

# Capital Returns

Political Theory

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*Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital*, by William Clare Roberts. Princeton University Press. 2017, 304 pp.

*Portfolio Society: On the Capitalist Mode of Prediction*, by Ivan Ascher. Zone Books. 2016, 192 pp.

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## Zombie Marxism

In 1888, five years after Marx's death, Engels published a small book called *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*. In it he introduced the now familiar distinction between the early and the later Marx. To bolster his argument that Marx had rejected the Hegelian philosophy of his youth so as to develop instead the materialist science of his maturity, he included as an appendix the famous "Theses on Feuerbach," which he had found among Marx's literary remains. Whether he knew it at the time or not, Engels was instituting a long tradition of scholars plundering Marx's archive to develop new interpretations of his work, to challenge established orthodoxies, and to make Marx relevant to new situations. Of course, something like this happens with all great thinkers. But, if only for the simple empirical fact that owing to the commitment of Marx's followers, scholars have so much posthumous material to work with, Marx's case is almost certainly unique. No other thinker has died and been reanimated in this fashion as many times as Karl Marx.

In this context, however, the most recent Marx revival, of which the two books under consideration here are examples, is unusual. For, rather than unearthing the archive to reveal a hidden truth of Marx, it is focused squarely on the first volume of *Capital*. Throughout the previous century, when scholars wanted to return to Marx, as they often did, *Capital* was perhaps the last text to attract their attention. Yes, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, or *The German Ideology*, or the *Grundrisse*, or the *Theories of Surplus Value*, but not *Capital*. Even Althusser, who is undoubtedly the exception in this regard, proposed a "symptomatic reading" of Marx's "masterpiece," or a reading that

attended less to what Marx said than to what he left unsaid. But history moves in irregular ways. And as the world sinks deeper into the permanent crisis called “neoliberalism,” many seem to be sensing that *Capital* cannot easily be dismissed as either a dilapidated monument of the past or a dangerous blueprint for totalitarianism, but is instead a living document that speaks directly to some of the most pressing questions of our age.

Both Roberts and Ascher find a new Marx, or a new way of making sense of Marx, then, not by picking through his archive, or conjuring up what he left unsaid, but, surprisingly, by taking him at his word. Roberts suggests that, when read in relation to the debates that were raging among socialists when Marx wrote it, *Capital* appears as less of an economic treatise than a political one, or a work concerned less with economic equality in the socialist sense than with political freedom in the republican one. In a somewhat different fashion, Ascher proposes that on a formal level at least, the economic theory set out in *Capital* remains entirely relevant today, but for the fact that in contemporary capitalism, it is less labour that produces value, than credit, finance, and risk. Neither author dwells on the old irony, noted by many before, that the history of Marxism did as much to obscure as to illuminate Marx’s thought. Rather, both approach *Capital* with fresh eyes, and show us that its fecundity as a text exceeds the colossal number of things that have been said about it (not to mention those that have been done with it) thus far.

## Market Domination

Along with the tradition of plundering the Marx archive, Engels’s *Ludwig Feuerbach* played a role in instituting another tradition among Marxists, one that was sustained at least until Althusser—the tradition of asserting that Marx invented a new science. It is surely curious that a body of work so devoted to the notion that individuals do not exist in isolation, but are conditioned by social and material practices, should itself so often be characterized as the creation of an individual genius. Even a cursory glance at Marx’s writings reveals that he never thought in isolation, but always in response to others. And eliding the fact that Marx was less of an inventor than a responder has probably done as much damage as good. As just one small example, we might consider Marx’s 1844 essay “On the Jewish Question.” For the title alone contains an ambiguity that is worth examining. Is Marx writing on the Jewish Question, or the question of Jewish emancipation that ricocheted throughout German culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? Or is he writing on *The Jewish Question (Die Judenfrage)*, or the book by Marx’s former mentor Bruno Bauer that Marx explicitly reviews in his piece? In either case, and even if both are true, if our intention is to retrieve some

element of what Marx was attempting to do when he wrote “On the Jewish Question” (rather than, say, retroactively compose a coherent discourse called “Marxism”), then it would be helpful, one assumes, to read Bauer’s piece as well. This is, of course, something almost nobody ever does.

On a substantially larger scale, Roberts begins his book by making a similar claim about Marx’s *Capital*. It was written in a very precise political and polemical context, Roberts proposes, in order, at least in part, to respond to other socialist theorists. However, in all but rare cases, it has been read in isolation, as if it were the personal journal of some especially scholarly Robinson Crusoe. Adopting the methodology of the Cambridge School of political historians, Roberts endeavours to reconstruct the specific strategic and tactical purposes of *Capital*—to treat it not as an abstract theory of political economy but as a direct political engagement, or hand-to-hand intellectual conflict. And he proposes that not only Marx but nearly all of those around him had inherited, and to some degree took for granted, a collection of eighteenth-century republican convictions that get obscured when Marx is read out of context. But writing about Marx in relation to his interlocutors would itself be a rather abstract exercise were it not intended as a political engagement of its own. As Roberts understands very well, particularly in the case of Marx, every interpretation is also a kind of action. And it is not for nothing that, in the short time since it appeared, *Marx’s Inferno* has already ruffled the feathers of some rather large birds (see, e.g., David Harvey’s review in *Jacobin*).

While it is a work of considerable detail, and while the scholarship on display is formidable, *Marx’s Inferno* is nevertheless organized around a central conceit, on the one side, and a central thesis, on the other. In the first instance, Roberts endeavours to show that Marx’s *Capital* is surreptitiously structured to mirror Dante’s *Inferno*, and he arranges his own book along the same lines. In the second, and as I noted above, Roberts claims that when read in relation to those whom it is intended to challenge, *Capital* appears less as a work of socialist political economy than one of republican political theory. Indeed, on Roberts’ account, Marx rejects the notion that there might be a socialist version of political economy, or even a socialist version of the concept of value. In keeping with his Cambridge School commitments, Roberts argues that the main emphasis of *Capital* is not economic equality but political freedom, understood as what Pettit calls “non-domination.” However, Roberts continues, Marx adds a twist to this republican conception of freedom, or develops an “alternative republicanism” (8). For Marx is concerned not with the personal domination of some individuals over others, but with what Roberts frequently refers to as the “impersonal domination” of the market over everyone, or the way the

market compels everyone to work without any opportunity to deliberate over the purpose of their labour, and to consume without any opportunity to deliberate over the content of their needs.

For his claim that Marx structured *Capital* to mirror Dante's *Inferno*, Roberts is able to marshal a great deal of compelling evidence. He shows, for instance, that Marx was both very familiar with and very fond of Dante's poem, and that his writings are replete with references to it. And he shows, via an intensely close reading of *Capital*, that there are profound formal similarities between the two texts, and that their various sections map neatly onto one another (see especially figure 1, on page 27). He even shows that the implied moral purpose of *Capital* has recognizable affinities with that of Dante's *Inferno*, in that both works endeavour to diagnose and overcome the classical condition of *akrasia*, or lack of self-mastery (see chapter 3, arguably the most important chapter in the book). But, as Roberts confesses (24–25), given that Marx never made any direct reference to using Dante as a model, all of this evidence remains circumstantial. As captivating as the suggestion may be, no one will ever be able to *prove* that *Capital* is designed to mirror *Inferno*, and Roberts's conceit remains just that—a conceit.

In a sense, however, that point does not matter. For the question is not whether Roberts's conceit is true, but whether it reveals anything true, or previously unknown, about *Capital* itself. And on this score, there can be little doubt. For, whether or not Roberts proves that Marx had Dante in mind when writing *Capital*, he does show that the metaphor of capitalism as a "social Hell" was widespread among Marx's contemporaries, and that Marx "took up and transformed" (56) this trope, as well as a host of similar ones, with great frequency. But there is a catch. According to Roberts, the "hell" into which Marx descends in *Capital* (and out of which he eventually emerges) is not capitalism, but the discourse of political economy. For Marx, Roberts explains, political economy does not describe a set of universal economic laws. It describes, instead, the internal logic of a particular, historically located set of social relations called capitalism. There is therefore no way of redeeming political economy, or reworking it for socialist purposes. It exists in Marx, not to be appropriated, but to be traversed.

Here Roberts's application of the Cambridge School method becomes germane. While Roberts explores a wide range of thinkers, he emphasizes Proudhon, whom he calls Marx's "primary opponent" (17). On Roberts's account, it is Proudhon who makes the error of believing he can construct a socialist "science" of political economy, and of underwriting this "science" with a thinly veiled morality. In essence, Proudhon accepts Ricardo's labour theory of value, and suggests the source of value is labour time. A just society, therefore, would be one in which workers are fairly compensated for their labour time. For his part, Marx recognizes the contradiction built into

Proudhon's slogan "property is theft." For clearly the second concept presupposes the first. Moreover, if labour time were the source of value, then we would quickly arrive at the absurd proposition that capitalists should slow down, rather than speed up, the rate of production, as more time would equal more value. And this is where we arrive at Roberts's most controversial claim. As Roberts sees it, Marx does not ascribe to any theory of value, labour or otherwise. Rather, the point of his critique of political economy is to reveal that the value-form is specific to capitalism. Marx's aim, in other words, is to destroy the value-form.

There can be no question that *Marx's Inferno* represents a significant contribution to both political theory in general and Marx scholarship in particular, and that it will point the way forward for many. It would be impossible in this short review to survey all of the topics Roberts takes up, but I would be remiss not to note that he intervenes into an extraordinary range of long-standing debates: the questions, for instance, of whether Marx has a theory of human nature; of whether his work implies an ethics or a normative horizon; of what Marx means by the "immiseration" of the working class; of what he means by "surplus value" and "real subsumption"; of Marx's understanding of technology and modernity; of the way that capitalism shapes our experience of time; and, most importantly I think, of what Marx calls "primitive accumulation," or the historical origins of capitalism and the relationship between capital and the state.

All of that said, while it is undeniable that a great deal is gained by taking Roberts's approach, we must allow that some important things appear to be lost as well. The most obvious example here is class struggle. For if capitalism is less about the exploitation of one class by another than the "impersonal domination" of the market over everyone, then what, I wonder, is the struggle against it going to look like? Indeed, is there any politics whatsoever without some distinction between friends and enemies? How exactly shall we organize against something "impersonal"? This is not to say that Roberts fails to discuss such concrete issues. On the contrary, his Conclusion (chapter 7) consists of a masterful consideration of the old accusation that Marx does not provide any positive account of a socialist political form. Taking issue with Cohen's assertion that Marx has an "obstetric conception of politics" (239) (or the notion, which Cohen believes Marx inherits from Hegel's dialectic, that the political form that will replace capitalism can only emerge through a full elaboration of the contradictions inherent to capitalism, thus absolving Marx of any responsibility to provide prescriptions of his own), Roberts argues that, as a republican, Marx cannot provide prescriptions, as that would entail another form of domination. Rather, Roberts claims, Marx places his faith in the rational and deliberative capacities of all free humans, and in the republican principle that virtue thrives where domination recedes.

What Roberts appears to have in mind, then, is some kind of loosely federated archipelago of local deliberative bodies, each conferring over the purpose of their labour and the content of their needs. Leaving aside the viability of such a system, we might wonder what would compel anyone to seek to bring it about in the first place. Here, and as a supplement, I would like to mention two aspects of the republican tradition that Roberts does not really explore. First, there is the radical Jacobin notion of “constituent power,” in which revolutionary process and collective action are not so much aimed at a determined end as the source or creative laboratory of new political forms. Second, there is the ostensibly more conservative idea of the “rule of law.” Indeed, while what Roberts says about the “impersonal domination” of the market is fascinating, it must be admitted that republicans have always tended to favour another kind of impersonal domination, namely, the impersonal domination of the law. The question for republicans is how to bring these two phenomena (constituent power, on the one hand, and rule of law, on the other) together, or how to constitute a legal and political order that preserves, rather than negating, the free act of its constitution. Obviously, I will not make any effort to square this ancient circle here. But I will wager that a larger investigation of the work of Marx and his interlocutors (one that continued on the methodological path broken by *Marx's Inferno*, but that also ventured beyond *Capital* alone) would open up some robust possibilities.

## Credit Slaves

Ascher's book, like Roberts's, also returns to *Capital*, but it is different in almost every other respect. If *Marx's Inferno* is a work of thick scholarship, one could imagine *Portfolio Society* serving as the basis for a Hollywood script. Nearly every chapter starts with an impeccably crafted vignette, typically recounting an episode from the dramatic series of events that unfolded around the global financial crisis (GFC), and then goes on to compare that episode to the more dramatic elements of *Capital*. Put differently, *Portfolio Society* is slick—and that is by no means a criticism. Rather, just as the rhythms of *Capital* might be said to reflect those of the factories and machines that Marx investigates, Ascher replicates the surface speed and deep complexity of the finance industry with which he is concerned. And this is the real strength of the book. In less than one hundred thirty pages, Ascher explains in lucid terms the byzantine world of finance capitalism—a world in which so few have been able to make so much by trading in the misery of so many. And yet, despite Ascher's enviable lucidity, it is hard not to remain mystified. It is as though someone has shown to you exactly how the magic trick works, step by step; but, when the rabbit comes out of the hat, you are still baffled and confused.

Aping the famous opening words of *The Communist Manifesto*, Ascher begins by suggesting that we must dispense with moralistic “nursery tale” renunciations of Wall Street, and develop instead “a proper critique of contemporary finance and the societies that live under its spell” (10). In order to do so, Ascher embarks on what he calls a “creative appropriation” of *Capital*, one that accepts the form of Marx’s argument, but substitutes the terms Marx deployed to explain nineteenth-century industrial capitalism with ones that help explain twenty-first-century finance capitalism. Thus, Ascher exchanges “labour” for “risk,” “wage” and “wage slavery” for “credit” and “credit slavery,” “commodity form” for “security form,” and “use value” and “modes of production” for what he wryly dubs “hedging value” and “modes of prediction.” Like Roberts, Ascher seems to leave open, or unaddressed, the question of organization. If this is the system we are dealing with, then how will we struggle against it? At times, things seem to fit together a bit too neatly, although none of Ascher’s comparisons between Marx’s *Capital* and contemporary finance capitalism ever appear incredible or forced. In any case, the overarching claim that the left needs to take finance seriously, and understand it as at least relatively autonomous with respect to old categories such as labour and modes of production, is undeniable. It is therefore valuable to follow Ascher down into this rabbit hole, and see what is on the other side.

The naïve way to understand investment, Ascher explains, would be to think that someone comes up with an idea for a business, and then asks others to help fund the cost of starting their business, on the agreement that those others will share in the profits if and when they are made. But this kind of one-to-one relationship obviously exposes the investor to a great deal of risk, for it is possible and even likely that the business will never generate a profit. The naïve way to understand the portfolio would be to think that investors can minimize their exposure to risk if they invest in more than one business, such that, even if one fails, others will succeed, meaning the investor will net a profit overall—so-called diversification and security. However, this also means that the investor may buy shares in businesses with competing interests. Indeed, as Ascher points out, a well-constructed portfolio *should* do so. For its aim is not to invest exclusively in businesses that are guaranteed to succeed (as, in business, there are no such guarantees), but to minimize the investor’s exposure to risk in relation to the overall quantity of risk circulating in the market as a whole. In the final analysis, Ascher concludes, what is being traded by financiers is not real production, or even the potential for real production, but the amount of risk investors are willing to take, or, as Ascher puts it, “*risk itself*” (14).

Ascher illuminates this situation with reference to Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism. For Marx, commodities appear to us as specific things with

specific values. But these things or values conceal, not the “concrete labour” of the individual producers who make them, but a social relation, or what Marx calls “abstract labour.” The particular commodity’s value is determined by the relative portion of the total amount of labour required to produce all commodities, or what Marx calls “socially necessary labour.” Similarly, an investment (a stock or a bond, for example) may appear to us as a specific thing with a specific value. But, like the commodity, the investment also conceals a social relation. In this case, however, the social relation is not labour but risk or credit. In other words, an investment appears to us as a thing, when in fact it is a reification of an entire system of promises, or a general economy of risk. And just as the individual nineteenth-century factory worker is offered the illusion that they are free to sell their labour on an open market, when in fact, if they wish to survive, they are not free not to, so too is the individual twenty-first-century credit holder told that they are free to borrow money, and enter into “the portfolio society,” when in fact, owing to the ever-increasing necessity of household mortgages or student loans or simply credit cards, it would be more accurate to say that they are not free not to.

Like Marx’s *Capital*, Ascher’s book is a work of history as much as it is one of theory. Thus, Ascher devotes a considerable amount of attention to the pivotal historical events that allowed for the emergence of finance capitalism or “the portfolio society.” Among others, he pinpoints Nixon’s 1971 decision to drop the gold standard, which had previously operated as an external regulation on the flow of capital, and the neoliberal dismantling of the Welfare State, which Ascher characterizes as a kind of “commons,” or a way of collectively distributing risk, the “enclosure” of which resulted in a new era of “primitive accumulation” (96). At the pinnacle of this new era, Ascher suggests, we find the GFC, in which the finance industry somehow found a way to lend money to bad or “subprime” credit risks, and to garner a profit, not when those debtors repaid their loans, but precisely when they did not. Whence we arrive at the insane calculus of a system that is (often deliberately) designed to destroy those whom it feigns to promote—the contemporary equivalent of the immiseration of the working class.

For Ascher, one deeper consequence of the age of finance is the manner in which it re-creates the subject. Each of us are now compelled to become speculators, and to define ourselves in relation to the credit that we hold—“*homo probabilis*” (89), as Ascher puts it. But it occurs to me that there may be an even more profound issue at stake. For it is not just our subjectivity that gets re-created but our experience of time. To recall the figure whom Roberts refers to as Marx’s “primary opponent,” already in his 1847 polemic against Proudhon, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx seems to have brushed up against this issue. If Proudhon thought that capitalism robbed the worker of the true value of their labour time, Marx suggested that it operates first of all by

promulgating the illusion that their labour time has a fixed value—one that might be exchanged freely on a market for other values. In fact, Marx proposed, under capitalism, the value of my labour time is not fixed, but relative to all of the time required in any given society to fulfil all of the needs present in that society at any given moment. And yet, the same capitalism that relativizes time in this fashion faces the worker with a boss or a line manager who, in the name of efficiency, seeks to segment or rationalize time, or divide it into calculable bits. The worker is, in effect, wedged between these two times, one that says that nothing counts, the other that insists on counting.

In the age of finance, matters are slightly different. For, having successfully colonized the present and the past, capitalism now sets its sights on the future. It is not that we are crowded into factories and rendered components of a machine—one that must forever be made to work faster and to produce more (although, no doubt, for many, that is unquestionably still the case). It is instead that we are all compelled to trade in what remains yet to come. This is effectively what Ascher means by the shift from the “mode of production” to the “mode of prediction.” Thus, he concludes his book with a powerful opposition between Marx’s old image of capitalism as “vampire” and a new one of capitalism as “zombie” (124–27). What used to suck blood from the worker now eats our brains. What used to compel us to work harder for smaller returns in the present now feeds on that part of us that has the capacity to imagine what may or may not happen in the future. The experience of living in time, of looking around ourselves and imagining things might be otherwise—that is the experience that finance capitalism wants to appropriate, and press into the service of profit.

## Buried Alive

It is a little-known fact that Marx was buried not once, but twice. The first time was in March of 1883, when his body was placed a small family plot on the east side of London’s Highgate Cemetery. The second time, however, was in November of 1954 when, due to the intervention of a group of British communists who believed he deserved a more auspicious resting place, his body was disinterred and, under a cloak of secrecy and in the dead of night no less, moved to the west side of the same cemetery. This is where you will find the Marx memorial today. And it explains why the high modernist granite slab of which it consists towers over the modest Victorian stones that surround it. Surely there is something prophetic in this little piece of history. For it seems as though we are forever digging Marx up and moving him around. Roberts and Ascher are clearly recommending we do so again, and they are hardly alone in this recommendation. This time, one hopes, even if his eyes do not suddenly bolt open and come back to life, ours will.