

When Marx Translated *Capital*

BY

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Today marks 150 years since the first French edition of *Capital*. This wasn't just a translation but a "completely revised" work — showing how Karl Marx's research continually renewed his critical perspective on capitalist development.

In February 1867, after more than two decades of herculean work, Karl Marx told his friend Friedrich Engels that the first part of his long-awaited critique of political economy was finally complete. Marx travelled from London to Hamburg to deliver the manuscript of Volume I ("The Process of Production of Capital") of his magnum opus and, in agreement with his editor, Otto Meissner, it was decided that Capital would appear in three parts. Brimming with satisfaction, Marx wrote that the publication of his book was, "without question, the most terrible missile that has yet been hurled at the heads of the bourgeoisie."

Despite the long labor of composition before 1867, the structure of *Capital* would be considerably expanded over the coming years, and Volume I itself continued to absorb significant energies on Marx's part, even after its publication. One of the most evident examples of this commitment was the French translation of *Capital*, published in forty-four installments between 1872 and 1875. This volume was not a mere translation but a version "completely revised by the author" in which Marx deepened the section on the process of capital accumulation and better developed his ideas about the distinction between the "concentration" and "centralization" of capital.

Seeking the Definitive Version

After interruptions due to poor health — and after a period of intense political activity for the International Working Men's Association — Marx turned to work on a new edition of *Capital*, Volume I, at the beginning of the 1870s. Dissatisfied with how he had expounded the theory of value, he spent December 1871 and January 1872 rewriting what he had published in 1867. A reprint of *Das Kapital* in German that included the changes made by Marx came out in 1872. This was a key year for the dissemination of *Capital*, since it also saw the appearance of the Russian and French translations.

Entrusted to Joseph Roy, who had previously translated some texts of the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, the latter appeared in batches with the publisher Maurice Lachâtre. The first one was published 150 years ago, on September 17, 1872.

Marx agreed that it would be good to bring out a “cheap popular edition.” “I applaud your idea of publishing the translation . . . in periodic installments,” he wrote. “In this form, the book will be more accessible to the working class, and for me that consideration outweighs any other,” he argued with his publisher. Aware, however, that there was a “reverse side” of the coin, he anticipated that the “method of analysis” he had used would “make for somewhat arduous reading in the early chapters,” and that readers might “be put off” when they were “unable to press straight on in the first place.” He did not feel he could do anything about this “disadvantage,” other than alert and forewarn “readers concerned with the truth.” As Marx wrote in a well-known sentence of the preface to the French edition of *Capital*, “There is no royal road to learning and the only ones with any chance of reaching its sunlit peaks are those who do not fear exhaustion as they climb the steep upward paths.”

In the end, Marx had to spend much more time on the translation than he had initially planned for the proof correction. As he wrote to the Russian economist Nikolai Danielson, Roy had “often translated too literally,” forcing Marx himself to “rewrite whole passages in French, to make them more palatable to the French public.” Earlier that month, his daughter Jenny had told family friend Ludwig Kugelmann that her father was “obliged to make numberless corrections,” rewriting “not only whole sentences but entire pages.” Subsequently, Engels wrote to Kugelmann in a similar vein that the French translation had proved a “real slog” for Marx and that he “more or less had to rewrite the whole thing from the beginning.”

In revising the translation, moreover, Marx decided to introduce some additions and modifications. In the postscript to *Le Capital*, he did not hesitate to attach to it “a scientific value independent of the original” and stated that the new version “should be consulted even by readers familiar with German.” The most interesting point, especially for its political value, concerns the historical tendency of capitalist production. If in the previous edition of *Capital*, Volume I, Marx had written that “the country that is more developed industrially only shows, *to those less developed*, the image of its own future,” in the French version, the words in italics were substituted with “to those that follow it up the industrial ladder.” This clarification limited the tendency of capitalist development only to Western countries that were already industrialized.

Following a more in-depth study of history, Marx was now fully aware that the schema of linear progression through the “Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production,” which he had drawn in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in 1859, was inadequate for an understanding of the movement of history, and that it was indeed advisable to steer clear of any philosophy of history. He did not see historical development in terms of unshakable linear progress toward a predefined end. The more pronounced multilinear conception that Marx developed in his final years led him to look even more attentively at the historical specificities and unevenness of political and economic development in different countries and social contexts. This approach certainly increased the difficulties he faced in the already bumpy course of completing the second and third volumes of *Capital*.

In the last decade of his life, Marx undertook thorough investigations of societies outside Europe and expressed himself unambiguously against the ravages of colonialism. It would be wrong to suggest otherwise, and to attribute him a Eurocentric view of societal development. Marx criticized thinkers who, while highlighting the destructive consequences of colonialism, used categories peculiar to the European context in their analyses of peripheral areas of the globe. He repeatedly warned against those who failed to observe the necessary distinctions between phenomena, and — especially after his theoretical advances in the 1870s — he was highly wary of transferring interpretive categories across completely different historical or geographical fields. All this is clearer thanks to *Le Capital*.

In 1878, in a letter in which Marx weighed the positive and negative sides of the French edition, he wrote to Danielson that it contained “many important changes and additions,” but that he had “also sometimes been obliged — principally in the first chapter — to simplify the matter.” Later, Engels thought that these additions were simplifications not worth reproducing, and he did not include all the changes made by Marx to *Le Capital* in the fourth German edition of *Capital*,

published in 1890, seven years after Marx's death. Marx was unable to complete a final revision of *Capital*, Volume I. In fact, neither the French edition of 1872–75 nor the third German edition issued in 1881 can be considered the definitive version that Marx would have liked it to be.

Marx Through *Le Capital*

Le Capital had considerable importance for the diffusion of Marx's work around the world. It was used for the translation of many extracts into various languages — the first in the English language, published in 1883, for example. More generally, *Le Capital* represented the first gateway to Marx's work for readers in various countries. The first Italian translation — published between 1882 and 1884 — was made directly from the French edition. In the case of Spanish, *Le Capital* made it possible to bring out some partial editions and two complete translations: one in Madrid, in 1967, and one in Buenos Aires, in 1973. Since French was more widely known than German, it was thanks to this version that Marx's critique of political economy was able to reach many countries in Hispanic America more rapidly. Much the same was true for Portuguese-speaking countries. In Portugal itself, *Capital* circulated only through the small number of copies available in French until an abridged version appeared in Portuguese, shortly before the fall of the Salazarist dictatorship in 1974. In general, political activists and researchers in both Portugal and Brazil found it easier to approach Marx's work via the French translation than in the original. The few copies that found their way into Portuguese-speaking African countries were also in that language.

Colonialism also partly shaped the mechanisms whereby *Capital* became available in the Arab world. While in Egypt and Iraq it was English that featured most in the spread of European culture, the French edition played a more prominent role elsewhere, especially in Algeria, which, in the 1960s, was a significant center for facilitating the circulation of Marxist ideas in “non-aligned” countries. The significance of *Le Capital* stretched also to Asia, as demonstrated by the fact that the first Vietnamese translation of Volume I, published between 1959 and 1960, was based on the French edition.

Thus, as well as being often consulted by translators around the world and checked against the 1890 edition published by Engels, which became the standard version of *Das Kapital*, the French translation has served as the basis for complete translations of *Capital* into seven languages. One hundred and fifty years since its first publication, it continues to be a source of stimulating debate among scholars and activists interested in Marx's critique of capitalism.

In a letter to his longtime comrade Friedrich Adolph Sorge, Marx remarked that with *Le Capital*, he had “consumed so much of [his] time that [he would] not again collaborate in any way on a translation.” That is exactly what happened. The toil and trouble that he put into producing the best possible French version were remarkable indeed. But we can say they were well rewarded. *Le Capital* has had a significant circulation, and the additions and changes made by Marx during the revision of its translation contributed to the anti-colonial and universal dimension of *Capital* that is becoming widely recognized nowadays, thanks to some of the newest and most insightful contributions in Marx studies.

CONTRIBUTORS

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