

[One Hundred and Fifty Years of Marx's Grundrisse: Incomplete, Complex and Prophetic](#)

by Marcello Musto

In 1857 -- as 150 years later, with the crisis triggered by 'subprime' loans -- the United States was the theatre for the outbreak of a great international economic crisis, the first in history. The events aroused huge excitement in one of their most attentive observers: Karl Marx.

After 1848 Marx had repeatedly argued that a new revolution would occur only in the wake of such a crisis. And when it arrived he made the decision, tormented though he was by poverty and health problems, to resume the intense studies he had begun in 1850 in the «British Museum» with a view to a critique of political economy. The result of these labours was eight large notebooks that he filled between August 1857 and May 1858: the *Grundrisse*, the first draft of *Capital*.

1858-1953: One Hundred Years of Solitude

It then became one more of Marx's many unfinished works, probably unread even by Friedrich Engels. After Engels's death, the manuscripts were entrusted to the archives of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), where they were treated with great neglect; the only section that came to light in this period was the 'Introduction', which Karl Kautsky published in 1903. This extract -- the most detailed pronouncement that Marx ever made on methodological issues -- attracted considerable interest and was soon translated into a number of languages. It is among the works of Marx on which most has subsequently been written.

While fortune smiled on the 'Introduction', however, the *Grundrisse* remained unknown for a long time. Its existence was made public only in 1923, when David Ryazanov, director of the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow, found it among Marx's literary bequest in Berlin. It was photographed on the spot, and a team of experts back in Moscow deciphered its contents and converted it to a typewritten form. When it was finally published in Moscow (in two volumes, in 1939 and 1941), it became the last of Marx's major manuscripts to see the light of day. Yet the circumstances of the Second World War meant that this went virtually unnoticed at the time; the three thousand copies soon became very hard to find, and only a few managed to cross the Soviet frontiers. It had to wait until 1953 before it was finally republished in East Berlin, in a print run of thirty thousand. Written in 1857-8, it only then became available to read all over the world -- after a hundred years of solitude.

Five Hundred Thousand Copies Circulating in the World

It was another extract, after the 'Introduction', which first generated widespread interest in the *Grundrisse*: namely, the 'Forms Which Precede Capitalist Production'. This was translated into various languages in the 1950s, and Eric Hobsbawm, the editor of the English edition, added a preface that helped to underline its importance: it was, he wrote, Marx's 'most systematic attempt to grapple with the problem of historical evolution', and 'it can be said without hesitation that any Marxist historical discussion which does not take [it] into account . . . must be reconsidered in its light'.

The dissemination of the *Grundrisse* as a whole was a slow yet inexorable process, which eventually permitted a more thorough, and in some respects different, appreciation of Marx's oeuvre. The first versions in other languages appeared in Japan (1958-65) and China (1962-78), while an edition in Russian came out only in 1968-9.

In the late 1960s the *Grundrisse* also began to circulate in Western Europe. The first translations here were in France (1967-8) and Italy (1968-70), the initiative in both cases significantly coming from a publisher independent of the Communist Party. Separate Spanish editions came out in Cuba (1970-1) and Argentina (1971-6), and later also in Mexico and Spain. A full English translation arrived only in 1973, with a preface by its translator, Martin Nicolaus, that presented it as 'the only outline of Marx's full political-economic project, which puts to the test every serious interpretation of Marx yet conceived'.

The 1970s were also the crucial decade for East European languages: Czechoslovakia (1971-7 in Czech, 1974-5 in Slovak), Hungary (1972), Romania (1972-4) and Yugoslavia (1979). Editions appeared in Denmark (1974-8) and Iran (1985-7), while the Slovenian version dates from 1985, and the Polish and Finnish from 1986. After 1989 and the end of 'actually existing socialism', the *Grundrisse* continued its

journey to other parts of the world: Greece (1989-92), Turkey (1999-2003), South Korea (2000) and Brazil (forthcoming 2009), so that today it has been published in full in 22 languages and in a total of more than 500,000 copies. These figures would greatly surprise the man who wrote it only to summarize, with the greatest of haste, the economic studies he had undertaken up to that point.

Readers and Interpreters

Roman Rosdolsky's *Making of Marx's Capital*, published in German in 1968, was the first monograph devoted to the *Grundrisse*. In the same year, Marx's text won over some of the leading actors in the student revolt, who were excited by the radical and explosive content as they worked their way through its pages. The fascination was irresistible especially among those in the New Left who were committed to overturn the interpretation of Marx provided by Marxism-Leninism.

But the times were changing in the East too. After an initial period in which the *Grundrisse* was regarded rather warily, the authoritative Russian scholar Vitalii Vygodskii defined it as a 'work of genius' requiring close attention. In the space of just a few years, it thus became a fundamental text with which any serious student of Marx had to come to grips.

With various nuances, interpreters of the *Grundrisse* divided between those who considered it an autonomous work conceptually complete in itself and those who saw it as an early manuscript that had merely paved the way for *Capital*. The ideological background to discussions of the *Grundrisse* -- the core of the dispute was the legitimacy or illegitimacy of approaches to Marx, with their huge political repercussions -- favoured the development of inadequate and what seem today ludicrous interpretations. Some of the most zealous commentators even argued that the *Grundrisse* was theoretically superior to *Capital*, despite the additional ten years of intense research that went into the composition of the latter. Similarly, some of the main detractors claimed that, despite the important sections for our understanding of Marx's relationship with Hegel and despite the significant passages on alienation, the *Grundrisse* did not add anything to what was already known about Marx. Not only were there opposing readings, there were also non-readings -- the most striking and representative example being that of Louis Althusser, who drew his hotly debated division between Marx's early and mature works without taking cognizance of the *Grundrisse*.

From the mid-1970s on, however, the *Grundrisse* won an ever larger number of readers and interpreters. Various researchers saw it as the key text for one of the most widely debated issues concerning Marx's work: his intellectual debt to Hegel. Others were fascinated by his prophetic statements in the fragments on machinery and automation.

Today, 150 years after its composition (see the volume [Karl Marx's Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later](#)), the *Grundrisse* demonstrates Marx's enduring capacity to explain the capitalist mode of production. Its insightful analysis of the great historical role of capitalism, or of the creation of an ever more cosmopolitan society than the one that preceded it, goes together with a critique of the obstacles and internal contradictions that capitalism places in the way of a more complete development of society and the individual. The *Grundrisse* is also exceptionally valuable for the many observations, such as those on communist society, which Marx was never able to develop elsewhere in his incomplete oeuvre. It seems highly likely that new generations approaching Marx's work will experience for themselves the fascination of these manuscripts. They are certainly indispensable today for anyone who wishes seriously to consider the fate of the Left and the transformation of the world around us.

Marcello Musto is editor of [Karl Marx's Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later](#) (London/New York: Routledge, 2008). This article is extracted from this book. See, also, ["The Importance of Marx, 150 Years after the Grundrisse."](#) a conversation between Marcello Musto and Eric Hobsbawm.

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