

Review - Globalisation and the Critique of Political Economy

Written by Kees van der Pijl

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KEES VAN DER PIJL, FEB 12 2016

Globalisation and the Critique of Political Economy: New insights from Marx's Writings

By Lucia Pradella

London: Routledge, 2015

One way the genius of Marx's *Capital* continues to confuse readers is by evading categorization. Is it a work of economics—no, it is a critique of economics ('political economy' at the time was merely the term used for what we today call economics). Is it a work of social science, then? And if so, which particular discipline(s)? Antonio Labriola in 1896 claimed that 'the different analytical disciplines, which illustrate the facts that develop in history, have finally given rise to the need of a common and general social science, which renders possible the unification of the historical [process], and the [historical] materialistic doctrine marks... the apex of this unification'.

Now given that at that point, the overriding framework in which comprehensive social phenomena were perceived was the national one, with a marked European slant at that—the rest of the world was still stuck in the past, such as the great land empires, or colonised by Europeans—did this mean Marx's analysis also took the nation as its frame of reference? There has been no shortage of accusations that Marx at least had a Eurocentric world view, but Kevin Anderson has gone a long way in laying to rest that claim in *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*.

Marx himself of course in the Preface to the second edition of *Capital* refers to his reworking of Hegel's dialectics and without this philosophical lineage it becomes difficult to understand its structure, the relation of appearance and substance, or the rules governing the formation of its concepts. Especially after the publication of the sketches for *Capital*, the *Grundrisse*, and their dissemination after World War II, an entire library has been filled with works dealing with this aspect—writings by Roman Rosdolsky, Vitali Wygodsky, Jindrich Zelený, E. Ilyenkov, Helmut Reichelt, and many others. However, in several of these works the dividing line between Hegelian dialectics and Marx's innovative handling of the issue becomes blurred again or is insufficiently emphasised.

The fact of the incompleteness of *Capital* as a published work, finally, has added to differences of interpretation too. The problems caused by Engels' editing of Volumes II and III, and Kautsky's of the *Theories of Surplus Value* (intended as Book IV) amidst the continuing discovery of notebooks revealing new information on the different stages in the composition of the work, or suggesting possible further routes of the unfinished Marxist argument all have worked against 'closing the book' on Marx and on *Capital* in particular (here my own reading of the ethnographic notebooks for an argument proposing modes of foreign relations, published in three volumes between 2007 and 2015, or Kojin Karatani's *The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange*, originally of 2010, may be mentioned). Of course the new, historical-critical edition of Marx's and Engels' writings (*MEGA*), itself still unfinished, is a landmark in this respect.

This long introduction may help to grasp the scope of Lucia Pradella's *Globalisation and the Critique of Political Economy*, which is truly impressive. The work is divided in five substantive chapters and a conclusion. Chapter 1 presents an overview of the various ways in which classical thinkers such as Locke and Smith theorised what we

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now call globalisation and also includes as a fascinating section the concept of Asiatic despotism.

The second chapter turns to the legacy of Hegel, not just in terms of his philosophical contribution but also by reading him as a precursor of Marx's critique of political economy. It forms an excellent stepping stone to chapter 3, which moves from Marx's critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right to his own exploratory sketches from which the critique of political economy would be developed later. These are the earliest notebooks included in the historical-critical *MEGA* edition.

Chapter 4 then shifts the focus to the London notebooks compiled between 1850 and '53; chapter 5 deals with the immediate preparatory works leading up to *Capital*, primarily of course the *Grundrisse*.

Throughout his writings, Pradella argues, Marx has sought to uncover the generic, intrinsically world-embracing aspects of the capitalist mode of production as they were already explored by his scientific predecessors. 'Contrary to representations of neoliberal globalisation as a completely new process, proper to the last quarter of the twentieth century, the international sphere appears to be the background and the starting point of modern economic and political thought (p. 7).

Hegel already recognised social antagonisms as the driving force of civil society, thus breaking with the static conception of the classical economists (p. 44). Certainly he considered bourgeois capitalist society the supreme achievement of historical humanity. Yet unlike Adam Smith, who assumes that the division of labour arises from human nature, Hegel maintains it follows from the nature of labour itself (p. 47). This marks the step from an anthropological understanding of political economy to one appropriate to its object. Only thus Hegel was able to theorise for instance that mechanisation frees people again after first having drawn them into an alienating division of labour; although this 'liberation' also pushes them into what Marx would call the reserve army of labour.

The key point is that Hegel recognized that beginning from England, the 'entire world [is] put into universal relation, since the market responds to a "world interest"' (p. 51). Much of what Pradella reads in Hegel announces, sometimes strikingly so, the Marxist argument, such as the civilising mission of capital in destroying the bases for superstition and backwardness. But then the author has done an exemplary job in not just reading all the relevant works, but also their different versions and editions, the lectures accompanying the works and expanding on them, etc.

Pradella then turns to Marx's notebooks to disentangle the different strands of thought that he studied whilst developing his own. This constitutes the main body of the work and it demolishes entirely the notion of a young Marx being superseded by the Marx of *Capital* in old age. From the start we see Marx struggling with the categories developed by the classical writers on political economy, drawing all kinds of conclusions which in no way belong to a different period from the conception and elaboration his own mature writings. The red thread running through these notes is the scale on which the process of capital formation and accumulation is assumed to take place. 'Marx does not consider the economic systems of dominant states like Britain as national systems, but as integrated systems including both formal and informal colonies, both settler colonies, like the US, and densely populate countries, like India, ruled by a minority of European origin' (p. 83). His critique of the quantity theory of money led him to bypass the implicit national approach of the classics and understand the circulation of commodities as a world market process instead (p. 98). In turn this world market is 'not a static sphere, but consists of the process of universalisation of capital' (p. 130, emphasis added).

Marx all along understood capital as universal, based on labour as a universal category (p. 128). That of course does not mean that his theory was ready-made at the start, on the contrary. Pradella's method of going through the successive voluminous notebooks has the advantage of seeing how e.g., the elaboration of the notion of surplus value (as the source of profit) in the *Grundrisse*, is followed by the distinction between capital in general, as an 'empty generality', and capital as a concrete totality in the 1860-63 *Manuscript*, which then enabled Marx to recast the original plan for *Capital* and start with value (pp. 145-6).

As to the question of Marx's supposed Eurocentrism, there are phrases in his work that suggest an appreciation of the role British rule in India in sweeping away old superstitions etc. But then 'for Marx, British rule did not play a

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positive role as such, but only in so far as it laid the premises for its own supersession' (p. 122). Pradella therefore rejects Kevin Anderson's idea of a shift in Marx's work towards an anti-colonialist position, even though the spirit of this book is otherwise very close to *Marx at the Margins*.

The sections on primitive accumulation and the Asiatic mode of production further deepen Pradella's analysis, and actually speak against the notion of an Asiatic 'backwardness'. For Marx, the Asiatic mode of production operated at a high level of productivity which posed a barrier to the expansion of capital from the West. Therefore the colonial powers aimed at capturing state power in the non-Western world to destroy the union between agriculture and domestic industry and force production to concentrate in the primary sphere (p. 139).

Lucia Pradella studied in Venice, Naples and at SOAS in London before moving to King's College London to teach. With this book she has produced a splendid contribution to the debates with which I began this review. It is a pity that the publisher, as so often these days, has chosen to bring out this important work in an expensive edition that only a library can afford.

About the author:

Kees Van Der Pijl is Professor of International Relations at the University of Sussex. He is known for his critical approach to Global Political Economy and has published, amongst others, *Three Volumes on Modes of Foreign Relations and Political Economy* (2007, 2010, 2014, Pluto Press); *Global Rivalries from the Cold War to Iraq* (2006, Pluto Press); *Transnational Classes and International Relations* (1998, Routledge); and *The Making of an Atlantic Ruling Class* (1984, Verso).