

David Harvey's Jacobin interview on Marx's *Capital*

A promotion of the “life-style” politics of the pseudo-left

Nick Beams
21 July 2018

The *Jacobin* magazine, which functions as a kind of house journal for the middle class pseudo-left milieu, in particular the Democratic Socialists of America, has published an interview with the academic David Harvey, purporting to show why Marx's *Capital* is “still the defining guide to understanding—and overcoming—the horrors of capitalism.”

Harvey, variously described as a social theorist, a historical-materialist geographer and sometimes a Marxist, has attracted a wide following over the past decade in the wake of the global financial crisis due to his online lectures on *Capital* and a number of books critical of capitalism and its irrationalities.

The interest in his writings and lectures, particularly from among younger people and students, is an expression of the growing hostility to capitalism, increasingly regarded as having failed, and the growing receptiveness towards socialism, coupled with a turn to Marx in the search for answers to the mounting problems and crises caused by the ongoing breakdown of the capitalist order.

But as with all of Harvey's work, this interview does not provide a clarification or guide to Marx but serves to prevent an understanding of his masterwork, seeking to render him suitable to the political and life-style sensibilities of a middle class “left” audience.

This emerges from the very outset of the interview. Asked to give an overview of the three volumes of *Capital*, Harvey says: “Marx is very much into detail and it's sometimes hard to get a sense of exactly what the whole concept of *Capital* is about.” This has been a recurring theme virtually since the day *Capital* was published—that it is too difficult and too dense to be comprehended.

Capital is certainly no easy work but that difficulty arises not from Marx but from the fact that capitalism is the most complex form of socio-economic organisation in the historical development of mankind.

However, as Harvey well knows, Marx provided a very clear explanation of the essential thread of his theoretical labours.

In the postface to the second edition of *Capital*, Marx favourably cited a Russian reviewer of the first edition published in 1867 who had set out the objective logic of his analysis.

The reviewer had begun by citing Marx's famous Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*, published in 1859, in which he set out the materialist basis of his method.

There Marx had written: “In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. ... At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing social relations of production ... From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution.”

Basing himself on this explanation, the Russian reviewer concluded that Marx “concerns himself with one thing: to show, by an exact scientific investigation, the necessity of successive determinate orders of social relations, and to establish, as impeccably as possible, the facts from which he starts out and on which he depends. For this it is quite enough if he proves, at the same time, both the necessity of the present order of things, and the necessity of another order into which the first must inevitably pass over.”

In other words, *Capital* was the application of the theory of historical materialism, worked out by Marx and Engels in the late 1840s, to the analysis of capitalist society in which the central social relation of production was the buying and selling of the labour power of the new social force, the working class, which this society had brought into being. It was aimed at demonstrating how the very development of the productive forces to which this new social order had given rise inevitably came into conflict with the social relations on which it was based, leading to social revolution and the transition to a new and higher form of society.

While *Capital* was grounded on a thorough-going scientific analysis of capitalist society, it was not an academic treatise. It was written with the aim of providing the working class, its historical gravedigger, with the theoretical weapons necessary for its overthrow and the transition to a higher socio-economic order, international socialism.

It is highly significant, therefore, that in Harvey's interview on *Capital* and its significance, the words “social revolution” and “working class” never appear.

What then is the essential content of the interview? It is the dressing up in Marxist-sounding terminology of the politics of the middle class pseudo-left, focusing on protests against some of the irrationalities and outrages of the capitalist system, concerned not with its overthrow but “life-style changes.” Its role is to seek to divert those seeking answers away from a real grappling with and understanding of Marx's masterwork.

Harvey presents the three volumes of *Capital* as something of a jumble, that Marx was saying “in volume one, I deal with this, in volume two I deal with that and in volume three I deal with something else.”

Harvey goes on to say that Marx has in mind “the totality of the circulation of capital” but then points to a problem because Marx did not complete volumes two and three (they were edited by Engels from Marx's drafts) and so they “aren't as satisfactory as volume one.”

The upshot of this focus on circulation is twofold. First, it leaves the impression that there is no inherent logic to Marx's presentation. Second, it downplays the centrality of capitalist production, dissolving it in the process of circulation, a move which, as we shall see, forms a key foundation of Harvey's political perspective.

Contrary to Harvey, Marx is very clear on the logic of the three volumes, which he sets out at the beginning of volume three.

There he explains that the investigation in volume one concerns the process of capitalist production itself, leaving out the external secondary influences on this process. But as he notes, the analysis does not complete the life cycle of capital and so in volume two he considers how the process of production is supplemented by the process of circulation.

In volume three the issue is to “discover and present the concrete forms which grow out of the process of capital’s movement considered as a whole.”

“The configurations of capital, as developed in this volume,” he writes, “thus approach step by step the form in which they appear on the surface of society, in the action of different capitals on one another, i.e., in competition, and in the everyday consciousness of the agents of production themselves.” [1]

The materialist method employed by Marx is to ascend from the most abstract forms to the concrete. *Capital*, therefore, begins with the cell-form of the capitalist economy, the commodity, in which the product of human labour—the basis of all society—presents itself in the social form of a product produced for exchange.

The significance of this starting point was noted by Lenin:

“In his *Capital*, Marx first analyses the simplest, most ordinary and fundamental, most common and everyday *relation* of bourgeois (commodity) society, a relation encountered billions of times, viz. the exchange of commodities. In this very simple phenomenon (in this ‘cell’ of bourgeois society) analysis reveals *all* the contradictions (or the germs of *all* the contradictions) of modern society. The subsequent exposition shows us the development (*both growth and movement*) of these contradictions and of this society in the summation of its individual parts, from its beginning to its end.” [2]

From the analysis of the commodity and its value, Marx reveals the origin of money as the material expression of value. The analysis of money discloses the nature of capital as self-expanding value.

The most decisive breakthrough made by Marx was to discover the source of this self-expansion. The issue which had tortured the minds of Marx’s classical predecessors in the science of political economy, in particular its two leading representatives, Adam Smith and David Ricardo, was how, on the basis of market relations in which equivalents exchange for equivalents, could a surplus arise? In particular, how out of the most important exchange in commodity-capitalist society, could profit rise, if equivalents were exchanged for equivalents according to the laws of the market.

Marx established that the commodity that the worker sold to the capitalist was not his or her labour, as had previously been maintained, but the capacity to work, or labour power.

Like every other commodity its value was determined by the time taken to reproduce it, that is, it was determined by the value of the commodities needed to sustain the worker and enable the raising of a family to produce the next generation of wage workers.

The surplus value appropriated by the capitalist owner of the means of production, to whom the worker sold his or her labour power, arose from the fact that the value of labour power was less than the value created by the worker in the course of the working day. That is, while it may take, say three hours, for the worker to reproduce the value of labour power, the working day extended for much longer and this additional, or surplus, value fell to capital.

This epoch-making discovery had vast political implications. Marx was by no means the first socialist. Others before him had trenchantly criticised the operations of the capitalist system and pointed to its irrationalities, the increasing exploitation of the working class and widening social inequality. But as Engels explained:

“The socialism of earlier days certainly criticised the existing capitalistic mode of production and its consequences. It could not explain them, and, therefore could not get the mastery of them. It could only

simply reject them as bad.” [3]

It was necessary, Engels continued, to present the capitalist mode of production as necessary during a given historical period and also to present the inevitability of its downfall and to lay bare its essential character. The critics had attacked its evil consequences rather than reveal the secret of the thing itself. This was revealed by the discovery of surplus value.

With these two great discoveries, he concluded, the materialist conception of history and the revelation of the secret of capitalist production, socialism became a science. The next step was to work out the details.

Marx’s discoveries revealed that not only was the working class an exploited class but, in laying bare the source of that exploitation in the social relations of capitalism itself, established that it was a revolutionary class. That is, to secure its own emancipation the working class had to overthrow the entire system of social relations, deriving from wage-labour—on which capitalism was grounded.

One of the most important “details” to which Engels referred, was the way in which the contradiction between the growth of the productive forces under capitalism and the social relations based on wage-labour—the contradiction that was the driving force of social revolution—manifested itself in the capitalist economy.

This was discovered by Marx in his analysis of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. He demonstrated that this tendency—the nemesis of the capitalist mode of production whose driving force is profit—arose from the very development of the productive forces to which it gave rise.

The sole source of surplus value and profit, the basis for the self-expansion of capital, is the living labour of the working class. But the more capital grows the greater must be the extraction of surplus value from the working class in order to expand it yet again. To the extent that the extraction of surplus value fails to keep pace with the growth of capital, the rate of profit tends to fall. This leads to a crisis to which capital responds by reorganising production, in order to intensify exploitation in order to continue. But the very development of these crises, growing ever more serious, drives the working class into struggle against the capitalist system and its ruling class.

This is the source of the realities of “everyday life,” as Marx put it, in which we see the vast accumulation of wealth and an enormous growth in the productive forces and the social productivity of labour on the one hand and the growth of poverty, misery and degradation, accompanied by ever widening social inequality on the other.

The discovery of the secret of surplus value as the basis of the capitalist accumulation process and the contradictions arising from it, had, as we noted, far-reaching political implications. It concretised, as Marx had set out in in his early writings, the revolutionary role of the working class.

“It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment *regards* as its aim. It is a question of *what the proletariat is*, and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do. Its aim and historical action is visibly and irrevocably foreshadowed in its own life situation, as well as in the whole organisation of bourgeois society.”[4]

The key to Harvey’s politics is his rejection of and outright hostility to the analysis made by Marx of the revolutionary role of the working class which is central to *Capital*. Therefore, as far as his “socialism” is concerned it is clouded in the mists of pre-Marxist conceptions.

“Capital has built the capacity, technologically and organisationally, to create a far better world,” he says in the *Jacobin* interview. “But it does so through social relations of domination rather than emancipation. This is the central contradiction. And Marx keeps saying, ‘Why don’t we use all of this technological and organisational capacity to create a world which is liberatory, rather than one which is about domination?’”

Here Harvey follows the road taken by previous “social theorists” who,

while identifying some of the irrationalities of the capitalist mode of production, separated Marx's scientific analysis of capitalism from its central purpose, that is, the arming of the working class for the revolutionary struggles in which it is driven by the crises of the profit system.

The Frankfurt School, for example, sought the agency for social transformation—insofar as it had not completely abandoned such a perspective—in the “cultural criticism” of the irrationalities of capitalism and “consumerism.”

Paul Sweezy, the “independent Marxist”, writing in the 1960s, wrote off the working class in the advanced capitalist countries and glorified the national liberation movements in what was then known as the Third World.

Herbert Marcuse, the darling of the New Left in the 1960s, maintained that the working class had been completely integrated into advanced capitalist society—and was even a potential basis for fascism—and found the agency for social change in the marginalised sections of society.

On the basis of his historical materialist analysis, Marx was well aware of the fact that the advancement in the productive force under capitalism had created the basis for socialist society, free of class exploitation and domination “in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”

But he rejected as utopian any perspective which sought to bring about this transformation by drawing out the contrast between what was possible under a different form of social organisation and what presently existed in capitalist society. Such a perspective made the socialist transformation a question of the criticism of capitalist society by so-called enlightened individuals.

The crucial question for Marx was what was the social material force—the class—created by capitalist society itself, which would be the agency, the driving force, of this transformation. Today, the point at issue is not that socialism will somehow be more advantageous for humanity—that was already clear in Marx's day—but that it is an historic necessity if human civilisation is to survive and progress.

The contradictions of capitalism are not, as Harvey attempts to portray them, the contrast between what would be possible under socialism as compared to present reality but are rooted in the inexorable drive of the profit system towards the impoverishment of the working class, the development of authoritarian forms of rule and war, threatening the very destruction of human civilisation, and a relapse into barbarism. For socialism to become a reality and not simply a dream of human advancement, there must be a social force in capitalist society whose material interests drive it forward to its realisation. That force is the working class, that is, the class separated from the control and ownership of the productive forces which is compelled in order to sustain its existence to sell its labour power.

One of the most significant historical developments of the past three decades has been the transformation of the overwhelming majority of the world's population into proletarians, forced to sell their labour power. Hundreds of millions of peasants in China, India and elsewhere have been transformed into wage workers while in the advanced capitalist countries hundreds of millions of people, employed in what were once considered secure “middle class” occupations, have discovered, through relentless job cuts, downsizing and cuts in their incomes, that they are proletarians with nothing to sell but their labour power, no less than the millions engaged in the factories.

In his criticism of the utopian socialists of his day, Marx pointed to their dreams of experimental realisation of their social utopia as they opposed all political action by the working class.

It is therefore significant that Harvey says nothing in his interview about the resurgent movement of the working class, manifested in the widespread teachers' strikes in the US, the strike movements in Europe

and in countries such as India after decades of suppression by the trade unions and the social democratic and labour parties, and focuses attention on “life-style” movements.

“Now, there are revolts against certain things that are happening,” he writes. “People are beginning to say, ‘look, we want something different.’ I find little communities all around the place in urban areas, and in rural areas, too, where people are trying to set up a different lifestyle. The ones that interest me most are those which use new technologies, like cell phones and the internet, to create an alternative lifestyle with different forms of social relations than those characteristic of corporations, with hierarchical structures of power, that we encounter in our daily lives. To struggle over a lifestyle is rather different than struggling over wages or conditions of labour in a factory.”

Of course Harvey does not leave matters there. He would rapidly lose all credibility in the eyes of those who consider him to be an interpreter and a guide to Marx if he did. And so he maintains that those who are struggling over lifestyle issues, or race, or the environment need to recognise from the standpoint of the totality of capital the relationship between those struggles and how they are related to the forms of production. Putting them all together provides a picture of what a capitalist society is all about “and the kinds of dissatisfactions and alienations that exist in different components of the circulation of capital, which Marx identifies.”

Harvey recognises the struggle of the working class, though it is not so much as mentioned in the interview, but he identifies it as purely the struggle over wages and conditions within a given factory, and thus purely within a trade union perspective.

But as workers are coming to realise, on the basis of their experiences, even struggles which begin on this limited basis rapidly extend to embody broader, political, issues. Workers fighting for improved wages and conditions are immediately confronted not just with the management of the individual corporation or firm within which they work but the apparatuses of the trade union bureaucracy and behind them the capitalist government and the state.

Every struggle of the working class, whether it begins over wages, social conditions, health, pensions or today the increasing use of internet censorship to try to prevent them organising themselves, places them more and more directly in conflict with the entire capitalist organisation of society and raises the question of political power, that is, which class is to rule. As Marx put it, every class struggle is, therefore, a political struggle.

The political aim of Harvey's work now comes into clearer focus. It is aimed at subordinating the struggles of the working class to the politics of the pseudo-left and middle classes concerned with questions of sexual orientation, life style and individual, not class, identity.

This political orientation makes clear why Harvey, insofar as he deals with questions of political economy and the structure of *Capital*, seeks to downplay the centrality of production and dissolve it into the question of the circulation of capital.

He maintains that if one really wants to understand Marx's conception of capital, “then you can't just understand it as just being about production. It's about circulation. It's about getting it to the market and selling it, then it's about distributing the profits.”

The issues related to circulation and the distribution of profits are, of course, vital to an understanding of the capitalist economy, its movement and contradictions. But the key point at issue is this: what is the essential determinant of the structure of society, its political relations and state apparatus and the driving force of its development.

In volume three of *Capital*, Marx directly addresses this question as follows:

“The specific economic form in which the unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers determines the relationship of domination and servitude, as this grows directly out of production itself and reacts back on it as a determinant. On this is based the entire

configuration of the economic community arising from the actual relations of production and hence also its specific political form.”

It is in the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the immediate producers, Marx continues, “in which we find the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social edifice, and with it the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the corresponding specific form of the state.”[5]

As Marx goes on to point out, the same economic forms can display variations and gradations in the political forms of rule, depending on a series of external factors and historical circumstances. But there is no question that the essential content of these various political forms is the mode in which surplus labour is pumped out of the immediate producers.

Volume one of *Capital* is concerned with the way in which under capitalism, a specific historical mode of production, this unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the immediate producers, the working class, through the system of social relations based on wage labour to yield surplus value.

Harvey wants to de-emphasise or outright dissolve this fundamental structural foundation by pointing out that there is more to capitalism than simply the production of surplus value—there is also the process of realisation, detailed in volume two and distribution in volume three.

However, the essential foundation of capitalism is in production—not the production of commodities as such, or the means of production, the production of the material needs of society as a living organism—but the production of surplus value which forms the essential driving force of this society.

Volume two is concerned with the relationships pertaining to realisation. But this, it must be emphasised, is the realisation of the surplus value, its transformation from the commodity form back into money so the process of surplus value extraction can begin again. Likewise, volume three is concerned with the distribution of this surplus value among the various owners of property in the form of profit, interest and rent.

In his recent writings, Harvey has drawn out the connection between his focus on the process of circulation and realisation and his downplaying of the centrality of the production of surplus value and his political perspective.

In his latest book, *Marx, Capital and the Madness of Economic Reason*, Harvey writes:

“Struggles at the point of valorisation inevitably have a class character ... Those at the point of realisation focus on buyers and sellers and trigger fights against the predatory practices and accumulation by dispossession in the market place ... Such struggles are not well theorised. In the field of social reproduction issues of social hierarchy, gender, sexuality, kinship and family and the like become much more predominant and the primary political focus shifts to the qualities of daily life rather than the labour process. These struggles have often been ignored in the Marxist literature.”

What follows from this dissolving of the centrality of the production of surplus value within the capitalist system is that “the social and political struggles against the power of capital within the totality of capital circulation take different forms and call for different kinds of strategic alliances if they are to succeed.”[6]

There is no question what kind of “strategic alliances” Harvey has in mind—alliances with sections of the radical petty bourgeoisie and its concern for life-style politics and even sections of the bourgeoisie itself.

This is done on the basis of a misrepresentation of *Capital*, implying that it was not directed to politically and theoretically arming the working class for social revolution but was aimed at merely drawing out the irrationalities of capitalist society.

By this means, Harvey is seeking to misdirect those who are turning to Marx and have followed his own work in the hope that it might provide a guide. He seeks to divert them away from a struggle in the working class,

to mobilise it as an independent revolutionary force, and channel them into the milieu of pseudo-left and middle-class radical politics and there to fight for “strategic alliances” that ensure the continued domination of the bourgeoisie and capital.

Notes:

[1] Marx, *Capital* Volume 3 (London: Penguin, 1991) p. 117

[2] Lenin, *Collected Works* Volume 38 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1961) p. 360

[3] Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969) p. 38

[4] Marx, *The Holy Family* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975) pp. 44–45

[5] Marx, *Capital* Volume 3 (London: Penguin 1993) p. 927

[6] David Harvey, *Marx, Capital and the Madness of Economic Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) p. 48



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)