Which Science of Value?

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Twenty years ago, a German newspaper asked me to review a text by Michael Heinrich that was in its third edition.[1] I began my review by questioning the reasons for the book's success. The publication's context was the revival of the critical edition of the works of Marx and Engels (MEGA^2). After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Marx's critical edition passed from the hands of the SED in Berlin to the more 'respectable' oversight of the Internationale Marx-Engels-Stiftung (IMES) in Amsterdam. Young and senior academics alike saw the critical edition as an opportunity to approach Marx as a subject of philological, scholarly, and de-ideologized study—one that was, eventually, also de-politicized. My 2005 review attributed the success of Heinrich's book to three interconnected elements: first, the monetary theory of value, which emphasized exchange over production; second, the bracketing of classes and class struggle; and third, the framing of the core issue of capitalism as its "intrinsic logic," in which everything becomes subordinated to the limitless production of surplus value, culminating in "environmental destruction."[2] In other words, the problem of capital, if one still wants to speak of a problem of capital, would consist in its "immanent power of destruction."[3] What is to be done? We need only to become aware of it. Politically vague conclusions like these have found, and continue to find, easy acceptance in a social and political climate marked by

[1] Michael Heinrich, *Zur Kritik der politichen Oekonomie*, Stuttgart, Schmetterling Verlag, 2005; English translation: *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 2012.
[2] Heinrich, *An introduction*, 117.
[3] Ibid., 36.

the perceived disappearance of classes and class struggle, the marginalization of industrial labor, and the pressing urgency of ecological catastrophe.

In *Wissenschaft vom Wert*, Michael Heinrich sketches a particular image of Marx, highlighting what is consistent and what is less so in *Capital*. In doing so, Heinrich excludes everything that is deemed superfluous to the science of value. The reader must wait nearly four hundred pages to find any mention of workers in the flesh in Heinrich's book. *Wissenschaft* does not concern itself with bodies. Only a few pages from the end of the book does Heinrich include a few quotes from Marx on the exploitation of the producers and the "systematic robbery of what is necessary for the life of the worker while he is at work".[4] Heinrich cuts out the quote from Marx's text, which instead specifies what the robbery is about: "space, light, air and protection against the dangerous or the unhealthy concomitants of the production process."[5] Heinrich considered this Marxian specification unimportant. However, if the theft regards "space, light, air," it shows that the theft is not only about the surplus value produced by the worker, but also about the worker's life itself. This point warrants further exploration.

Throughout his book, Heinrich repeatedly emphasizes that these Marxian remarks should not be interpreted as a moral critique, a problem of justice, or a demand for the right to an unimpaired life. From the perspective of Heinrich's *Wissenschaft*, the purpose of these passages is solely to illustrate the destructive nature of the capitalist system. This should also explain why Marx would "sometimes (*zuweilen*)" use "drastic terms" such as "exploitation" or even evoke the image of the labor-sucking vampire.[6] Sometimes? *Zuweilen*? What about the hundreds of pages in which Marx describes the conditions of the laborers in modern factories? What about the pages detailing the past and present history of the capitalist mode of production? When Marx describes the revolution that took place in the production process in Lancashire at the expense of the workers, he writes that "*experimenta in corpore vili*, like those of anatomists on frogs, were actually being made here."[7] But these "drastic terms" hold little significance for the *Wissenschaft*. According to Heinrich, "the historical passages," which "come after the (theoretical) depictions [...] complement the theoretical account, but they don't constitute the theoretical account."[8] Heinrich does not acknowledge the theory and politics intrinsic to the hundreds of pages of ethnography on the condition of workers in modern capitalist production.

This limitation is not unique to Heinrich but is shared by much of academic Marxism. Similarly, Chris Arthur described the historical-ethnographic pages of *Capital* as

[4] Michael Heinrich, *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert. Die Marxsche Kritik der politischen Ökonomie zwischen wissenschaftlicher Revolution und klassischer Tradition*, Münster, Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2006, 384.
[5] Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy,* London and New York, Penguin, 1990, 553.
[6] Heinrich, *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert*, 384.
[7] Marx, *Capital*, 586.
[8] Heinrich, *An introduction*, 32.

"strictly illustrative."[9] For Arthur, the chapter on the working day "can be deduced from the concept of the capital relation that there must be struggles over the length of the working day, but it was by no means necessary for Marx to illustrate it at such length."[10] If *Capital* is read as a book of logic, then the long fourth part, where the intensity of excerpts from *Factory Reports* is greater, becomes on the one hand purely "illustrative," and on the other, serves only to introduce the concept of relative surplus value and real subsumption, which is "logically implicit in the concept of capital."[11] This is as far as the Hegelianization, scientification, and logicization of Marx's *Capital* goes: "The appearance shows nothing that is not in the essence and there is nothing in the essence that is not manifested."[12] It seems that Marx wrote the so-called historical parts for the dumb reader, whereas the smart, academically trained one can understand everything by reading the first part and from there grasp the whole logic of capital.

To preserve the purity of his *Wissenschaft*, Heinrich points out that Marx not only talks about the theft of surplus value from the worker, but also makes remarks of the opposite nature—for example, when he notes that "the worker 'steals' from capitalists when he consumes for himself the labor power purchased by the capitalists."[13] This analogy is 'so wrong it's not even wrong,' as Wolfgang Pauli would have said. Marx writes that "if the free worker rests for an instant, the base and petty management which watches over him with wary eyes claims he is stealing from it."[14] This statement is a paraphrase from *Théorie des lois civiles*, a work by the French lawyer Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet.[15] Marx adopts the capitalist's perspective not to draw a comparison between so-called worker theft and capitalist theft, as Heinrich suggests, but to underscore the fundamental incommensurability of these two positions. Instead, Heinrich's scientific perspective aligns with what Linguet himself critically calls "sordid economics (*économie sordide*)," which Marx translates as *schmutzige Ökonomie*. In that text, Linguet questioned the 'freedom' of the wage-worker in comparison to slavery, highlighting the worsening living conditions of the former. The theft Marx refers to is not about money—that is the capitalist's perspective. From the worker's perspective, the capitalist's denial of air, space,

[9] Christopher John Arthur, *The New Dialectic and Marx's Capital*, Leiden, Brill, 2004, 75.
[10] Arthur, *The New Dialectic*, 75.
[11] Ibid., 76.
[12] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline*, Part 1, *Science of Logic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, par. 139, 207.
[13] Heinrich, *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert*, 384 fn. 12.
[14] Marx, *Capital*, 542.
[15] When the laborer is needed, writes Linguet, he "is hired at the lowest price possible. The meager wage he is promised barely covers the cost of his subsistence for the day he has to surrender in exchange. He is given overseers to force him to complete his task promptly; he is hurried along; he is prodded for fear that an industrious and excusable idleness might hide half his vigor. They fear that the hope of remaining longer occupied with the same work will stop his arms and dull his tools. The sordid economy, which follows him with anxious eyes, accosts him with reproaches for the slightest rest he appears to take; if he takes even a moment of respite, it claims he is stealing from it." Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet, *Théorie des lois civiles, ou principes fondamentaux de la société,* Vol. 2, London, 1767, 466.

and light constitutes a theft of life itself, ultimately leading to injury, harm, and death. But *Wissenschaft* does not deal with such miseries.

What is science from the worker's point of view? During the Revolution of 1830, *L'Artisan: Journal de la classe ouvrière* published a piece stating that "higher wages and restrictions on machines could never change the basic condition of the worker, which is to be exploited by a master".[16] One would do better to focus on this theory in action within working-class practices, as it holds greater significance than a lengthy paragraph from *The Science of Logic*. Similarly, from the perspective of the working class and the critique of political economy, the *Factory Reports* compiled by Leonard Horner are no less significant than Hegel's philosophy. However, one must learn to recognize theory in action as it emerges through working-class practices.

For Heinrich, instead, the functioning of capital can be deduced from the science of value: "the *end* of capitalist production has nothing to do with human beings, but only with the valorization of value."[17] This statement may seem plausible from a conceptual perspective, but the price of remaining at this level of abstraction is the severing of analysis from the concreteness of context. Heinrich is primarily concerned with value as an automatic subject. Like Postone and other 'critical thinkers,' the focus remains on "impersonal domination" [18]—the domination of abstract time and commodity value that transform human beings into mere functions of exchange and reduces social relations to interactions between things. "In a commodity-producing society," Heinrich writes, "people (all of them!) are under the control of things, and the decisive relations of domination (*Herrschaftsverhältnisse*) are not personal but 'objective' (*sachlich*)."[19] This is how reality appears from the perspective of circulation: all human beings ("und zwar alle!" as the *Wissenschaft* emphasizes) are subordinated to the control of things, equally subject to impersonal and thing-like relations of domination.

Heinrich's analysis should be read as a symptom of the present, and that is what needs to be discussed: how Marx's critique is received in the present. The subtitle of *Capital*, often overlooked on the covers of many publications, is *A Critique of Political Economy*. One aspect of this critique focuses on the economic categories of capital and how individuals function as personified categories. This is where both Hegelian-Marxian readings and the science of value tend to stop. However, Marx's critique has another dimension: it addresses the pre-categorial. Accessing this domain requires historical inquiry, which is precisely what value-science interpretations tend to avoid. The pre-categorial reveals that the world is not populated solely by personified categories, formal equality, and abstract freedom. The critique of political economy is critical because it

[16] Bernard H. Moss, "Producers' Associations and the Origins of French Socialism: Ideology from Below" in *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 48 (1976), 73.
[17] Heinrich, *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert*, 326.
[18] Postone, *Time, labor, and social domination. A reinterpretation of Marx's critical theory*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003, 125.
[19] Heinrich, *An introduction*, 75.

examines the labor of the worker not in the abstract, but from the perspective of the body of the worker who carries the labor power; it examines the relationship between the consumption of labor power and the consumption of workers' lives and bodies in production; it examines the unfreedom imposed by forced, unnatural postures. It scrutinizes the inequality that arises from asymmetrical, and at times outright despotic, relations of domination.

These relations are not merely characterized by "impersonal" or "thing-like relations of domination," as in the circulation of commodities. They are hybrid in nature. Human material is subjected to the "direct and indirect domination"[20] of the capitalist. This is an important addition. It is, as one can read in the French edition, "personal domination (*domination personelle*)."[21] This personal, despotic form of domination is recalled by Marx not to emphasize the brutality of the master, but to demonstrate that what occurs in production negates the basic principles of political modernity and its celebrated self-representation. It constitutes a denial of formal equality, individual freedom, autonomy, and even the very life of the worker in conditions that reveal a continuity between wage labor and slavery. Marx's *Capital* shows that domination is not evenly distributed across all individuals in society and that this disparity is not merely quantitative but fundamentally qualitative. The specific commodity called labor-power is inseparable from the workers' bodies—their corporeality (*Leiblichkeit*)—and their living personality (*lebendige Persönlichkeit*),[22] which is consumed in the process of production.

But there is no trace of this in Heinrich. The descent into the relations of production reveals something that cannot be deduced from concepts: it shows that personal relations of despotic domination exist alongside impersonal forms of domination; it shows that a radical asymmetry in labor relations exists alongside the formal equality of the sphere of circulation; it shows that the despotic domination of capital over the lives of workers exists alongside the formal freedom of subjects who exchange commodities; it shows that the wear and tear on workers' bodies cannot be compensated by a mere wage increase or access to public healthcare to mend a broken body, as French workers stated in 1830 in *L'Artisan*. While Heinrich does not address the body, Marx uses the *Factory Reports* to politically address the living corporeality of the workers: "These experiments were not made just at the expense of the worker's means of subsistence. His five senses also had to pay the penalty. 'The people who are employed in making up Surat cotton complain very much. They inform me, on opening the bales of cotton there is an intolerable smell, which causes sickness ... In the mixing, scribbling and carding rooms, the dust and dirt which are disengaged, irritate the air passages, and give rise to cough and difficulty of breathing. A disease of the skin, no doubt from the irritation of the dirt contained in the Surat cotton, also prevails ... Bronchitis is more

[20] Marx, *Capital*, 740.
[21] Karl Marx, *Le Capital* (Paris, 1872/1875), in *MEGA* II,7, 514.
[22] Marx, *Capital*, 270.

prevalent owing to the dust. Inflammatory sore throat is common, from the same cause. Sickness and dyspepsia are produced by the frequent breaking of the weft, when the weaver sucks the weft through the eye of the shuttle.'"[23]

The *Blue Books* cited by Marx are not illustrations. They constitute the theoretical and political foundation of Marxian critique. The critique begins with the descent into the hidden abodes of production, where the sign "No admittance except on business" is to be found. That is why half of *Capital* is devoted to the genetic history of the capitalist mode of production and, in the hundreds of pages of ethnography of factory workers' conditions, to its history of the present. The long chapter on "Machinery and Modern Industry" consists almost half of quotations from *Factory Reports*, *Health Reports*, and *Children's Reports*. These are not casual remarks that would *follow* the theoretical chapters and add nothing to the theory. These parts stand at the *core*. A core that Heinrich's *Wissenschaft* deactivates. Not by a minor omission, but as a method.

Heinrich wants to distinguish his *scientific* method, which is nonpartisan and not driven by special interests, from the *political* critique of capitalist relations.[24] At this point, all that remains is to ask: What is the *Wissenschaft* that Heinrich celebrates? What does it enable us to see better, and what does it conceal? Or rather, what does his *Wissenschaft* have to conceal in order to see what he sees? It is not a question of pointing out to Heinrich what he has not sufficiently considered. I do not expect another volume on value or a new biography of Marx. The question is political, and it arises from a confrontation with the way Marx understands critique.

In the "Afterword" to the second edition of *Capital* (1873), Marx speaks of the scientific character of political economy, which "can remain a science only so long as the class struggle is latent or manifests itself in isolated and sporadic phenomena."[25] Thus, wrote Marx, political economy emerged in England when "the class struggle was yet underdeveloped." It was not until the 1830s that the class struggle between capital and labor "sounded the death knell for scientific bourgeois economics."[26] This means that political economy became a weapon to defend partisan interests in the conflict with the proletariat. From this point of view, bourgeois economic categories must be understood as weaponized categories, born and reconfigured in a concrete historical conflict. These conflicts, such as the Lyon riots of 1831–34, must be investigated historically. "The hour of vulgar economics"[27] arrives when "the urban proletariat sounded the tocsin of revolution at Lyons, and the rural proletariat began to set fire to farmyards and hayricks in England."[28] It is at this point that classical economics is forced to intervene. "The learned dispute between the industrial capitalist and the wealthy landowning idler as to

[23] Marx, *Capital*, 586.
[24] Heinrich, *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert*, 384.
[25] Marx, *Capital*, 96.
[26] Ibid., 97.
[27] Ibid., 744.
[28] Ibid., 743.

how the booty pumped out of the workers may most advantageously be divided for the purposes of accumulation had to fall silent in the face of the July Revolution."[29] The *Critique of Political Economy*, its *scientific* task, is to show how the "booty" is "pumped out of the workers."

1830 was a turning point. Workers' struggles produced a new theory that Marx took up and developed. Heinrich retorts instead that the correlation Marx established between the "intensification of class struggles since 1830 and the impossibility of scientific economy" constitutes a problem because there were scientific economic treatises even after 1830.[30] What Heinrich misses is that a weaponized science is no less scientific. A technological invention is no less technological or scientific because it is used by capital as "a weapon against working-class revolt."[31] Science and technology became weapons in the struggle. Machinery "is the most powerful weapon for suppressing strikes, those periodic revolts of the working class against the autocracy of capital."[32] Ure noticed this when he stated that the self-acting mule was a "creation destined to restore order among the industrious classes."[33] Marx understands that the intensification of class struggle is reflected in new technologies and applied sciences: "It would be possible to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working class revolt."[34] This is what Heinrich fails to grasp: from 1820 to 1830, the class struggle between capital and labor constitutes the new background of economic debates, an increasingly weaponized political economy, and, one might add, a weaponized *Weltbild*. Scientific categories are forged in the clash and operate polemically to conceal or delegitimize opposing practical and theoretical positions. Heinrich fails to see any of this because he disregards history.

Instead of dismissing the nexus between class struggle and science, it would be better to question the significance of that nexus for Heinrich's *Wissenschaft* and its partisan character, particularly when he remains deliberately silent on working conditions in production, workers' bodies, and their struggles. One could argue that his book reflects the times, geographical contexts, and perspectives in which class struggle is nearly absent, allowing Marx to be reinterpreted as an ecological prophet of degrowth in a world captivated by the dream of the end of work and total automation. In this context, Marx's concept of impersonal domination could be replaced by Weber's analysis of rationalization and the iron cage, while the apocalyptic scenario of environmental and planetary destruction might be more aptly explored through Heidegger. These positions represent different facets of the same erasure of the perspective of production—and of class struggle. For the absence of class struggle is itself a manifestation of class struggle.

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[29] Marx, *Capital*, 743.
[30] Heinrich, *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert*, 79 fn 33.
[31] Marx, *Capital*, 563.
[32] Ibid., 562.
[33] Ibid., 563.
[34] Ibid., 563.