1 Introduction
The Making and the Dissemination of Le Capital

Marcello Musto

Capital: An unfinished masterpiece
In February 1867, after several years of hard work, Marx was finally able to give Engels the long-awaited news that Volume I of his masterpiece was finished. Marx went to Hamburg to deliver the manuscript and, in agreement with his editor Otto Meissner, it was decided that Capital would appear in three volumes. The first of them – ‘The Process of Production of Capital’ – was put on sale on 14 September. A few months before that date, Marx had written to his friend Johann Philipp Becker that the publication of his book was, ‘without question, the most terrible missile that has yet been hurled at the heads of the bourgeoisie (landowners included)’ (Marx to Becker, 17 April 1867, Marx and Engels 1987: 358).

Following the final modifications, the table of contents was as follows:

Preface
1. Commodity and money
2. The transformation of money into capital
3. The production of absolute surplus value
4. The production of relative surplus value
5. Further research on the production of absolute and relative surplus value
6. The process of accumulation of capital
Appendix to Part 1, 1: The form of value.
(Marx 1983: 9–10)

Despite the long labour of composition before 1867, the structure of Capital would be considerably expanded over the coming years, and various further modifications would be made to the text. Volume I therefore continued to absorb significant energies on Marx’s part even after its publication.

In October 1867, Marx returned to Capital, Volume II. But this brought a recurrence of his health issues: liver pains, insomnia and carbuncles (see Musto 2018). The new year began much as the old one had ended and at times he was even unable to attend to his correspondence. As soon as he could return to

DOI: 10.4324/9781003336365-1
work, he took a great interest in questions of history, agriculture and ecology, compiling notebooks of extracts from works by various authors. Particularly important for him were the *Introduction to the Constitutive History of the German Mark, Farm, Village, Town and Public Authority* (1854), by the political theorist and legal historian Georg Ludwig von Maurer, and three German works by Karl Fraas: *Climate and the Vegetable World throughout the Ages, A History of Both* (1847), *A History of Agriculture* (1852) and *The Nature of Agriculture* (1857).

While affording Marx a little energy for these new scientific studies, the state of his health continued its ups and downs. Anyway, he was able to put together a group of preparatory manuscripts on the relationship between surplus value and rate of profit, the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to decline and the metamorphoses of capital – which occupied him until the end of 1868 (see Musto 2019: 26–7).

The next year, however, the carbuncles flared up with exhausting regularity and his liver took another turn for the worse. Despite his plan to finish *Volume II* by September 1869, which had once seemed realistic, his continuing misfortunes over the following years prevented him from ever completing the second part of his magnum opus.

There were, of course, also theoretical reasons for the delay. From Autumn 1868 to Spring 1869, determined to get on top of the latest developments in capitalism, Marx compiled copious excerpts from texts on the finance and money markets that appeared in *The Money Market Review*, *The Economist* and similar publications.¹ His ever-growing interest in developments on the other side of the Atlantic drove him to seek out the most up-to-date information. He wrote to his friend Sigfrid Meyer that ‘it would be of great value [...] if [he] could dig up some anti-bourgeois material about landownership and agrarian relations in the United States’. He explained that ‘since [he would] be dealing with rent in [his] 2nd volume, material against H. Carey’s “harmonies” would be especially welcome’ (Marx to Meyer, 4 July 1868, Marx and Engels 1988: 61). Moreover, in Autumn 1869, having become aware of recent literature on socio-economic changes in Russia, he decided to learn Russian so that he could study it for himself. He pursued this new interest with his usual rigour.²

**The search for the definitive version of Volume I and *Le Capital***

After many more interruptions and a period of intense political activity for the International Working Men’s Association, following the birth of the Paris Commune, Marx turned to work on a new edition of *Capital, Volume I*. Dissatisfied with the way in which he had expounded the theory of value, he spent December 1871 and January 1872 rewriting the 1867 appendix (see Musto 2018: 167–8). This led him to address again the first chapter itself, resulting in the manuscript known as ‘Additions and Changes to *Capital, Volume I*’ (Marx 1983: 1–55). During the revision of the 1867 edition, Marx inserted a number of additions and clarifications and also refined the structure of the
entire book. Some of these changes concerned surplus value, the difference between constant capital and variable capital and the use of machinery and technology. He also expanded the new edition from six chapters to seven books containing 25 chapters, themselves subdivided into more detailed sections. The new edition came out in 1872, with a print run of 3,000 copies.

The year 1872 was a year of fundamental importance for the dissemination of Capital, since April saw the appearance of the Russian translation – the first in a long series (Musto and Amini, forthcoming 2023). Begun by German Lopatin and completed by the economist Nikolai Danielson, it was regarded by Marx as ‘masterly’ (Marx to Davidson, 28 May 1872, Marx and Engels 1989: 385).

In this year, too, the publication of the French edition of Capital got under way. Entrusted to Joseph Roy, who had previously translated some of Ludwig Feuerbach’s texts, it was scheduled to appear in batches with the French publisher Maurice Lachâtre, between 1872 and 1875. Marx agreed that it would be good to bring out a ‘cheap popular edition’ (Marx to Lafargue, 18 December 1871, Marx and Engels 1989: 283). ‘I applaud your idea of publishing the translation [...] in periodic instalments’, he wrote. ‘In this form the work will be more accessible to the working class and for me that consideration outweighs any other’. 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. 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’ (Letter 4 in Part IV of this volume; also Marx to Lachâtre, 18 March 1872, Marx and Engels 1989: 344).

In the end, Marx had to spend much more time on the translation than he had planned for the proof correction. As he wrote to Danielson, Roy had ‘often translated too literally’ and forced him to ‘rewrite whole passages in French, to make them more palatable to the French public’ (Marx to Danielson, 28 May 1872, Marx and Engels 1989: 385). His daughter Jenny had told Ludwig Kugelmann that her father was ‘obliged to make numberless corrections’, rewriting ‘not only whole sentences but entire pages’ (Jenny Marx to Kugelmann, 3 May 1872, Marx and Engels 1989: 578) – and a month later she added that the translation was so ‘imperfect’ that he had been ‘obliged to rewrite the greater part of the first chapter’ (Jenny Marx to Kugelmann, 27 June 1872, Marx and Engels 1989: 582). Subsequently, Engels wrote in a similar vein to Kugelmann that the French translation had proved a ‘real slog’ for Marx and that he had ‘more or less to rewrite the whole thing from the beginning’ (Engels to Kugelmann, 1 July 1873, Marx and Engels 1989: 515).

In revising the translation, moreover, Marx decided to introduce some additions and modifications. These mostly concerned the section on the process of capital accumulation, but also some specific points such as the distinction between ‘concentration’ and ‘centralization’ of capital. In the postscript to
Le Capital, he did not hesitate to attach to it ‘a scientific value independent of the original’ and to state that the new version ‘should be consulted even by readers familiar with German’ (Marx 1996: 24). It was no accident that in 1877, when an English edition already seemed a possibility, Marx wrote to Sorge that a translator ‘must without fail [...] compare the 2nd German edition with the French edition, in which [he had] included a good deal of new matter and greatly improved [his] presentation of much else’ (Marx to Sorge, 27 September 1877, Marx and Engels 1991: 276). In a letter of November 1878, in which he 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 [aplatisr] the matter’ (Marx to Danielson, 15 November 1878, Marx and Engels 1991: 343). For this reason, he felt it necessary to clarify later in the month that the chapters ‘Commodities and Money’ and ‘The Transformation of Money into Capital’ should be ‘translated exclusively from the German text’ (Marx to Danielson, 28 November 1878, Marx and Engels 1991: 346).

The drafts of Capital, Volume II, which were left in anything but a definitive state, present a number of theoretical problems. The manuscripts of Capital, Volume III have a highly fragmentary character, and Marx never managed to update them in a way that reflected the progress of his research. It should also be borne in mind that he was unable to complete a revision of Capital, Volume I that included the changes and additions he intended to improve his book. In fact, neither the French edition of 1872–75 nor the German edition of 1881 can be considered the definitive version that Marx would have liked it to be.

Marx through Le Capital

Following its original appearance in German in 1867, Capital was published in its entirety in only three more editions during Marx’s lifetime. All of them came out, at least in part, in 1872: the Russian translation in the month of March, the revised second German edition – in nine parts – between Spring of that year and January 1873 and the series of 44 instalments of the French translation, from September 1872 to May 1875.

The appearance of Le Capital, translated by Joseph Roy and revised by Marx himself, had considerable importance for the diffusion of his work around the world. It was used for the translation of many extracts into various languages – the first in English and Spanish, for example – as well as for compendia such as the one put together in 1879 by the Italian anarchist Carlo Cafiero (1879), which received Marx’s approval and achieved a wide circulation. More generally, Le Capital represented the first gateway to Marx’s work for readers in various countries. The first Italian translation – published in instalments between 1882 and 1884 and then as a book in 1886 – 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 Latin 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 Salazar dictatorship. 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 centre for the circulation of Marxist ideas in the Maghreb, as well as in the Levant, where two full Arabic translations of Capital appeared in Syria and Lebanon, in 1956 and 1970, respectively. Moreover, between 1966 and 1970, a serialised Farsi edition was produced in exile, in the German Democratic Republic.


Thus, as well as being often consulted by translators around the world and checked against the fourth German edition – published by Engels in 1890 – Le Capital has until now served as the basis for complete translations into languages, to which we should add numerous partial editions in various countries (Marcello Musto and Babak Amini, forthcoming 2023). One hundred and fifty years since its first publication, it continues to be a source of stimulating debate among people interested in Marx’s work.

In a letter to Friedrich Adolph Sorge, the last general secretary of the International Working Men’s Association, Marx himself 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’ (Marx to Sorge, 27 September 1877, Marx and Engels 1991: 276). The toil and trouble that he put into producing the best possible French version were remarkable indeed. But we can certainly say they were well rewarded.

Notes

1 Still unpublished, these notes are included in the IISH notebooks, Marx–Engels Papers, B 108, B 109, B 113 and B 114.
2 In early 1870 Marx’s wife told Engels that ‘instead of looking after himself, [he had begun] to study Russian hammer and tongs, went out seldom, ate infrequently, and only showed a carbuncle under his arm when it was already very swollen and had hardened’ (Jenny Marx to Engels, 17 January 1870, Marx and Engels 1988: 551). Engels hastened to write to his friend, trying to persuade him that ‘in the interests of the Volume II’ he needed ‘a change of life-style’; otherwise, if there was ‘constant repetition of such suspensions’, he would never finish the book (Engels to Marx, 19 January 1870, Marx and Engels 1988: 408). The prediction was spot on.

3 In 1867 Marx had divided Capital, Volume I, into chapters. In 1872 these became sections, each with much more detailed subdivisions.

4 For a list of the additions and modifications in the French translation that were not included in the third and fourth German editions, see Marx (1983: 732–83).

5 The editorial work that Engels undertook after his friend’s death to prepare the unfinished parts of Capital for publication was extremely complex. The various manuscripts, drafts and fragments of Volumes II and III, written between 1864 and 1881, correspond to approximately 2,350 pages of the MEGA². Engels successfully published Volume II, in 1885, and Volume III, in 1894. However, it must be borne in mind that these two volumes emerged from the reconstruction of incomplete texts, often consisting of heterogeneous material. They were written in more than one period in time and thus include different, and sometimes contradictory, versions of Marx’s ideas.

6 See, for example, Marx to Danielson, 13 December 1881:

   In the first instance I must first be restored to health, and in the second I want to finish off the 2nd vol. [...] as soon as possible. [...] I will arrange with my editor that I shall make for the 3d edition only the fewest possible alterations and additions. [...] When these 1,000 copies forming the 3d edition are sold, then I may change the book in the way I should have done at present under different circumstances.

   (Marx and Engels 1993: 161)

7 See the section ‘The Early Dissemination of Capital in Europe’ in Musto (2020:77–85).

References

Cafiero, Carlo (1879) Il Capitale di Carlo Marx brevemente compendiato da Carlo Cafiero, Milan: Bignami.


Marx, Karl, IISH, Marx-Engels Papers, B 108, B 109, B 113 and B 114.


