advances” on the book. One is «Marx, Hegel and the Value-Form» in *Marx’s Capital and Hegel’s Logic* edited by Fred Moseley. See: <https://chrisarthur.net/marx-hegel-and-the-value-form/>. This aligns the forms of value, up to, and including, money, with the categories of Hegel’s «Doctrines of Being» and «Essence». The other is *With What Must the Critique of Capital Begin?* which appeared in a Brazilian on-line journal. This relates to my “esoteric” doctrine about the starting point of a systematic dialectic of capital. It is a view unique to me. In the chapter on «The Spectre of Capital» in my *New*

Dialectic book, I briefly argued that instead of starting like Hegel with the category of «Being» we need to start with «Nothingness». In this paper, I put forward the argument in a rigorous way (Christopher J. Arthur, *With What must the Critique of Capital Begin?*, Revista Opinião Filosófica, [S.l.], 2017; see: <http://periodico.abavaresco.com.br/index.php/opiniaofilosofica/article/view/646>).

Q. *Unlike other theorists of capital (like Moishe Postone and Roberto Finelli) who stress the similarities between capital and the Hegelian self-positing Subject, you argue that «capital is a closed totality only in form». Notably, external nature and labour-power can be re-signified and subjugated by capital, but not produced by it. Now, those who endorse the idea that capital is a fully-fledged totality cannot but be sceptical about the possibility of a transition to a different social system via class struggle, since the labour-force appears to be completely colonised by capitalist imperatives (a position akin to some quite discouraging views by Adorno and Marcuse on the “crisis of the individual” and on the “integration” of the working class). Does the critique of political economy lead to political and historical pessimism? How would a de-colonisation of human subjects look like?*

A. It is right that if we are trapped in a Hegelian totality there is no way out. Although I do not hold that position, I have been attacked by “revolutionaries” for debilitating pessimism. As to the pessimism, do not shoot the messenger for bearing the bad news! Capital is indeed the all-encompassing epochal subject imposing itself in accordance with an ineluctable logic. As to its “others”, Nature will surely bring about the downfall of capitalism eventually, because value is blind to use-value. Living labour, broadly conceived, cannot but revolt against the inherent perversity of capital’s logic, eventually. But that presupposes a politically, and technically, educated working-class. This will be a revolt against their classification as mere «labour-power». The problem of the colonisation of the consciousness of human subjectivity by capital, and its forms of thought, is indeed profound. A combination of lived experience and critical theory is required to overcome it.