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Together with Louis Althusser's book *For Marx*, *Reading Capital* represents one of the foundational texts of the school of "structuralist Marxism" which transformed the face of modern philosophy and social theory. Presided over by the magnetic and intellectually coruscating figure of Althusser, the structuralist Marxists attempted no less than an intellectual revolution against dominant interpretations of Marx. Seeking to cleanse Marx of all Hegelian impurities and recast his thought on a rigorously scientific basis, in this work Althusser and one of his most brilliant students and colleagues, Etienne Balibar, subjected Marx's method in *Capital*, his critique of classical political economy, and the fundamental terms of historical materialism, to searching textual analysis and challenging conceptual reconstruction. Inaugurating a new way of reading Marx that was to prove both intensely stimulating and capable of generating fierce controversy, *Reading Capital* is a work that cannot be bypassed by anyone interested in Marxism, and in theory more generally, in this century.

Reading Capital Details

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From Reader Review Reading Capital for online ebook

David says

A dense, difficult read, more about the intellectual politics of French Marxism and the philosophical scene of the 1960s than about Marx, but essential for understanding French intellectual history.

William West says

This extremely influential text has aged poorly exactly because of how influential its been in Marxist discourse. Many of its key claims, which were eye-brow raising in 1965, are generally accepted by interpreters of Marx today. What makes this book a somewhat frustrating read is that Althusser's writing style is far denser here even than in his other key works, and yet there seems to be less ideas to sink one's teeth into than in, say, the author's "For Marx."

First off its most influential, and today least interesting suggestion is that Marx, in *Das Kapital*, proposes a new way of examining society not as a relation between individuals or even classes, but as a structure shaped by class domination, which has many distinct and complex levels but is brought together not by one overriding power, such as the brute force of any one class, but by many factors, the most significant of which is the economy. Althusser sometimes referred to this conception of society as a "topography"- suggesting a layering of complex levels, like shifting tectonic plates, independently following their own laws, yet in doing so collectively shaping a world to which they all belong and which, even if that world is pre-supposed by the levels that form it, shapes the levels' relation to one another. This conception of society and history Althusser opposed to the Hegelian and Hegelian-Marxist notion of history as an unfolding totality, the inevitable end result of which is Knowledge itself.

Thus, Althusser was labeled a "Marxist Structuralist" although the author did not consider himself a Structuralist. In the near-fifty years since the book's publication, the discourses of Marxism and Structuralism, in no small part due to this book's influence, have become so intertwined that almost noone who is familiar with these lines of thought would not have come to think of Marx and *Das Kapital* as forerunners of the work of thinkers such as Saussure and Levi-Strauss.

Today the book's most interesting, if least clearly proposed, ideas concern the ways in which a new form of knowledge, which Althusser thinks *Das Kapital* constitutes, comes into being. Any new form of knowledge, or affect of knowledge, is born from older forms of knowledge, and thus that the thinker who discovers a new knowledge affect can never entirely understand this knowledge, can not truly speak in the language of the new understanding that the thinker has discovered.

In "For Marx" Althusser suggested that the work of the young Marx was not Marxist but Hegelian idealist. Only Marx's late work, such as *Das Kapital*, constituted Marxist thought, a new way to understand social relations. In *Reading Capital*, Althusser proposes that Marx, in discovering a new knowledge affect, could not himself fully understand his own discovery. It is for this reason that Marx proposes, at the end of Volume 1, that communism will constitute a negation of negation which is, as Mao had previously pointed out, a wholly idealist notion that proposes an inevitable "end of history." This idea can lead a "Marxist" to the counter-revolutionary notion that struggle is unnecessary and that one can simply wait for the class consciousness of the masses to catch up to that of the "vanguard".

Marx must be forgiven for this indiscrepancy, Althusser writes, because he was all alone with his discovery. His momentary relapse into idealism was simply the all-too-human response of working with a knowledge affect that noone, including Marx himself, fully understood yet. Althusser closes by saluting Marx's courage and solitude. Marx was all alone with his discovery right until the end of his life, when he was still trying to complete Das Kapital.

These two branches of thought in the book- the suggestion that Kapital represents a new, structural way to understand society, and the ways that a new thought emerges from an old one, are only seemingly disparate. The "new world" of Marxist thought that Kapital represents still contains an idealist "plate" operating under its own laws, yet transformed and transforming by and of its new materialist world.

Alex says

Science wins! (Sorry ideology).

Materialism wins! (Sorry idealism).

"Well grubbed, old mole." KM is the mole. Capitalism is the mud. Once you grab that grub, don't let it go!

Iben says

Only read the first section, but that was enough for me. I enjoy any French philosopher who mentions "poached baby elephant."

Steve says

sometimes interesting but mostly incomprehensible

Mahdi says

Only read "The Errors of Classical Economics: Outline of a Concept of Historical Time" and it's amazing

Zebardast Zebardast says

are dadsh!ine!khastam bedooni maam ye vaghti si khodemoo ademi boodim,azi ketaba mikhoondim.haaa!louis althosser:)

Benjamin Britton says

"But the protocols for a reading of Capital which we have inherited from the history of the interpretation of Marxism, as well as the experiments in reading Capital we can make ourselves, confront us with real difficulties inherent in Marx's text itself. I shall assemble them under two headings, and these two headings will constitute the object of my study.

(1) Contrary to certain appearances, or at any rate, to my expectations, Marx's methodological reflections in Capital do not give us a developed concept, nor even an explicit concept of the object of Marxist philosophy. They always provide the means with which to recognize, identify and focus on it, and finally to think it, but often at the end of a long investigation, and only after piercing the enigma contained in certain expressions. Our question therefore demands more than a mere literal reading, even an attentive one: it demands a truly critical reading, one which applies to Marx's text precisely the principles of the Marxist philosophy which is, however, what we are looking for in Capital. This critical reading seems to constitute a circle, since we appear to be expecting to obtain Marxist philosophy from its own application. We should therefore clarify: we expect from the theoretical work of the philosophical principles Marx has explicitly given us or which can be disengaged from his Works of the Break, and Transitional Works – we expect from the theoretical work of these principles applied to Capital their development and enrichment as well as refinements in their rigour. This apparent circle should not surprise us: all 'production' of knowledge implies it in its process.

(2) But this philosophical investigation runs into another real difficulty, one which no longer involves the presence and distinction of the object of Marxist philosophy in Capital, but the presence and distinction of the scientific object of Capital itself. Restricting myself to a single, simple symptomatic question around which turn most of the interpretations and criticism of Capital, what, strictly speaking, is the nature of the object whose theory we get from Capital? Is it Economics or History? And specifying this question, if the object of Capital is Economics, precisely what distinguishes this object in its concept from the object of classical Economics? If the object of Capital is History, what is this History, what place does Economics have in History, etc.? Here again, a merely literal reading of Marx's text, even an attentive one, will leave us unsatisfied or even make us miss the question altogether, dispensing us from the task of posing this question, even though it is essential to an understanding of Marx – and depriving us of an exact consciousness of the theoretical revolution induced by Marx's discovery and of the scope of its consequences. Without doubt, in Capital Marx does give us, in an extremely explicit form, the means with which to identify and announce the concept of his object – what am I saying? – he announces it himself in perfectly clear terms. But if he did formulate the concept of his object without ambiguity, Marx did not always define with the same precision the concept of its distinction, i.e., the concept of the specific difference between it and the object of Classical Economics. There can be no doubt that Marx was acutely conscious of the existence of this distinction: his whole critique of Classical Economics proves it. But the formulae in which he gives us this distinction, this specific difference, are sometimes disconcerting, as we shall see. They do guide us onto the road to the concept of this distinction, but often only at the end of a long investigation and, once again, after piercing the enigma contained in some of his expressions. But how can we establish the differential specificity of the object of Capital with any precision without a critical and epistemological reading which assigns the site where Marx separates himself theoretically from his predecessors, and determines the meaning of this break. How can we aim to achieve this result without recourse precisely to a theory of the history of the production of knowledges, applied to the relations between Marx and his pre-history, i.e., without recourse to the principles of Marxist philosophy? As we shall see, a second question must be added to this one: does not the difficulty Marx seems to have felt in thinking in (penser dans) a rigorous concept the difference which distinguishes his object from the object of Classical Economics, lie in the nature of his discovery, in particular in its fantastically innovatory character? in the fact that this discovery happened to be theoretically

very much in advance of the philosophical concepts then available? And in this case, does not Marx's scientific discovery imperiously demand that we pose the new philosophical problems required by the disconcerting nature of its new object? This last argument calls on philosophy to participate in any depth reading of Capital in order to answer the astonishing questions asked of philosophy in its pages: unprecedented questions which are decisive for the future of philosophy itself.

Such is the double object of this study, which is only possible given a constant and double reference: the identification and knowledge of the object of Marxist philosophy at work in Capital presupposes the identification and knowledge of the specific difference of the object of Capital itself – which in turn presupposes the recourse to Marxist philosophy and demands its development. It is not possible to read Capital properly without the help of Marxist philosophy, which must itself be read, and simultaneously, in Capital itself. If this double reading and constant reference from the scientific reading to the philosophical reading, and from the philosophical reading to the scientific reading, are necessary and fruitful, we shall surely be able to recognize in them the peculiarity of the philosophical revolution carried in Marx's scientific discovery: a revolution which inaugurates an authentically new mode of philosophical thought."
Althusser

John says

Althusser and student Balibar offer a symptomatic reading of Marx's Capital and read him as definitively anti-humanist and anti-historian. It is not humans who are the engine of history, but the various "levels" of society (political, theological, and-in the last order-economic) that create social conditions. Each of these levels also shifts along its own temporal frame, and while the levels are articulated, this relationship prohibits a description of history as a single teleological line.

Ike says

Althusser is an absolute nut. Sound and fury signifying nothing.

Humphrey says

Obviously essential reading for marxists. That said, I have a lot of problems with the basic principles of Althusser's approach. Rather than attempting to approach marx as a philosopher - to find the implicit philosophy of marxism - I find it more compelling to approach philosophy as a marxist - to seek the historical and political economic determinations of both philosophy and science. Lots of keen ideas, however; and it is a marvelous example of constructing complex and persuasive arguments. I have not looked at the essays not included in the English edition, but I will say that Balibar is, at times, even more interesting than Althusser.

Alex Lee says

Althusser and Balibar here demonstrate that Marx's genius lay not with communism but with recognizing

that Capital is its own domain (off the work of David Ricardo). Marx however eventually did something wrong; in finding the immanence of Capital's logic, he then swallowed his own poison pill. He attempted to read the totality of all of history through this immanent logic, and found no way out. Balibar in particular takes great pains to show that at each turn an analysis of history yields again the invariant relations of capital, demonstrating that Marx was no longer in fact analyzing history but only providing a re-reading of his own definitions. This too is the flaw with communism or understanding production through Marx's Capital: the means by which the categorizations are realized are dependent on one another. From one position of proletariat, you automatically create the position of bourgeois and so on... Marx's analysis is too rigid in that its view produces only itself.

Neither Althusser nor Balibar really pursue why this happen or what it means, they only mean to show the self necessity of Marx's Capital in its failure to utilize its techno-rationality beyond its self-wrapping envelope. There are historic reasons for what Foucault calls the episteme split of the 19th century. This goes hand in hand with Hegelian twists and Absolute knowledge, of which Marx borrowed in order to wrap Capital as its own complete worldview, but these two thoughts goes beyond the analysis both Althusser and Balibar present.

All the same, if you are interested in an in depth view of Marx, or you want to see what Althusser (or Balibar) can do, here is a text for you. The writing is sometimes obscure, difficult and circumlocutus. Their explanations would have been helped if they had sought to differentiate what they wanted to say from how they were saying it. Often the move was to use Marx's internal logic and twist it around itself, so as to demonstrate the very realization they wish to impart. This makes for a confusing reading if you aren't familiar with what they are doing or if you don't read it closely. I can imagine many people often draw the complete opposite conclusion both Balibar and Althusser wished to demonstrate because of this bad technique. So if you read it, be warned that you must read closely and carefully, keeping in mind what Marx says and what these authors want to show you about how Marx says what he says and why he says it.

Muhammad Shemyal Nisar says

very interesting and thought provoking book which not only outlines the achievements of Marx's thesis but also delineate its pitfalls.

Bradley says

Honestly, after reading Capital volume one I thought this text would be a breeze, or at the very least, illuminate some of the darker, more opaque passages in Marx's Magnum Opus. Boy, was I wrong. In fact, this text is so much harder I had to put it down after only about 20-25 pages in. Will probably pick it up again (I own it after all), but sheesh - those Frenchies sure love to prognosticate in the realm of abstractions. Would take a lifetime to truly understand this text, and other scholars such as Slavoj Zizek and Antonio Negri, have made a career out of living in this space. For Zizek his project for me was about fusing Althusserian conceptions of ideology with Lacanian conceptions of subjectivity, but Zizek makes this drudgework somewhat fun and interesting to read. On second thought, I am starting to see why Althusser had some of the most brilliant students (Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, Balibar, Ranciere, among others), none of whom turned out to be Althusserians (ironically)...and I am also starting to see why he went mad and strangled his wife! His work lives in the liminal space between brilliance and madness...this book is a French

Philosophers wet dream come true! The Opacities are brilliant, confusing, and completely original. Marxism will never be the same again. Down with Marxism, up with Reading Capital (the one thing Stalinists never bothered to do).

Eric says

In this tremendous work, Althusser (and Etienne Balibar) argues that Marx's "Capital" marks the emergence of a new "science of history," a new mode of knowledge that sprang out of the author's encounters with his philosophical predecessors but which couldn't be recognized as such precisely because the answer that it provides is directed towards a question not available in his empiricist philosophical antecedents. Key to Althusser's recuperation of this new science in Marx is the manner in which MARx's thought fundamentally restructures the field through two recognitions: the rejection of the separation between subject and object in empiricist thought, and his understanding of knowledge as production, as that which both adheres to the essence of its object (always-already-there) and which itself produces that object.

"Reading Capital" is not only a wonderful reading of "Capital" itself, attending to its nuances with admirable rigor and sustantial pay-off, but the symptomatic method of reading that Althusser identifies in Marxist praxis is an essential articulation of duty and complicity for any student of inquiry, Marxist or otherwise.
