

Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism

Capital in General

A: arra'smāl bišaklin'ām. – G: Kapital im Allgemeinen.

F: capital en général. – R: kapital vooščce.

S: capital en general. – C: ziben yiban. 资本一般

From the *Grundrisse* to his work on the 1861–3 *Manuscripts*, the term 'Capital in General' was a central reference point in **Marx's** economic research. Its relevance to **Marx's** *Capital*, however, is controversial. Two issues are contested: first, the importance of the concept, including the use **Marx** intended for it in the presentation of his critique of political economy; second, why (or even whether) he abandoned the idea.

1. When **Marx** published the first result of his economic studies in 1859, the title was *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*; but it presented only two chapters ('Commodities' and 'Money or Simple Circulation') of a 'Book' on 'Capital', of which 'Section One' was 'Capital in General'; furthermore, *Capital* was to be only the first of a projected six books (*MECW* 29, 257; 261; 267; 269). However, when the first volume of **Marx's** masterpiece appeared in 1867, its title was simply *Capital*. The term 'capital in general' did not appear, either as a title, or in the text; nor did it ever recur in **Marx's** lifetime. Nonetheless, it has been argued by **Rosdolsky** that some such *concept* was implicit in **Marx's** research-programme, and that the idea of 'capital in general' retains its importance in any evaluation of the three volumes of *Capital* given to us (1977, 41–53). These volumes, according to their original plan, comprise what was to be covered by the topic of capital in general. **Marx** wrote to **Lassalle**: 'The first instalment [...] contains [...] capital

in general (the process of production of capital; process of its circulation; the unity of the two, or capital and profit; interest)' (11.3.1858). This was to be followed by studies of other problems, as the plan sent to **Engels** by **Marx** shows: 'Capital falls into 4 sections. a) Capital *en général* [...] b) *Competition*, or the interaction of many capitals. c) *Credit*, where capital, as against individual capitals, is shown to be a universal element. d) *Share capital* [...]' (2.4.1858). Between 1861 and 1863 **Marx** wrote a new draft of *Capital*; but he still conceived of it under the rubric 'capital in general', as we see from his letter to **Kugelmann**: The continuation to his *Critique* 'appears separately under the title *Capital*, and [...] it deals only with the subject of the third chapter of the first part, namely "capital in general". So it does not include the competition of capitals and the credit system' (28.12.1862). Thereafter, the term disappears.

2. The main source for our understanding of 'capital in general' is **Marx's** *Grundrisse*, which is the background to the above plans. An examination of the text shows **Marx** uses the term in different senses. **Marx** wrote to **Engels**, around the middle of January, 1858, that in **Hegel's** *Logic* he found much to assist him with regard to the *method* of his work. This explains why, in Notebook II, **Marx**, evidently under this influence, sketches out some logical categories with which to grasp the dialectic of capital. Here 'generality [*Allgemeinheit*]' is differentiated from 'particularity [*Besonderheit*]', and 'singularity [*Einzelheit*]'. These are all, in their turn, sub-divided triadically:

'Capital I. Generality: (1) [*Generality of capital*] (a) emergence of capital out of money. (b) Capital and labour [...]. (c) The elements of capital dissected according to their relation

to labour (Product. Raw Material. Instrument of labour.) (2) *Particularisation of capital*: (a) Circulating capital, fixed capital. Turnover of capital. (3) *The Singularity of capital*: Capital and profit. Capital and interest. Capital as *value*, distinct from itself as interest and profit. II. *Particularity*: (1) Accumulation of capital. (2) Competition of capitals. (3) Concentration of capitals [...]. III. *Singularity*: (1) Capital as credit. (2) Capital as stock-capital. (3) Capital as money market' (MECW 28, 205-6).

The next relevant passage is in Notebook III, where **Marx** makes a similar distinction: 'As a relation distinct from that of [commodity] value and money, capital is *capital in general* [...]. But we are still concerned neither with a *particular* form of capital, nor with *one individual* capital as distinct from other individual capitals etc. We are present at the process of its becoming' (MECW 28, 236).

However, **Marx** was not yet satisfied and returned in Notebook IV to the question again from another angle: 'Capital in general [...] does indeed appear (1) *only as an abstraction*, not an arbitrary abstraction but one which grasps the *differentia specifica* which distinguishes capital from all other forms of wealth. [...] These are determinations which are common to every capital as such, or which make any particular sum of values into capital. And the distinctions within this abstraction are likewise abstract particularities which characterise every type of capital, in that it is their position or negation (e.g. fixed capital or circulating capital). But (2) capital in general is itself a *real existence*, *distinct* from particular real capitals' (MECW 28, 378). The example he gives of this last is that of banking and loans, where capital 'doubles' itself into the 'general form' accumulated in banks and the particular applications for which chunks of it are lent. What is important here is that, while the latter are obviously 'particular real capitals', the 'general form' too has separate 'real existence' rather than being a mental classification: 'while the general is therefore on the one hand only a *mental differentia specifica*, it is at the same time a *particular* real form

alongside the form of the particular and singular' (MECW 28, 378).

From Notebook V on, the term 'many capitals' begins to show up in the text; as 'real' they are contrasted with 'what they all have in common' (MECW 28, 440–1) or with their 'general concept'; but it is important to postpone consideration of 'the interaction of many capitals on one another' (MECW 29, 37). In particular, examination of the distribution of total profit among different capitals does not belong here but only with the study of many capitals (MECW 29, 144).

Finally, in the last Notebook, (VII), yet another concept of capital in general appears: 'Capital considered in general is not a mere abstraction. If I consider the total capital of a nation, e.g., in distinction from the totality of its wage labour (or also landed property), or if I regard capital as the general economic basis of one class as distinct from another class, I am also considering it in general' (MECW 29, 227–8).

3. What can be made of these genial suggestions in **Marx's** *Grundrisse*? There are three broad senses of 'capital in general' to discuss: methodological, logical, and ontological.

3.1 *Methodology*. **Marx** makes a distinction between many capitals and 'what they all have in common', or 'capital as such'. It is a standard procedure of empiricism to abstract common elements to form a class. Here, the 'real' capitals are the many and the 'general' is merely an abstraction which is generated by the observer and granted expositional priority for the sake of clarity. However, **Marx's** concept is not really an empirical generalisation over cases, but an attempt to grasp the 'inner nature' of capital as against its manifestation at the level of many capitals. This means that the form-determinations that impel capital to accumulate – such as the ability of capital to compare itself with itself through the money poles of the 'general formula' and hence to set a monetary increment as the sole aim of investment in production, a gain which itself is to be incorporated in an endless iteration of the circuit – are already 'built in' prior to its

actualisation and manifestation under the pressure of competition of capitals on one another. As **Marx** says, ‘scientific analysis of competition is only possible when the inner nature of capital is understood’ (1976, 433).

But there is a complication: **Marx** seeks to *postpone* discussion of the interaction of capitals, for example the determining effect of competition. This is explicit in the above-mentioned plans. Yet, since capital *necessarily* exists as many capitals in competition, it is doubtful if the distinction can be rigorously maintained. In the *Grundrisse* itself, he says: ‘Conceptually, *competition* is nothing but the *inner nature of capital*, its essential character, manifested and realised as the reciprocal action of many capitals upon each other; the immanent tendency realized as external necessity. (Capital exists and can only exist as many capitals; hence its self-determination appears as their reciprocal action on each other)’ (MECW 28, 341). Moreover, it is necessary to ‘*presuppose* the absolute predominance of free competition in order to be able to study and to formulate laws adequate to capital’ (MECW 29, 39). It would be hardly surprising if the effort to hold apart essence and appearance proved too artificial and a more dialectical presentation were later adopted by **Marx**.

3.2 *Logic*. A different approach to the methodological one is that in which capital is structured in a tripartite logical division, between generality, particularity, and singularity. The ‘logical’ differs from the ‘methodological’ in that the very structure of capital itself has the shape of the Hegelian Concept such that the movement of the argument from general to particular is not an expository convenience but a reconstruction and replication of capital’s own reproduction of itself as a universal through the mediation of the particular and singular.

3.3 *Ontology*. **Marx** says that there is a sense in which capital in general can be understood not merely as a mental abstraction from the plurality of real capitals but as itself a real existence, for example in the banking system, as we saw above. Here, capital appears as a concrete universal self-particularising itself to determinate sites. The ontological differs

from the logical in that, in opposition to **Hegel’s** idealisation of ‘the concept’, its dimensions are identified by **Marx** with material practices, such that the universality of capital is empirically visible in the operation of the money markets whereas its particularisation appears in specific industrial enterprises.

4. Research aimed at developing these notions, either severally or in combination, must take account of the failure of the term in question to appear in *Capital*. One main question for research here is: did **Marx** stick to his plan to treat competition separately, or was material brought forward from the never-to-be-written book on competition into *Capital*, Volume III? From a wide range of literature, I give now some examples of responses to this problem (such responses are, of course, conditioned by the definitions of ‘capital in general’ adopted in the first place).

Rosdolsky opposes ‘capital in general’ to ‘many capitals’ and sees in these two categories ‘the key to understanding [...] also the later work, i.e. *Capital*’ – regardless of the fact that the terms no longer appear; but he acknowledges that ‘the meaning which these concepts have in *Capital* does not always coincide with the one found in the [*Grundrisse*]’ (1977, 51). Volume I and Volume II of *Capital* are definitely restricted to capital in general, but the coverage of Volume III progressively approaches the surface forms determined by competition: ‘At this point the limits of “capital in general” [...] are far exceeded’ (ibid.).

Müller thinks **Marx’s** notion of ‘capital in general’ does not grasp essential social relations (1978, 131). Moreover, he believes that the attempt to deal separately with pure laws apart from their appearance in the real movement is insupportable (134). In truth, the general must be always the concretely general; this must comprehend the specification of single capitals as form-determined by the concept (134 et sqq.). Thus, in *Capital*, **Marx** *concretised* his concept of capital in this respect, so as to present the laws *together* with their forms of appearance, including such matters as the distribution of surplus-value. While the original

focus on ‘capital in general’ was a legitimate research-tool, it is dialectically sublated in the concrete concept of capital (142, 132).

Heinrich argues that **Marx’s** attempt to present the theoretical content (value, surplus-value etc.) at the level of ‘capital in general’ – abstracting from the movements of the many capitals – failed. **Marx** recognised this while working on the manuscript of 1861–3, when he found discussion of reproduction and the average rate of profit could not be fitted within this plan. So a new method had to be developed. *Capital* presents the dialectic of individual and social total capital at the three different levels of the three volumes (2003, 179–95).

Inspired by **Rosdolsky**, **Moseley** contests this interpretation. He argues that, if the notion is identified with ‘total social capital’ yielding an ‘aggregate surplus value’, then, in *Capital*, this mass is logically presupposed to the distribution of surplus-value through the formation of a general rate of profit and prices of production. For **Moseley**, then, *Capital* is at the level of ‘capital in general’ until the problem of distribution is addressed. That the term disappears is not important when one sees that similar terms, such as the distinction between inner nature and surface appearance, are maintained (2003, 15–48).

Haug contends that, to develop his critique of the classical labour-theory of value through the introduction of the key concept of ‘abstract labor’, Marx uses the commodity of competition [*nebenbuhlerische Ware*] (1976, 202), and the ‘average’ of many cases instead of the single case (129), from the outset. **Haug** therefore speaks of the ‘complementarity of the driving motive and competition’ (2006, 103), and sees their ‘result [...] in the form of what we term “the drama of the average” present from the first chapter’ (155).

Fineschi takes up the ‘logical’ definition of ‘capital in general’ outlined in **Marx’s** *Grundrisse* plan allocating the materials to universality, particularity and singularity. Even though *Capital* does not explicitly say so, these logical categories are still implicit in its articulation. What changed with the development of **Marx’s** research was a reallocation of the material, so

that ‘accumulation’ was brought up to the level of the universal while ‘interest’ was held back (2001, 187–235; 358–79).

Another version of **Marx’s** logical scheme is given by **Arthur**, where the logically ‘general’ is not only immanent to the three volumes of *Capital*, but itself divides into a specific moment of generality instantiated in Volume I, with particularity assigned to Volume II and singularity to Volume III (2002, 42–64).

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Capital, competition, composition-plans, concept, determination, dialectics, distribution, form and substance, form/content, Hegelianism, historical/logical, idealisation, logic of capital, logico-historical, method, price of production, reading of *Capital*, research/presentation, single/particular/general.

Aufbaupläne, Begriff, Bestimmung/Determination, Dialektik, Distribution, Einzelnes/Besonderes/ Allgemeines, Formgehalt/Forminhalt, Form und Substanz, Forschung/Darstellung, Hegelianismus, Historisches/Logisches, Idealisierung, Kapital, Kapital-Lektüre, Kapitallogik, logisch-historische Methode, Konkurrenz, Methode, Produktionspreis.