

CAPITAL AND MARX'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL REVOLUTION

FROM NEUE MARX-LEKTÜRE TO POLITICAL MARXISM

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SUMMARY

The paper discusses the thesis about Marx's "epistemological revolution" by elaborating two issues that incorporate two entirely different contemporary Marxist traditions. To give this undertaking a more precise formulation, in its first part, the study examines the relationship between theory and history within the critique of political economy, proposed by Michael Heinrich under the tradition known as Neue Marx-Lektüre. It then turns to introducing the second part of the discussion related to the "commercialization model" of capitalist development, outlined by Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood within the context of the so-called Political Marxism. A special emphasis is thereby put on the latter, since it deals with the contemporary nature of a few distinct epistemological and methodological novelties of the *Capital*, as well as some posited in the *Grundrisse*.

KEYWORDS: *Capital*, Marx, history, theory, form, commercialisation model, epistemological revolution, critique of political economy

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1 INTRODUCTION

*Every new aspect of a science involves a revolution
in the technical terms (Fachausdrücken) of that science.*

– Engels 1886, 35–6

The *Capital* is one of those extraordinary books that one will hear mentioned in practically every serious discussion regarding capitalism. Clearly, interpretations of the *Capital* that appeared throughout history vary and are affected by different ideological inclinations. This is evident just by briefly comparing the interpretations that emerged after the historical fall of the socialist left and were developed in either the context of close ties between party politics and Marxism or at the margins of the academia. The amount of texts on Karl Marx and Marxism written during the economic crisis of 2008 increased, as it was, after all, the time when debates on capitalism, austerity measures, and state bailouts were mainstreamed as an integral part of everyday life. Marx “has been on the rise”, as stated by *The Guardian* a couple of years after the outbreak of the crisis (Jeffries 2012). Under the same public and political climate, Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* was listed among the best-selling books of all time. Unsurprisingly, from 2008 onwards, Marx’s *Capital* has been intensely deliberated upon in numerous studies (Fine and Saad-Filho 2010; Jameson 2011; Altwater 2012; Harvey 2010, 2013; Haug 2013; Callinicos 2014), not to mention the many publications issued on the occasion of the renowned German philosopher’s 200th birthday.

Slightly diverting from his 1848 *Communist Manifesto*, which was more than a brilliant essay brimming with insight into the class struggle and capitalist mechanisms of production that was acquired through rather momentary inspiration than an exhaustive study, in the late 1850s Marx began keeping extensive notes on the theories he developed with respect to political economy, which soon resulted in a series of important, albeit unfinished and unpublished manuscripts, such as the *Introduction* to the *Grundrisse* of 1857, the *Grundrisse (Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy)* of 1857/58 themselves, as well as the *Theories of Surplus Value* of 1861–1863 (Heinrich 2004, 22). Although Marx intended to develop this intellectual project, only a handful of written materials were published during his lifetime. Among the works to be counted into this category is the 1859 preliminary work titled *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, a short document on commodities and money which Marx never revised (Ibid., 23). There is also his *Capital, Volume I*, published in 1867 and edited in 1872, the fourth edition of which came to be used to create the version most commonly used today. Also, somewhere towards the end of his life, Marx disclosed to Engels that he wanted to thoroughly revise

the *Capital* and abandon the English variety of capitalism in favour of the American one as the textbook example of that economic system (Stützle 2017). Thus, *Capital* is a sort of work in progress, and should be approached as such. Friedrich Engels published the second and third volume, respectively, only after Marx's death: the former in 1885 and the latter in 1894 (Hecker 1999). In preparing these editions, Engels used Marx's at least 30 years old notes and the work has since been edited so many times that Marx never got to see today's final versions.

Although written 153 years ago, the *Capital* is to a great degree a contemporary book. It represents a major epistemological breakthrough both in developing criticism of the orthodox political economy and in understanding the origins of the capitalist mode of production. This is particularly distinguishable in the subtitle of the *Capital*, Marx's comprehensive scientific project named "The Critique of Political Economy". Notwithstanding the fact that Marx was rejected as a dead thinker on numerous occasions and in numerous contexts, his analysis of conceptual categories of political economy and methodological patterns can hardly be ignored when searching for origins of capitalism and its viable alternatives. Since the *Capital*'s aimed not only at presenting political economy and developing a fundamental "critique" of comprehensive economic science, it is highly reasonable that Marx explicitly insisted on what Thomas Kuhn calls "scientific revolution" (Murray 1988). Accordingly, the thesis about Marx's "epistemological revolution" will be analysed by elaborating two topics that incorporate two entirely different contemporary Marxist traditions. First thing that will be explicated is the relationship between theory and history within the critique of political economy as proposed by Michael Heinrich under the tradition known as the Neue Marx-Lektüre (New Marx Reading). The second topic represents one segment of discussions related to the "commercialization model" of capitalist development as outlined by Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood within the context of the so-called Political Marxism. Specific focus will be directed at the latter, as it not only illuminates the contemporary nature of several distinct epistemological and methodological novelties of the *Capital* (and some of the *Grundrisse*), but it also takes into account the latest theoretical contributions to the critique of transhistorical interpretations of capitalism's development that are primarily based on the concept of "primitive accumulation".

2 CAPITAL – DYNAMICS BETWEEN THEORY AND HISTORY WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

The chapter that follows attempts to summarize the relationship between history and theory as understood by various Marxist traditions in order to demonstrate the influence of epistemological novelties and peculiarities

of the *Capital*. By insisting, in a methodological sense, on locating the two parallel lines in the Marxist critique of political economy, the historical and the theoretical one, we do by no means suggest that they are divorced from and uninformed by each other. In fact, they operate within a unitary universe rather than in separate ones. Although Marx flirts with the methodological issues we consider here only briefly, namely in the foreword to the first edition of the *Capital* and in the afterword to its second edition, we have to concur with the statement of Patrick Murray that „Marx was one of the most methodologically self-reflective thinkers in the history of science” (Murray 1988, 109) and that he „informed his scientific work with an extraordinary methodological sophistication” (ibid., 139).

The discussion on scientific method could touch upon at least four big thematic registers: (1) the meaning and values of science; (2) the relations of science to morality, critique, and practice; (3) the relationship between science and the actual world; and (4) the proper scientific method (ibid., 221). Considering that Marx deepened the epistemological power of all four aspects in a way hitherto unseen, including philosophical method of historical materialism and subjecting to scrutiny the methods and conceptual apparatus of bourgeois economic sciences, as well as rejecting the metaphysical-theological system of philosophical idealism and reinterpreting its terminology, we are going to label the influence of Marx’s epistemology as „revolutionary”, since it showcases a strident, darting and unequivocal departure from mainstream regime of knowledge production in the context of political economy. Using Engels’ own words from the Preface to the volume two of the *Capital*, Marx’s work appears as a „thunderbolt out of a clear sky (Engels 1893) or, as Althusser puts it, the *Capital* represents a „brutal index of Marx’s novelty” (Althusser and Balibar 1970).

Even though our topic focuses primarily on contemporary Marxist tendencies that in a certain way amplify the revolutionary effects of the epistemology outlined in the *Capital*, we also listen in to Althusserian concerns: “[W]hat is the peculiar object of the economic theory founded by Marx in *Capital*, what is the object of *Capital*? What is the specific difference between Marx’s object and that of his predecessors?” (ibid.). When talking about *Capital*, we undoubtedly have that double “epistemological cut” in mind, whether we consider its departure from previous methods of economic sciences or the philosophical-scientific method in general. It is important to note that, although the discussion in terms of an “epistemological cut” always takes us back to Althusser’s *Reading Capital*, we are here not going to insist on deepening the argument about the difference between the “early” and “mature” among Marx’s works:

[W]e posed *Capital* the question of the specific difference both of its object and of its discourse – asking ourselves at each step in our reading,

what distinguishes the object of *Capital* not only from the object of classical (and even modern) political economy, but also from the object of Marx's Early Works, in particular from the object of the 1844 Manuscripts; and hence what distinguishes the discourse of *Capital* not only from the discourse of classical economics, but also from the philosophical (ideological) discourse of the Young Marx (ibid.).

Our goal is to take a step ahead of Althusser and his chronologically underlined understanding of the "epistemological cut" and to refresh the discussion on revolutionary effects of *Capital's* epistemology by taking into account interpretative traditions of the New Marx Reading (NMR) and Political Marxism (PM). Fully aware of how limited this format of discussion is for a substantial and serious presentation of various Marxist traditions that focus on the epistemology of *Capital*,¹ this paper will not present them all, but rather start with an introductory analysis of history and theory in *Capital* as conceptualized by the contemporary tradition of the NMR, particularly by Michael Heinrich as one of the most distinguished members of its "younger" generation.²

Speaking in very concise terms, the NMR critique of economy concentrates on reinterpretation of Marx's critique that was envisioned from a methodological perspective of social theory and took into account such questions as the original object of *Capital* (economic form-determination), the particularity of scientific presentation (dialectics of value-forms), as well as the connection between the three volumes of *Capital* (*Capital* in general vs particular *Capitals*). These questions „are posed anew”, as stated by Ingo Elbe, a member of the younger NMR generation, „as distinct from quantitative approaches, and with a specific emphasis upon the significance of the *Grundrisse* (Elbe 2014). Following the central problematic thread of the analysis of value-forms inevitably leads to an analysis of a whole cluster of related questions and ideas pertaining to the Marxist

1 It should be noted at the very beginning, however, that the studies examining the language and logic of presentation in *Capital*, as well as Marx's critical analysis of certain economic categories vary both in chronological and in genre sense. In this chapter we are primarily going to focus on the tradition of the New Marx Reading, yet it would not be superfluous to mention at least some influential analytical studies that, in the past century, dealt with interpreting the forms of presentation and language in *Capital*; for a systematic review of global discussions since 1965 cf. Hoff 2009; Harvey 2010. For specific studies and analyses of *Capital* cf. Rubin 1928 [1972]; Althusser and Balibar 1970; Fine and Saad-Filho 2010 [1975]; Cohen 1978; Haug 1979; Fine and Harris 1979; Pilling 1980; Resnick and Wolff 1982; Smith 1990.

2 The interpretative tradition of the NMR has its roots in the pioneering studies of former Adorno's students Hans Georg Backhaus and Helmut Reichelt from the early 1970s. It should be stressed that it is possible to identify even earlier interpreters who, in their works, emphasized Marx's theory of value and the problem of fetishism, in the first instance the Soviet-Marxist Isaak Illich Rubin (Čurković 2015, footnote 5). For a concise review of development of the NMR cf. Elbe 2014.

critique of political economy, including whether Marx's method outlined in the *Capital* is, in fact, logical or historical.

Even though Marx's *Capital* indisputably examines the capitalist mode of production, Heinrich suggests that the reading of the book reveals that Marx simultaneously combined two methods: the abstract-theoretical and the historical (Heinrich 2004, 29). On the one hand, the work features theoretical discussions on capital, prices, and money, while on the other hand there are instances of historical method where Marx presents his theories about the causes for the decline of feudalism in England and describes processes of transition from feudalism to capitalism. As Heinrich states, the central question of the work is: "Is *Capital* first and foremost concerned with the main features of the *history of capitalist development*, or with a particular *phase* of capitalism, or is the point rather about *abstract-theoretical depiction of the mode of operation* of capitalism?" (ibid.). This question inevitably opens further concerns: does this type of critique represent a medium through which we may problematize only certain aspects of existing theories and scrutinize only certain assumptions of economic science or does this critique indeed make comprehensive critical-theoretical claims? Friedrich Engels summarizes this problem in the following way:

The purpose of a work like the one under review [*Capital*, A/N] cannot simply be desultory criticism of separate sections of political economy or the discussion of one or another economic issue in isolation. On the contrary, it is from the beginning designed to give a systematic résumé of the whole complex of political economy and a coherent elaboration of the laws governing bourgeois production and bourgeois exchange. This elaboration is at the same time a comprehensive critique of economic literature, for economists are nothing but interpreters of and apologists for these laws (Engels 1859).

When comparing the interpretative patterns of *Capital* among Marxist classics, mainly those from the Second International, although both the abstract-theoretical and the historical method are employed, it is clear that the latter has precedence. In this regard Engels states the following:

Even after the determination of the method, the critique of economics could still be arranged in two ways – historically or logically [...] The logical method of approach was therefore the only suitable one. This, however, is indeed nothing but the historical method [...] The point where this history begins must also be the starting point of the train of thought, and its further progress will be simply the reflection, in abstract and theoretically consistent form, of the historical course (ibid.).

Quite similarly, Karl Kautsky suggests that the *Capital* should be read through the historical lens. In the very introduction to *The Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx*, he defines his analysis of the *Capital I* as a “historical work” and emphasizes that “value is a historical category” (Kautsky 1887/1903). Kautsky notes that “Marx was charged with recognizing capital to be a historical category and to prove its emergence in history, rather than mentally constructing it” (Elbe 2014). Rudolf Hilferding also states that “in accordance with the dialectic method, conceptual evolution runs parallel throughout with historical development” (ibid.). Both Marxism-Leninism and Western Marxism, claims Elbe, follow Hilferding in this assessment (ibid.). Also, taking the *Capital* as her point of departure, Rosa Luxemburg analyses imperialism as a specific accumulation method, claiming that it represents the final developmental stage of capitalism (Luxemburg 2015). In other words, she also performs an overwhelmingly historical reading of *Capital* while seeking a way to scientifically study and explain the conditions of capitalist monopolisation, extended reproduction and imperialism, all while taking into account the dynamic relation between capitalist and non-capitalist spatiality (Čakardić 2015).

A particular objection on part of the NMR to such examples of Marxist “historical schools”, which neglect the abstract-theoretical level of *Capital* – in particular the objection to Engels, whose assessments of Marx’s economic critique had long been considered the only legitimate and adequate – complains about disregarding revolutionary effects of Marx’s epistemology as are evident from examples of his radical theoretical departure from labour theory of value inherent to the classical political economy:

Up until the 1960s, Engels’ theorems continued to be passed on undisputed. [...] There is a significant disproportion between, on the one hand, the emphasis upon the “historical,” and on the other, the absence of a historically specific and socio-theoretically reflected concept of economic objectivity. This is made evident by the irrelevance of the concept of social form in the discussions of traditional Marxism, in which it is at most considered to be a category for ideal or marginal circumstances, but not a constitutive characteristic of Marx’s scientific revolution (Elbe 2014).

According to Elbe, to insist on a historical interpretation, which excludes a theoretical-abstract dimension, is to approach the reading of the text in a reductionist manner, particularly if Marx’s analysis is implied to be outdated or, at best, valid only for the nineteenth century (ibid.). It is precisely along these argumentative lines and unlike the above mentioned Marxist classics that Heinrich argues that Marx intentionally insisted on the theoretical-abstract approach in his research. To further strengthen this assertion, Heinrich quotes Marx’s definition of his own work, which

may be found at the end of the *Capital III*, where the author states that his analysis was out to present “the internal organization of the capitalist mode of production, its ideal average, as it were” (Heinrich 2004, 31). Therefore, it is not unlikely that all “historical” parts of *Capital* follow only after theoretical analysis of the presented associated categories, such as in the case of the “so-called primitive accumulation of capital.”

By following the thesis of Helmut Reichelt, which claims that the method of critique of political economy may be described as a “development” or “form analysis” (Reichelt 2001), NMR tends to encompass the particular sociality of different historical modes of production. Whereas “bourgeois” approaches at best conduct a science of social reproduction *within* specific economic and political systems, Elbe claims that the critique of political economy ought to be understood as a science *of* these forms (Elbe 2014). The critique of political economy, especially in later Marx’s works, “does not tolerate comparisons with the imminent demand from the programmatic statement of the *German Ideology*” (Reichelt 2001, 73) – namely to describe the capitalist mode of production in its totality. The critique, therefore, as Elbe argues, is not imminent in the sense that it would affirm the determinations of exchange, bourgeois ideals, proletarian demands for rights, or industrial production (which is subsumed to capital) against capitalism as a whole. The author points out that the NMR form analysis:

develops these forms (such as value, money, capital, but also law and the state) from the contradictory conditions of the social constitution of labour, “clarifies them, grasps their essence and necessity” (Marx 1843, N/A). Form *development* is not to be understood as the retracing of the historical development of the object, but rather the conceptual deciphering of the immanent (sic) structural relationships of the capitalist mode of production. It unscrambles the apparently independent, apparently objectively grounded forms of social wealth and the political compulsion of the capitalist mode of production as *historically specific* and therefore – albeit in no way arbitrarily or in a piecemeal manner – as *changeable* forms of praxis (sic) (Elbe 2014).

NMR claims that traditional and Western Marxism totally disregarded the revolutionary epistemological potential of Marx’s approach and his theory of monetary constitution of value (ibid.). Following in these footsteps, this interpretative tradition critiques the empirical-historical interpretation of *Capital* that starts with Engels, as well as the “pre-modern” interpretation of the theory of value in *Capital* (Hoff 2004). Elbe accentuates that Marx’s critique of political economy differs from some alternative political economy primarily in that it does not constitute a theory about surplus value, but rather a theory of labour based on the form. This may in a certain way also be seen by Reichelt, who also points to Marx’s

difficulties in grasping the capitalist system in all its varied details, and, according to him, the from it resulting solution of the problem through the focus on the “general notion of capital” (Mattick 1974). For Reichelt, this does not amount to “a superficial reduction, but was considered by Marx as a completely adequate treatment of the whole matter” (ibid.).

As we already mentioned, Heinrich suggests that *Capital* should in a methodological sense be conceptualized as an abstract-theoretical work that features some historical episodes. However, it should be many times stressed that the efforts of the NMR to underline the importance of the abstract-theoretical method of *Capital* by no means suggests that historical materialism is not a valid method or that it is superfluous. Although *Capital* primarily provides a comprehensive theoretical analysis of capitalism instead of focusing on a more closely defined particular subject and examines its essential traits and categories instead of only its history, historical passages in *Capital* are not irrelevant. On the contrary, according to the NMR, they complement the theoretical account even if they do not constitute it (Heinrich 2004, 33). This is so because, to reach serious scientific conclusions about social-economic relations in history, it is necessary to understand social structure at a definite stage and make the matter of historical research more specific. Nevertheless, this does not mean to suggest that the presentation of categories in *Capital* is ahistorical, as classical or neoclassical economic science would like to suggest. In fact, the terminology in classical economic theory, such as competition, commodity production, and entrepreneurial spirit, all express aspects of human nature, a substantive definition of a person, and are thus constructed as ahistorical constants, rather than results of specific capitalist relations that emerged historically and hence may be overcome. As will be explained in detail in the second part of this paper, it is precisely the analysis of these and similar would-be ahistorical categories, that makes Marx's critique of the entire economic science and society still relevant today (Stützle 2017).

Capital is still considered one of the historically most consequential breakthroughs in the critique of orthodox political economy. It is seen as the first systematic research into the peculiarities of capitalism in relation to previous modes of social production and reproduction. The epistemologically revolutionary nature of this type of analysis is exemplified in Marx's theory, which explains how every historical mode of production consists of entirely specific social relations, whose representation necessitates corresponding categories. In Marx's own words:

The example of labour strikingly demonstrates how even the most abstract categories, despite their validity in all epochs – precisely because they are abstractions – are equally a product of historical

conditions, even in the specific form of abstractions, and they retain their full validity only for and within the framework of these conditions (Marx 1859).

Strictly speaking, the categories used to describe or explain reality have historical rather than transhistorical character. It is indisputable that Marx appropriated the concept of labour theory of value from Adam Smith and David Ricardo, but to claim that he appropriated classical-economic definition of that theory would be farfetched. Marx's revolutionary rejection of the capitalist system is preceded by his theoretical disputes with the representatives of classical economics (Mattick 1974). He concluded that abstract categories such as "labour" or "labour as such", that oftentimes constitute points of departure in modern economics, are rendered "true in practice only in modern bourgeois society" (Marx 1859). He asserts:

The categories which express its relations, and an understanding of its structure, therefore, provide an insight into the structure and the relations of production of all formerly existing social formations, the ruins and component elements of which were used in the creation of bourgeois society. [...] The anatomy of man is a key to the anatomy of the ape. On the other hand, rudiments of more advanced forms in the lower species of animals can only be understood when the more advanced forms are already known (ibid.).

These statements provide guidelines that help us determine the level of abstraction we are dealing with. If we begin our analysis with a "completed structure" or an "ideal average" of the capitalist mode of production, as Marx suggests, it may mean that theoretical analysis, rather than strictly historical one, will provide categories which will underlie any further research into the history of capitalism. Heinrich controversially argues that "the notion that one must know history in order to understand the contemporaneity has a certain justification when applied to historical events, but not to social history (Heinrich 2004, 31).³ Michael Sommer and Dieter Wolf emphasize that what was written about historical origins of capital does not cease to be true once we analyse the case of production and reproduction of capital on historical foundations, i.e. when it comes to the contemporary history of capital that relies on its basic structure and

3 This controversial and provocative assertion – and many others centred around the question of whether Marx's method in *Capital* tends to be more "logical" or "historical" and, by extension, questions like whether there is only simple commodity production or the commodity form depends on the capitalist mode of production as captured by the term "abstract labour", also whether commodity has value or this value constitutes a strictly relational term – facilitated a polemic between Wolfgang Fritz Haug and Michael Heinrich in the magazine *das Argument* in the period between 2003–2004. Croatian translation of this interpretative dispute we can find in the first issue of the magazine *3k: kapital, klasa, kritika* (2014).

constitutes a subject of logical-systematic presentation in *Capital* (Sommer and Wolf 2013, 282).

As mentioned earlier, Marx's aspirations were focused on the entire "critique of political economy", rather than just developing a new system. In theory, *Capital* is a critique of an entire structure behind a category, rather than mere development of alternative "political economy". At certain point Marx states that in every historical and social science, including those dealing with presentation of economic categories, the subject "is presupposed both in reality and in the mind" (Marx 1978, 619). In this sense, categories we use to denote certain forms of existence oftentimes point to more than just individual and realistic sides of society or a subject matter at hand, and, hence "even from the scientific standpoint, [subject matter] by no means begins at the moment when it is discussed as such" (ibid).

Marx's epistemological revolution is literally a critique, or more precisely, a dismantling of self-evident categories and perspectives that political economy uses to defend its own supposed plausibility. In addition to the critique of the existing bourgeois science and the dissection of its theoretical field, Marx turns to examining capitalist social relations. Roughly speaking, although he concentrates on the attempt to prove that the rise in socially productive labour was carried out at the expense of an individual worker, he does not practise moral criticism. In fact, Marx refuses to reduce his analysis to a debate on "norms of justice" and instead outlines deeply and "immanently destructive" potential of capitalism. In relation to this, Matthijs Krul insists that *Capital* should be observed as a serious and painstaking analysis of functional modes of capitalist production rather than just random invective against that system (Krul 2017). This partly explains the abstract-theoretical nature of the first three chapters of the work. In them, Marx determines his key terminology and elaborates upon its application in text. However, "the 'abstractions' of the critique of political economy do not have anything to do with abstract models or generalizations that simply summarize the characteristics of the already existing forms" (Bonefeld 2013, 238). Presumably, *Capital* explains not only the logic of capitalism, but also what makes that logic functional. Hence, it fulfils both descriptive and explanatory purpose. This position will be further elaborated in the follow-up through the critique of commercialization model of capitalist development.

3 CAPITAL AND THE CRITIQUE OF “COMMERCIALIZATION MODEL”

In 1980s, Robert Brenner’s article “Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe”, which was based on Marx’s analyses in *Capital* and, to some extent, those in the *Grundrisse*, initiated a debate on European transition from feudalism to capitalism (Brenner 1985). Its controversial nature won it the name “The Brenner Debate”⁴ and the Marxist tradition responsible for further development of Brenner’s theoretical approach came to be known as Political Marxism (PM).⁵ The key theoretical considerations outlined in the afore-mentioned article are structured around critiquing the description of capitalism as a social form distinguished by the rise and spread of urbanization, demographic growth and commercialization. Arising from Smith’s classical-economic view on equilibrium “laws”, which postulated that the quantity demanded equals the quantity supplied, Brenner’s analysis was rooted in the opposition to the narrative that considered capitalism an inevitable consequence of trade, or more precisely, the market. Brenner rejected the self-evident assumptions that capitalism had to have been present in all societies throughout human history to a certain extent. Following Marx’s passages on history and phenomena from *Capital*, Brenner rejects the Smithian concept of society by dismantling the so-called “commercialization model” of capitalist development. So what does this model represent, especially if its critique is viewed as a revolutionary result of Marx’s epistemology?

The classical narrative of economic theory teaches that capitalism has “somehow always been there”. Ellen Meiksins Wood states that “old models” of classical economics are highly paradoxical and problematic:

How we understand the history of capitalism has a great effect on how we understand the thing itself. The old models of capitalist development were a paradoxical blend of transhistorical determinism and “free” market voluntarism, in which the capitalist market was both an immutable natural law and the perfection of human choice and freedom (Meiksins Wood 2002, 34).

4 Cf. Aston and Philpin 1985. For an updated review of the debate cf. Dimmock 2015; the study lays out Brenner’s key theses and comprehensively discusses some of the critiques against them.

5 Term “Political Marxism” (PM) was first coined by Guy Bois as a criticism directed to Brenner, but today the phrase “Political Marxism” is widely accepted, cf. Guy Bois 1985, p. 115. School of PM repoliticizes Marxist project and all its analyses are centred in *Capital* (often-times they are called “Capital-centric Marxism”). It is a movement away from post-Marxism and structuralism, and it stresses analytical importance of the role of class conflicts in society. For a detailed review of PM and bibliography of this school cf. Political Marxism’s Research Group website: <<http://politicalmarxism.wordpress.com>>.

According to the commercialization model, basic tenets of capitalism originate from prehistory, and capitalism as such aims at reaching the moment of its full, complete, and mature realization. This historical approach has produced an abundance of explanations stressing the “continuity” of capitalist and non-capitalist societies, and simultaneously of historical distinction of capitalism. The argument introduces the narrative that exchange has existed since time immemorial, and that capitalism does not represent a revolutionary innovation in relation to, for instance, feudal trade. Instead, it is understood as an extension of natural, inevitable, eternal, and universal characteristics of productive forces, almost seen as inherent characteristic of human nature and its inclinations. In other words, capitalism is primarily explained as a system of exchange or trade, the “commercialization” of society, which had already been present in feudalism and earlier societies and their trade patterns. By the same token, the emergence of industrial capitalist class is explained in the context of technological progress, as if it had emerged directly from the early modern bourgeoisie, which would then have developed out of mediæval bourgeoisie and this developmental line would go back in history all the way to early-Babylonian traders (ibid., 5).

According to Meiskins Wood, in its attempt to summarize the existing research on capitalism and its history, the commercialization model wanted to provide a universal and all-encompassing explanation of transhistorical development of human economy.⁶ This narrative assumed that capitalism is a result of specific human activities and that its intrinsic assumptions have been developed by humans over the course of history as obstacles on the path to its development and final realization were gradually being overcome. According to this model, rational individuals, focused on their own interests, have always been involved in some kind of exchange and calculation. The development of technology caused a growth in productivity and fuelled specialization and division of labour. This essentially gave structure to the model, as it was based on synching the development of market and technology, respectively. According to it, capitalist society is defined as a highly developed “commercial society” that has surpassed the primitive and outdated social forms and liberated itself from political constraints of pre-capitalist societies. However, the explanations based on this model never truly offered an answer to the question of origins of capitalism itself.

The first epistemological leap away from the classical commercialization model and the earliest emphasis on exploratory analysis of the origins of capitalism, as was already mentioned in several passages, was carried out by Marx himself in the very *Capital*. Therefore, if we undertake further

6 Cf. ibid, pg. 11–33. Term “commercialization model” was coined by Brenner, cf. Brenner 1985, pp. 25–30.

attempts to elaborate the premise of Marx's epistemological revolution, as proposed in the first part of the paper, what would certainly have to be considered is Marx's critique of ahistorical commercialization model of capitalist development. His historical analysis of capitalism proves that the principles of development of capitalist dynamics are actually unbalanced and that a single cataclysmic cause of capitalism, which in its pure form would have carried the seed of new social order and broken the chains of feudalism or earlier systems of social relations, does, in fact, not exist.

Contrary to commercialization interpretations, which attempted to generalize the emergence of specific systemic logic of capitalism as an extension of the old feudal exchange and trade, Brenner used Marx's theory of the so-called primitive capital accumulation as a departure point and further developed it. A key novelty in Brenner's interpretation and the PM's tradition in relation to *Capital* was the re-labelling of "relations of production" as "social-property relations". What Brenner Debate identified as relevant for the class analysis of transition processes along vertical line (capitalist – wage labourer) was the inclusion of class relations into a particular class along the horizontal line. In this context, the status of peasant population ranged from expropriated to land-owning peasants. This factor determined the access to the means of production, reproduction, and distribution of surplus value.

In his research, Brenner emphasizes the position of direct producers, who were forced to submit to "imperatives" of the market, even before the process of industrialization gained momentum. In this regard, he reaches two conclusions. Firstly, the bourgeoisie of industrial class was not necessarily the result of capitalist processes of separating labourers from the means of production. Secondly, capitalism originated even before the "bourgeois revolution" and was present among the richer peasant class. Simply put, as proposed by PM on the example of England in the 16th century, capitalism did not necessarily imply bourgeoisie. In his analysis, Brenner focused on the new rules of reproduction in 15th and 16th century England in order to emphasize the importance of increased production value and the methods that improved land value (Čakardić 2016). From there he concluded that these improvement techniques caused changes in social-property relations, i.e. class relations between lords and peasants. Meiksins Wood paraphrases Brenner's discovery, arguing that improvement and industrialisation were "the result, not the cause of market society" (Meiksins Wood 2002, 144).

With his critique of dominant economic theories, Brenner examined the transition to capitalism, concluding that capitalism evolved with the emergence of similar social structures in other geo-historical contexts. These factors, above all, imply the effects of a specific class structure and

long-term development of productive forces and economic growth. Brenner's socio-historical starting point is England as the historically first capitalist country (cf. Brenner 2003; Wood 2002; Marx 1867, chapter 24). He believes that English class configuration and social property relations, together with demographic changes and the growth of trade, facilitated the development of capitalism in that country. Brenner additionally points out that this shift was one-directional, with social-property relations serving as the universal trigger.

In Medieval England an exceptionally large part of land was owned by lords, whereas the tenants cultivated and maintained it. A factor that particularly strongly affected this relationship was the unstable rental price, i.e. unfixed rents. The price of rent was not prescribed by law, hence rendering it very flexible, deregulated and "situational", i.e., determined by market conditions. With capitalist-rentiers as a power player in the economic game, very specific reproductive conditions emerged, determined by highly competitive social relations. These did not in any way correspond to the idea of the market as an "opportunity", but rather to the idea of the market as a synonym for imperative, coercion, and subsistence. If we consider this phenomenon in the context of class structure of the early-modern English society, it is obvious that the peasant class had to be subordinated to the imperatives of the market and certainly not because they saw "opportunities" for progress there. Rent deregulation did not suit the interests of peasants who were better off if they remained "in direct possession of their means of subsistence, were shielded from competition and the compulsions of the market, even if they engaged in market exchange (Meiksins Wood 2002, 53)".

The position of English landowners was likewise conditioned by the growth in productivity. Although lords occupied the position of principal owners and enjoyed substantial economic power, they were not obliged to use force, i.e. extra-economic coercion to extract surplus value. In agreement with Brenner and Meiksins Wood, this argument presupposes the distinction between the English and the French ruling classes. The latter primarily used political and legal means, or force, to implement strategies of surplus value appropriation, whereas English agrarian capitalism evolved due to the increase in tenant's productivity, which was something lords very much depended on. The English case is a phenomenon that is manifest most precisely in this distinction. In these circumstances, according to Brenner, relations between classes were organized under particular conditions of reproduction.

Seeing that, for Brenner, class structure of feudalism or feudal social-property relations are not strictly determined by social relations between serfs, one should also consider a somewhat bigger picture that

would include the allocation of feudal lands and class power. Brenner argues that the continuity of relatively stable feudal power played an important role in the development of English capitalism. In the early 15th century, Brenner claims, serfdom largely disappeared:

It was the English lords' inability either to re-enserv the peasants or to move in the direction of absolutism (as had their French counterparts), which forced them in the long run to seek novel ways out of their revenue crisis. With the decline of their own self-discipline and self-organisation under the pressure of the later medieval crisis of seigniorial revenue, the English ruling class was impelled, for a time, to turn instruments of feudal political accumulation in upon itself. But the resulting zero-sum game *within the ruling class* in the context of declining overall ruling-class incomes, could not constitute a stable solution. Lacking the ability to reimpose some system of extra-economic levy on the peasantry, the lords were obliged to use their remaining feudal powers to further what in the end turned out to be capitalist development. Their continuing control of the land – their maintenance of broad demesnes, as well as their ability to prevent the achievement of full property rights by their customary tenants and ultimately to consign these tenants to the status of leaseholders – proved to be their trump card. This control of landed property was, above all, an expression of their feudal powers, the legacy of the position the lords had established and maintained throughout the medieval period on the basis of their precocious self-centralisation (Brenner 1985a, 293.)

Because they focus on serfdom, Brenner's claims are of great importance to comprehensive understanding of the origins of capitalism. He additionally proposes reasons for analysing the origins of feudal crises. Only when rights and authority of lords ceased to be the means of control of peasantry was it possible to talk about the actual abolition and the decline of serfdom. Of course, serfdom could have always been restored by various existing political and economic means, even if the decline of serfdom automatically implied the decline of feudalism. For Brenner, transition from feudalism to capitalism implied "the collapse or breakdown of lordly surplus extraction by means of extra economic compulsion as one side of a two-sided development of class relations, the other being the undermining of peasant possession or separation of direct producers from their means of subsistence (ibid., 214–215)".

The role of yeomen, or free peasants, is almost equally important for this discussion. Operational principle in Brenner's analysis, as addressed earlier, is the role of market compulsion, and not what orthodox economics regards as market "opportunities". If in the class analysis of this discussion the focus lies on small landowner-farmer or small producer of certain

goods, it has to be taken into account that the social-economic position of these subjects was less than ideal as they did not have ample opportunities for advancing or competing on the market. On the contrary, they were in a highly conditioned situation in which the relationship of competition or, more precisely, the imperative for active competition on the market constituted one of the primary evolutionary forces of society towards agrarian capitalism. In this respect, yeomen mostly assumed the role of typical capitalist leaseholders and were under constant pressure from competitive market, which soon imposed itself as the only means of economic survival. This way, lords and leaseholders were in a strong mutually dependant relationship, that is, they depended on market dynamics and their personal success in agrarian-capitalist rules of the market. In this type of relationship, lords depended on profit from leaseholders, whereas leaseholders depended on the lease.

Meiksins Wood argues that leaseholders in medieval England were more than mere producers who would suddenly have “transitioned” into capitalists. The situation is somewhat more complex, as she herself admits: “His [leaseholder’s] specific relation to the means of production, the conditions in which he had access to land itself, in a sense made him a capitalist from the start” (Meiksins Wood 2002, 54). This means that the tenant did not miraculously acquire a position when he was finally able to appropriate surplus value for himself or gained access to economic development, or rented labourers to work for him. It is more likely that “his relations to the means of his own self-reproduction from the outset subjected him, together with any wage labourers he may have employed, to market imperatives” (ibid.).

The reason why we consider Brenner and Meiksins Wood to be the key reference points in the context of alternative approaches to the dominant theoretical-historical commercialization narratives is simply because they emphasize social “imperatives” as the catalysts of transition from feudalism to capitalism. This historical transition happened purely due to economic pressures of competitive dynamics of the market and because of direct pressure from landowners, who had enormous economic benefits from the increase in the lease rate. Here, the appearance of “mass proletariat is the *end*, not the beginning of the process” (ibid., 60). Similarly, Brenner states that the logic of the market as a force and imperative is the cause, not the consequence of proletarianization (cf. ibid.).

It appears that Brenner took a step ahead of Marx’s *Capital*. If we want to further explicate the subject matter explored in Marx’s analysis of transition from feudalism to capitalism, complications immediately arise due to the fact that Marx not only developed more than one line of argument in his work, but also because these lines of argumentation do not always

mutually correspond (cf. Comninel 1987). In *The German Ideology* and *The Communist Manifesto* Marx hypothesizes that capitalism existed already during feudalism, but a discussion of the origins of capitalism is omitted and they somewhat tacitly assumed. Then, in the *Grundrisse* and the *Capital*, he proposes an alternative perspective and breaks away from the “old paradigm”. This shift takes place, as already emphasized, in the section of *Capital I* on the “so-called primitive accumulation”.

The classical commercialization model of Adam Smith is based on the theory that treats the process of capital accumulation, which enabled the accumulation of wealth on part of the capable and “entrepreneurial” individuals, as the underlying cause of the emergence of capitalism. This process is in its entirety merely a story about the “history” of gaining material wealth and creating investment opportunities. In the commercialization model, the origins of capitalism are interpreted as a result of accumulation of “capital”. Furthermore, within that model, understanding the phenomenon of “commercial society” assumes the description typical of the “quantitative” model of interpretation, i.e. it takes on the form of a narrative about how trade was developed and how wealth was being accumulated. This theory barely touches upon the “qualitative” change that may provide some insight into transition from feudalism to capitalism, i.e. a transition from one social relation into another.

Marx delivered an intense blow to orthodox economics and simultaneously prospectively rejected the commercialization model with his critique of the “so-called primitive accumulation of capital.” His revolutionary explication that wealth in itself does not imply merely “capital”, and that capital implies specific social relations, served as the basic material for the development of Marxist explanatory models for transition from feudalism to capitalism. Meiksins Wood emphasizes that this key premise in Marx became the point of departure for the critique of classical-economic narrative on capital accumulation as the origin of capitalism (Meiksins Wood 2002, 36). The accumulation of capital was an indispensable precondition for capitalism, but it was far from sufficient or the only one. What facilitated the transition to the capitalist mode of production or transformation of wealth into “capital” was the change in societal property relations. They affected the dynamics of the phenomena and laws in the distribution of capital and economic growth, not vice versa. What does this mean for Marx specifically?

Marx argued that England was the original place where transformation of relations of production took place and that expropriation of land provided the basis for that whole process. Due to the newly established agrarian relations, feudal lords began making significant profit from rent that they received directly from well-off capitalist-leaseholders, whereas

small producers, who were unable to pay rent, were dispossessed and ultimately turned into cheap labour. Meiksins Wood points out that Marx called this process of accumulation the “original” primitive accumulation, because he sharply shifted the focus from classical-economic mythology of voluntarism and entrepreneurship to the historical role of societal property relations in generating new economic imperatives and systemic investment in improving the productivity of labour (ibid., 37). This is where we ought to look for origins of capitalism and interpret particularities of its logic. Moreover, to clarify the issue, epistemological novelties proposed and elaborated by Marx in analyses of these issues are an entirely new concept in the socio-humanistic theory.

Once we accept Marx’s argument arising from the historical analysis of capitalism, we have simultaneously made two very important epistemological steps. Firstly, we are paving the way for analysing the origins of capitalism and historical conditions that enabled it, thus understanding that it is not a transhistoric phenomenon, but rather one that has its own sources and origins. Secondly, the stakes are even higher when one realizes that identifying the origins of capitalism may mean anticipating its end. With respect to that, Meiksins Wood states the following: “Capitalism was not the product of some inevitable natural process, nor was it the end of history” (ibid.). In a sense, Brenner and the whole PM tradition, in their critique of the commercialization model, continue to epistemologically develop theory established in the *Capital I*, which is primarily the critique of orthodox-economic analysis of the history of society and its trade/commercial activities, their transhistorical methodological form and ontology, and the specific discourse on human nature that arises from it.

4 CONCLUSION

Combing through the interpretative traditions of the NMR and the PM, still fully aware that we are dealing with very different systems of thought that must be read as separate entities, our discussion was primarily intended as an incentive for deepening the epistemology of *Capital* and its effects. No less than 153 years since the publication of *Capital*, the contemporary critique of the commercialization model starts to demonstrate how the work’s radical-epistemological breakthrough is still applied in both the abstract-theoretical and historical analyses of capitalism. Thus, *Capital* is far from obsolete. Similarly, the New Marx Reading tradition, starting with Rubin, continues to develop an epistemological repository of *Capital*, focusing on further investigation of the concept of form of value and bringing out particularly clearly the significance of distinctions between value and exchange value, as well as between abstract and embodied labour. All of these contribute much to the debate about the

methodology of *Capital* (Rubin 1927). For these reasons we tend to believe that NMR's extraordinary epistemological enterprise enables a broader critique of orthodox political economy and paves the way towards insisting on the relationship between theoretical and historical approach to *Capital* in a fashion similar to the undertakings of the PM's tradition. In a sense, these contemporary Marxist traditions, apart from pointing to the analytical vitality of Marx's scientific project, remind the humanities in general, and philosophy in particular, of the impossibility of forming a plausible theoretical basis of any idea if it has not been appropriately socio-historically pinpointed beforehand. In the same sense, the analyses of political economy are not to be reduced to trivialized series of particularizing empirical data, since some minimal dosage of theoretical universalism and abstraction is mandatory for understanding capitalism as a whole.

However, apart from theoretical-historical discussion, which is primarily motivated by methodological implications and readings of *Capital* through the lens of NMR and PM, we would like to conclusively emphasize the inherent connection between epistemology and politics. This would basically mean that it is not enough to take a scientific study and locate certain methodological novelties or radical epistemological approaches in it, but also to persistently highlight the revolutionary effects of particular epistemology. If we want to deliver an example of a philosophy whose bonding of epistemology and politics possesses revolutionary potential, then we would certainly be obliged to point out Marx's *Capital*. When Althusser, in the first part of *Reading 'Capital'* states that "some day it is essential to read *Capital* to the letter" (Althusser 1970), it cannot simply be taken as a demand that stops at correct and scientific understanding of theory. It bears a much more radical epistemological implication. To understand how political economy works from a Marxist perspective means polishing the critical, methodological and conceptual apparatus to its maximum, because, in order to be able to change the world, we have to know how it functions. Anyway, forms of consciousness have not only a historical and political character, but a logical character as well (cf. Murray 1988, 14). Geoff Pilling formulates it similarly:

For Marx a study of the concepts of political economy as they had arisen in the pre-1830 period was decisively important for he held that without conceptual thinking, no conscious thinking was possible. [...] These forms had to be investigated, because it was only through them that the content of bourgeois relations developed and revealed itself (Pilling 1980).

This paper may be summarized by paraphrasing the words of Ellen Meiksins Wood: "We live in times when capitalism has 'finally' become a universal system that no longer has corrective mechanisms beyond its own

logic; therefore, in the spatial sense, it feeds exclusively on itself” (Meiksins Wood 1997). It is universal, not only in the sense that it is global or that every economic actor operates according to the capitalist logic, be it the centre or the periphery, but also in the sense that the logic of accumulation, commodification and competition has become the fundamental way of organizing human life and nature. This premise may serve as a departure point to modestly argue that Marx's *Capital* and his epistemology represent more than just efficient current instructions for explanatory analysis of systemic logic of capitalism. „Heavy” terms like “revolutionary” or “radical” are employed in describing the epistemology of *Capital* not only to point out the extraordinary nature of political conclusions it allows, but also to underline it as is the “most radical” critique of economics and society in modern philosophical thought, as well as of the manner in which we analyse the scientific field of economic theory today and debunk its foundations. Therefore, *Capital* is more than a critique of particular corrosive and destructive elements of economics. It represents Marx's more ambitious, and hence, more revolutionary theory, which suggests that the element of destruction are the economics itself.

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