

William C. Roberts, *Marx's Inferno. The Political Theory of Capital*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2017, pp. 282, € 29.19, ISBN 0691172900

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Marx's Inferno, a new book by William Clare Roberts, offers an original and controversial reinterpretation of the first volume of *Capital*. Its aim is to reconstruct the political core of Marx's critique of the political economy. To this purpose, its author introduces two interpretative keys: one consists of the structure of Dante's *Inferno*, that – according to Roberts – Marx used as a framework during the composition of his *magnum opus*, the other is the partly implicit dialogue between Marx and the various competing French and English socialisms of that period. By weaving these two threads of *Capital* together, Roberts comes to his central claim about Marx's project.

When reading Marx, one cannot help but notice his continuous use of metaphors and literary references. Less obvious is that such literary allusions – in some occasions – come to play a substantial argumentative role, one beyond mere rhetorics or illustration. As S. S. Praver has shown in his classical study *Karl Marx and World Literature*, in order to make his point Marx often employed structures of classical literary works. A clear example is the *Eighteenth Brumaire* (one that Roberts discusses in the book: p.28-32). Analysing the 1851 coup of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, Marx casts himself in the role of Hamlet, establishing the betrayal of the republic, and pointing out the guilty parties. In his second chapter Roberts argues that a similar parallelism exists between the first part of the *Divina Commedia* and the first volume of *Capital*. Just as Dante, on his journey toward salvation, descends through the various levels of hell, so Marx, the “Virgil for the proletariat” (p.1), guides us through the multi-layered “social hell” (p.1) of the capitalist mode of production. More important than the question of whether such a parallelism is convincing, is the reasoning that Roberts founds on it. This parallel, he contends, goes beyond the exposition – the *Darstellung* – of the work, and reveals how, though Marx's “culmination and criticism” (p.23) of socialism, *Capital* draws upon classical and Christian moral discourses, Roberts is somewhat ambivalent here. For although he rightly emphasises Marx relentless criticism of the moralism of early

socialism, and in particular of their moral economy, he at the same time suggests a strong continuity between classical and Christian moral discourses and *Capital* (p.57). This continuity-thesis is mirrored in Roberts' structuring of his book: from chapter two to six he uses the various sins punished in Dante's hell – incontinence, violence, fraud, and treachery – to analyse aspects of Marx's critique of political economy.

This brings us to the central claim of *Marx's Inferno*, one closely connected to Roberts' second interpretive key: the Marx of *Capital* is closer to a republican conception of freedom than the positive conception traditionally attributed to him (p.7, 256). Contrary to a positive conception of freedom, in which freedom is understood as either individual or collective self-realisation, such a republican freedom subscribes to freedom as non-domination. As Roberts himself indicates, here he is clearly influenced by the contemporary interest in republicanism within political theory, a revival inspired by the works of Quentin Skinner and others. He takes care, however, to demarcate such republicanism from neo-republicanism. Neither can it be reduced to the French republicanism associated with the French revolution (p.247). Roberts hopes “to portray Marx as delineating an alternative republicanism” (p.8). The essence of such an alternative republicanism would lie in the control of arbitrary power (p.63, 247). Arguments stem from both Marx's indebtedness to a certain strand of republican socialism (as represented by Robert Owen), and – most importantly of course – the analysis of *Capital*. Through such a republicanism Marx would partake in a modern, secularised version of the moral discourses just mentioned.

The decision to treat only volume one of *Capital*, and thus to separate it from the unpublished volumes two and three, seems very problematic. David Harvey, in a review for *Jacobin*, has already convincingly criticised this choice. Nevertheless, many aspects of Roberts' analysis are both original and solid. The book is at its strongest where it traces the genesis of Marx's innovations in the context of the theories of his socialist predecessors. Roberts' analysis follows the chapters of *Capital*. He starts in chapter three of the book, where he discusses the first part of *Capital*, beginning with the riddle of the money-form (*Marx-Engels Collected Works* (hereafter MECW), volume 35, p.58). Against Proudhon and the Owenites, who held that the abolition of money would lead to a proper evaluation of labour

and honest commercial exchange, Marx – following his theory of the genesis of value – stresses the inevitability of a general equivalent. This leads Roberts, importantly, to stress the impersonal form of domination of the market. Such objective domination is, as he writes, “not domination *by objects*, but domination by ‘social production’, or by the social relation of individuals to one another” (p.92). It must be noted, however, that the contributions of Lukács, the Frankfurt School, and Althusser on this point – that Roberts describes as theories of “social domination” (p.82) – are more or less brushed aside: “in the absence of an analysis of the market as a system for aggregating *arbitria*, the diagnosis of social domination is little more than a vague and unpersuasive complaint” (p.93). Although the idea of commodity fetishism – later taken up by Lukács and Adorno – certainly implies a theory of the market, in my view Roberts here reduces social relations to economic relations. In a broader political theory – and none of the aforementioned theorists intend to limit themselves to *Capital* – the question of domination is certainly related to the way in which market forces come to determine other spheres of social and political life.

In chapter four, analysing the second and third part of *Capital*, Marx’s concept of exploitation is explored. The Saint-Simonians and Proudhon understand the famous “exploitation of man by man” (p.110) as a consequence of physical force. They believe that exploitation stems from the remnants of feudalism within capitalism. In other words, it ultimately follows from the feudal ownership of land, an original inequality that allowed the proprietors to accumulate and speculate. Roberts argues that Marx, writing against his competitor Proudhon, depersonalises the concept of exploitation: the source of exploitation lies in capital, not in the individual capitalists. “It is not the *power* to exploit that matters to Marx”, Roberts notes, “but the *imperative* to exploit” (p.121). Furthermore, the capitalist mode of production is clearly linked to overwork (MECW 35, p.244). In a third step, associating Marx with Aristotle, Roberts claims that the latter condemns the capitalist exploitation of labour power as a use of labour contrary to its nature. Overall, it is rightly stressed that for Marx the issue of exploitation needs not so much to be assessed in moral terms – the individual abuse of power, etc. – as in political terms. All too often moral terminology legitimises structural exploitation.

In chapter five, that relates to part four to seven, Roberts analyses the capitalist mode of production in terms of fraud. Although capitalism promises to benefit the labourers, by bringing material prosperity, independence, humanisation, and freedom, it cannot keep its promises. Very interesting, again, is the contrast that Roberts sketches between Proudhon and Marx. Whereas the former, with his principle of association, accepts the idea of a mutual exchange between free producers, the liberal idea of the social contract, the latter rejects this possibility. Under the conditions of the capitalism, it is illusionary to see the exchange between individuals as free (p.162). In the sixth chapter, that focuses on the much-debated eighth part of *Capital*, Roberts mainly contextualises the problem of primitive accumulation. The contrast between Marx and various socialisms on the question of how to exit capitalism is further examined. In contrast to the ideals of separatism and artisanal production, common to the socialist movements of the time, Marx believed in “the necessity of expropriation” (p.193). Turning to “the positive political theory of *Capital*” (p.19), Roberts uses the last chapter to bind the various threads of his argument together. Marx, he argues, is best understood as “a radical republican and an (admittedly heterodox) Owenite communist” (p.231). Owen's idea of cooperative production must certainly have influenced Marx's conception of communism as free association. I am not sure if this would make him an Owenite. More convincing is Roberts' criticism of G. A. Cohen's contention that Marx's obstetric view of politics is problematic. Cohen, he argues, understands equality and community as the principles of communism. From this perspective, Marx's reluctance to “write receipts [...] for the cook-shops of the future” (MECW 35, p.17), appears as a problem for communist politics. If freedom and association are seen as “the principles of Marx's communism” (p.238), however – as seems right – such a view forms the only coherent stance. Nevertheless, Roberts replacement of positive freedom with republican freedom, remains deeply problematic. Not only does Marx, in various works before *Capital*, explicitly formulate an idea of positive freedom, such an interpretation also neglects the continuity that exists between Marx's work and post-Kantian German Idealism. Furthermore, why should the struggle against domination necessarily exclude an ideal of positive liberty? In the third volume of *Capital*, Marx describes the need of

labourers to bring, as associated producers, “the interchange with Nature” under rational control, and then adds: “But it nonetheless still remains the realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom [...]” (MECW 37, p.807).

In spite of some problematic aspects, *Marx's Inferno* is an engaging, well-researched, and original book. It is questionable, however, if the parallels that exist between the first volume of *Capital* and *Inferno* have the importance that Roberts attributes to it. More importantly, it feels as if Roberts could have made his argument about Marx and republican socialism without invoking Dante. An investigation of the similarities and differences with either French republicanism (Rousseau, de Sieyès), or the republicanism of the Left-Hegelians (Ruge and the brothers Bauer) might have been more productive. But that Roberts has succeeded in presenting the first book of *Capital* in a new light is an impressive achievement. Above all, reconnecting socialism with an analytical concept of freedom seems an urgent task for the present.

Bibliography

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Siegbert S. Praver, *Karl Marx and World Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1978.

More reviews of this volume

David Harvey, *Reading Capital*:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/03/david-harvey-marxs-inferno-review-capital-grundrisse>