

## Marx lecturer: notes on the constitution and teaching of (Critique) of Political Economy

Marx conferencista: notas sobre a constituição e o ensino da (Crítica) da Economia Política

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**Abstract:** This text begins with the assumption that a critique of Marx's political economy is the product of the multi-faceted insertion given by the theorist in the social life of his time, either by the most well-known and explored route that his theoretical studies were, or by his political practice and his professional performance as a journalist. Therefore, Marx's criticism is the result of the interaction of various factors, among which we intend to highlight a little explored facet of him: his moments as a lecturer, when he tried to systematize his ideas and reach out, through direct teaching, to a restricted group of interested people by sharing the results of his theoretical research. The two best known lectures given by Marx ("Wage Labour and Capital," 1865, and "Value, Price and Profit," 1865) will be analyzed both for their importance within Marx's theoretical trajectory towards the constitution of his critique, and for their fruitfulness of indicating elements to support the teaching of "Critique of Political Economy."

**Keywords:** Conferences; Critique of Political Economy; Political Economy; Teaching.

**JEL Classification:** P00; B14.

**Resumo:** Este artigo parte do pressuposto de que a crítica da economia política de Marx é legatária da inserção multifacetada daquele autor na vida social de seu tempo, seja pela via mais conhecida e explorada que foram seus estudos teóricos, seja pela sua prática política e pela sua atuação profissional como jornalista. Sua crítica, portanto, é o resultado da interação de diversos fatores, entre os quais pretendemos destacar uma faceta pouco explorada do autor, que foram seus momentos como conferencista, quando tentava sistematizar suas ideias e fazer chegar a um grupo restrito de interessados, pela via do ensino direto, os resultados das suas pesquisas teóricas. As duas conferências mais conhecidas proferidas por Marx, *Trabalho Assalariado e Capital*, de 1847, e *Salário, Preço e Lucro*, de 1865, serão analisadas tanto pela sua importância dentro da trajetória teórica de Marx rumo à constituição de sua crítica, quanto pela sua fecundidade para indicar elementos de apoio ao ensino da (crítica) da Economia Política.

**Palavras-chave:** Conferências; Crítica da Economia Política; Economia Política; Ensino.

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## 1. Introduction

Before publishing some of his works, and especially before the publication of *Capital*, Marx presented his scientific discoveries to a small audience through lectures, seeking to clarify the workings of capitalist society, as well as the need and reasons for overcoming it. Marx's inclination often coincided with moments when his theoretical activities came to a standstill, as if he used the spectators to revise his research and better refine the sense and meaning of his theoretical categories, in a symbiotic relationship between teaching and research, as Rosdolsky (1977, p. 03) points out: "(It is also possible that Marx's 'pedagogic' activity, the lectures on political economy which he gave at home for his close friends, may have given him the incentive to take up his theoretical studies again.)."

One of the best testimonies to this *modus operandi* can be found in Marx's biographical memoirs published in 1896 in Germany by his friend and philosopher Wilhelm Liebknecht, who says that, with the political isolation imposed on Marx when he arrived in London, he gave economics courses to his friends in his own home, which kept him in touch with theory. The account below, although lengthy, is indispensable as it clarifies Marx's unenlightened verve in great detail.

During the years 1850 and 1851, Marx gave a Course of Lectures on Economics. He wasn't very enthusiastic at first, but after a few private lessons with a small circle of friends, he was persuaded to give his teachings in front of a larger audience. Throughout the course, which was a profound pleasure for all of us who had the good fortune to attend, Marx was already fully developing the foundations of his system, as they are written down today in *Capital*. In the crowded hall of the Communist Alliance, or Communist Workers' Educational Club, [...] Marx displayed a remarkable talent for popularization. No one hated the vulgarization of science more than he did, that is, its adulteration, simplification and denaturalization; but no one had a greater ability than he did to express himself so clearly. Clarity of speech is the fruit of clear reasoning, clear thinking requires a clear form. Marx proceeded methodically. He would formulate a sentence - as short as possible - and then go on to explain it in detail, avoiding using any expression that was incomprehensible to the workers. Then he asked them to ask him questions. If they didn't, he began to examine them, and he did this with such pedagogical skill that no gap, no misunderstanding escaped him. When I expressed my surprise at his mastery, I was told that he had lectured on economic issues at the Brussels Workers' Association. In any case, he had all the qualities needed to be a good teacher. He also made use of a blackboard where he wrote down various formulas, including those we are familiar with from the early part of *Capital*. Too bad the course lasted about six months or a little less (LIEBKNECHT, 1975).

The analysis of Marx's two best-known lectures, *Wage Labor and Capital*, from 1847, and *Value, Price and Profit*, from 1865, as well as shedding light on Marx's theoretical trajectory towards the constitution of his critique, can indicate elements both about the limitations faced by the author in transmitting those contents, and about the strategies he adopted. Therefore, in the next two sections we will analyze the two famous lectures given by Marx: in the second section, *Wage Labor and Capital*, and in the third, *Value, Price and Profit*. In the fourth and final section, we will try to highlight some of the lessons that Marx's lectures can offer us for thinking about the teaching of the critique of political economy.

## 2. Wage Labour and Capital<sup>2</sup>

It should be emphasized that the aim of this section and the next is not to rigorously analyze the inaccuracies, shortcomings and advances of each of these works that were published as a result of the conferences, or to compare the "level" of Marx at this time in relation to the mature Marx. Although the analysis of *Wage Labor and Capital* is an important moment in the evolution of Marx's theoretical thought, the aim is to highlight the way Marx saw fit to transmit his knowledge of political economy to workers (students), given his mastery of the content at the time.

Perhaps more explicitly than any other work, Marx's two book-length lectures, *Wage Labor and Capital* and *Value, Price and Profit*, represent the visceral coming together of the essential poles of his critique of political economy, driven as much by dissatisfaction with the philosophy of his time as by the political-ideological motivation of the socialist transformation of the world. In the case of the work in question in this section, it must be said that it represented one of Marx's first attempts to vivify the skeleton of classical German philosophy by assigning it theoretical elements capable of, if properly understood, moving political practice towards the transformation of the prevailing social order.

If the teleological perspective of history is not supported by Marx, then, as we have already pointed out, it would be a matter of using the weapons of political action to give some impetus to the process of transforming a reality that he had deeply analyzed in several years of intense study of political economists.

Let's go back to 1844. In Paris, Marx began his contacts with socialist groups and the vanguards of the working class and, with this, he began a process of changing his idyllic vision, transforming his abstract conception of the working class into one with a materialist bias that would accompany him in his following works. At the same time, he immersed himself in the studies of the classical economists to such an extent that he filled nine books

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<sup>2</sup> We will use the Brazilian translation contained in the book *Nova Gazeta Renana*, as it contains the five original editorials published in 1849 in the newspaper of the same name, without the changes made by Engels, although with footnotes on the additions he made for the 1891 edition.

with notes and quotations, in what became known as the *Paris Manuscripts*, written at the same time as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*.

From that moment on, with a broad knowledge of political economy, Marx began giving lectures to craftsmen and, from August until the end of 1844, he had a decisive influence on the editorial direction of the magazine *Vorwärts!*, a radical newspaper published in German (JONES, 2016, p. 164). It can therefore be seen that, although *Wage Labor and Capital* and *Value, Price and Profit* are his best-known lectures, Marx always tried to intersperse his varied list of theoretical, political and professional activities with others linked to the transmission and teaching of the contents of his critique of political economy. It should be noted, therefore, that the lectures and conferences given by Marx were preceded by an intense period of study of the themes that would be presented, and were not, therefore, mere motivational speeches or speeches aimed at conditioning and inflaming the working masses, even though, as Engels (2020, p. 02) points out in the Introduction to the 1891 edition, the intention was to disseminate the work as a propaganda pamphlet. In short, theory and propaganda in Marx's work are not necessarily mutually exclusive.<sup>3</sup>

On January 25, the journal was closed down and Marx was ordered to be expelled. His destination was Brussels, where he arrived on February 2, 1845. There, Marx continued his studies of political economy. Alongside his political activities, Marx worked incessantly, writing a voluminous set of excerpts related to the history of economics between the fall of 1846 and September 1847, divided into three notebooks of quotations. At the same time as his studies, Marx finished *The Poverty of Philosophy* in April 1847, and in December he gave lectures at the German Workers' Association in Brussels, which were published in a total of five editorials in the *Nova Gazeta Renana* newspaper<sup>4</sup>, between

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<sup>3</sup> Mandel exalts the scientific character of *Wage Labor and Capital*, listing it alongside the *Poverty of Philosophy* and the *Communist Manifesto*, because, according to him, referring to these works as a whole, "we no longer find a mere partial view of bourgeois society, concerned chiefly or even exclusively with the misery of the proletariat. Instead we have an impressive picture in which the laws that gave rise to capitalism are examined, its historical merits are analyzed (in particular that of having made possible the abolition of all class divisions, thanks to a marvelous growth in the productive forces), and in which the labor movement and the communist movement are provided with the foundation of an analysis conceived as strictly scientific, the foundation of historical materialism." (MANDEL, 1971, p. 52).

<sup>4</sup> With the outbreak of the 1848 Revolution, Marx was expelled from Belgium on March 3rd. He returned to France and a few days later left for Cologne, the capital of the Rhineland, where he and Engels set up a newspaper called the *Nova Gazeta Renana*, with an editorial line designed to guide the revolution in that country.

April 5 and 11, 1849, and then gathered together in a work that became known as *Wage Labor and Capital*<sup>5</sup>.

This work represented a giant leap forward<sup>6</sup> in the evolution of his knowledge of political economy, but due to its inaccuracies, misunderstandings and theoretical-conceptual gaps, it was still far removed from the minimum requirements for the constitution of the critique that would be consummated in the *Grundrisse* of 1857-1858. It should be reiterated that the theoretical weaknesses will be mentioned at times, but not analyzed in detail, because, as already mentioned, the aim here is not to situate the work in the general evolution of Marx's thought, but rather to shed light on his research and the verbal transmission of his results.

Even if one recognizes the possibility of a rift between theoretical knowledge and political action, i.e. that the working class could understand the call for political mobilization contained in that work without understanding the intricacies of theory, it should not be said that Marx disdained the theoretical rigour necessary in the exposition of his thought. He himself would not embark on political activities without the support of the scientific knowledge needed to underpin each initiative. Marx's resistance to taking part in projects to prepare for the revolution was linked to his conviction that it was first necessary to gain a scientific understanding of the nature and structure of capitalist society.

The argument that we are trying to develop here, that is, that Marx's works from conferences had great penetration among the target audience<sup>7</sup>, and could therefore be an indication of more didactic ways of teaching *Critique of Political Economy* (from this point on, CPE), are supported by Engels' (2020, p. 02) indications that, in the 1891 edition of the work, it would be published in a print run of no less than 10,000 copies intended almost exclusively for propaganda among workers. Further on, he justifies that the only change he felt entitled to make, namely that the worker sells not his labor, but his labor power, was only intended to enlighten the workers and the bourgeoisie. The former, so that they can

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<sup>5</sup> According to McLellan (1995, p. 158), "In February [1848] Marx started writing up these lectures for publication, but was to be interrupted by his expulsion from Belgium." Marx himself says, in a letter written to Engels on June 3, 1864, that his work *Wage Labor and Capital* was "which were in fact merely a printed version of lectures I had delivered in 1847 at the Brussels Workers' Society." (Marx and Engels, 2010c, p. 534).

<sup>6</sup> According to Mandel (1971, p. 54), "It was in *Wage Labor and Capital* that Marx hinted for the first time at the essence of his theory of surplus value, though without using the term or expressing himself precisely."

<sup>7</sup> It must be said that when the articles were first published in 1849, they didn't have the expected repercussions with readers. If in 1891, as Engels informs us, the work finally had the expected penetration in workers' circles, we can't believe that this was only due to the curiosity of his ideas or because he had become an established figure in German political and trade union circles. It won't be possible to investigate here the reasons for the better reception of Marx's work from the last two decades of the century in which he lived, but it wouldn't be unreasonable to suggest that the political context of the time, historical developments and the reinforcement given by Marx's later works could have contributed to making *Wage Labor and Capital* more intelligible. We'll talk about this reinforcement later.

see "that they are not dealing with a simple question of words, but, on the contrary, with one of the most important points in the whole of political economy." The latter, so that they can convince themselves how vastly superior the uneducated workers, for whom one can easily make comprehensible the most difficult economic analyses, are to our supercilious "educated people" to whom such intricate questions remain insoluble their whole life long (ENGELS, 2020, p. 02).

The central theme of Marx's analysis in *Wage Labor and Capital* was wages. There was a reason for this. Marx was once again on the verge of a revolution that would begin in France but spread to several European countries. Therefore, in December 1847, the heat of events was already pushing Marx to nourish the workers' movement with a theoretical content that would underpin its actions beyond any utopian ideals of social transformation through consciousness. That's why, in the first editorial, published on April 5, 1849, he says: "we systematically approach these relations only when they immediately erupt into political collisions." (MARX, 2010, p. 531).

It should be noted that at the beginning of his lectures for the workers, Marx recapitulates how he had discussed things up to that point, generically indicating objectives, methodology and bibliography. "It was above all a question of following the class struggle in everyday history and proving it empirically, with the historical materials available and the new ones produced daily [...]." (Ibidem). The subject to be analyzed and debated therefore had to be of direct interest to the audience. He tried to attract the listeners' attention by highlighting the connection with the workers' reality:

Now, after our readers have seen the class struggle develop into colossal political forms in 1848, it is time to take a closer look at the very economic relations on which the bourgeoisie and its class domination are based, as well as the enslavement of the workers (Ibidem, p. 532).

In fact, what Marx wants is to reach his students. He doesn't indicate a miraculous formula for this. We see this point as sufficient to dispel any impression that we intend to find in Marx's text the revelation of *hors concours* pedagogical resources. All he says is that his aim is "to present the subject in the simplest and most popular way possible, without taking even the most elementary concepts of political economy for granted." (Ibidem). He then announces that the presentation will be made in three major sections:

1. The relationship between wage labor and capital, the enslavement of workers, the domination of capitalists, 2. The inevitable ruin of the bourgeois middle classes and the peasantry under the current system, 3. The commercial subjugation and exploitation of the bourgeois classes of the various European nations by the despot of the world market - England.

The next step is to go into the first item on the program: "Let's move on to the first question: What is a wage? How is it determined?" (Ibidem). The first editorial will attempt to answer only the first question, leaving the second for the following editorial, which will be published on April 6, 1849. From there, a series of inaccuracies that would not appear later in *Capital*. Without yet having radically broken with Ricardo's theory of wages, Marx

mistakenly defines wages as "part of the already existing commodities with which the capitalist buys himself a determined quantity of labor" (ibid., p. 534), insurging against the idea that wages are a part of the worker's own share in the commodities he produces. It also refers to work as the commodity sold by the worker and not to labor power.<sup>8</sup> Later, in the second editorial, he asks the question: "What determines the price of a commodity?" (ibid., p. 537). He responds by saying that the price of a commodity is determined by its production costs and that, therefore, the commodity labor will have its price determined in the same way. Therefore, "the price of labor will be determined by the costs of production, by the labor time needed to produce this commodity, labor." (Ibidem, p. 540).

At this point, Marx's still substantial affiliation with Ricardo's theory of value is apparent, which partly explains his constant reference to the category of labor, rather than the category of labor power, and the category of exchange value, rather than the category of value. On the other hand, he demonstrates that he has advanced towards a theory of capital by recognizing, in the third editorial, that capital is a social relation of production, but he is still a long way from understanding the category of capital as a social form, which would put him definitively far from what economists used to say, for whom "capital consisted of raw materials, instruments of work and means of subsistence of all kinds [...] accumulated labour." (Ibidem, p. 542). Marx seems to flirt with this view of capital more than he would admit when he says, a little later, and with a certain conciliatory tone, that "capital **too** is a social relation of production" and that "capital does not consist **only** of means of subsistence, instruments of labor and raw materials [...]" (ibid., p. 543, emphasis added).<sup>9</sup>

However, even with this limitation, Marx comes to expressive and enlightening conclusions about the subordinate and degrading role of the working class in the face of capital, which is something that is preserved and multiplied "as an autonomous social power, that is, as the power of a part of society, through exchange with immediate living labor." (Ibidem, p. 544).<sup>10</sup> Towards the end of the third editorial, he gives the workers a

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<sup>8</sup> Regarding the change made by Engels in the 1891 edition, when he replaced the term "labor" with labor power, Teixeira (2014, p. 134-135) points out that one of the problems with this procedure is that "the various methodological acquisitions that allowed Marx to discover the category of labor power were not yet in place when he wrote this work. It contradicted the adage widely known by every Jew, which advocated not pouring new wine into an old wineskin. A determination of the object, labor power, was arbitrarily introduced at a past point in the theory through a methodological development that took place in the future."

<sup>9</sup> Since this conference was held in 1847, it is perhaps possible to say that the failure of the revolutions of the following year stimulated Marx to advance his understanding of the category of capital beyond its material dimension, since it was clear that it would not be enough to destroy machines and equipment in order to contain the depredating power of capital.

<sup>10</sup> On this point, Marx was ahead of Ricardo, but without having yet developed his theory of surplus value, he remained in a similar field of analysis to authors such as Thomas Hodgskin (1983),

crucial observation about the position of this class in the relationship between capital and labor:

Capital can only multiply by exchanging itself for labor, creating wage labor. Wage labor can only be exchanged for capital by expanding capital, reinforcing the power to which it is a slave. The expansion of capital is therefore the expansion of the proletariat, i.e. the working classes.

Marx therefore continues to develop his exposition within the limits of the theoretical and methodological acquisitions he himself had made up to that point. This may explain the lack of immediate success with the workers, as understanding the real enemy would require years of study of capital. If an analogy can be made, Marx was there trying to identify the enemy through a precariously constructed portrait of the society of capital.

In addition to its advances and shortcomings, it is important to note that the presentation of the content, although it underwent some formalization when it was written in the form of editorials for publication, still reflected a high level of didactic elements typical of a classroom. It is possible to see in the course of the text that Marx makes use of modest resources, albeit fundamental in a teaching process, which could not be used if he did not abandon, or at least make more flexible, the demands of a formal exposition using the dialectical method. Here are some elements that show the didactic nature of the five editorials: makes extensive use of conceptual definitions, seeks to popularize the presentation and create rapprochement with the public by abandoning any formalism, exemplifies his arguments at every turn with situations familiar to workers, studies historical cases, concrete situations and refuses to adopt dogmatic positions by admitting the possibility of temporary situations that are opposed to the central argument defended.

In the last two editorials, Marx opens up the range of observations made in the previous ones, signaling that there was still a lot to study: "Wages are by no means determined solely by the mass of commodities that I can exchange for them. Other relationships must be considered." (Ibidem, p. 547). Despite realizing the long road of study that the topics discussed there still required, with what he had already achieved it was possible to reach decisive conclusions for the listeners: "We see, therefore, that even while remaining within the relationship between capital and wage labor, the interests of capital and the interests of wage labor are directly opposed." (Ibidem, p. 550).

As we have seen, the theoretical themes dealt with by Marx in *Wage Labor and Capital* are not very diverse, but even so, Marx did not fail to emphasize the contradictory nature of capitalist society and to achieve his initial objective, which was to describe the way capitalist society works in an accessible, albeit insufficient, way, providing workers with a theoretical basis on the laws that govern the functioning of that society. If he didn't lose sight of the greater goal, he also didn't give up intellectual honesty and the necessary scientific rigor, basing his analysis on concrete situations, not abstract ones. That's why he

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considered by some to be a Ricardian socialist, who placed capital either as the elements of the production process (ibid., p. 314), or as a "power to use labor" (ibid., p. 335).



ends his lectures with a quote that dialectically reflects the contradictory essence of the capitalist order:

As capital grows rapidly, competition between workers grows disproportionately faster, that is, the means of occupation, the means of subsistence for the working class, relatively diminish, and yet the rapid growth of capital is the favorable condition for wage labor (ibid., p. 558).

If in this work Marx chose as his enemies what he generically calls economists, it was in the 1865 lectures that he, as he did with Proudhon in *Poverty of Philosophy*, Vogt in *Mr. Vogt*, the Bauer family in *The Holy Family* and others, identified a privileged interlocutor right from the start: citizen Weston.

### 3. Value, Price and Profit

*Value, Price and Profit* was first published in 1898 by Marx's youngest daughter in London under the title *Value, Price, Profit*, and then republished as *Wages, Price and Profit* in 1952 (Bottomore, 2001, p. 407). The work is the result of lectures given by Marx on June 20 and 27, 1865 at the General Council of the International Workingmen's Association.

The main theme was the same: wages. However, when it came to mastering the themes of political economy, Marx was at a much higher level than the knowledge he possessed on the occasion of *Wage Labor and Capital*. It's worth mentioning that Marx had written the *London Notebooks* between 1850 and 1853, the *Grundrisse* in 1857-1858, the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in 1859, the *Manuscripts* from 1861 to 1863 and was writing the *Manuscripts* from 1864 to 1865 when he gave the aforementioned lectures. As Dussel (1990, p. 23) points out, by 1865 Marx was already

with an overall vision of what his future work would be. His discourse was based on twenty-two years of study (since the distant year 1843 in Paris) and was practically the result of the analysis of a large part of the three books of the third edition of *Capital*. Few times had a politician matured so deeply theoretically to make a decision at the level of praxis.

Marx stayed away from political activities since 1851, but from the 1860s he returned to the countryside and took part in the actions that resulted in the creation of the First Workers' International in 1864. Therefore, at that moment, it was a question of reviving the same purposes of the conferences that resulted in *Wage Labor and Capital*, providing the proletarian class with better articulated theoretical elements that already resulted from a critique of political economy not yet formulated in 1847, but quite advanced in the *Grundrisse*, from 1857 to 1858.

Although he had extensive knowledge of the economic categories that made up his critique, as well as the levels of abstraction within which they moved, Marx also sought to present his research in a popular format that was easier for workers to reach. Dussel marks

precisely that moment in Marx's theoretical evolution when, referring to the year 1865, he says that

[...] eighteen years had not passed in vain. Marx was in full command of his theoretical-dialectical development and was therefore able to delimit the concept of wages on the basis of the necessary categories. Let's remember that Marx had already written Book I of Capital in its entirety (in 1863-1864), and had also written chapter 2 of Book III (the whole question of the passage from value to the price of production) in a definitive manner (since he would not make any significant advances in the future). However, in this lecture, Marx is at a much more concrete level of abstraction, much closer to the phenomena, because he goes into the question of the law of supply and demand in reference to wages. [...] Marx argues that supply and demand are not the law that regulates the variation of wages. [...] This implies that Marx has already made clear the conclusion of chapter 3 of book III on the law of the tendential fall in the rate of profit - which shows that supply and demand are the effect and not the cause of the fundamental laws (Dussel, 1990, p. 104).

In what would have been a useful pedagogical resource, citizen Weston was then invoked as a privileged interlocutor, although in essence Marx was expressing ideas resulting from his recently concluded clashes with Adam Smith and David Ricardo in the Manuscripts of 1861 to 1863, part of which was later published as Theories of surplus value. For Marx, it was a question of starting a process of deconstructing ideas crystallized in common sense, with a fragile scientific basis, but with a strong appeal in minds that were hostage to the movements of the phenomenal world.

The wage fund theory, according to which wages were a fixed quantity in the universe of national wealth, and the iron law of wages, an expression used by Ferdinand Lassalle to illustrate the idea that there was a law of tendency for wages to decrease to the level of physical subsistence of the workers, had to be deconstructed so that Marx could erect his already perfected theory of wages in its place. So he waits until the sixth chapter to say: "Citizens, I have now arrived at a point where I must enter upon the real development of the question." (MARX, 2020, p. 75).

As he had already written the Contribution in 1859 and the first version of Book I of Capital between 1863 and 1865, works that start with the commodity, Marx takes a few steps back and, before talking about wages, deals with topics such as the commodity, exchange value, value, money and price, until he gets to labor power in Chapter VII: "What the working man sells is not directly his Labour, but his Labour Power, the temporary disposal of which he makes over to the capitalist." (Ibidem, p. 83). In the following chapters, Marx explains the category of surplus value to the workers (in chapter 8), seeks to demystify the idea of wages as the price of labor (chapter 9), demonstrates that the capitalist can make a profit even if he sells a commodity for its value (chapter 10), points out that surplus value appears in the forms of profit, interest and rent (chapter 11) - themes that he would develop further when he returned to write book III of Capital - discusses the

relationship between profits, wages and prices (chapter 12) and reserves the last two chapters to bury the wage fund theory once and for all.

Even John Stuart Mill, one of Citizen Weston's sources, had, as if in a crisis of conscience at the end of his life, given up on the wage fund theory because he saw the class struggle as a fundamental element in determining wage levels. Marx never pretended to expect some kind of epiphanic manifestation within the working class. That's why he sought to provide those who assisted him with theoretical and empirical elements to finally denaturalize concepts and ideas that, in turn, tended to lead the working class to immobilism and resignation. He does this in chapters 13 and 14, demonstrating that the "The value of the labouring power is formed by two elements—the one merely physical, the other historical or social." (ibid., p. 107).

If this is the case, the supposedly universal laws that determine wages will be dismantled, and it will become clear that, on the one hand, it is the capitalists who want to bring wages closer to the minimum necessary for workers' subsistence, and on the other hand, the latter must react, through constant struggle, to the voracity of capital's inhuman instincts. The relationship of forces in the struggle between the classes participating in the production process is established as a fundamental element in determining wages. But before listeners get excited about the possibilities of success in the daily struggles with capital, Marx (ibid., p. 112) presents one of the results of his research: "The general tendency of capitalist production is not to raise, but to sink the average standard of wages". This is because capitalism is regulated by internal laws that encourage capitalists to replace workers with machines. This is why Marx's (ibid.) final message to the workers was that they should direct their efforts not only "to a guerilla war against the effects of the existing system", but to the "final emancipation of the working class, that is to say, the ultimate abolition of the wages system."

If in *Wage Labor and Capital* the moralistic tone of Marx's critique is still very pronounced - which brought him closer to so-called socialist authors such as Thomas Hodgskin - in *Value, Price and Profit*, Marx presents a mature and enlightening critical theory of the position and role of the proletarian class in the process of socialist transformation of the world.

Just as in the 1847 lectures, in the 1865 lectures Marx sought to use pedagogical devices to soften the natural weight of such dense content, with the aggravating factor that his theory, at the same time as it became more powerful for unraveling the intricate web of capitalist social relations, also became more complex. As for the didactic weight, there are common elements between the two conferences, but there are also different elements related to the specificities of the two works. We will highlight some aspects of Marx's didactic approach, from the order in which the content is presented to the resources used: a) defines an issue that was on the agenda: salaries; b) he chooses a target, citizen Weston, and devotes the first five chapters to clearing the ground and creating space to present his ideas, which he does from chapter 6 onwards; c) choose just one or two themes for each section and position them in a logical sequence from the simplest to the most complex so that, without emphasizing the methodological issue (the dialectical transitions between

them), their interrelationships are clarified later on; d) uses intuitive examples that are external to the content of the lecture: "...I shall recur to a very simple geometrical illustration[...]" (Ibidem, p.76); e) makes extensive use of the empirical field, using statistical data that is easy for viewers to assimilate; f) remains in the field of interest of the workers, without trying to develop from the outset a discussion that would perhaps satisfy him much more.

We can therefore see particularities in the two conferences that mark profound differences in relation to the editorial fortunes and structure of *Capital* itself. But that's not all. Marx's constant delays in publishing this work, the misreadings of the first readers, the relationship with the target audience, Engels' commitment to publishing reviews of the work in order to make it known, his friend Kugelmann's advice to him to make changes to the work for didactic reasons, Marx's various prefaces and postfaces providing clarifications, are all factors that have always signaled the difficulties that would surround the understanding of *Capital*. Therefore, since it is Marx's masterpiece, the climax of his critique, an indispensable resource for the process of understanding the way capitalist society works, and central and inescapable material for study in the CPE discipline, we will make some considerations in the next section about the way in which the content related to the discipline commonly known in the curricula of Economics courses as "Political Economy" is presented.

#### **4. On the teaching of the Critique of Political Economy.**

When comparing the two conferences with *Capital*, it is clear that the intention here is not to put on an equal footing works that were born and built in such different contexts. But it is clear that there are common elements, especially the fact that all of Marx's work carries the gene of the radical transformation of capitalist society, without which the meaning of his critique cannot be understood.

The starting point for teaching "Capital" is already controversial, since the choice of where to begin implies certain consequences for the sequence of a CPE teaching program. This is all the more true because Marx himself (1990, p. 89) identifies a quagmire<sup>11</sup> at the beginning of *Capital*. He says, in the preface to the first edition of: "Beginnings are always difficult in all sciences. The understanding of the first chapter, especially the section that contains the analysis of commodities, will therefore present the greatest difficulty". Realizing the aridity of the task, Marx wrote to Kungelman on November 30, 1867, suggesting that he advise his wife to start reading Book 1 with the so-called historical chapters, namely those dealing with the following themes: the working day, cooperation,

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<sup>11</sup> On this, Harvey says (2010, p. 09): "What this means in practice is that you have to hang on like crazy, particularly through the first three chapters, without really knowing what is going on, until you can get a better sense of it all when you get further on in the text. Only then can you begin to see how these concepts are working."

the division of labor and manufacturing, and primitive accumulation (Marx and Engels, 2010d, p. 490).

It should be said once again that the aim is to extract from those works resulting from conferences elements about the starting point that can indicate alternative ways of transmitting the conceptual richness contained in *Capital*, without disregarding the specificities of all of them. In fact, retrieving the lectures allowed us to glimpse a Marx capable of throwing the ship's cargo overboard with the aim of preserving lives, in other words, capable of making methodological concessions, of relaxing some aspects of the scientific rigor typical of his writings in order to achieve the greater goal.

#### **4.1. Follow the trail that starts with the merchandise?**

If in *Capital* Marx started with the commodity, why not do the same in a CPE course? This is what is generally done in political economy courses throughout Brazil, possibly as a reflection of a growing tendency to move away from the old political economy textbooks, many of which were pamphleteering and hostage to a dogmatic view of Marxism, concerned more with the dissemination of deterministic theses about the inexorable advent of socialist society.

The underlying idea is that going through the chapters of *Capital* in the order in which they appear in the table of contents would represent a faithful way of no longer transgressing the spirit of Marx's thought. This teaching script, although it has its merits, has problems and disadvantages that will be analyzed below.

In fact, Marx's circuitous route to making the commodity the starting point of his exposé is not easy to understand, coinciding with the moment when he finally felt ready to bring his magnum opus to light. If, on the one hand, for methodological reasons, he avoided publishing his work at all costs until he felt he had the necessary conditions, on the other, he did not hesitate to make public presentations of his research in a thematic order quite different from that which would appear in *Capital*.

The story of the conception of this work and its publication encompasses a broad spectrum of comings and goings, changes and adaptations of various kinds, in which the author was uncomfortable with how best to present his discoveries. It's more than just making yourself intelligible to your audience. Marx was trying to meet the demands of a method of exposition that didn't transfigure reality, but was a representation of the concrete on the level of ideas, on the theoretical level. That's why, when he had finished the two chapters of the *Contribution*, he didn't move on to the third, the one on capital, and he explained this to Lassalle in a letter dated November 12, 1858, saying that the delay in sending the manuscript was mainly due to the following fact: "the material was to hand and all that I was concerned with was the form [...]. My aim is not to produce an elegant exposé." (Marx and Engels, 2010b, p. 354).

Since the *Grundrisse* of 1857/1858, Marx has made several changes to the plan of his work, drawing up new indexes of the work he was still writing. Since, for this author, the method has no prior determination and therefore needs to follow the object being

researched, Marx, as he progressed, made short summaries of the results of his research and tried to systematize the next steps in his work. Clearly, the summaries do not corroborate the idea of an a priori method, but were merely attempts at systematization at a time when the theoretical elaboration was not yet ready for publication and could be reviewed and modified at any time.

The fact is that Marx continued until the last days of his life to make the necessary changes to his work to reflect the continuous transformations of social dynamics, an object that was constantly in flux and which therefore required a method capable of capturing the contradictions of reality. His analysis used to start from the category of value. It wasn't until the end of the Grundrisse that Marx pointed out that the commodity should be at the beginning of the research, which would happen in his next work, Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, from 1859.

After working intensively on his research, both in the Manuscript of 1861-1863 and in the Manuscripts of 1864-1865, Marx published Capital in 1867. As he would explain in the various prefaces and postfaces to subsequent editions of the work, he made changes, according to him<sup>12</sup>, to make the text more accessible to the public. Therefore, it cannot be doubted that Marx tried to find an intermediate position between the necessary rigor of theoretical exposition and a didactic and more simplified narrative to reach the target audience of his work, the proletarian class. He writes about this in the preface to the French edition of 1872: "I applaud your idea of publishing the translation of Capital as a serial. In this form the book will be more accessible to the working class, a consideration which to me outweighs everything else." (Marx, 1990, p. 104). Then he recognizes the problem:

That is the good side of your suggestion, but here is the reverse of the medal : the method of analysis which I have employed, and which had not previously been applied to economic subjects, makes the reading of the first chapters rather arduous, and it is to be feared that the French public, always impatient to come to a conclusion, eager to know the connection between general principles and the immediate questions that have aroused their passions, may be disheartened because they will be unable to move on at once. (ibidem).

In general, it seems that Marx's optimistic comments about the difficulties of understanding the work are more frequent than his pessimistic ones. In the preface to the first edition, dated July 25, 1867, he says: "With the exception of the section on the form of value, therefore, this volume cannot stand accused on the score of difficulty". (Ibidem, p. 90). Even more enthusiastically, he mentions in the afterword to the second edition, written on January 24, 1873: "The appreciation which Das Kapital rapidly gained in wide circles of the German working class is the best reward for my labours". (Ibidem, p. 95).

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<sup>12</sup> In the afterword to the second edition of Capital, Marx says: "It would be pointless to go into all the partial textual changes, which are often purely stylistic." (Marx, 1990, p. 94).

Marx's mission in *Capital* was more complex than that of the two conferences. In a large sense, the distinction implies the very distinction he made between the method of investigation and the method of exposition, although it should be emphasized that Marx was careful at one point to order the categories in Value, Price and Profit.

The teaching of CPE, which starts directly from chapter 1 of *Capital*, is based on the understanding that the method can be understood along the way, an option that is somewhat similar to that of someone who sets out to change a car tire while it is in motion. Given the methodological rigor present in *Capital*, one should not underestimate the difficulties of explaining to beginners the differences between the real movement of history and the logical development that abstractly reflects the real historical process, the latter of which can only be understood if the internal connections of the logical process are clarified.

The risk for those who try to strictly follow the succession of chapters in *Capital* is to lose navigators along the way.<sup>13</sup> The necessary conceptual analysis of the first chapter may convey the idea that the entire work has the same configuration. If this is the option, some didactic lessons from the conferences need to be recovered. In fact, even in *Capital*, Marx apparently abandons logical-categorical processing in order to get hold of empirical data and various concrete elements that supply the dialectical transitions still to be made. This is the case with his digressions on working hours.

Still using the metaphor of the moving car, perhaps the teacher of the subject needs, more than Marx in *The Capital*, to take in the journey, make strategic stops to refuel, look at the movement of the other cars and make sure all the passengers are present and enjoying the scenery. This means cutting out some themes, recovering others, collecting elements of the economic and political situation, getting closer to the students' field of interest, enabling them to travel to the next stop, when other content will be presented to them.

To break up the journey would be to divide up the content to be studied into themes that have been defined in advance and strategically, both because of the topicality of the issues and because of the greater potential for adherence to the students' immediate interests. This could be done without harming the innate field of study of the critique of political economy, namely bourgeois society. A study program configured in this way could represent an apparent escape from the essential core of the discipline. However, it would only be an initial concession that would allow a later return to the fundamental objectives of the discipline.

Starting with the commodity and tracing subsequent categorical developments has the advantage of providing a good link to Marx's way of expounding his theory, but it has the disadvantage of trapping the student in a problematic that would only appear clearly to them at some future point, generating wear and tear that could jeopardize the gradual apprehension of contemporary phenomena of capitalism, which are the most attractive to

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<sup>13</sup> In the same vein, Harvey (2010, p. 08) highlights this possibility, because "we only fully understand how these concepts work by the end of the book!".

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the economics student in their initial stage of study. The student would practically have to have a prior interest in Marx before even studying him.

Note that although we can see a sequence in Value, Price and Profit that starts from the commodity, it only happens from chapter 6 onwards. This procedure could dispel an annoyance that even an experienced Marx scholar like Harvey (2010, p. 09), who insinuates that there was arbitrariness in the choice of the commodity as the starting point, because, according to him, Marx "just starts with the commodity, and that is that". In fact, if the student reaches the end, not only of Book I, but also of Book III, they will realize the systematic<sup>14</sup> structure of the work in which the commodity has never been just a starting point, but also a point of arrival, with the advent of interest-bearing capital as a special commodity, a fundamental category for understanding the financial plethora that characterizes contemporary phenomenal capitalism.

Regardless of the choice of where to start and the path to be followed, Marx makes it clear that the reality of material life, with its ups and downs, challenges and mystifications, must be the object to be analyzed and discussed. In both works, *Wage Labor and Capital* and *Value, Price and Profit*, Marx does not start from an abstract plane, without the potential to transform reality. Somehow, CPE needs to take advantage of the strong appeal that the concrete and immediate world has on students, who are always eager to apply the scientific tools they are taught immediately, to present a new and revolutionary way of understanding social reality.

## 4.2. The need (or not) for theoretical contributions prior to CPE

Strictly speaking, at first glance, the proposal to look for theoretical contributions before going into *Capital* bears a resemblance to the proposal that Marx himself refused, namely to discuss the forms of knowing before knowing itself. He says in the preface to the *Contribution*: "A general introduction, which I had drafted, is omitted, since on further consideration it seems to me confusing to anticipate results which still have to be substantiated". (Marx and Engels, 2010a, p. 261).

On the other hand, familiarizing students with epistemological issues can provide them with theoretical elements to minimize the strangeness that usually arises when faced with Marx's dialectical method. If *Capital* was the result of decades of study, written by a philosopher with a vast cultural background, who appropriated the broad scientific knowledge bequeathed by the political economists of his time, all forged in the heat of a variety of political and economic events, a young student cannot be expected to try to penetrate unarmed the wide walls that obstruct access to that work.

Choosing to strengthen the student's theoretical knowledge, for example, with contributions from the philosophy of science, classical economics or other content before starting the study of chapter 1 of *Capital* does not mean violating the dialectical method.

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<sup>14</sup> On this issue, it is worth checking out the article by Muller and Paulani (2012).



Even Marx, in *Value, Price and Profit*, only started his exposition from the commodity after having put the mistaken notions of citizen Weston as a starting point.

Once again, using the difference between research and exposition, it should be argued that while the latter had to have a specific, concrete starting point, which was the commodity, research cannot be predetermined, as there is no prior knowledge of what has yet to be discovered. In research, the starting point is random, often coincidental. However, in the process of teaching CPE, the object is already determined, which is Marx's theory. What is not determined are the mediations between knowledge of Marx's theory and its application to interpreting and understanding contemporary capitalism. For the latter mission, the reconstitution of reality would need to safeguard to a certain extent the requirements of the dialectical method. In classroom practice, there are always transitions between research and exposition, and it is often counterproductive to distinguish between the two at undergraduate level.

The study of issues related to the philosophy of science or the economists who were part of the raw material used by Marx to make his critique could, as a kind of leveling, prepare the student to enter *The Capital*, as well as generate questions and doubts that foster interest in the way that author responded to everyone, how he opposed the philosophers and economists of his time.

## Final considerations

Despite the formats imposed by higher education bodies, CPE has its own particularities. Perhaps the main one is its necessary and permanent openness to the new, to transformations, to a way of thinking that is free to grasp the complex tangle formed by the web of capitalist social relations. This will certainly mean collisions along the way, as the CPE student will not always be able to break the ropes that bind him to the sociability of capital, because he imagines that it is the only one possible. It's not always painless. These are permanent labor pains for the teacher, which reach their peak when the semester is over and it turns out that the student has preferred to remain in the womb, has settled down without showing any signs of restlessness. If only he had tried to get out of there, to look outside, to examine another world beyond the womb and even then wanted to return there, at least some break would have been made and the mission of teaching would have been accomplished.

Recalling Lukács, "Man is in himself a complex, in the biological sense; but as a human complex he cannot be broken down; therefore, if I want to understand social phenomena, I must consider society, from the outset, as a complex of complexes." (LUKÁCS, 1969, p. 16). CPE welcomes this warning and claims the centrality of the category of totality - which implies that slicing up its contents could result in possible damage to the understanding of its meaning. But let it not be said that *Wage Labor and Capital* and *Value, Price and Profit* represented arbitrary cuts from the social totality, for even this needs a starting point, albeit not an arbitrary one. These lectures represented the best Marx had to offer in terms of critical theory for a particular audience, a particular

historical moment and a particular place. They referred to a determining aspect of the capitalist social complex: wage labor.

As well as indicating a recurring aspect in Marx's works, marked by their unfinished character, Marx's "continue" at the end of *Wage Labor and Capital* made it clear that other aspects of the totality still had to be investigated. But for that moment, it was clear that his listeners left nourished with the scientific content necessary for the workers' cause. CPE always needs to respond to the demands of the moment, to be resilient in the face of the changing nature of social reality. And when it is discussed in the classroom, it must not lose sight of the long road ahead, because if it stagnates, it ceases to be critical and becomes adhesion.

In the same way, CPE cannot become an end in itself. As in *Value, Price and Profit*, it cannot fail to disturb the crystallized knowledge, petrified in the social imaginary, typified in the human figure of citizen Weston. Marx was always dialogical, never passive or distant from the scientific knowledge that justified the social order of his time, because he understood that this knowledge was one of the main inputs for his critique. Perhaps this is why the term "citizen" is used so insistently and mockingly. Despite the modern sense that defines it as someone who continually fights for their citizenship, it also refers to someone who has already been accepted, sanctioned by the system, and who, having already found their place in the current society, adopts a passive, merely contemplative stance in the face of social injustices.

CPE, therefore, needs to disturb, to discuss topics that are on the agenda, that have the power to acquiesce, but also to embarrass its immediate viewers. That's why Marx didn't skimp on the use of empirical elements in his lectures, because he was trying to clear the ground in order to present a new theory.

The student will not progress in CPE without these ruptures, which implies giving up perceptions of the world that have already been formed in his mind. If this doesn't happen at undergraduate level, it won't happen at postgraduate level either, and when they get there "unscathed", it won't be with an interest in CPE, but in topics related to macro, micro and other fields of economics. Likewise, the lecturer will have to discern the possible methodological and theoretical content renunciations that can be made. As long as it doesn't mortally wound the meaning of Marx's critique, an occasional renunciation can mean that the student's interest in the subject is maintained, and he or she can return later on, in graduate school for example, with greater aptitude to the content that has only been postponed for them.

If any option seemed to us to be potentially the most effective for teaching CPE, it would be the strategy of, without violating Marx's method, starting by investigating a select set of themes linked to the necessary understanding of contemporary capitalism.<sup>15</sup> This, in

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<sup>15</sup> As Paro (2022, p. 18-19) suggests, "with regard to *Capital*, if I want to avoid misunderstandings and be consistent with the revolutionary meaning of the work, it is not enough for me simply to know what Marx said or meant; I need to look for in what he said what I consider to correspond to

itself, would help to combat the common prejudice carried by students who understand that they are only going to study the revolutionary Marx, and not his object of study (capitalism). In this way, it would also be possible to illuminate the strange nature of capitalist society from the outset, so that at a later stage, or even at specific moments throughout the study of these themes, we could analyze the categorical development that starts with the commodity and progresses to more advanced categories that are fundamental to understanding the current stage of capitalism. The didactic model adopted by Marx in *Value, Price and Profit* seems to be closer to this.

Revisiting the subject of the teaching of CPE from the conferences of 1847 and 1865 was simply an attempt to air the debate, to bring new perspectives on the process of teaching that content, which often enters a decadent automatism that prevents self-reflection, due to a set of factors that make the task of teaching precarious, making it just a toll, an obligation among many others that the teacher has. In a sense, prescribing ways of teaching is like advising how to raise a child, for which there is no ideal starting point, but only borrowing from known paradigms, given that each human being is unique, as is each historical moment.

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reality in such a way that I can have this content as my own knowledge, having the conditions and legitimacy to propagate and defend it on the basis of reason and reality, not on the authority of who said it."

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