

William Clare Roberts. *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. xi + 282 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-17290-3.

Reviewed by Amy E. Wendling

Published on H-Ideas (December, 2017)

Commissioned by Aidan Beatty (University of Pittsburgh)

In William Clare Roberts's *Marx's Inferno*, we are invited to look, with different eyes, at something we may have looked at many times. Look again, says Roberts, at *Capital* (1867) as a book. Look again, says Roberts, at Marx as the inheritor of the republican tradition that emphasizes freedom. Look again, says Roberts, at the relationship between concepts and history. Look again, says Roberts, at the kind of domination exercised by *Capital* and the kind of subjectivity it informs. This, the heart of Roberts's intervention, is the substance of chapter 3 of *Marx's Inferno*. Look, he says, with Marx's eyes, literary eyes trained by the levels of hell in Dante's *Inferno*. When we look as he directs us, the result is both a novel and a convincing interpretation of Marx and some ways through or across many of the most interesting problems in Marxist theory.

There are significant reasons not to think about *Capital* as a book, and they are well known. But Roberts convinces us that there may also be significant reasons to think about *Capital*, and volume 1 in particular, as a contained work. When we do so, we gain an appreciation for Marx as a political theorist that we cannot gain in any other way. By limiting his consideration in this way, Roberts is able to do truly excellent textual work on volume 1 of Marx's *Capital*: disciplining ambiguities in the German text with the French;

making a real attempt at understanding the relationship between the sections on primitive accumulation and the work as a whole; treating Marx's utopian and other socialist sources not en bloc but differentially, with the differences between Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, Saint-Simone, and Pierre Joseph Proudhon carefully described; showing how the International Workingmen's Association (IWMA) speeches that accompanied Marx's composition of the text informed it and the political project it describes; and showing Marx's literary sources in *Capital* and taking their philosophical import seriously. Rachel Holmes's recent biography of Eleanor (*Eleanor Marx: A Life* [2014]) also supplies significant empirical evidence for the value of both the IWMA and the literary sources in the composition of *Capital*.

As a political document, *Capital* gives us a Marx that, oddly enough, diverges from the received Marx in significant ways, especially as the republican political argument that Roberts highlights. Marx's philosophy, like many philosophies, is a freedom project. Roberts's link between this freedom project and the republican freedom of non-domination is unique, and probably also correct. New forms of domination can spring from where they are least expected. They can even spring from the old forms of freedom. Capitalism

does not simply make us unequal: it makes us unfree.

Roberts has prescribed a nearly perfect method for reading volume 1 of *Capital*, one that brings the conceptual and the historical materials together, just as Marx intended them to be. In two areas, however, Roberts's work falls slightly below the exceptionally high bar set by his method. The first is rooted in the arsenal of conceptual tools we find in chapter 1 of *Capital* but omitted in Roberts's historical considerations: a reflection on the labor concept. The second is in the arsenal of historical tools we find, especially in the *Gruntdrisse* (1939), though also in *Capital*, but omitted in Roberts's conceptual considerations: a proper understanding of the role of money.

One of the insights from the *Wertstheorie* debates that Roberts eschews—along with any vocabulary of dialectics—is that the concept of labor itself is hardly a fixed point. The labor concept simply cannot be used without clarification, explanation, and distinctions. Marx gives us the abstract labor concept to specify the “peculiar social character of the labor that produces” commodities; Roberts glosses the passage from *Capital* as “the fact that labor is indirectly social, or socialized only in exchange” (p. 81). But the gloss elides a crucial point: after having been socialized in exchange, the labor concept itself comes to be colonized by the abstract labor concept. It is then socialized prior to exchange by the coding of human laboring activity as abstract labor. This may mean, as Moishe Postone argues most famously in *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (1996), that the potential for rehabilitating the labor concept is limited. Insofar as Roberts's work relies on a rehabilitation of the labor concept, it will be incomplete without a robust answer to this critique.

However, Roberts's exact interpretation of the labor concept remains unclear. In particular, it is unclear how he understands the issue of abstract labor in relationship to the other key labor con-

cepts of Marx's work: labor time, labor power, and labor itself when unqualified by either himself or Marx. Similarly, I believe that Roberts could learn from his own method in his characterization of the historical issue of money in relationship to the conceptual issue of exchange. It is too strong to claim, as Roberts does, that “a system of exchange without money, if it were possible, would present all of the same difficulties as a system of monetary exchange” (p. 77). In fact, Christian Lotz is correct that it is impossible to imagine a system of exchange of the capitalist type without money, since it is money, and money precisely, that introduces the abstractions inherent in the capitalist mode of exchange (*The Capitalist Schema* [2014]). Exploring money, in particular, rather than exchange, in general, makes us able not only to specify the commodity's tendency toward abstraction, fungibility, and quantification but also to explain the level of hyper-abstraction that occurs when goods are quantified in money rather than in another good.

Without question, the very finest point of Roberts's book is his characterization of the moral subjectivity of capitalist subjects as a kind of *akrasia*. To say that capitalist subjects suffer from akratic, rather than false, consciousness is a thousand times more accurate. Roberts's *akratic* consciousness is not false: options are open to her, and she well knows what they are. But she chooses against the better of these options. She knows better but does it anyway. And what decision in capitalism is not subject to this logic? The consumer replaces the air conditioning unit at his house from an old one that cools the house to 78 degrees Fahrenheit to one that cools it to precisely 72 degrees, but for two years afterward, he struggles with anxiety about paying off the debt he has thereby incurred. All the while knowing better, he trades modest material bodily comfort, felt to be a need, for this anxiety. The basic structure is addiction to shopping and, beneath this, addiction full stop. In another example, I know I should walk in-

stead of drive to work. It is better for the environment and my body. I don't do it.

In a complication of Aristotle's account of *akrasia*—and, for what it may be worth, also Davidson's[1]—the akratic subject feels forced to choose wrongly: or, more accurately, unfree to choose rightly. Is the akratic, then, truly akratic, or does her reason simply point in two different directions simultaneously? The consumer justifies the air conditioner choice with an appeal to the low price of units this year, the fear that the warhorse unit will die, and the idea that the indebtedness of subsequent years would be still worse. I justify the walking choice with an appeal to the safety of the footpaths, and it is no small consideration. Fetish is not illusion; it is domination. And it is impersonal domination: the feeling of having one's reason split in two directions, and being forced to choose the wrong path comes from no one in particular, but from the aggregate impersonal choices of the market or its externalities: rising air conditioner prices and unsafe roads.

Finally, it is not only simply consumers and workers but also capitalists who are subject to akratic consciousness, since it is the same akratic consciousness that is behind the imperative to exploit, notes Roberts. The boss does not want to keep her workers after hours, but if she does not do so, the business as a whole will go under. Under such conditions, workers themselves might well agitate for their own exploitation!

This tack through the false consciousness problem tries to leave open the possibilities for action that traditionalists foreclose. The decisive point is that I can still see how it might be otherwise, and, with this, can glimpse what kind of collective action or change would be necessary to remove the source of the domination that sends me in the wrong direction. This will be harder, of course, for subjects who can no longer imagine a category of being that does not reduce to a monetary form, or imagine a category of activity that

does not reduce to abstract labor. But without it, Roberts is quite right to point out that neither morality nor freedom is possible.

Note

[1]. Donald Davidson, "How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?" in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 21-42.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-ideas>

Citation: Amy E. Wendling. Review of Roberts, William Clare. *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital*. H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. December, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=50377>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.