

PAULA RAUHALA

# Marx in the West and in the East

Reading *Capital* in the Divided Germany



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ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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# Abstract

The dissertation examines how scholars approached Marx's *Capital* in the divided Germany during the Cold War. At the project's core is a set of scholarly articles addressing the following constellation of specific questions: What kinds of problems did researchers from the East and the West tackle in their reading of this classic work? While the Berlin Wall separated East German researchers from West German ones, there was no language barrier between them, so did they communicate with each other? What types of conflicts, contradictions in approach, or tensions, if any, existed between these sets of scholars, who were working in very different social and institutional contexts? Did influences cross the wall?

The focus is on the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* (NML), a tradition of reading *Capital* that began to take shape around 1968 among Theodor W. Adorno's students, with the matter of how East German scholarship influenced its formation. Today, the NML is known for its resolute rejection of the GDR's state ideology, Marxism-Leninism. As a negative example, concretising how *not* to read Marx, that ideology functioned as an identity-precipitating Other for the NML. Not simply another way of reading Marx; Marxism-Leninism was an ideology of legitimisation for the autocratic rule of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). As such, it was not based on critical reasoning; rather, its purity was maintained by the secret police. When drawing an analytical distinction between Marxism-Leninism and genuine Marx scholarship, one can, however, find serious East German scholarship also, work that influenced the NML 'positively'. The dissertation explores these influences.

A pillar of its argument is that scholarship on Marx in the GDR was a phenomenon replete with contradiction. The authoritarian rule of the SED simultaneously facilitated and hindered the work of those scholars who applied Marx's ideas or prepared his original manuscripts for publication in an official complete edition (MEGA). The party intervened substantially in research, so genuine discussion in this field required application of cunning. Accordingly, the contributions that remain relevant today are usually spiced with Marxist-Leninist jargon. Deciphering the meaning and importance of those texts demands awareness of the limits within which the argumentation of East German scholars moved.

The years leading up to 1968 proved pivotal for both Western and Eastern literature on Marx. The student movement brought Marx into West Germany's

academic establishment, and economic reforms that began in 1963 in the GDR ushered in greater intellectual freedom. The years 1967 and 1968 marked not only the peak of the student movement but the centenary of *Capital* and the 150th birthday of its author, respectively. Scholarship on *Capital* poured forth in both German states then. In both East and West, 1968 brought social upheavals to a climax and then an abrupt end. Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia (marking the conservatives' decisive victory over economic reformers who had found inspiration in the ideas of the Czechoslovak reform movement). Before this chill, especially vivid in the East, came an event with dramatic consequences for the discourse at the heart of the dissertation project: a conference held in 1967 for the centenary of *Capital* at Frankfurt. This also offered a rare opportunity for face-to-face discussion between East and West German scholars.

The first two articles contributing to the dissertation concentrate on this occasion, which proved central to the emergence of the NML. These tease apart the nuances of why East and West Germans had decisively different perspectives on two profoundly important theoretical questions: Marx's theories of value and the matter of commodity fetishism.

The third article deepens the discussion via attention to the sticky issue of the 'monetary theory of value', one of the fundamentals of the NML's thinking. The piece demonstrates that, in contrast against what representatives of the NML argue, it cannot be set in opposition to East German positions. There are understandable reasons for the ignorance of scholars cohering around the NML in this respect: several of them related to adversarial stances.

The final article fleshes out the picture by examining the reception of the ideas of Isaak Rubin, the most important early Soviet expert on Marx, in the divided Germany during the Cold War. It lays bare a discrepancy between word and deed in both German states, a nexus of contradictions that may stem from the fact that the reception of his ideas was extremely politicised in the Cold War setting.

If scholars of any stripe are to be able to approach questions related to the interpretation of *Capital* in an unprejudiced manner today, it is imperative for them to grasp the history of the work's reception in East and West alike. Only by doing this can we unearth the real Marx, a classic thinker whose ideas remain largely hidden beneath the weight of Marxism-Leninism, the Cold War, and twentieth-century history more generally.

# Tiivistelmä

Kysyn artikkeliväitöskirjassani, miten Marxin *Pääomaa* luettiin jaetussa Saksassa kylmän sodan aikana. Millaisia kysymyksiä erilaisissa yhteiskunnallisissa konteksteissa ja instituutioissa toimineet itä- ja länsisaksalaiset tutkijat esittivät tälle klassikolle? Vaikka Berliinin muuri erotti nämä tutkijat toisistaan, kielimuuria heidän välissään ei ollut. Millaisia ristiriitoja heidän välilleen muodostui? Siirtyikö vaikutteita muurin yli?

Keskityn Länsi-Saksassa opiskelijaliikkeen ja Frankfurtin koulun piirissä syntyneeseen *Pääoman* lukemisen perinteeseen *Neue Marx-Lektüree* (NML) ja kysyn, miten itäsaksalainen Marx-tutkimus on vaikuttanut sen syntyyn ja muotoutumiseen. Nämä *Pääomaa* lukeneet Theodor Adornon oppilaat ovat tunnettuja torjuvasta asenteestaan DDR:ää ja sen valtioideologiaa, marxismi-leninismistä, kohtaan. Marxismi-leninismi toimi NML:lle identiteettiä konstituivana ”toisena”. Se tarjosi negatiivisen esimerkin siitä, kuinka Marxia ja hänen pääteostaan ei ainakaan tule lukea. Marxismi-leninismi ei nimittäin ole yksi Marxista ammentava koulukunta muiden joukossa. Kommunistisen puolueen yksinvaltaa legitimoineena ideologiana se ei perustunut kriittiseen argumentaatioon, vaan puolue valvoi sen puhtautta salaisen poliisin avustuksella. Väitän, että akateeminen Marx-tutkimus on kuitenkin erotettava – vähintään analyttisesti – valtioideologia marxismi-leninismistä, ja osoitan, että ensin mainittu vaikutti NML:ään myös positiivisesti.

Esitän akateemisen Marxin lukemisen DDR:ssä ristiriitaisena ilmiönä, sillä SED:n autoritäärinen yksinvalta samaan aikaan sekä mahdollisti että vaikeutti Marx-tutkijoiden työtä. Toisaalta tällaiselle tutkimukselle tarjottiin ennennäkemättömät resurssit. Toisaalta puolue vaikeutti tutkijoiden työtä puuttamalla sen sisältöön. Osoitan, että tutkijat kuitenkin kävivät kiinnostavia keskusteluita, joskin aina tarpeellisella jargonilla höystettyinä. Siksi itäsaksalaisten tutkijoiden keskustelut Marxista – ja heidän kommenttinsa läntisten kollegoiden teksteihin – avautuvat vain lukijalle, joka ymmärtää ne reunaehdot, joiden puitteissa keskustelu oli mahdollista.

Keskustelunvapaus oli suurimmillaan vuonna 1963 alkaneiden talousuudistusten aikana. Samaan aikaan opiskelijaliike toi Marxin ajatukset uudella tavalla Länsi-Saksan akateemiseen keskusteluun. Keskityn erityisesti vuosiin 1967 ja 1968, jotka olivat länsisaksalaista yhteiskuntaa ja konservatiivista yliopistoinstituutiota ravistelleen opiskelijaliikkeen huippuvuonia. Vuonna 1967 molemmissa Saksoissa

juhlittiin myös *Pääoman* 100-vuotisjuhlaa, ja seuraavana vuonna tuli kuluneeksi 150 vuotta sen kirjoittajan syntymästä. Niin idässä kuin lännessäkin vuosi 1968 merkitsi kuitenkin sekä yhteiskunnallisen uudistusliikkeen huippukohtaa että sen loppua. Neuvostoliiton miehitettyä Tšekkoslovakian Itä-Saksan konservatiivit saivat lopullisen selkävoiton talousuudistajista, jotka olivat ammentaneet myös Prahan kevään ajatuksista. Lännessä opiskelijaliike puolestaan hiipui nopeasti tämän dramaattisen vuoden jälkeen.

Keskityn artikkeleissani NML:n keskeisiin teemoihin: Marxin arvo- ja fetisismiteoriaan. Väitöskirjan kaksi ensimmäistä artikkelia käsittelevät konferenssia, joka järjestettiin *Pääoman* 100-vuotisjuhlan kunniaksi Frankfurtissa vuonna 1967. Tapahtuma oli keskeinen NML:n synnylle ja oli samalla harvinainen tilaisuus, jossa itä- ja länsisaksalaiset tutkijat keskustelivat toistensa kanssa kasvotusten. Ensimmäisessä artikkelissa erittelen tämän kohtaamisen suurimpia teoreettisia kiistanaiheita. Toisessa selitän, miksi Marxin fetisismiteoria askarrutti *Pääoman* frankfurtilaisia lukijoita enemmän kuin hänen lisäarvoteoriaansa, kun taas itäsaksalaisille ensin mainittu oli potentiaalisesti kiusallinen aihe.

Kolmannessa artikkelissa osoitan, että DDR:ssä vallalla ollut tulkinta Marxin arvoteoriasta eroaa NML:n puolustamasta arvoteorian monetaarisesta tulkinnasta huomattavasti vähemmän kuin sen edustajat ovat myöhemmin väittäneet. Selitän tätä NML:n edustajien tietämättömyyttä omasta historiastaan kylmän sodan ajan ilmapiiirin synnyttämällä ristiriidoilla.

Neljännessä artikkelissa tarkastelen varhaisen Neuvostoliiton tärkeimmän Marx-asiatuntijan Isaak Rubinin ajatusten vastaanottoa jaetussa Saksassa. Osoitan, että itäsaksalaiset tutkijat tunsivat Rubinin kirjoitukset paremmin ja länsisaksalaiset puolestaan huomattavasti huonommin kuin on väitetty. Tätä sanojen ja tekojen välistä ristiriitaa selittää se, että Stalinin vainoissa teloitetun Rubinin ajatusten vastaanotto oli kylmän sodan aikana – ymmärrettävistä syistä – politisoitunutta.

Meidän on hyvä tuntea *Pääoman* lukemisen historiaa 1900-luvulla niin idässä kuin lännessäkin, jotta osaisimme eritellä sitä, mitkä Marxin ”teoriana” pitämistämme ajatuksista todella ovat peräisin 1800-luvulta ja mitkä ovat pikemminkin 1900-luvun, marxismi-leninismien ja kylmän sodan aikakauden perua.

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# Abbreviations

CPSU	Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union
GDR	German Democratic Republic (Deutsche Demokratische Republik, DDR)
DKP	<i>Deutsche Kommunistische Partei</i> (German Communist Party)
HKWM	<i>Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus</i> (Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism)
IfG	<i>Institut für Gesellschaftswissenschaften beim ZK der SED</i>
IMSF	<i>Institut für Marxistische Studien und Forschungen</i> (The Institute for Marxist Studies and Research)
KPD	<i>Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands</i> (Communist Party of Germany)
MEGA <sup>1</sup>	The first <i>Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe</i>
MEGA <sup>2</sup>	The second <i>Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe</i>
MECW	<i>Marx/Engels Collected Works</i>
MEW	<i>Marx-Engels-Werke</i>
NÖS/NÖSPL	<i>Neues Ökonomisches System der Planung und Leitung</i> (New Economic System of Planning and Management, NES)
PEM	<i>Projektgruppe Entwicklung Marxschen Systems</i>
PIT	<i>Projekt Ideologie-Theorie</i> (Project Ideology-Theory)
PROKLA	<i>Probleme des Klassenkampfes – Zeitschrift für politische Ökonomie und sozialistische Politik</i> / <i>PROKLA – Zeitschrift für kritische Sozialwissenschaft</i>
SDS	<i>Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund</i> (Socialist German Student Union)
SED	<i>Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands</i> (Socialist Unity Party of Germany)
SEW	<i>Sozialistische Einheitspartei Westberlins</i> (Socialist Unity Party of West Berlin)
SPD	<i>Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands</i> (Social Democratic Party of Germany)
SoPo	<i>Sozialistische Politik</i>
ÖFI	<i>Das Ökonomische Forschungsinstitut der Staatlichen Plankommission</i>



## ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

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# 1. INTRODUCTION: READING *CAPITAL* IN THE DIVIDED GERMANY

How did the scholars reading Marx's *Capital* at the time of the Cold War in East and West Germany communicate with each other? Since 1961, the Berlin Wall had separated East and West German scholars from each other, but the two states still shared the same language. What kinds of influences crossed the border? What sorts of questions did scholars pose while reading this classic work in both German states? What types of tensions, contradictions, and disagreements existed between East German and West German scholars?

Delving into these matters, the dissertation focuses especially on what is today called the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, a West German tradition of reading *Capital*, in its relations with East German scholarship on Marx.

With Section 1.1, I present the topic of my doctoral project and its research questions, then devote Section 1.2 to explaining why this topic is worth studying. Marxism-Leninism seems to have disappeared overnight in 1989; nevertheless, this ideology of legitimising the power and domination exercised by the communist parties in the Soviet Union and countries under its influence continues to affect our perception of Marx as a thinker. It is important to be able to distinguish between Marxist-Leninist and Marx's own ideas. The former distorts the latter, whereas Marx's critique of political economy is still useful for those who wish to understand the dynamics of capital accumulation in the twenty-first century.

To avoid the impression of a dichotomy between a dogmatic Marxist-Leninist approach in the East and a critical mode of thinking in the West, Section 1.3 calls attention to the point that the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) did more than reproduce the state ideology, Marxism-Leninism. These countries also granted generous resources to research on Marx's ideas, and for highly educated and intelligent people it was easy to see the differences between Marx's critical spirit and Soviet state ideology. Applying East German philosopher

Michael Brie's (1993, 40) term 'orthodox heretics', I examine three academic readers of *Capital* in the Soviet Union and the GDR who remained faithful to Marx's critical spirit and, therefore, faced serious difficulties in their respective careers: Fritz Behrens (1909–80), Evald Ilyenkov (1924–79), and Peter Ruben.

With Section 1.4, I justify my decision to concentrate on the years 1967–8, a time that witnessed great changes in West and East alike. Then Section 1.5 looks beyond the wall, with Subsection 1.5.1 comparing work conditions of scholars between the two German states and Subsection 1.5.2 briefly discussing how various West German Marxist approaches tied in with East Germany and its official ideology. The final main portion of the chapter, Section 1.6, deals with the communication between the representatives of the West German *Neue Marx-Lektüre* and the Eastern 'orthodox heretics' introduced in Section 1.3. Chapter 2 introduces the four articles on which this composite dissertation is based.

## 1.1. The *Neue Marx-Lektüre*

'It is very convenient to be "liberal" at the expense of the Middle Ages.' (Marx in MECW 35, 708)

My study tackled the question of how the Cold War atmosphere influenced the readings of Marx's *Capital* in the divided Germany. The project examined which kinds of questions the scholars in the two Germanies posed and addressed in relation to this seminal work. I sought to uncover whether their sets of questions differed and, if so, why. In what ways did the knowledge interests of East and West German scholars truly differ, and what can this tell us?

Given that the Berlin Wall divided these scholars into two groups but there was no language barrier, did the scholars communicate with each other across the wall? Did the scholarly readings of *Capital* show some commonality? At the same time, I considered divergences: what kinds of contradictions or tensions existed between them. Many of these questions boil down to a single fundamental one: how did the societal situation in East and West Germany condition, enable, and constrain their readings of *Capital*?

I approach these questions by focusing on what is probably the most popular approach to *Capital* in Germany today, the so-called *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, current

proponents of which include such thinkers as Michael Heinrich, Ingo Elbe, and Nadja Rakowitz.

This tradition may be traced back to a few students of Theodor W. Adorno (1903–69) and Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), who began to read Marx’s *Capital* in earnest in the 1960s. The earlier Frankfurt school is often considered a typical ‘Western Marxist’ school, focusing rather more on questions of culture than on matters of political economy and interested mostly in Marx’s earlier texts. In the late 1960s, amid waves from the publication of Marx’s ‘Grundrisse’ (which saw light in the GDR in 1953, some 15 years after its Soviet release), Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s assistant Alfred Schmidt (1931–2012), Adorno’s student Hans-Georg Backhaus, and Adorno’s and Iring Fetscher’s (1922–2014) student Helmut Reichelt started to focus on Marx’s critique of political economy. They maintained this interest, in a phenomenon today often retrospectively considered the beginning of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*.<sup>1</sup>

Initially, I took the term ‘Neue Marx-Lektüre’ for granted. Then, the further I read, the more problematic it started to appear. The first problem I encountered in talking about the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* is that, in that my focus is on the years of the Cold War, 1967 and 1968 in particular, my usage of the term is somewhat anachronistic: the name was not used in this context until introduced by Backhaus in 1997a.<sup>2</sup> It later was applied by Reichelt (2008), Elbe (2010 [2008]), and Jan Hoff (2017 [2009]). Yet Backhaus had already demarcated between the ‘new’ reading and the old readings of *Capital* in 1978:

The ‘New Marx-Reading’ [sic!]<sup>3</sup> emerged within the milieu of the Frankfurt School and is thus owed above all to [the latter’s] critique of the theory of reflection, of the dialectic of nature, and of the base-superstructure theorem. It relates in an orthodox way only vis-à-vis Marx’s critique of political economy, and in a thoroughly revisionist way vis-à-vis certain core philosophical conceptions of Marx and Engels. On account of this ambivalent position, the ‘logical’ current of *Capital*

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, the early Frankfurt school displayed notable exceptions, people who focused on Marx’s critique of political economy and not on questions of culture, such as Henryk Grossman (1881–1950) and Friedrich Pollock (1894–1970), both of whom Backhaus (1997, 30) consulted on the question of dialectical contradiction, which puzzled him. Unlike these two, trained as economists, those readers of *Capital* associated most with the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* have been philosophers and social scientists, approaching the text accordingly.

<sup>2</sup> In France, Henri Lefebvre (1901–91) called for a ‘new reading of Marx’, which was ‘first and foremost an attempt to reconstruct Marx’s original thought’ (Lefebvre 1982 [1968], 3).

<sup>3</sup> Backhaus (1978, 25) wrote about the ‘new reading of *Capital*’ [Die ‘neue Kapital-Lektüre’].

interpretation could be termed as *neo-orthodox*. (Backhaus 1978, 25; excerpted and translated into English per Hoff 2017 [2009], 79; emphasis in original)

As Backhaus underlines, these readers of *Capital* approached Marx rather more as a theoretician of capitalism than as a philosopher promoting a Marxist-Leninist materialist ontological worldview, or a dialectical philosophy of history. Following the tradition called ‘Western Marxism’ in general but also Adorno’s philosophy in particular, Adorno’s students understood Marx’s materialism or his dialectics in a much more specific context, as related to his analysis of the bourgeois society. This approach, I believe, was and still is extremely valuable.

Of course, the authors who are today cited as part of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* were not the only ones approaching Marx as a critic of political economy instead of a philosopher of history. For more than a century and throughout the world, numerous anti- or non-Stalinist approaches to Marx have rejected metaphysical materialism and eschatological angles on history (see, among the many examples, Anderson 1979; Elbe 2010 [2008]; Gramsci 1999 [1971]; Hoff 2017 [2009]; Korsch 2008 [1923], Marcuse 1969 [1958]; 1981 [1932]; Skeggs et al. 2021).

Moreover, intensive engagement with *Capital* – rather than with Marx’s early philosophical writings – became an international phenomenon after the Second World War. The most obvious reason was the first publication of the ‘Grundrisse’, in 1939–41 in the Soviet Union, then 1953 in the GDR. Just as the release of Marx’s early manuscripts in the early 1930s had inspired humanistic readings of Marx targeted against Stalinism (see Marcuse 1981 [1932]), this and other material articulating Marx’s critique of political economy inspired a host of novel readings from the 1950s onward. New interpretations of *Capital* brought in such authors as Ilyenkov in the Soviet Union, Louis Althusser (1918–90) in France, and Jindřich Zelený (1922–97) in Czechoslovakia.

As Frédéric Monferrand (2020, 239) described it, the Soviet repression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 ‘occasioned a deep crisis of the Communist movement’, and the

Hungarian events ... interrupted the ‘dogmatic slumber’ of a new generation of militant intellectuals who, discontent[ed] with both the trivialities of an all-encompassing ‘dialectical materialism’ and with its ‘humanist’ ethical supplement, turned to *Capital* in order to ground emancipatory politics on a renewed theoretical basis. (Ibid.)

In West Germany, *Capital* was not discussed only in Frankfurt. Wolfgang Fritz Haug taught courses on it at the Free University of West Berlin (see Haug 1976). Haug and his students discussed the book in the academic Marxist journal *Das Argument*. Elmar Altvater (1938–2018), likewise based in West Berlin, published material on it in *Probleme des Klassenkampfes – Zeitschrift für politische Ökonomie und sozialistische Politik* (later *PROKLA – Zeitschrift für kritische Sozialwissenschaft*), from 1971 onward, and the scholarly school *Projektgruppe Entwicklung des Marxschen Systems*, published detailed commentaries on Marx’s preparatory manuscripts (see PEM 1973; 1975). These are only a few examples. None of the scholars mentioned approached Marx in the spirit of Marxism-Leninism – i.e., as a dialectical and materialist philosopher of history who predicted an advent of communism.

The second problem that I have struggled with in defining the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* is that it is not clear at all which authors should be considered to display such a tendency. Should Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1899–1990), who theorised on real abstraction, be included? What about Adorno’s student, Hans-Jürgen Krahl (1943–70), best known as the leader of the Socialist German Student Union (Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund, SDS)?

I have concentrated mainly on Backhaus’s reading of *Capital*. Backhaus and others have focused predominantly on the very first chapters of the first volume: on value-theory questions and matters related to commodity fetishism. In the collection of his writings published in 1997, Backhaus (1997a, 29; see also Reichelt 2008, 11) explained why this is the case by recalling how in 1963 the rare first edition of *Capital*’s first volume (from 1867) entered his hands. He noticed that the first chapter differed from that in the reworked second edition, from 1872, which had served as the basis for all the subsequent standard editions. This earlier version of the first chapter of Volume 1, the ‘Grundrisse’, and the only partially preserved first draft of *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) (a 1858 piece called ‘Urtext’) inspired Backhaus to ask whether Marx had popularised the way in which he presented the results he had obtained via his original, allegedly dialectical method. Had Marx historicised the results he had come to through his logical method? Could this ‘esoteric’ method be discovered under the ‘exoteric’, more readily apparent layer in Marx’s critique (Backhaus 1978, 43, 44–5)?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Marx had found two layers in Adam Smith’s (1723–90) writings. The first, esoteric labour theory of value focused on inner structure of economic relations by positing that the values of the commodities are *based* of the social labour time embodied in them. Elsewhere he maintained that the values of commodities may be *resolved* into the forms of income: profits, wages, and land rent (see

Adorno's lectures on social theory profoundly influenced how his students, Backhaus among them, read *Capital*. Even though Adorno did not write about economics, he considered the critique of political economy to be the fundament of Marx's theory (Braustein 2011, 10; see also Konstanz-Sydney Research Program 1980, 96). In 1997, Backhaus (1997b, 501 ff.) published his lecture notes from Adorno's 1962 seminar 'Marx on the Basic Concepts of Sociological Theory'. Its central themes, grounded in Adorno's critique of positivism in social science, have been reiterated and further elaborated upon over and over again in the *Neue Marx-Lektüre's* later writings. Adorno (2018 [1997]) criticised positivism in social science for merely recording the given facts without asking how those facts had become constituted in the first place. Positivist social science applied 'the conceptual apparatus of the natural sciences, the processes of observation and classification, to the field of society' (Adorno 2022 [2011], 56), and society thereby appeared to it 'as hardened, just as thing-like, as first ... nature is' (ibid., 56–7). For him, positivism was 'so blinded by society that it' regarded 'second nature as first nature' (Adorno 2018 [1997], 156). Adorno (2022 [2011], 57) admitted that its perspective held an element of validity: society genuinely was reified: in an exchange society, the relations between the subject and the object truly are inverted, with the movements of the products of labour determining the lives of their producers. Therefore, our consciousness really is determined by our social being (ibid., 160). With his critical theory, however, he sought to disclose this reified social phenomenon – to show that society is of our own making – rather than acritically bend and adapt to it (ibid., 57).

Reichelt (2008, 11) later explained how very important Adorno's students found his idea that exchange abstraction (*Tauschabstraktion*) brought about a really existing generality (*real Allgemeinen*). In other words, exchange involved a conceptual moment that was not dependent on the consciousness of those involved in it (Adorno 2018 [1997], 156; Reichelt 2001).<sup>5</sup>

Adorno's students found support for the centrality of this idea of the existence of the conceptual within the material reality from the first chapter of the first edition

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MECW 36, 221; Smith 2001 [1776], 68). Marx held that this exoteric theory focused on the outward appearance of economic relations (see Pilling 2012, 60).

<sup>5</sup> Of course, with his idea that something universal coheres within the social reality, Adorno also in many ways continued the lines of thought presented by Georg Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* (1971 [1923]).



of *Capital*, Volume 1. Here Marx describes the existence of a general equivalent, or money, alongside commodities as use-values, saying that it is

as if alongside and external to lions, tigers, rabbits, and all other actual animals, which form when grouped together the various kinds, species, subspecies, families etc. of the animal kingdom, there existed also in addition *the animal*, the individual incarnation of the entire animal kingdom. Such a particular which contains within itself all really present species of the same entity is a *universal* (like *animal*, *god*, etc.). (Marx 1976 [1867], 69; emphasis in original)

Marx did not include this passage in the second edition of Volume 1. The presentation in the second edition was a combination of the ‘popularised’ version of the value-form analysis, which he had published as an appendix to the first edition, and the body text of the first edition. Backhaus and Reichelt believed that Marx had pared back the ‘Hegelianism’ of the first chapter because his dialectical derivation of money from value had left him dissatisfied. Therefore, they held, revisiting earlier versions of Marx’s critique could help one reconstruct the dialectical method with which Marx had originally arrived at money from value (Reichelt 2008, 12).

In the coming years, the ideas of real abstraction and of the subjective-objective constitution of social reality would play a central role in Schmidt’s (1968) important presentation at a conference on the centenary of *Capital* in 1967, in Backhaus’s essay ‘Zur Dialektik der Wertform’ (‘On the Dialectics of the Value-Form’) (1969; 1980 [1969]), in Reichelt’s dissertation *Zur logischen Struktur des Kapitalbegriffs bei Karl Marx* (1973 [1970]), and in Backhaus’s ‘Materialien zur Rekonstruktion Marxschen Werttheorie’ series of essays (published in 1974–8).

Alongside Adorno, Horkheimer and Fetscher, Althusser influenced authors who are today considered part of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*. The most famous of them is Michael Heinrich, whose dissertation from 1991 Backhaus and Reichelt (1995, 72) criticised for attributing a system of two worlds to Marx in *Capital*. They argued that said system per Heinrich’s account, quite unlike what Marx presented, entails the ideal and abstract world of exchange-value and money supervening on the natural, concrete, and sensible world of use-values. Althusserian thinker Frieder Otto Wolf took issue especially with Backhaus and Reichelt. Elbe, for his part (2008), has heavily criticised Backhaus. It could be said that Adorno’s students Backhaus and Reichelt read *Capital* in a Hegelian manner. Reichelt (1973 [1970], 76) even has portrayed Marx’s concept of capital as structurally identical to that of Spirit in G.W.F.

Hegel's (1770–1831) philosophy, whereas Heinrich, Wolf, and Elbe have found greater inspiration from Althusser (see Elbe 2010 [2008]; Hoff 2017 [2009], 89; Reitter 2015, 8). All these authors, however, share pronounced emphasis on Marx's method and on his theories of value and (commodity) fetishism.

Partly on account of all these disagreements, Heinrich (2022, 140) has pointed out that it makes no sense to talk about a 'school'. Rather more, 'Neue Marx-Lektüre' designates a certain way of viewing Marx's writings on the critique of political economy. The associated readings 1) approach various manuscripts of *Capital* as independent texts, 2) criticise the 'historical-logical' approach that presumably follows the review of *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* presented by Friedrich Engels (1859), 3) consider Marx's theory of money integral to Marx's theory of value, and 4) emphasise the themes of fetishism and so-called socialisation (*Vergesellschaftung*) through value. The last of these foci draws attention to how important it is to remember that the surplus-value extraction in a bourgeois society is not based on personal relations of domination (Heinrich 2022, 141).

Heinrich's first point could be seen as methodological, while the other three are substantive in nature. This dissertation includes articles dealing with the two related substantive questions from points 3 and 4, on theories of value and fetishism. As my work is not meant to be an exhaustive study of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, I have not addressed the other substantive point (item 2), on whether Marx's method is better understood as logical, historical-logical (see, for example Backhaus 1978, 23), or genetic (see Ilyenkov 1982 [1960], 199) – or perhaps as 'praxeologically grounded *genetic reconstruction*' (Haug 2013, 28).<sup>6</sup> Neither have I dealt with the more specific questions related to this: whether what Marx does in his analysis of the value-form should be described as logical derivation, as 'dialectical-logical presentation of the genesis of the money-form' as Zelený (1980 [1962], 57) has termed it, or as 'praxeological' analysis in Haug's (2013, 263) understanding.

The debates regarding the role of the logical and the historical would have been interesting to examine in relation to the object of this study, because that discussion too was not confined to either bloc (see, for example, Backhaus 1974; Bischoff 1973; Haug 2004c; 2015; Hoff 2017 [2009], 82–3, 86; Holzkamp 1974; Kittsteiner 1977; Pietilä 1984; Schkredow 1987; Schwarz 1987b; Zelený 1980 [1962]). When defending his 'logical' reading, Backhaus (1978, 106) explicitly

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<sup>6</sup> '[P]raxeologisch begründete *genetische Rekonstruktion*'. Translation mine. Emphasis in original.

referred to Soviet authors Igor Narsky (1920–93), Mark Rosental (1906–75), and Ilyenkov, noting that the ‘logical’ interpretation – represented by Backhaus himself – has its supporters in the East as well (Backhaus 1978, 25).

Neither have I dealt with the related question of the sense and utility of the term ‘simple commodity production’, which could have served as another example of a discussion crossing the border between the East and the West. An editor of the complete edition of the writings of Marx and Engels (*Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*, MEGA) from the former GDR, Rolf Hecker, in later years offered a reminder that his teacher Vladimir Schkredow (1925–96) had argued in line with Backhaus in the West that the object of the beginning of *Capital* is simple circulation, not simple commodity production (Hecker 1998; see also Backhaus 1997a, 11; Hecker 1979; Schkredow 1987).

Another potentially interesting debate that I do not discuss here is that related to the methodological question of ‘capital in general’ in its relationship with competition and ‘many capitals’. Scholars on both sides of the Berlin Wall engaged with this matter too (see Müller 1978; Rosdolsky 1977 [1968]).<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, being an article-based dissertation, this work addresses several research questions and perspectives, with the unifying theme across all of the component articles being the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* in its contacts with the Marx scholarship in the GDR. Any broader scope would have impoverished my project, and indeed it was never meant to offer exhaustive analysis of the readings of *Capital* within the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*. Previous research, represented by Hoff’s *Marx Global: Zur Entwicklung des Internationalen Marx-Diskurses Seit 1965* (2009; available in English as *Marx Worldwide: On the Development of the International Discourse on Marx Since 1965*, 2017) and Elbe’s *Marx im Westen: Die neue Marx-Lektüre in der Bundesrepublik seit 1965* (2010 [2008]), has already comprehensively mapped and presented the central contributions and discussions.

The gap this dissertation is designed to fill is in asking how Marxism-Leninism and East German Marx scholarship has influenced – for better or worse – the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* reading of Marx’s *Capital*. I formulated this question because I could not understand why so many German authors understood exactly the three

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<sup>7</sup> It should go without saying that I have not discussed the questions of state theory either, especially with regard to the state-derivation debate (*Staatsableitungsdebatte*) (see Elbe 2010 [2008], 319 ff.).

questions mentioned by Heinrich (2022), about value theory, the theory of fetishism, and the question of the historical vs. logical, to be the most central and interesting questions tackled in *Capital*. As I explain in the course of Section 2, I found these questions important but not necessarily the most urgent ones, at least for the twenty-first century. In particular, I did not entirely understand why these highly theoretical questions were so politicised. This confusion led me to consider the context in which the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* emerged – the western portion of the divided Germany from the 1960s onward. What problems plagued these writers and why? Obviously, their issues differed from those that rose to trouble me half a century later. What role the division of Germany had in the formation of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*. What position did the special location of West Germany have on the frontline of the systems competition? What was the role of the Cold War atmosphere, of the vulgarisation of Marxism, and of the monopolisation of Marx by the communist parties?

In his definition of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* created by Backhaus and Reichelt, Elbe (2018) explains that this ‘new reading opposed both the Marxist-Leninist and Social-Democratic orthodoxy’ (Elbe 2010 [2008], 30; 2018, 367). It seems to me that, alongside the ‘humanistic’ Marxism that predominated in Western dialogue in the 1950s, here and elsewhere the Marxist-Leninist reading of Marx served as an identity-defining Other for the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* (see also Elbe 2012, 26; Heinrich 2009, 72–3; 2012 [2004], 27). Marxism-Leninism, and those scholars who willingly subsumed their scholarship within politics in the GDR and elsewhere in the Soviet bloc, served as a negative example: how not to read Marx. Of course, it did so for all other Western Marxism that ‘is something that is not “Soviet Marxism”’ (Kangal 2018, 67; see also Levant 2011, 178).

But this is not the whole story. Following Oskar Negt (1974 [1969]), Frankfurtians have rightly understood Marxism-Leninism as legitimisation ideology of the ruling communist parties in several authoritarian states, but once we analytically distinguish between serious scholarship on Marx’s thought and the state-ideology Marxism-Leninism in East Germany and elsewhere in the Soviet bloc, the picture gets more complicated. How did the constellation of that scholarship and ideology interact with the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*?

Initially I observed that Backhaus, much more than his followers, referred in his writings to Soviet and East German contributions and took those contributions

seriously. When I asked about this by e-mail, Backhaus told me that, having been born and raised in the eastern part of Germany, he was against Adorno's often excessive critique of Soviet Marxist literature – which Adorno called 'rubbish' – and that therefore he wanted to document the valuable contributions from the East.<sup>8</sup> In Adorno's (2018 [1997], 158) opinion, in 'the East', Marx served 'the interests of power relations'. Backhaus, for his part, wanted to show that many scholars in the Soviet Union and the GDR likewise challenged this instrumentalisation of Marx by the ruling parties.

I have aimed to show that serious, genuinely scholarly readings of Marx's theory in the East influenced the *Neue Marx-Lektüre's* reading of *Capital* positively also. The difficulty is, of course, that all scholars of Marx in the GDR were restricted by Marxism-Leninism, such that 'genuine' research (Bakhurst 1991, 3) and state ideology were intertwined. Nonetheless, this distinction is a crucial one.

Marxism-Leninism and serious scholarship on Marx and Marxism both were present in many respects in the formation of this West German school. The fact remains, however, that scholars on the two sides of the Berlin Wall read and interpreted *Capital* for different purposes. They sought answers to different questions, and their institutional, political, and cultural contexts in doing so differed dramatically. East/West communication, therefore, was characterised largely by tensions, contradictions, disagreements, and sometimes also misunderstandings. My dissertation traces influences and agreements, alongside disagreements, tensions, and misunderstandings, in the East–West communication on Marx.

It might appear that the other party disappeared almost overnight in 1989, with only the Western reading of Marx surviving. A closer look reveals that Marxism-Leninism continues to lead a ghostly life in our contemporary 'Marx-folklore'. Already for this reason it is important to know the whole history of Marxism, scholarship on Marx, and Marxist theory, not merely the 'Western' side of it. The next section outlines the history of Marxism-Leninism in its relations with other readings of Marx.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Ich stamme aus der DDR und war ein Gegner jener oft maßlosen Kritik Adornos an der sowjetmarxistischen Literatur ("Schundliteratur" für Adorno [see Backhaus 1997c [1984], 505], deshalb mein Versuch, in ihr "Positives" aufzuzeigen und zu dokumentieren' is what Backhaus wrote in his e-mail message to me on 23.9.2016).

## 1.2. Marxism-Leninism, an angle that disappeared overnight... or did it?

‘Devil: “You think, because you have a purpose, Nature must have one. You might as well expect it to have fingers and toes because you have them.”’ (Shaw 1951 [1903], 645)

Since 1989, and increasingly after 2008, such scholars as Terry Eagleton (2011), Heinrich (2012 [2004]), Altvater (2015), David Harvey (2010), and Marcello Musto (2007; 2018; 2020a) have emphasised that today it is possible to rediscover Marx as a thinker, since his thought is no longer buried under the belief system of Marxism-Leninism. These and numerous other scholars have concluded that Marx’s ideas remain useful for research in the fields of philosophy, the social sciences, politics, culture, and economics alike as our new century unfolds, while Marxism-Leninism meanwhile has no value beyond offering an interesting case study for ideology critique.

The turn that occurred in 1989 is not, however, as radical as it might appear at first sight. Marxism-Leninism always had its other. From the early twentieth century onward, in the immanent critique of Marxism, scholars representing various Marxisms have repeatedly and from every possible perspective demonstrated how deeply flawed it is to attribute to Marx such Marxist-Leninist dogmas as defending ‘dialectical and historical materialism’ as an answer to the ‘fundamental question of philosophy’, or epistemological ‘reflection theory’, or a ‘dialectical conception of history’, or the ‘inevitability of the victory of communism’. This vein of criticism, more than a century old, encompasses such contributions as Rosa Luxemburg’s (2004 [1918]) ‘criticism of Lenin’s authoritarian tendencies’ (Brie and Schüttrumpf 2021, 135), Karl Korsch’s ‘*application of the materialist conception of history to the materialist conception of history itself*’ (Korsch 2008 [1923], 102; emphasis in original), Antonio Gramsci’s (1891–1937) castigation of the vulgarisation of Marxism in the hands of Bolsheviks in his commentary on Nikolai Bukharin’s 1921 work *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (Gramsci 1999 [1971], 769 ff.), the critique Negt (1974 [1969]) presented of Marxism-Leninism as a science of legitimisation by the ruling bureaucratic stratum of the Soviet Union, or Georges Labica’s (1930–2009) enquiry into how Marx’s critique of religion *became* religion in Marxism-Leninism (Labica 1986 [1984]). The most famous writings among such critiques are Western, but

several Eastern contributions do exist (Behrens 1992; Kuczynski 1997 [1989]).<sup>9</sup> Numerous scholars from both the East and the West have fruitfully applied Marx's concepts in analysis of economic, political, or cultural phenomena of both, Western and Soviet-type societies. Doing this was indeed possible before 1989.

The other reason the break in 1989 is not as radical as it might first appear is that Marxism-Leninism did not disappear overnight, even though it would be difficult to identify in today's Anglophone, French, or German debate an academic reader of Marx endorsing Marxism-Leninism. It is quite universally considered a centralised doctrine aimed at maintaining the rule of the state communist parties in the Soviet bloc countries, as the *Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism* (*Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*, HKWM) defines it (Adolphi 2015, 1901). Marxism-Leninism does not do any justice to Marx as a thinker.

Nonetheless, popularised presentations of Marx's thought, among them words in introductory textbooks of philosophy, politics, and other social sciences that are read by high-school or university students all over the globe, still present us with the Marx of Marxism-Leninism: a Marx whose thought has been shaped to serve the historically specific power interests of Stalin and other leaders of the communist parties in the Soviet Union and elsewhere. The numerous non-Marxist-Leninist readings of Marx (including the object of my study, the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*) that have always existed alongside this, not to mention the new bodies of scholarship produced since the collapse of European state socialism, appear to have had surprisingly little influence on the mainstream expositions of Marx's thought. Any readings of Marx apart from Marxist-Leninist ones have had disproportionately little influence on the mainstream's image of Marx as a thinker.

Even the prestigious *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, reproducing the focus on Marxism-Leninism, introduces Marx as a thinker who 'sees the historical process as proceeding through a series of modes of production, characterised by (more or less explicit) class struggle, and driving humankind towards communism' (Wolff and Leopold 2021). No textual evidence is presented. Although this is an accurate summary of Marxism-Leninism, with respect to the unilinear development of 'history' experienced by the whole of 'humankind' and in terms of its endpoint, 'communism', this summary does not do any justice to Marx.

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<sup>9</sup> A thorough presentation of the Western Marxist critiques of the Soviet Union is available (see Van der Linden 2007).

Let us first address the unilinear development of the ‘history’ of ‘humankind’. It is true that Marx analysed in some detail the transition from the feudal system into the age of the hegemony of the capitalist mode of production in Western Europe. He did not, however, accept transforming his ‘historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historico-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they are placed’ (MECW 24, 200). In Marx’s words, ‘[t]he chapter on primitive accumulation’ in *Capital*, Volume 1, which sketches out the processes between the fifteenth and the eighteenth century in England that enabled the hegemony of the bourgeoisie and its mode of production, ‘does not pretend to do more than trace the road by which in Western Europe the capitalist economic order emerged from the entrails of the feudal economic order’ (MECW 24, 199).

The encyclopaedia’s claim that, according to Marx, humankind would be driven toward ‘communism’ is an accurate expression of the Soviet ideology. Such a narrative was vital for the survival of the ruling communist parties in the twentieth century. Let us unpack why this was so.

This figure of thought, in which humanity is propelled toward this or that, resonates with how Marx and Engels characterised ideology. In the realm of ideology, contingent outcomes of political and class struggles are portrayed as inevitable and natural. Such ideological figures of thought consolidate present power structures and are reproduced, on one hand, spontaneously and socially but also, on the other hand, deliberately and professionally.

A paradigmatic example that Marx considered involves bourgeois economists who presented ‘[t]he institutions of feudalism’ as ‘artificial institutions’ and ‘those of the bourgeoisie’ as ‘natural institutions’ (MECW 6, 174). In doing this,

they resemble the theologians, who likewise establish two kinds of religion. Every religion which is not theirs is an invention of men, while their own is an emanation from God. When the economists say that present-day relations—the relations of bourgeois production—are natural, they imply that these are the relations in which wealth is created and productive forces developed in conformity with the laws of nature. These relations therefore are themselves natural laws independent of the influence of time. They are eternal laws which must always govern society. Thus there has been history, but there is no longer any. (Ibid.)



Marx saw such a figure of thought even in David Ricardo's (1772–1823) writings (see MECW 35, 91–2) – though greatly appreciating his scholarship. Marx accepted neither the view that the bourgeoisie would have merely restored the 'natural' order that, until feudalism distorted it, had been in place 'since the time of Adam' nor the related view that victory of the bourgeoisie over the landed aristocracy would be ultimately secured by the laws of motion of 'history'.

It is nevertheless true that after the fact it was possible to say that the English bourgeoisie had achieved major political victories in the fifteenth to eighteenth century. Accordingly, it had begun to shape the whole world after its own image. As Michael Krätke (2018, 29) highlights, only from then on, according to Marx, did it make sense to speak of any common fate of 'humankind' or to talk about 'world history', which 'did not exist always; history as world history is a result' (MECW 28, 46). Toward the end of that era, England won hegemony in the world market, and it gained the upper hand over the Netherlands and its other colonialist rivals. This enriched English merchants, industrial capitalists, and bankers. Technological innovations in the field of navigation and in the maritime sector, production technologies, finance, and agriculture all benefited the bourgeoisie in their class struggle against the landed aristocracy. The final straw for that aristocracy arrived with the elimination of the corn laws in 1846, a reform that Ricardo as an eminent political economist and a member of parliament had supported in theoretical and political arenas both. The reform lowered wage costs and was, in essence, a transfer of wealth from the landowners to the industrial capitalists.

Marx saw this victory of the bourgeoisie as temporary in the grand scheme of things. He witnessed the rise of a new class: urban factory workers. In tandem with industrialisation of European countries and their colonial expansion, change was hitting the class structures there after a long era of relative stability. Marx understood such events as the revolution of 1848, the first global financial crisis unfolding 10 years after it (in 1857–8), and the Paris Commune that followed the Franco-Prussian war in 1871 as signs that the prevailing class structure was still not the final and, therefore, the natural one. He labelled those who believed that 'the social conditions in which the bourgeoisie is dominant as the final product, the *non plus ultra* of history' (MECW 39, 65) as ideologists.

Marx saw encouraging signs, such as the successful campaigns for shortening the work day after 1848 or the successful strike actions in which the proletariat seriously challenged the bourgeoisie in Western Europe, just as the bourgeoisie had called the aristocracy to account in the preceding centuries. However, he also had witnessed the defeat of the 1848 revolutions, and this was not his last disappointment. As the economic crisis deepened in 1857, he had hoped that the radicals and the suffering factory workers would achieve something comparable to what they had gained a decade earlier, but he was bitterly disappointed. Then, nearly 15 years later Marx saw the bloody suppression of the Paris Commune, and he saw the beginnings of a class compromise in Britain, where ‘the labour movement, enjoying better living conditions partly based on colonial exploitation, had grown weaker and undergone the negative conditioning of trade-union reformism’ (Musto 2018, 240–1).

The simplification wherein Marx would have predicted ‘the emergence of communism’ is most familiar to us from Soviet propaganda but is not unique to it. The authors of the above-mentioned encyclopaedia article do not draw on Marxism-Leninism for their account; they rely on Gerald Allan Cohen’s *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence* (1978), and still their article ends up flanking the Marxist-Leninist instrumentalisation of Marx’s ideas with a claim that ‘it is essential to Marx’s thought that one should be able to predict the eventual arrival of communism’ (Wolff and Leopold 2021).<sup>10</sup> Why do so many believe such a prediction was central to Marx’s work? I find three reasons for this. The first is that Marx campaigned and laboured for various workers’ organisations. Whether or not he predicted a change in the class hegemony, it is certain that he campaigned for one. Secondly, this story served the power interests of the communist parties but also propagandist aims of other leftist political groups. Thirdly, as is true of any ideology, it was not built on nothing. There are some scattered prophetic expressions in Marx’s writings.

Let us begin with the first point. Even though it would be very difficult to find textual evidence that it would have been ‘inevitable for Marx’s thought that one

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<sup>10</sup> Such a prophetic Marx is mainly composed of quotations of certain passages from the preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, from one or two of the prefaces Marx wrote to *Capital*, and from the *Communist Manifesto*. These texts are central to the doctrine of historical materialism of Marxism-Leninism, and analytical Marxists have referred to this same, rather narrow body of texts. So is the historicist false prophet Marx (however self-constructed (see Marcuse 1983 [1959]) by Popper (1947, 78), whose thought would eliminate the prospects of any free and deliberate human action, put together from a few passages quoted from these texts.

should be able to *predict* the eventual arrival of communism' (ibid.; emphasis mine), it is easy to find considerable textual and other evidence that Marx *advocated* what he called communism as a solution for various difficult problems facing the proletariat: exploitation in the workplace, miserable living conditions in the pollution-rife residential quarters, the lack of any political rights, poor health, and short life expectancy. Marx, who wrote the establishing document of the Communist Party, a small transnational organisation that was founded in Brussels in 1848, was by no means a non-partisan scientist. He not only supported communism but also gave up a promising academic career, his livelihood, and even his nationality because of his political convictions. Marx, one of the political refugees from the failed 1848 revolutions, acted as the leader of the First International Working Men's Association from 1864 onward, in which capacity he represented a communist line against anarchists, trade-unionists, and other currents he swam against (see Musto 2018, 173 ff.). Marx admired the Paris Commune, though fearing that it would be violently suppressed, as indeed came to pass within just a few weeks from its establishment (Musto 2018, 211). In a joint effort with Engels, he later functioned for 'a sort of think tank' for the Social Democratic parties (Heinrich 2012 [2004], 23).

Marx was not the only leader of a small political organisation to have attempted to convince the members of that organisation, and others, that the future belongs to their cause. *Communist Manifesto* is a masterpiece of such rhetoric:

The development of Modern Industry ... cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable. ('The Communist Manifesto', in MECW 6, 496)

Does Marx not state quite clearly here that the victory of the proletariat is inevitable? Mikko Lahtinen (2016) has emphasised, that manifesto belongs to a different genre than *Capital* and other of Marx's major writings. It is a manifesto. Marx is not predicting any particular outcome of the ongoing political struggles here; he is rather agitating for a certain one, appealing to the supporters of the party and encouraging them to act. The outcome of political processes depends, at least partly, on the success of such agitation.

A careful reader should detect that a text beginning with the words 'A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism' ('The Communist Manifesto', in

MECW 6, 481) is not a place to present scientific predictions. China Miéville (2022, Chapter 5) has expressed this notion in the terms “‘we will win!’”: prediction in the course of an exhortatory text is not of the same kind as prediction that water will boil at 100°C’. Moreover, the ‘fervent recruitment drive – Workers of the world, unite! – expresses the opposite of that supposed certainty of a desired outcome’.

Moreover, insofar as these early communists, Marx among them, had reasons for announcing that soon people would live under communism, these reasons were different from those behind twentieth-century Soviet communism. Marx’s declarations had no immediate meaning beyond agitation of a marginal group of political activists. At the time of its writing, workers remained deprived of all political rights. Even though the latter part of the nineteenth century saw trade unions become legal and some members of the working class were granted suffrage, neither Marx nor Engels lived long enough to witness the advent of universal suffrage in any European country. Only shortly before his death, in the autumn of 1877, did Marx see a major electoral success, by German social democrats. Unlike Engels, he was not alive by the time the social democrats received the majority of the votes in Germany’s parliamentary elections, in 1890. Marx’s communism involved little more than a small group of activists fighting mostly underground for the empowerment of factory workers, who were deprived of most political rights.

Soviet communism is – for institutional reasons, if nothing else – something entirely different. It was the ideology of the ruling party of a dictatorial- or authoritarian-rule country and, later, of an entire bloc of countries. After the Second World War, Marxism-Leninism became an ideology echoed by the ruling strata in such European states as the GDR and Czechoslovakia and in various nations in the ‘Third World’, China and Cuba among them. Numerous renowned Marxists turning to Marx’s writings have found support there for their criticisms of the rule of these communist parties. Marx’s communism is substantively incompatible with the communism of the twentieth century.

I now turn to the second reason listed above. The story of Marx predicting the ‘eventual arrival of communism’ served the power interests of the communist parties in the twentieth century. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union, in its urge to control every detail of life in that country, in the Eastern Bloc more generally, and in the worldwide communist movement, had good grounds for

inferring from Marx's writings an argument that communism (as absolute dominance by the communist parties) would be the inevitable final stage of the development of the whole of humanity. Marx himself could not have had similar reasons. His 'communist party' represented something entirely different from what 'communist party' denoted in the twentieth century. The Communist League that commissioned Marx and Engels to pen its founding manifesto was a tiny underground organisation fighting for fundamental political and human rights for workers who had no right to organise, unionise, or vote. On the eve of the 1848 revolution, the declaration by Marx and Engels that the 'victory of the proletariat' is 'inevitable' ('The Communist Manifesto', in MECW 6, 496) inspired people who had little to lose.

Their organisation's namesake, the 'communist' parties of the twentieth century, had far more to lose: their rule over roughly a third of the world's population. For the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and other communist parties, aligned with it – which together, according to Ivan Avakumovic (1962, 151), had a global membership of 40 million in 1961 – it was vital to try to convince the regime's subjects that 'history' proceeds through a series of modes of production and that this progression is 'driving humankind towards communism'. However attractive the capitalist West with all its individual rights and freedoms, not to mention the impressive array of consumer goods advertised or its highly advanced culture industry, might have appeared to the various peoples living in the Eastern Bloc countries, the 'history' itself doomed all of that to failure. Communist parties struggled to control the populations of the countries under their rule. Every citizen received the prescribed daily dose of Marxism-Leninism, with its argument that the viability of the state socialist experiment from the outset was guaranteed by Marx. In other words, Marx foresaw that the Soviet Union would win the final battle between 'capitalism' and 'communism'.<sup>11</sup>

Even though this may sound silly, it begins to make sense as we consider all the uncertainties that the Bolshevik rulers faced. After a failed revolution in Germany in 1919, Soviet Russia found itself isolated. In the civil war between 1917 and 1922, the Bolsheviks fought against several powers, European and non-European,

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<sup>11</sup> The terms 'capitalism' and 'communism' are rooted in twentieth-century vocabulary. Marx rarely used such terms. He instead analysed the 'capitalist mode of production', which from the beginning was always articulated with other modes of production and distribution. Theories of convergence, discussed in publications I and II, were largely based on the observation that such a binary worldview of ideology did not correspond to the reality of either bloc.

on Russian soil. World War II soon followed, then the Cold War. Whatever the state ideology averred, the survival of the authoritarian rule of the Communist Party was never guaranteed. Against this backdrop it is easier to understand why world history (in the doctrine of historical materialism) and even the history of the universe (in the doctrine of dialectical materialism) was harnessed for assuring the masses that the victory of the Soviet Union was not just possible or plausible but inevitable.

The doctrine of historical materialism was, in the words of Stalin (2008 [1938], 105, 109, 114), ‘the extension of the principles of dialectical materialism to the study of social life’. Stalin (2008 [1938], 114) explained that

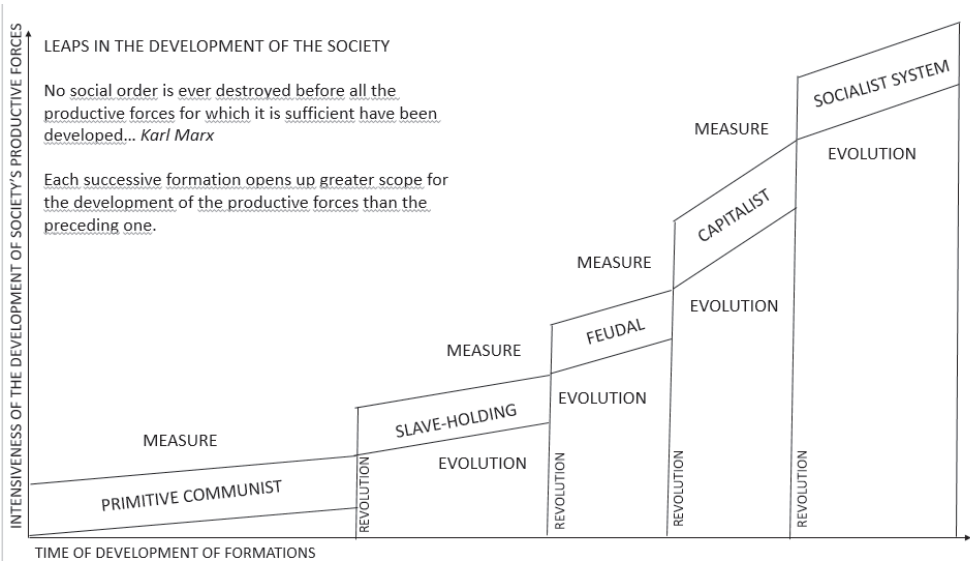
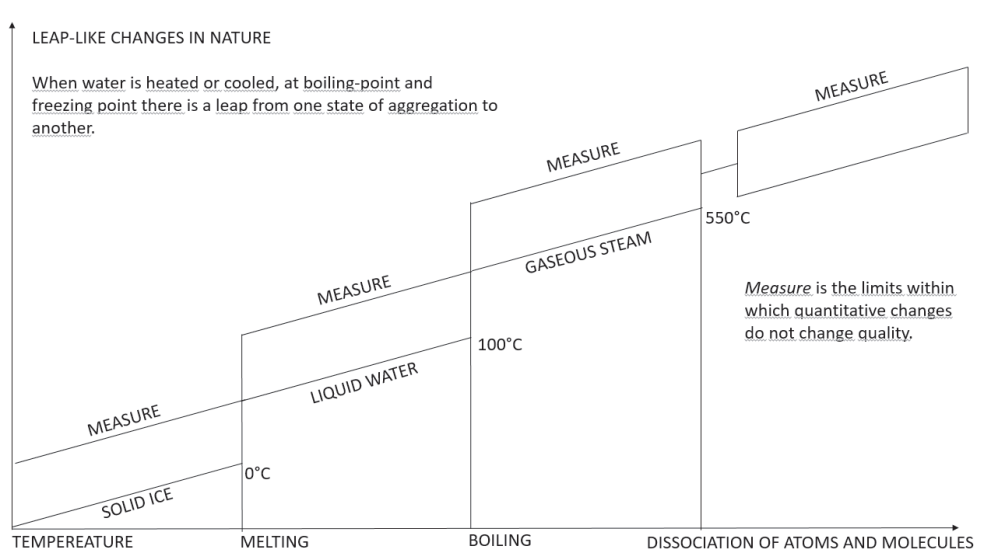
[i]t is easy to understand how immensely important is the extension of the principles of philosophical materialism to the study of social life ...

If the connection between the phenomena of nature and their interdependence are laws of the development of nature, it follows, too, that the connection and interdependence of the phenomena of social life are laws of the development of society, and not something accidental.

Further, if the world is knowable and our knowledge of the laws of development of nature is authentic knowledge, having the validity of objective truth, it follows that social life, the development of society, is also knowable, and that the data of science regarding the laws of development of society are authentic data having the validity of objective truths.

Already, dialectical materialism – which explained all the laws of development of the universe, from the smallest particles to solar systems – thus pointed toward the coming victory of communism.

A textbook of Marxist-Leninist philosophy presented a graph by T. Vlasova (1987, 60–1) that illustrates the notion of inexorable progress toward communism:



Every detail in such depictions of natural development points toward the infallibility of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, CPSU. Only a fool would waste energy on trying to fight the natural laws

of history. As Behrens (1992, 183), who was the most important economist of the GDR, explained, Marxism-Leninism, being an ideology of legitimising the ruling bureaucracy, portrayed the present power relations as historically necessary, as if the prevailing relations of power and domination were predetermined results of natural developments. Behrens underscored, in a marked contrast against his country's prevailing ideology, that the bureaucratic mode of production stemmed from entirely accidental developments.

The central message of Marxism-Leninism, encapsulated in such depictions as the graph above, was that 'there is no alternative'. This impression of a state in which no alternatives exist was maintained predominantly by the 'Central Administration of Eternal Truths' (Havemann 1971), backed by extensive intelligence machinery (however ineffective by today's standards).

Marxism-Leninism was not, however, the first thinking to misinterpret Marx to be a prophet of 'historical necessities'. As Musto (2020b, 64) explains, Marx accused Russian sociologist Nikolai Mikhailovsky (1842–1904) of inappropriately generalising Marx's analysis into universality. Mikhailovsky had drawn conclusions as to the prospects of socialism after reading Marx's analysis of the transition from feudalism to capitalism in *Capital*. In response, Marx wrote: 'I beg his pardon. This does me too much honour, and yet puts me to shame at the same time' (MECW 24, 200). He explained the erroneousness of the universalising his analysis in *Capital* by way of an example from ancient Rome, where immediate producers were separated from the means of production, just as they would be centuries later in early modern England. In England, this process created a massive pool of proletarians that the emerging large-scale capitalist industry could exploit. In Rome, a similar process of separation had led to 'the formation of large landed property' and 'the formation of large money capital' (ibid.), yet nothing reminiscent of the modern capitalist mode of production, let alone its hegemony, emerged: 'Thus events strikingly analogous, but occurring in different historical milieux, led to quite disparate results' (ibid., 201). A 'key to the phenomenon ... will never be arrived at by employing the all-purpose formula of the general historico-philosophical theory whose supreme virtue consists in being supra-historical', Marx explained (ibid.).

In Musto's words (2020b, 151),



[t]he recent publication of Marx's manuscripts and study notes, in the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* ... showed ... how strongly he oriented himself to empirical research and historical analysis. In contrast to what many previous interpreters have maintained ... new materials definitively refute the idea that he was mainly driven by a new philosophy of history, or that he had obsessive recourse to the dialectical method.

Krätke has agreed that Marx did not speculate about the past, present, and future of all peoples on the globe. Instead, he

studied the history of Asia Minor, of the Near East and Middle East, the Islamic world, the Americas, and Asia (with three centres of focus: India, China, and Central Asia) ... the history of North Africa ... all areas of Europe, from the North (Scandinavia), to the West (France, England, Germany), to the South (Portugal, Spain, Italy and the Balkans) to the East (Eastern Europe, including Russia) ... the history of the countries colonized by the Europeans (North America, Latin America, Indonesia, North Africa). (Krätke 2018, 14)

Had Marx studied all of these geographical areas in search of a pattern of 'a series of modes of production ... driving humankind towards communism' (Wolff and Leopold 2021), he would not have found one.

It is true that the sequel 'tribal', 'ancient communal', and 'feudal or estate' forms of property (MECW 5, 32–5) appears in Marx's writings. Some of his writings exhibit traces of a stage-based Euro-centric historico-philosophical theory, listing social formations such as hunter-gatherer activities, pastoralism, a slaveholder society, feudalism, and commercial societies, but that figure of thought was not Marx's invention. This was a central schema for the social science that preceded him (Meek 1976).

In Marx's writings, this sequel does not systematically refer to the developmental path of 'humanity'; rather, it is used for Western Europe's development from Antiquity until the mid-1800s. Even though Marx limited his analysis of the transition from feudalism to modern capitalism 'this "historical necessity" ... to the *countries of Western Europe*' (MECW 24, 360; also MECW 24, 346, 364, 370; emphasis in original), it is true also that the European development left – or, as Marx predicted, would later leave – an imprint on almost every locality on Earth. From the beginning, capitalist production in England was in dire need of resources from numerous overseas territories. These ultimately included raw materials, manufactured goods, and slaves from the East Indies; gold and silver from South America; African slaves; and North American cotton.

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins. ... These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation. (MECW 35, 739)

In this sense, the primitive accumulation that separated immediate producers from their means of production in England from the fifteenth century onward, even though only creating preconditions mainly for modern English industrial capitalism, was from the beginning a global and hence, in at least one sense, universal process, albeit an uneven one. The same processes that on one hand separated the English workers from their means of production and simultaneously granted them many core liberal freedoms overtly dispossessed, enslaved, and killed entire peoples in the colonies (MECW 35, 751 ff.). In England, wage workers gained freedom and ownership rights that made it possible for them to alienate their labour power in the labour market. These individual-level rights, in Marx's understanding, formed the basis for the workers' further emancipation. All this would not have been possible without the work of numerous people in the colonies, people less privileged than English workers. In Marx's words, 'the veiled slavery of the wage workers in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the new world' (MECW 35, 747). Only in this sense does the modern bourgeois mode of production concern all of 'humanity'. But it is important still to remember that the slaves in the Americas and elsewhere in the colonies were never the doubly free waged workers presupposed by the capitalist mode of production. From the beginning, capitalist production was articulated in relations with other modes of production – including various forms of subsistence economy, petty commodity production, diverse communal forms of production and reproductive work, feudal relations of production, and the slave trade and plantation economy.<sup>12</sup>

The older Marx grew, the less he endorsed any kind of unilinear conception of history. He made it clear that wherever a modern capitalist mode of production had encountered indigenous peoples, it had exploited their resources, destroyed their modes of production and their cultures, turned their populations into wage workers, and thereby often forced them to join the most miserable segments of the reserve army of labour. A prime example was the case of the Irish emigrants after

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<sup>12</sup> For discussion of the concept of articulation, see the work of, for example, Althusser et al. (2015 [1965]), Thomas Weber (1994), and Matti Kortesoja (2016).

the famine ‘of 1846’ that ‘killed more than 1,000,000 people’ (MECW 35, 695). But did Marx therefore hold a unilinear conception of history, in the limited sense that European developments may ultimately determine the future of the whole planet? Such researchers as Musto (2020b, 76), Kolja Lindner (2010, 36), and Kevin B. Anderson (2010, 2) have concluded that, if he ever did, he started to question it as his studies progressed.

Even though the young Marx who wrote *Communist Manifesto* (1848) ‘held to an implicitly unilinear model of development according to which non-Western societies would’ be ‘swept into the world capitalist system’ as Anderson put it, this model was ‘only implicit, because he gave little specific attention to non-Western societies in this period’ (2010, 10). Later, ‘this gap in his worldview would begin to disappear’ as he started devoting ‘a considerable amount of his intellectual efforts to the study of such major non-Western societies as India, Indonesia, China, and Russia, while also taking up revolutionary nationalism in Ireland and Poland as well as the dialectics of race and class in the United States’ (ibid., 10–11). This learning process changed Marx’s earlier

implicitly unilinear perspective, sometimes tinged with ethnocentrism, according to which non-Western societies would necessarily be absorbed into capitalism and then modernized via colonialism and the world market ... toward one that was more multilinear, leaving the future development of these societies as an open question. (Ibid., 2)

Krätke agrees that in his later studies of world history, ‘Marx gave no room to Euro-centrism; he considered world history in no way synonymous with “European history”’ (Krätke 2018, 14). The conclusions recently drawn by such researchers as Anderson, Krätke, and Lindner from Marx’s ethnological notebooks, from his studies of world history, and after paying special attention to Marx’s harsh comments about colonialism already known to us from *Capital*, are nearly absent from the popularised presentations of Marx’s ideas, mainly cleaving to the notion that Marx held a unilinear, Euro-centric, and teleological conception of history.

Let us finally turn to the third point listed above, Marxism-Leninism building on some valid elements, as any ideology does (see Rehmann 2013, 6). It leans on actual elements from Marx’s writings. Besides what Miéville (2022, Chapter 1) termed the ‘prophetic, poetic, melodramatic and tragic’ *Communist Manifesto*, other of Marx’s own writings – especially those that Hans-Jørgen Schanz (1948–2022), among others, has classified as belonging to the second phase of Marx’s *oeuvre*, the ‘historical

materialism' period (Schanz 1996 [1973], 113 ff.; see also Behrens 1992, 43) – indeed have provided textual evidence for the Marxist-Leninist philosophy of history. Yet, at the same time, Marx himself supplied arguments against every one of its fundamental tenets (Schanz 1996 [1973], 90).

As for *Capital*, from the more than 2,000 pages constituting the three volumes, some passages indeed seem to support the notion that their author prophesied the downfall of the capitalist mode of production. For some readers, Marx's declaration that one day 'the knell of capitalist private property' will sound (MECW 35, 750) colour the rest of the text. Many have taken Marx's theory-oriented explanation for the tendency of the general rate of profit to fall as foretelling the inevitability of such a tendency, which would 'finally seal the fate of capitalism' (Popper 1947, 172). Equally many authors have rejected an idea that Marx's theoretical elaborations would amount to a prophecy of an inevitable breakdown of 'capitalism' (see Honkanen 2022, 30). My view is that there are no valid reasons to believe that Marx would have addressed whether the rate of profit falls or rises at some point in time as anything other than an empirical question. Rather than predict some future decline in the general rate of profit, Marx turned his attention in the manuscript for Volume III of *Capital* to this: if the profit rate falls (which is an empirical matter)<sup>13</sup>, why it does so.

Marx did not dream up this phenomenon from his armchair. It was a topic discussed by classical political economists that he could not possibly have missed in his critique of political economy. A decline in interest-rates – which in Adam Smith's view implied a decline in the general rate of profit (Tsoulfidis and Paitaridis 2012, 310) – had been observed in Europe in previous centuries, and Smith (2001 [1776], 451) had explained this empirical phenomenon in relation to the profit-squeeze occurring when an economy approaches a 'stationary state' (Rubin 1981, 203; Tsoulfidis and Paitaridis, 2012, 309). Ricardo (2001 [1817], 78) had connected it with diminishing returns from land as the working population swells. Marx, in turn, built his explanation mainly on the rising organic composition of capital, which entails a diminishing rate of added value relative to the total sum invested.

Those who look to Marx's theorisation on profit rates' tendency to fall for evidence that he was a prophet of the demise of 'capitalism' forget that classical economists from Smith (1723–90) to John Stuart Mill (1806–73) had for the same reason

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<sup>13</sup> For reports on the recent empirical studies, see Anwar Shaikh (2016, 729 ff.).

predicted a grim future for what they called commercial societies (Krätke 2017, 41–2). Smith expected the falling rate of profit to cause ‘the growth process of society’ to be ‘terminated in its stationary (or steady) state’ (Tsoulfidis and Paitaridis 2012, 312). Classical economists were, in the words of Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950), ‘all stagnationists. Or, to use their own term, they all expected ... the advent of a stationary state’ (1954, 544). Why is it then that Marx gets singled out as some prophet of the ‘inevitable’ downfall of capitalism?

Of course, some have interpreted Marx’s expression ‘natural laws of capitalist production’ in the introduction to the first edition of the first volume (MECW 35, 9) to refer to a historico-philosophical prophecy. Herein lies one of the main points emphasised by Adorno and his students; where Marx discusses the ‘natural laws’ of capitalist production, should we interpret this term positively or, instead, critically (Koivisto and Mehtonen 2023)? Stalinist philosophy of history understands such expressions in Marx’s writings positively: the purported natural laws inevitably lead toward communism as an endpoint of history. Adorno (2018 [1997], 156), Horkheimer 2002 [1937], and their students (Schmidt 1968, 49; Reichelt 1973 [1970]), on the contrary, emphasised that the (economic and other) laws of the society result from our own actions, with those laws appearing to us as laws of nature only if we do not reflect on our part in their formation (Koivisto and Mehtonen 2023). In the words of a young Engels, such laws are neither laws of ‘nature’ nor laws ‘of the mind’ but ‘natural’ laws ‘based on the unconsciousness of the participants’ (MECW 3, 433–4).

Marxism-Leninism disappeared almost overnight, but Marxist-Leninist patterns of thought have not entirely vanished. Of course, ideas do not hang independently in the air. In the Cold War years, the Soviet Union maintained a massive global infrastructure for distributing Soviet literature. The Foreign Language Publishing House, or Progress Publishers, not only circulated works by Marx and Engels but also printed millions of copies of Marxist-Leninist textbooks and other Soviet literature, as Rossen Djagalov (2019, 89) explained, for audiences in major European, Afro-Arab, and Indian languages. According to Djagalov (2019, 90), until 1991, when Progress ceased its activities, it had published ‘yearly close to 2,000 new titles with a print run approaching 30 million copies’. Is it any wonder that Western mainstream presentations of Marx’s thought still reflect the ideas presented in this body of texts?

Looking Westward, we find that Marxism-Leninism was present in at least two other ways. It had its sympathisers, and, apart from that, it was an essential part of the object of study of Sovietology, a research tradition perhaps mirroring the teleological worldview of Marxism-Leninism in its conviction of ‘the superiority of the West’ (Burawoy 1992, 774). Even though Marxism-Leninism did not disappear overnight, Sovietology at least had lost the most obvious rationale for its existence.

Nevertheless, Marxism-Leninism continues to influence the popular image of Marx as a thinker. It is generally well-known that attitudes and habits tend to live longer than the material conditions in which these dispositions came about. For this reason, my project is not yet another attempt to demonstrate the relevance of Marx’s ideas for the twenty-first century, and I have not concentrated primarily on unearthing what can be discovered about Marx himself. My interest lies, rather, in the layer that has obscured his thought – the Marxism of the twentieth century and, especially, Marxism at the focal point of the Cold War: in Germany. With the next section, I aim to show that, while research on Marx in East Germany was conditioned by Marxism-Leninism, any characterisation that reduces it to this dogma is in error.

### 1.3. Marxism-Leninism and ‘orthodox heretics’

‘Ah, said Me-ti, understanding, unlike those who wish to place God at the beginning of everything, you lot place God at the end!’ (Brecht 2016 [1965], 56)

While not the object of my study, Marxism-Leninism, being the official ideology of the Eastern Bloc countries, conditioned the work of scholars seriously reading Marx in locales under its influence. I argue that this conditioning had a two-pronged character. On one hand, scholarship on Marx, or applying Marx’s ideas, was well-resourced. At the same time, the communist parties and their Marxist-Leninist ideology severely constrained the work of these scholars.

The quasi-religious features of Marxism-Leninism – the one ‘doctrine which alone brings salvation’ (Korsch 2008 [1923], 102) – are apparent from the perspective of Marx’s critique of ideology. The caricature *On the Riverbanks of the Volga* (or *An den Ufern der Wolga*, from 1937), by early Soviet artist Jacobus Belsen (1870–1937),

illustrates the peculiarities of the early Soviet popularisation of Marx.<sup>14</sup> A peasant stands facing an Orthodox-Christian-style home altar in the corner of a simple log cabin. The man holds a piglet over his left arm and has his right arm raised to his forehead to cross himself. At his side, a woman – bare-footed just as he is – kneels in front of the altar. She too is crossing herself, touching her left shoulder with three fingers together: thumb, forefinger, and middle finger. The altar before them comprises an icon, a painting of Marx with a halo framing his long hair and beard. Easter eggs, a symbol of resurrection, hang from the icon. The caption reads: ‘Have mercy and heal the piglet’.

How did Marx, the critic of religion, end up being depicted in icon-form pictures himself? In his book *Der Marxismus Leninismus: Elemente einer Kritik* (1986 [1984]), Labica traced the way in which the ideology critique penned by Marx and Engels evolved into state ideology itself. This addresses how critique of religion turned into a new religion, with all the pertinent characteristics of a religion: eschatology (communism as a heaven on earth), the fall of man (deviating from primitive communism onto the arduous path of a sequence of class societies each involving one or another form of slavery), the promise of salvation (found in the holy scriptures), rites of penitence (required self-critique), and (for those accused of revisionism) sanctions such as excommunication upon any deviation from the sacred doctrine.

The background of Marxism-Leninism is in early Russian Marxism with all its peculiarities. Full-fledged Marxism-Leninism was formulated amid the power struggles within the mostly underground Bolshevik faction of the Social Democratic Party in tsarist Russia. After gaining power, this revolutionary faction transformed into a ruling party with dictatorship over a vast country.

Russia and the early Soviet Union underwent times of revolution (1917) and civil war (1918–22), then the era of Lenin’s New Economic Policy (1921–28). Later, in the wake of the death of Lenin (1870–1924), Stalin (1878–1953) destroyed rivals within the party, and 1927–28 saw the revolutionary stage in early Soviet development yield to the totalitarian phase, which lasted until Stalin’s death, in 1953 (Brie and Schüttrumpf 2021, 186). Stalin applied terroristic means, including the physical destruction of more or less randomly selected people, most notoriously in the Moscow show trials between 1936 and 1938.

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<sup>14</sup> The piece has been reproduced by Hecker, Hübner, and Kubo (2008, 15).

Work on a critical edition of the output of Marx and Engels began at the Marx-Engels-Institute in early-1920s Moscow, in a project that was international at first. In its earliest years, the first *Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe* project, or MEGA<sup>1</sup>, helmed by that institute's director, David Riazanov (1870–1938), involved co-operation with the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research (Hecker et al. 2000). Both Riazanov and his colleague Isaak Rubin (1886–1937), with whom Publication IV deals, kept up with contemporary Western discussion.<sup>15</sup> Stalinism (and, to some extent, Nazism also) brought this promising co-operation to a violent end with the physical destruction of the MEGA<sup>1</sup> project. Rubin and Riazanov were both executed in Stalin's purges, along with '127 of the institute's 244 members of staff ... among them many skilled translators, archivists, economists, philosophers, and historians' (Rokityansky and Müller 1996, 116–17 per Boldyrev and Kragh 2015, 367–8).

Those early Soviet scholars who were not physically annihilated lost their intellectual integrity, as eyewitness Andrey Anikin (1927–2001) wrote poignantly:

We lost those who died. We lost those who emigrated. But this is by far not the whole list of losses. Under the pressure of a totalitarian state and an aggressive ideology many talented people were not able to do what they could have done under different circumstances. (Anikin 1995, 55; translated and cited by Shirokorad and Zweynert 2012, 654)

Marxism-Leninism, as canonised by Stalin most notoriously in the *Short Course on the History of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks* (or *Kratkii kurs istorii VKP(b)*) he commissioned (1938), built nominally on elements from Marx, Engels, and Lenin. *Short Course* was printed in 66 languages, in tens of millions of copies (Wetter 1958 [1952], 212). On no account was this just another writing on 'Marxist theory': it 'served for fifteen years as a manual of ideology completely binding on all citizens' (Kolakowski 2005 [1978], 862; quoted per Oittinen 2015, 2). One benefit of the 'short course' was that reading a single short text sufficed for presenting the appearance of mastering the fundamentals of all fields of knowledge (see Labica 1986 [1984], 59).

What was called 'dialectics' became ossified in pompous formulae. As Jan Rehmann (2013, 71) explains, 'Stalin rearranged, generalized and condensed Engels's reflections on nature into universal laws of "dialectical materialism"'.

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<sup>15</sup> As the focus of this dissertation is on the divided Germany during the Cold War, the fourth article does not deal with early Soviet Marxism and Stalinist era as such; rather, it addresses the reception of Rubin's ideas in the divided Germany between 1949 and 1989.



'Dialectical materialism' explained the laws of the whole universe. The more 'special' laws of the society and of thinking too could be explained via the three fundamental laws of dialectics: the law of the transformation of quantity into quality, the law of the mutual interpenetration of opposites and the law of the negation of the negation (Wetter 1958 [1952], 52). From the perspective of Marx's critique of traditional ways to pose philosophical questions, it is no less absurd that materialist ontology was lauded as the 'brilliant' answer Marx and Engels gave to the 'fundamental question of philosophy' (see Koivisto and Mehtonen 2001). Official epistemology followed Lenin's 'ingenious' theory of reflection. Dialectical method was declared to be the 'creative' solution of Hegel and Marx for the problems of rigid metaphysical approaches. According to Abdusalam Guseynov (2021, 387),

reduction of philosophy to ideology was carried out in the 1930s and 1940s. In those years, philosophy in any meaningful sense of the word was in fact dead. ... The very language of philosophical works changed: philosophers no longer researched, examined, or disputed, but fought, battled, exposed, and praised. ... If 'Soviet philosophy' ... as opposed to philosophy of the Soviet years of Russian history ... bears a single most characteristic feature, it is this consistent dogmatism that excluded any independent or individually responsible judgement.

In Rehmann's (2013, 71) words, Marxism-Leninism 'obliterated Marx and Engels's connection of the ideology-critique and state-critique, and substituted it with a "wide" and "neutral" concept of ideology'. Marxist-Leninist 'state-philosophy' defined "'proletarian ideology" from the standpoint of the Politburo' and persecuted 'every contradiction as "deviation"'

In 1953, after Stalin's death, began what Brie and Jörn Schütrumpf (2021, 186) describe as the final phase of Soviet development, 'characterised by a slowly disintegrating bureaucratic dictatorship until 1989/1991', which, in the end, 'collapsed like a hollow tree'. It is precisely this post-1953 phase that my project concentrates on, with more specific focus on the turning point in 1968, the pinnacle of the thaw and economic reforms of the 1960s, and the beginning of the new repressive/conservative period.

The process of de-Stalinisation, which began after the twentieth congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, held in 1956, featured reforms to all sectors of Soviet society. However, Khrushchev's secret speech that started the ball of this massive undertaking rolling, left the state ideology of Marxism-Leninism nearly

untouched (Adolphi 2015, 1922; Labica 1986 [1984], 85). Even though the Short Course primer was withdrawn from circulation by declaration of that party congress, the party remained the highest authority, even in science and culture (Wetter 1958 [1952], 241), and the extensive edifice of this state ideology, which had been designed to legitimate Stalin's rule, was effectively reaffirmed (Labica 1986 [1984], 88). This is of profound importance, in that Marxism-Leninism was a creation of Stalinist rule (with its prehistory in the developments within the Bolshevik party and Lenin's writings) as much as any other institution of Soviet society.

The numerous parallel Marxisms that took a different turn or arrived at some conclusion conflicting with Marxism-Leninism continued to be a taboo subject in the Soviet bloc (Adolphi 2015, 1922). That said, some cosmetic changes accompanied de-Stalinisation. In East Germany's official dictionary of philosophy (*Philosophisches Wörterbuch*), which offered an entry not on 'Marxism' but on 'Marxism-Leninism' (Adolphi 2015, 1923; Buhr and Klaus 1975 [1964]), Stalin is not even mentioned. It is instead several authors whom Stalinist canon had classified as enemies – Luxemburg, Karl Kautsky (1854–1938), and Antonio Labriola (1843–1904) – who are mentioned by name, and that is all (Adolphi 2015, 1923; Buhr and Klaus 1975 [1964], 742). This implies that de-Stalinisation meant little more than sweeping the 'great philosopher' Stalin under the carpet (see Adolphi 2015, 1923).

Nevertheless, especially since the beginning of de-Stalinisation, not all Soviet and Eastern European scholars presented themselves as true believers. Even though intellectual labourers were obliged to make concessions to Marxist-Leninist jargon, it was not just Western scholars who have contributed to the body of critical and philologically solid readings of Marx, even if only for the obvious reason that the original manuscripts by Marx and Engels were kept in East Berlin and Moscow for the majority of the twentieth century – manuscripts that contained many seeds for new insight and questioning of old ostensible certainties.

Scholars began to challenge the official dogma immediately after Stalin's death. In Sergey Mareev's words, 'the main tendency of the development of Marxism in USSR was the struggle between "dogmatic" and "creative" Marxism' (Maidansky and Pavlov 2018, 215). This phenomenon was especially pronounced since the beginning of de-Stalinisation, but I would not attempt to classify the Soviet

Marxist texts neatly into dogmatic vs. creative ones: in many texts from the mid-1950s onward, the state ideology is intertwined with creative readings of Marx. These relations between Marxism-Leninism and ‘creative’ (ibid.) or ‘genuine’ (Bakhurst 1991, 3) scholarship, which sometimes were interwoven even within individual texts, need some disentangling.

One more factor complicates the picture. Often the epithets ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ turn out to be problematic, given that in the case of such key figures of so-called Western Marxism as Gramsci, Georg Lukács (1885–1971) and his student Leo Kofler (1907-1995), Roman Rosdolsky (1898–1967), and Ernst Bloch (1885–1977) it is not so clear whether the thinker in question should be assigned the epithet ‘Western’, the label ‘Eastern’, or both. This is no wonder, because the Soviet Union both facilitated and constrained research on Marx, or the application of his ideas. Gramsci spent time in Soviet Russia, where he was involved in the work of the Comintern<sup>16</sup>, Lukács served twice as a minister of a communist government in Hungary, Rosdolsky worked in Vienna as a correspondent for the Marx-Engels-Institute of Moscow (Rabinbach 1974, 56), and Kofler and Bloch served for a short while as academics in East Germany. While these positions accorded their scholarship some freedom, Lukács had to denounce his earlier views, Rosdolsky was expelled from the Communist Party for his Trotskyism, and Kofler and Bloch fled East Germany before the construction of the Berlin Wall. We cannot divide scholarship on Marx neatly into dogmatic Eastern vs. critical Western writings.

While the official state ideology restricted the work of all scholars in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and debates between various streams of Marxism were not based on the principles of free and critical discussion, disagreements and even formal debates did exist. The political establishment was able to control scientific discussion, but doing so was not easy, for many scholars were, as they usually are, intelligent and astute people. Following Brie, I call intellectually honest Marxian scholars in the Soviet bloc orthodox heretics. Brie (1993, 40) applied this label to Lothar Kühne (1931–85), a philosopher who concentrated on questions of culture, especially architecture. He was a steadfast communist, a reader of Marx who, in Brie’s (1993, 46) view, mobilised Marx’s ideas pertaining to culture against the party- and state-bureaucratic, petty-bourgeois reality of the state socialism of the

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<sup>16</sup> Craig Brandist (2012) has traced the origins of Gramsci’s conception of hegemony to the early Soviet discussions followed by the latter, who was competent in the Russian language.

GDR and simultaneously attempted to mobilise his educational capital against the monopolists of dominant political capital.

I use this label to refer to a variety of readings of Marx's *Capital* that remained faithful to this classic. In publications I–IV, I discuss one example, the most important (Marxian) economist of the GDR, the already mentioned Behrens. In Section 1.6, I introduce Ruben, who was an especially noteworthy East German philosopher, and the most important Soviet philosopher, Ilyenkov. These three authors not only challenged Stalinist dogma when presenting highly original readings of *Capital*, but also all communicated with the early representatives of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*.

The attempts to control or even silence East German scholars Behrens and Ruben differed markedly from the terror exercised during the Stalinist era. The same is true with regard to Ilyenkov during the ‘thaw’ in the Soviet Union. The state had moved from ‘open state violence ... towards more subtle measures of executing state force’ such as ‘surveillance methods by the secret police’ (Düppe 2021, 1).

Even though nothing comparable to Stalin's terror re-emerged, the careers of these three scholars were anything but easy. The guardians of the purity of the official ideology probably drove Ilyenkov, the most inspiring of the Soviet philosophers, to his suicide in 1979 (Bakhurst 2019, 65). From 1968 onward, Behrens, who had received the national medal of the GDR in 1954 and who once had run the national statistics office (Zentralverwaltung für Statistik), found himself carefully hiding the manuscripts he had written on analysis of the ‘state and party monopolism’, lest they be found in a search of his house by the Stasi, East Germany's state-security police (Behrens 1992; Loschinski 1992, 10; Steiner 1999, 29). In 1981, Ruben was dismissed from the party and forbidden from teaching (Warnke 2009).

The same rules of play did not apply to the epigones of Marxism-Leninism as were applied to the scholarly readers of Marx. The two differed qualitatively, with Marxist-Leninist theses getting backed by force, not by solid arguments. As Till Düppe and Ivan Boldyrev (2019, 1) explain, the secret police ‘when dealing with ideas deemed potentially dangerous for the power of the Communist Party ... put potential deviators back in line. The result was self-censorship, socialist jargon, intellectual mediocrity, and professional frustration’.

The leeway for freedom of thought varied over time, though, with the result that not all eras in East German political economy or development of philosophy proving equally interesting. Even though de-Stalinisation did not alter the fundamental power structures of the state and party monopolistic socialism (it may be called a mere facelift, or bloße Fassadenerneuerung; see Bischoff and Lieber 2007), it enabled scholarly work after completely lost decades.

While the entire era ushered in after Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956 is interesting and important, I have chosen to concentrate on the years 1967 and 1968, the former celebrated as the centennial of *Capital* and the latter marking 150 years since its author's birth. In the next section, I justify my decision to concentrate on those years.

## 1.4. The years 1967 and 1968

'Don't trust anybody over 30.' (Jack Weinberg)

The years 1967 and 1968 were packed with dramatic events in the East and the West alike. In the West, 1967–68 witnessed the era's most active student unrest (see Bollinger 2008; Kraushaar 1998; 2000 [1998]). One important factor behind the rise of students as a distinct social group is a highly significant rise in their numbers (Hobsbawm 1995 [1994], 295). Mirroring a pattern visible in many countries, many children from middle- and working-class families gained access to the West German academy system (Abendroth 2018 [1978], 104). The academic culture they encountered was a conservative one and still labouring under the shadow of an only half-finished process of de-Nazification. The new generation of students showed that they were not satisfied with the practice of sweeping the reprehensible past of their parents' generation under the carpet (ibid., 105). Atrocities of the Vietnam war highlighted global-scale exploitation lying behind the accumulation of capital.

It was against the backdrop of the leftist student movement that increased interest in Marx's texts swept West Germany, where many initiatives to read *Capital* were connected with the activities of the SDS (Bebnowski 2021, 360; Dutschke 1966). Also, the recession of 1966–7, which marked the end of West Germany's

‘economic miracle’, inspired such radical economists as Ernest Mandel (1923–95) and a young Altvater (Stutje 2009, 135).

In the Soviet Union ‘*Shestidesiatniki* [people of the 1960s]’ (Youichi 2013) renewed Marxist thinking (see Guseynov 2021). Speaking in an important documentary film on Ilyenkov, directed by Alexander Rozhkov, philosopher Lev Naumenko described the spirit of the Khrushchev era that preceded the earlier developments as ‘the thaw, the spring’ and explained that he felt that the ‘winter was over’ (Naumenko in Rozhkov 2017, 28:24–28:32 min).

As for overall developments specific to East Germany, the early 1960s proved intellectually exciting largely on account of the economic reforms by Walter Ulbricht (1893–1973), the New Economic System (*Neues Ökonomisches System der Planung und Leitung*), NÖS (or NÖSPL). The NÖS, launched in 1963, heralded greater freedom in the discussions within political economy (see Krause 1996; 1998, 139 ff.; 2012, 20). Transformation of the rigid centrally planned economy was an officially acknowledged goal.

Even the most powerful and distinguished scholars of the GDR devoted attention to closely following the discussions related to the political and economic reforms in the Czech Republic. In 1966, Dietz Verlag published Ota Šik’s *Ökonomie – Interessen – Politik*, which served as a major source of inspiration behind the Prague Spring (Šik 1966 [1962]). No less than Otto Reinhold, director of the Institute of Social Sciences of the Central Committee of the SED (Institut für Gesellschaftswissenschaften beim ZK der SED, IfG), wrote a foreword to the book, praising it as an important contribution. One central problem in the rigid, bureaucratic system of planning and in Marxist-Leninist political economy, according to Reinhold (1966, 6), was that the problem of interests had not been taken seriously enough. It was admitted that the interests of an individual and those of the society did not yet coincide. There was an intermediate level between them: the interests of the enterprises. Already in 1962, Soviet economist Evsei Liberman (1897–1981) had suggested that the problems of the strict centrally planned economy could be solved via attention to these three levels of interests. He justified his claim about the economic significance of bonuses and profits with a catchphrase: what benefited the society should also benefit an individual (see Roesler 2020 [2012], 59; Schmid 1966, 298–9). If the Stalinist model represented an attempt to force or persuade individuals to give up their personal goals for the common good, the reformers wanted to create

societal structures that direct the self-interested behaviour of individuals to serve the common good.

At the heart of the economic reforms, Reinhold's own book, *Zu den wissenschaftlichen Grundlagen des neuen ökonomischen Systems* (1966), co-authored by Wolfgang Berger, appeared in the same year as Šik's. Then, 1969 brought the GDR the collectively authored textbook *Politische Ökonomie des Sozialismus und ihre Anwendung in der DDR*, which had been written in the spirit of the reforms. By the time of its appearance, however, the previous year's Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia had already thwarted all attempts at more free and creative discussion within the field, and Šik's career in his home country was over (see Krause 2012, 22).

When the 'spiritual spring' ended, with the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in autumn 1968, a decisive end was put to the greater freedom within scientific discussions in the Czech Republic, GDR, and Soviet Union alike.

In Rozhkov's film, philosopher Vadim Mezhuev (1933–2019) recalled the atmosphere of the era of stagnation that followed. Conservatives seized power in all of the countries mentioned. He explained that it was no accident that the dissidents replaced the earlier reformists as the major opposing force. All hope of the 'socialism with a human face' envisioned by the reform movement behind the Prague Spring was gone.

This is when dissidents or human rights activists appeared. They gave up on the idea of socialism with a human face. They said it was all deception. To use Hegel's language, the generation of the 1960s thought that the reality was to some extent rational, but deformed by Stalin's terror, so it needed to be put right and de-alienated. That's why the term 'alienation' was so popular with them. After 1968, most of the intellectuals believed that reality was completely irrational. (Mezhuev in Rozhkov 2017, 48:36–49:15 min)

People of the sixties 'preceded dissidents, and some of them even became dissidents, though they themselves as a cultural phenomenon were not dissidents' (Guseynov 2021, 384). 'The problem they faced was whether it was possible to have faith in communism without fanaticism' (ibid.).

In the GDR, the final nail in the coffin for the interesting developments in the field of political economy came with the Brezhnev-backed coup by Erich Honecker (1912–94) in 1971 (see Krause 1998, 193 ff.; Roesler 2020 [2012], 73 ff.; Steiner

2010b, 141 ff.). Ulbricht's reforms were, along with the related relative independence from Soviet thrall<sup>17</sup>, replaced with Honecker's doctrine of 'the unity of economic and social policy'. It offered generous social security in exchange for obedience. East Germany's economy and 'was again more closely oriented along the [lines of the] Soviet model and its centralistic structures and instruments' (Steiner 2010b, 141). Structural problems remained unresolved, and the state grew increasingly mired in debt (Steiner 2010b, 161 ff.; Zatlin 2007, 66 ff.). The party's control over scientists precluded a search for solutions.

After these two dramatic years, which brought the My Lai massacre and Vietnam Congress; the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr (1929–68); the Prague Spring and its suppression; and the attempted assassination of student leader Rudi Dutschke (1940–79), it did not take long for the 'Marx-boom' to fade in West Germany too. By the time of the resurgence of interest, in around 2008, the division of Germany – and the peculiar phenomenon of Marxism and Marx scholarship in East Germany – had long been consigned to history. Rediscovery of earlier discussion of *Capital* spotlighted mainly the West German contributions. Next, I present and compare the work conditions of scholars reading Marx in the two Germanies.

## 1.5. Separation by the Berlin Wall but not through language barriers

"I have noticed," said Mr. K., "that we put many people off our teaching because we have an answer to everything. Could we not, in the interests of propaganda, draw up a list of questions that appear to us completely unsolved?" (Brecht 2001 [1959], 18)

One of the aims behind this dissertation is to contribute to a bigger project of demonstrating that a critical and nuanced picture of Marx, his *Capital* especially, has been offered not only by such 'Western' scholars as Gramsci, Althusser, or Haug but also by 'Eastern' scholars such as Behrens, Ruben, Ilyenkoy, Zelený, Wolfgang Jahn (1922–2001), or Walter Tuchscheerer (1929–67). However, in contemporary mainstream, somewhat Euro-centric Anglophone reception of Marx and Marxism, the Eastern authors have still not received as much attention as they deserve. This is a remarkable gap, given that probably nowhere has there been a

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<sup>17</sup> See Grieder 1998, 13.



contribution of resources and expertise in the field of 'Marxology' as large as in the GDR.

This ignorance is not, however, without its reasons. Even genuinely valuable East German scholarly enquiry into Marx's ideas is bundled with some Marxist-Leninist jargon. Readers today rarely find these texts attractive. I have aimed to show that going through the heap of Marxist-Leninist literature is worth the effort, even if only for the simple reason that certain ideas later presented as if new were thoroughly discussed in the GDR decades earlier.

Conditions for research into the thinking of Marx and Engels varied greatly on both sides of the Berlin Wall. In the next section, I present and compare the working conditions of scholars reading Marx in East and West Germany.

### 1.5.1. Marx scholars' work conditions in the two German states

In Mezhuev's words: '[t]o be a creative, thinking Marxist, in a state at the head of which were Marxists, was the most dangerous thing of all' (Mezhuev in Levant 2008, cited after Levant 2014, 4). Being a thinking Marxist was not much easier in the GDR than in the Soviet Union. Since the former's establishment, in 1949, the party's control over science exacerbated the brain drain to West Germany. Many scholars who took Marx seriously left before 1961's erection of the Berlin Wall, most famously Leo Kofler (1907–95) and Bloch. Backhaus left because he was not allowed access to a university education. Two other well-regarded readers of Marx of that generation, Dutschke and Bernd Rabehl, left for the same reason. Both later became SDS leaders in the West. John Connelly (1997, 350) estimates that 'the open border made the East German intelligentsia the sole intelligentsia in Europe which had chosen socialism in full consciousness of the realities of East and West'.

It was not only the brain drain that hampered East German academia. Many older academics in the GDR lost their academic appointments in the process of de-Nazification, so many who started to work as philosophy (and other) professors soon after the Second World War had no background in their purported discipline. Many new professors of philosophy were former anti-Fascist resistance fighters and received only two years' training in Marxist-Leninist philosophy (see, for example, Maffei 2007, 53).

The communist parties of Eastern Europe not only instrumentalised Marx's writings to serve their particular power interests but also channelled finances to the immense undertaking of deciphering Marx's terrible handwriting and then editing and publishing the voluminous body of work that Marx and Engels had left behind. *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, or MECW (1975–2004); *Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe*, or MEGA<sup>1</sup> (1927–35) and MEGA<sup>2</sup> (1975–); and *Marx Engels Werke*, MEW (1956–68), all were Soviet and East German projects. The last one on this list was based on *Marks-Engel's Sočinenija* (1955–66), the collected works of Marx and Engels in Russian. These projects made Marx's writings more readily available for nearly every literate person, not only in the blocs called the First World and Second World but also in many developing countries. It might be easy to forget how vastly different the global reception of Marx's works would look without these massive projects.

This point is not an insignificant one with regard to my object of study, the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*. Until 1968, very few editions of Marx's writings had been published in West Germany, and West German researchers and students were largely dependent on MEW.

While considerable cultural and institutional differences formed a gulf between the two academic worlds of Germany, no language barrier separated the two. Therefore, Germany offers an especially interesting case for examining their influence flows and differences/contradictions, including the bloc-internal tensions between Marxist scholars during the Cold War.

Conditions for serious research into the thinking of Marx and Engels, or for work applying their ideas, varied greatly on both sides of the Berlin Wall. Eastern Marxist researchers had sufficient (intellectual) means of production at their disposal: funding; research institutes, among them institutes of Marxism-Leninism, the institutes of philosophy and political economy within the Academy of Sciences, and the research institute of the state's planning commission (Das Ökonomische Forschungsinstitut der Staatlichen Plankommission, ÖFI); and literature, including the original manuscripts from Marx and Engels. Numerous journals and publishers printed reports on research into Marx and Marxist theory. In West Germany, publishers close to the Communist Party – *Marxistische Blätter*, since 1963, and Pahl-Rugenstein Verlag (more familiarly Pahl-Rubelschein) – distributed these writings to audiences in the West.

Developments in the 1960s saw many East German scholars placed on the payroll of the well-resourced MEGA research groups. In the lead-up to the centenary of Marx's *Capital*, 14th September 1967, *Neues Deutschland* reported that the Institute of Marxism Leninism of the Central Committee of The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and Institute of Marxism Leninism of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of East Germany (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED) have started to prepare a historical-critical Marx-Engels edition, that is, the second MEGA.<sup>18</sup> The work on *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* gave new impetus to serious scholarship on Marx after the lengthy 'lost years' of Stalinism.

The MEGA research groups had their start at the universities of Leipzig, Halle, Erfurt/Mühlhausen, Jena, and East Berlin. Some of these institutions commenced regular publishing of research related to the MEGA effort. Martin-Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg published its *Arbeitsblätter zur Marx-Engels-Forschung*, beginning in 1976. The Marx-Engels Department of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the Central Committee of the ruling party, the SED (Marx-Engels-Abteilung im Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED), started publishing *Beiträge zur Marx-Engels Forschung* in 1977. Since 1978, *Marx-Engels Jahrbuch* was printed as an official publication of the Marxism-Leninism institutes of the CPSU and SED (Instituten für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der KPdSU und der SED). The respective publication of the Karl Marx University of Leipzig, *Marx-Engels-Forschungsberichte*, began to appear in 1981.

Simultaneously, East German scholars were, in the terms of their discipline, tied to these means of production. The party intervened in scientific discussions especially with regard to Marx, whose ideas it claimed to consider sacrosanct. The relations of intellectual production in the field of Marxist theory were, if not feudal or 'Asiatic', state monopolistic.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, the state did hire dozens of scholars of Marx, who had the luxury of professionally engaging with Marx's texts – even the unpublished manuscripts. It was easy for these educated people to discover inconsistencies between the original work and its official interpretation, as East German political economist Georg Quaas (2005) has explained.

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<sup>18</sup> 'Gesamtausgabe der Werke von Marx und Engels', in *Neues Deutschland* on 14 September 1967a, 1.

<sup>19</sup> On the concept of state monopolistic socialism, see Behrens (1992).

In the West, researchers enjoyed ‘dual freedom’ as academic wage labourers. They were free to engage with Marx’s ideas critically, but at the same time they were free from the (intellectual) means of production.<sup>20</sup> One’s chances of selling one’s labour power, as a Marxist researcher, were minimal. Opportunities to engage professionally with Marxist theory were restricted principally to the few departments of humanities and social sciences in West Berlin, Marburg, Frankfurt am Main, Tübingen, and Hannover (see Deppe 2015, 66).

Before 1968, West Germany was home to very few professors of social sciences with interest and expertise in Marx. In a stark contrast against the pompous organisational structures of East Germany, the increased interest in Marx’s writings in West Germany was dependent mainly on the initiative of students and early-career scholars in the years of the emerging student movement. *Das Argument*, which had begun publication in 1959, soon transformed into an academic Marxist journal specifically. The theoretical organ of the SDS, *neue kritik* started to appear in 1960, with *Sozialistische Politik* (SoPo) following in 1969. Finally, Otto-Suhr-Institute published *Internationale Wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, or IWK, from 1965, and PROKLA appeared on the scene in 1971.<sup>21</sup> Notwithstanding the scanty institutional support, the number of titles on Marx and Marxist theory that several academic publishers (among them Europäische Verlagsanstalt, Rowohlt, Fischer, and especially Suhrkamp) printed in those years is quite impressive.

In this light, the discussion next turns to the most important West German approaches to Marx, alongside the associated attitudes to the GDR, academic research there, and Marxism-Leninism.

### 1.5.2. West German approaches to Marx’s *Capital* and the GDR

Whereas the object of my study, the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* approach, was extremely critical of Soviet state socialism and its official ideology of Marxism-Leninism, at

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<sup>20</sup> Hoff, Wolf, Alexis Petrioli, and Ingo Stützle (2006a, 29) characterised the dual freedom of academic engagement with Marx in contemporary Germany a bit differently: on one hand scholars are free of the binary ideological constraints of the Cold War, and on the other they are free of any political praxis (ibid.).

<sup>21</sup> A thorough study of the history of *Das Argument* and PROKLA has been carried out (see Bebnowski 2021).

the other end of the spectrum was a communist-funded think tank, the Institute for Marxist Studies and Research (Institut für Marxistische Studien und Forschungen, IMSF). It was founded once the legislature had suspended its ban on the communist parties that had abolished the Communist Party of Germany (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, KPD), in 1956, and after the German Communist Party (Deutsche Kommunistische Partei, DKP) was established, in 1968. The party funded this institute, which co-operated closely with East German research institutions. Between 1970 and 1977, the IMSF published *Marxismus Digest. Theoretische Beiträge aus marxistischen und antiimperialistischen Zeitschriften*, which reviewed and summarised discussion of Marxist theory globally. The IMSF began publishing its annual compilation *IMSF-Jahrbuch* in 1978.

Several scholars belonging to the Marburg school, based at the Philipps University of Marburg, co-operated with the IMSF and sympathised with the DKP. That school's leading figure, Wolfgang Abendroth (1906–85), who held the title 'Wissenschaftliche Politik' (Professor of Scientific Politics) from 1950 onward, had for a brief while worked as a professor in the zone of Soviet occupation but had to flee on account of his membership in the Social Democratic Party of Germany (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, SPD) (Peter 2019 [2014], 31). Abendroth invited Adorno's young assistant Jürgen Habermas to complete his habilitation thesis *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962, published in English in 1989 as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*) in Marburg – Habermas was considered 'too left-wing' (Peter 2019 [2014], 37) or 'too Marxist' (Jeffries 2017, 299) in Frankfurt.<sup>22</sup>

Another major figure of the Marburg school was Werner Hofmann (1922–69). He was especially interested in the Soviet Union, on which he adopted 'a differentiated view ... shorn of clichés fixated on totalitarianism theory or terror', explains Lothar Peter (2019 [2014], 45). Hofmann published a study of the employment regime of the Soviet Union (*Die Arbeitsverfassung der Sowjetunion*, 1956) and of the sociology of the East–West conflict (*Stalinismus und Antikommunismus: Zur Soziologie des Ost-West-Konflikts*, 1967), in which, in the words of Peter (2019 [2014], 48), he examined the Soviet system as '*Erziehungsdiktatur*, a dictatorial form of government seeking to raise the material and cultural level of the society it rules'. Peter stated that, 'in retrospect', the latter book may 'be criticised for underestimating the

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<sup>22</sup> The book is dedicated 'To Wolfgang Abendroth in gratitude'.

extent of terror and repression under Stalinism’, which it may have done partly because of a lack of accessible sources (ibid.).

Other Marburgians – including Frank Deppe, Karl Hermann Tjaden (1935–2021), Georg Fülberth, Peter Römer, and Reinhard Kühnl (1936–2014) – contributed to a comparative project examining the social systems of the two German states (Jung et al. 1971). In Peter’s estimation (2019 [2014], 84), the pieces in the book implied ‘a fundamentally positive attitude’ of the authors ‘towards the GDR as an alternative to capitalism’, though such attitudes were not shared by all protagonists of the Marburg school.

Haug’s well-established journal *Das Argument* adopted an ‘anti-anticommunist’ stance. It expressed aims of functioning as a platform for academic Marxism in its numerous forms. Accordingly, it welcomed contributions from East German and Western communist authors, insofar as they were ready to engage in fact-based critical discussion, as Haug (2010, 41) later explained. The anti-authoritarian Dutschke therefore called the latter professor ‘SED-W [sic] Haug’, referring to the Socialist Unity Party of West Berlin.<sup>23</sup> Haug viewed an ‘anti-communist’ stance, in contrast, as serving the totalitarian logic of the Cold War, under which anyone willing to engage in discussion with the other party was labelled outright as an opponent (Haug 2010, 41). At the same time, Haug increasingly criticised what he characterised as regression of Marxism-Leninism (and the same tendency in the Marburg school) into ‘religious and other forms of the ideological’ (Haug 1983, 20; quoted and translation from Peter 2019 [2014], 120).

In the 1980s, Haug’s Project Ideology-Theory (or *Projekt Ideologie-Theorie*), PIT, based at the Freie Universität in West Berlin, analysed Marxism-Leninism through the lens of its distinctive approach to Marxist theory of ideology (see Rehmann 2013, 241 ff.). In the words of Rehmann (2013, 71), the Marxist-Leninist reinterpretation of the concept of ideology as neutral, which enabled its conception of Marxism as the ideology of the proletariat, was a ‘tectonic shift’ and ‘one of the “ideological” preconditions of Stalinism’.

In the lexicon of Marx and Engels, ideology is inseparable from all forms of class societies. It refers to the ideological institutions, or ‘forms of praxis’, inherent to class society through which the prevailing relations of dominance are justified and

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<sup>23</sup> SEW was a branch of the ruling party of the GDR (SED) in West Berlin.

legitimised as serving the ‘general interest’. Only the Marxist-Leninist reinterpretation of the concept of ideology enabled speaking of ‘proletarian ideology’. Ideology was not understood as socialisation from above, characteristic of class societies – i.e., as what it was for Marx and Engels. It was taken simply as a ‘group-specific world-view’ (Koivisto and Pietilä 1996, 43). Of course, Stalinist state philosophy defined its “proletarian ideology” from the standpoint of the Politburo of the “party of the working class” and it prosecuted ‘every contradiction as “deviation”’ (Rehmann 2013, 72). Referring to Uwe-Jens Heuer’s work from 2006, Rehmann (2013, 72) has explained that the party *nomenklatura* in Marxism-Leninism automatically possessed ‘the correct class-consciousness’. Even though the repression exercised by the state ‘became less terroristic’ with post-Stalinist administrative state socialism, the party elite was still protected by ‘repressive apparatuses, in particular the Stasi, self-defined as the ‘shield and sword of the party’ (ibid.).

PIT, however, approached ideology not as a swindle or as ‘false consciousness’ but as terrain of ‘contested practices or discourses’ (Koivisto and Pietilä 1996, 50). As Marx explained, in different ‘ideological forms ... men become conscious of’ the class ‘conflict and fight it out’ (see MECW 29, 263). In the words of Otto Kyyrönen (2020, 75), ideology, in the view of PIT, does not merely ‘neutralise, pacify, and legitimize’; it also serves ‘as the terrain on which humans become conscious of their own activities, organise themselves, and struggle against other groups in order to change the “structure”’.

Rehmann (2013, 72) and other scholars cohering around PIT typically acknowledge that the dominance of the party elite in the Soviet bloc countries was not absolute. I have employed PIT’s way of approaching the entire ‘administrative command system’ (*Befehlsadministrativer Sozialismus*) phenomenon (see Catone 1995), or ‘state monopolistic socialism’ (Behrens 1992), in the GDR as a contradiction-rife one, not as a harmonious or unitary whole. Hence, the bitter disputes over such ‘scholastic’ matters as the fundamental question of philosophy (discussed in Subsection 1.6.) may be understood as conflicts on ideological terrain.

When appearing in contrast against these other approaches, the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* seemed at first to be exclusively critical of, or even hostile toward, all Marxism of the GDR. This tendency in readings of Marx has branded itself as something opposed to ‘worldview Marxism’ (*Weltanschauungsmarxismus*) (Heinrich 2012 [2004],

10). In doing so, it gave an appearance of not being willing to engage with the readings of Marx in the ‘other Germany’ of the past.

It initially seemed to me that Heinrich, Elbe, and others tried to cope with the embarrassing history of Marxism in the twentieth century by simply dismissing it outright as Marxism of the workers’ movement (*Arbeiterbewegungsmarxismus*), ‘traditional Marxism’, or ‘worldview Marxism’ (Heinrich 2012 [2004], 26). Though a fresh start is an intriguing idea, a historical and materialist approach, as Haug (2013, 36) reminds us, precludes attempts to ‘rise above history’, wash one’s hands, and play innocent. Haug has called the ‘Marx-immediacy’ that the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* hopes to reach by neglecting the history of Marxism imaginary (2013, 139; see also Krätke 2017, 77). Various traditions of Marxism have sedimented into our culture and shape our ‘unprejudiced’ readings of him. A reader of Marx always adheres to one or another tradition of reading Marx, whether conscious of it or not (Haug 2013, 139). Therefore, Haug understood the efforts at ignoring all ‘traditional Marxism’ as ‘commodity-aesthetical’ (see Haug 1980) enterprises: pitching a ‘new’ product – old ideas branded as new. But a serious and sympathetic reader of Marx must confront the embarrassing chapters in the history of Marxism, must, as Haug stresses, be willing to engage in critical self-reflection, involving what Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) termed ‘saving critique’ (*rettende Kritik*) (Haug 2013, 207).

A closer look at the history of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* complicated the once-simple picture I had. As Publication III demonstrates in detail, Backhaus, who was born and raised in the GDR, discussed East German and Soviet literature in his essays, and he not only criticised Adorno’s excessively harsh criticism of all Soviet Marxist literature but also drew the attention of his elder colleague Fetscher to the fact that several East German or Soviet contributions dealing with Marx’s critique of political economy went beyond dogmatic presentations of Marxism-Leninism.

## 1.6. The *Neue Marx-Lektüre* and the GDR

‘Every genuine religious person is a heretic and therefore a revolutionist.’ (George Bernard Shaw 1951 [1903], 689)

This section delves into interaction between scholars in the proximity of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* and their East German colleagues. I discuss three ‘orthodox heretics’,



creative readers of *Capital* Behrens, Ilyenkov, and Ruben; the MEGA editors; and a book series targeted against ‘bourgeois Marxologists’. The interaction between these Eastern and Western scholars features both disagreements and ‘positive’ influences. My treatment is not meant to be an exhaustive presentation of all such connections; rather, I have selected a few cases to illustrate the presence of two, very different academic realities in Germany at the time of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*’s emergence.

### 1.6.1. Fetscher and Behrens: A ‘marginal Marxist from Leipzig’

Friedrich ‘Fritz’ Behrens was born in 1909 and qualified as a mechanical engineer before studying political economy and statistics. Before the GDR’s establishment, he was a member of the SPD and later of the KPD. In the GDR, he functioned as a leader of the Institute of Statistics (Zentralverwaltung für Statistik der DDR), as a deputy head of the Institute for Economics at the Academy of Sciences (Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin: Institut für Wirtschaftswissenschaften), won the national price of the GDR, and he repeatedly fell from grace before he was finally forced to retire prematurely in 1968 (see Caldwell 2000; 2003; Steiner 1999).

What has been termed the ‘revisionism debate’ (see Krause 1996; 1998, 121 ff.; Kuczynski 2015, 37) took place in 1957, at the very beginning of the thaw era in the GDR. More recently, Düppe (2021) called this episode a ‘scientific show debate’. The representatives of the ruling party within the Institute of Economics at the GDR Academy of Sciences did not want to directly reject a book manuscript that had been written by Behrens as deputy head of the institute and his colleague Arne Benary (1929–71), so the party and the Stasi jointly staged a show debate that was seemingly based on factual argumentation regarding the contents of the book. In effect, this was purely an exercise in censorship and bringing Behrens and Benary back into line (Düppe 2021, 3).

The central message of Benary and Behrens (1957, 125) was that

[t]he view that the state can do everything, and that every affair, even the most private, has to be managed and controlled by the state, is not socialist, but ‘Prussian’, that is Junker-monopolistic. Socialist, that is, Marxist-Leninist, is the view

of the withering away of the state as soon as the socialist relations of production solidify. (Behrens 1957, 125; English translation from Düppe 2021, 6)

Düppe (2021, 8) explains that initially the ‘reformist’ ideas presented by the two authors, based on Marx’s insight connected with such central matters as the withering away of the state, still found wide support among their colleagues. The longer the debate wore on, though, the less courage those colleagues had to defend Behrens and Benary, let alone realistic prospects of successfully doing so. The young Benary was sent ‘to industry’, notwithstanding the promising start of his academic career (Düppe 2021, 14). Behrens, meanwhile, was removed from his position as deputy head of the Institute of Economics within the Academy of Sciences and made the leader of a small labour-productivity group.<sup>24</sup> He would have problems in finding a publishing outlet until finally turning his back on his earlier views (Behrens 1961; Düppe 2021, 16).

In Düppe’s words (2021, 15), the show debate created a warning example to political economists for the following decades: ‘Serve your time’ and ‘be careful ... was the new professional ethos of East German economists.’

By 1963, most of the two’s proposed economic reforms (except the steps toward the state withering away) had ended up being adopted as fundamentals of the NÖS reform programme. Still, Behrens and Benary neither received any credit for them nor were given any role in the reforms’ execution (Krause 1996, 21–2; 1998, 150).

Ten years after the ‘science show debate’, Behrens, who had connections with West German student organisations, was invited to the conference being held in Frankfurt for the centenary of *Capital* (Steiner 1999, 27; 2010a, 36). The ruling party did not want to let Behrens travel, but he claimed that he had already sent his paper to be printed in *Gewerkschaftliche Monatsheften*, a publication of the trade-union movement (Seickert 1999, 38). The party therefore concluded that there was no other option than granting a travel permit, but it sent a delegation of trusted economists to escort him (ibid.). Three of them were among the most powerful political economists of the country: Reinhold, the director of the IFG; Klaus

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<sup>24</sup> Yakov Kronrod (1912–84) had a parallel destiny at the Soviet Academy of Sciences. After issuing a reminder that following the principles of socialism entails considering the immediate producers, not the state, the owners of the means of production, he was removed from his position as the head of the Political Economy of Socialism Section and assigned to an insignificant one as a ‘senior researcher’ (Feygin 2019, 120–1).

Steinitz, representing the ÖFI; and Karl Bichtler, a Stasi informant who had opposed Behrens and Benary in the revisionism debate (Düppe 2021, 3) and was at the time working as Managing Director of the Department of Political Economy of Socialism at the Academy of Sciences. Their two ‘assistants’ did not present papers.<sup>25</sup>

The East German delegation had no option but to listen as Behrens, in his talk – ‘a different version of a speech that had been agreed with the institute’ (Düppe 2021, 17) – took his country’s political economy of socialism to task for being underdeveloped. He did not suggest that the economists of the GDR had shown incompetence. The reason, he argued, was that the object of research of this science, socialist economy, itself was underdeveloped (Behrens 1968, 293). The Bolsheviks had tried to introduce highly advanced relations of production into a country whose forces of production were highly immature (*ibid.*, 289–9). On account of the absence of the material preconditions for building socialism, the Bolsheviks needed to entrust the power to a repressive state apparatus. The objective preconditions that Marx suggested to be required for forming a democratic economy characterised by solidarity were utterly absent. The situation only grew worse, in that the revolution unexpectedly was isolated to one country only, and then the breakthrough of Soviet-type socialism after the Second World War was confined to countries without any developed bourgeois democracy or where Fascism had destroyed the democratic structures (*ibid.*, 292). This bureaucratic, centralist mode of production was ‘the economic base’ for dogmatism in political economy (Behrens 1999, 138).

In an explanation set up as an analogy to Marx’s understanding of the historical development of bourgeois political economy, Behrens (1968, 295) stated that, in tandem with the economic reforms, the country’s political economy of socialism had taken steps analogous to the early developments of bourgeois political economy. It had recently overcome mercantilism and cameralism and was about to enter a phase akin to physiocracy, he argued. As the forces of production matured, said political economy was approaching its classical phase and one day perhaps even could reach the final stage articulated in the critique (see MECW 35, 13 ff.).

If presenting this parallel did not annoy the rest of the East German delegation enough, Behrens’s recommendation of a Yugoslavian-style model of ‘delegated

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<sup>25</sup> Sender Freies Berlin’s piece ‘Marx-Konferenz in Frankfurt’, of 18 September 1967.

group ownership', which could serve as a fundament of socialist democracy (ibid., 297), did. In the general discussion, Reinhold underscored from his position within the SED apparatus that he did not agree with everything that Behrens had said (Euchner and Schmidt 1968, 302). He rejected the notion of the Yugoslavian model's applicability to the more industrially advanced GDR (ibid.).

The organiser of the conference was an important West German expert on Marx and Marxism, Fetscher. A professor of politics at Frankfurt's Goethe University, this social democrat born in 1922 had served in the Wehrmacht as an officer candidate on the eastern front in World War II (Fetscher 1995, 55 ff.), after which he had studied, among other things, medicine and philosophy (Fetscher 1995, 303 ff.). As the chief editor of *Marxismusstudien*, which the Research Commission of the Evangelical Academies published from 1954 onward, Fetscher was a pioneering scholar of Marx and Marxism in West Germany. In his own words, Fetscher 'kept a critical distance to the GDR Marxism' (Stepina 2011, 34).<sup>26</sup> He aimed to trace the developments from 'Marx's critical and humanist thought' up to the 'reified ideology of Soviet Marxism in the Stalin era' (Fetscher 1971 [1967], ix).

The contributors to the journal, which Fetscher later described as 'the first serious documentation on Marx and Marxism in West Germany' (Anderson 1998, 12), included such persons as Helmut Gollwitzer (1908–93), who was not only a professor of theology but also a socialist and pacifist, and a friend of Dutschke. Gollwitzer emphasised that, whereas the pseudo-religious Marxism-Leninism rejected religion outright, Marx's attitude toward religion had been much more sophisticated (see Gollwitzer 1965; Zademach 1998). For Marx, religion was, among other things, 'the heart of a heartless world' (MECW 3, 175).

In the words of slightly younger philosopher Nicholas Lobkowitz (1931–2019), the contributors to *Marxismusstudien* largely shared a belief that, while 'original Marxism contained a number of valuable clues for the understanding of human history', an abyss separated 'Marx from his contemporary followers' (Lobkowitz 1963, 137). Lobkowitz was convinced of 'the impossibility of reaching any kind of spiritual agreement with orthodox Communists' (ibid.). Official Marxist-Leninist organs agreed that reaching any kind of agreement was impossible. This becomes evident to anyone acquainted with the East German industry of condemning

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<sup>26</sup> Translation mine.

‘bourgeois Marxology’'s supposed ‘Marxism-critique’ (see, for instance, Belkina 1975, 92).

Discussion between the two camps was, indeed, very difficult. In 1966, a conference entitled ‘Marx and the Western World’, held at Lobkowitz’s home institution, the University of Notre Dame, in the USA, brought together not only such eminent Western scholars as Fetscher, Maximilien Rubel (1905–96), and Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) but also philosophers from Eastern Europe, among them Gajo Petrovič (1927–93) and Karel Kosík (1926–2003) (see Lobkowitz and Adams 1967). Another orthodox heretic, Ilyenkov too planned to attend, and his paper was included in the proceedings volume (Il’enkov 1967), though he was ultimately denied a travel permit because he had ‘planned to speak about the alienation between people in socialist society’ (Maidansky and Oittinen 2015, 9).

If the image of Marx was glorified in the East, it was vilified in the West. In an explanation consistent with Adorno’s later remark that taking Marx seriously was a ‘cardinal sin’ (2018 [1997], 164) in those days, Fetscher stated that in the polarised atmosphere of pre-1968 West Germany

Marx was taboo ... During the Cold War some said it shouldn’t really be studied. I remember I had a friend in the East, in Leipzig, and I asked him to send me books. It was probably before the great divide. And he wrote me: ‘But you read it without being forced to do it. We have to do it, and we don’t like it.’ That’s always the consequence. If you are forced to read something then you are no longer interested in doing it. (Anderson 1998, 12)

Another friend from the East who sent books to Fetscher was Wolfgang Harich (1923–95). When interviewed by Clemens Stepina, Fetscher recalled that, after having met Harich at a book fair in Stuttgart in 1949 or 1950, Harich had, at his request, posted him those books by Lukács and Bloch that had appeared in East Germany (Stepina 2011, 33). At the time, Harich was a philosophy lecturer at Humboldt University and serving as the first editor-in-chief of *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*. Harich’s tenure was interrupted in 1957 by time in jail, where he remained until 1964, because of his leading role with a platform that promoted a model of democratic socialism and German reunification. As his colleague Alfred Kosing (1928–2020) opined in 2015, Harich was one more tragic figure who never was able to actualise his full potential as a Marxist theorist and avowed socialist in the difficult conditions of the GDR (Kosing 2015, 159).

The wall's erection in autumn 1961 prevented not just the drain of labour power (specialists in particular) from the GDR to the West but also such random encounters. The SED strictly controlled the opportunities of East Germans to travel to the West.

Given that Fetscher had supervised the writing of not just Reichelt's dissertation but also that of Moishe Postone (1942–2018), who in Anglophone academia today is among the most well-known representatives of the value-form approach (which has close connections with the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*), it is slightly surprising that the most important monograph on the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, Hoff's *Marx Worldwide*, mentions Fetscher merely as one of the 'few lone intellectuals who at least endeavored to ensure that interest in Marxian and Marxist theory was sustained' in the postwar West Germany (Hoff 2017 [2009], 27). Likewise, he is given only brief mention in Elbe's book about the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* (Elbe 2010 [2008], 70, 378).

Fetscher's student edition of Marx's writings was one of the first collections of the Marx and Engels writings ever published in West Germany. Its fourth part was devoted to political economy, and it included the first chapter of *Capital* from the 1867 first edition of the book. In the preface, Fetscher (1966, 11) explains that Backhaus had convinced him of the importance of this text that has since become central for the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* because it may, in the words of Heinrich (2009, 73), be considered 'the "missing link" between the "Grundrisse" and subsequent editions of "Capital"'.<sup>27</sup>

Backhaus had convinced Fetscher also of the importance of considering the scholarship on Marx and Marxist theory in East Germany (Fetscher 1966, 11). Fetscher cited East German economist Hans Wagner (1929–2012), who had explained self-critically that the political economy of capitalism did not yet have well-developed methodology. Fetscher saw such comments as evidence of the GDR's political economists apparently having overcome the dogmatism that had characterised their work, especially their textbooks, and that their work therefore merits full attention. He added that several young social scientists in Frankfurt,

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<sup>27</sup> Alongside this text, the 'Urtext' piece, which was published in East Germany in 1953, and the chapter that Marx originally intended to be the sixth section of the first volume of *Capital*, 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production', printed by Verlag Neue Kritik in West Germany in 1968, provided material for the new engagement with Marx's later works, also in West Germany. (See Marx 1968 [1933])

among them Schmidt, Backhaus, and Reichelt, were working on similar problems (ibid.).

Let us return to the conference held for the centenary of *Capital* at Frankfurt's Goethe University in autumn 1967, where Fetscher and Behrens spoke in person. I deal with this conference more thoroughly in Section 2.1, which addresses the results presented in Publication I. One might suppose that the talk by Behrens, which caused a scandal in East Germany and brought an end to Behrens's career, would have caught Fetscher's attention. But from reading an interview of Fetscher conducted decades later by Anderson (1998), one is left with an impression that Fetscher did not fully understand the importance of that talk. This is interesting because it is not every day that openly critical East German top economists visited West German universities. When interviewed, Fetscher explained that

[i]n 1967 we even had two East German people, one a party representative, Otto Reinhold, and the other a more or less marginal Marxist from Leipzig University. The debate was quite funny because they had a very strong critical debate with Ernest Mandel. I think it was the only occasion when Frankfurt School people, Trotskyists, East Germans (doctrinaire Stalinists), and French Marxists came together. ... I think the debate between Mandel and the East Germans, with their pro-Soviet position, was quite funny because it had something to do with the actual problem of what they call markets in socialist society. The East Germans said there is a kind of market relation between independent enterprises that are state owned. Then Mandel and others said either they are state owned, there is a collective property structure, and there is no market, or there is a market and there is no longer socialism. ... Can there be a market relation between enterprises which belong to the same owner – the society at large? So it was a quite funny theoretical debate, but in fact it had something to do with the lack of productivity of East Germany. The man from Leipzig made it clear that they had not succeeded in really developing the productivity of the country. (Anderson 1998, 6–7)

This 'man from Leipzig' is probably Behrens – definitely not marginal. Fetscher refers here to a debate between Mandel and the East Germans at the conference. In their discussion, Mandel challenged the East German contingent with five questions related to the fact that elements of commodity production still prevailed in the GDR: 1) Consumer goods were produced as commodities for the market in the GDR, but should we think of means of production as commodities too? 2) Do not some contradictions of commodity production, including permanent unemployment and excess production, still persist? 3) Did Marx not believe that fetishism, alienation, and ideologisation accompany commodity production? Do East Germans not suffer from these problems? 4) Marx envisioned a change in the

principle of distribution (for each according to that one's labour and, later on, for each according to that one's need) in the socialist mode of production, so should the principles of distribution not change in tandem with the development of productive forces? 5) Finally, should commodity production not start withering away? (Euchner and Schmidt 1968, 343–5)

Bichtler, from the East German Academy of Sciences, answered Mandel by asserting that certain market elements were still indispensable because the relative independence of enterprises that goes along with markets is central to a well-functioning economy (*ibid.*, 349). Mandel was not entirely satisfied with this answer and insisted that it is vital from a moral angle to overcome 'commodity–money relations' – in at least some branches of production – because generalised market relations encourage materialist and individualist behaviour (*ibid.*, 350). Steinitz, representing the GDR's state planning commission, defended the centrality of some market elements but agreed with Mandel about the importance of gradual decommodification over the long term (*ibid.*, 350–2).

Those West Germans who had acquainted themselves with the economic problems of East Germany, including Hofmann and Altvater, took part in the discussion. Hofmann, representing the Marburg school, stressed the differences between proper commodity production and the current model in the Eastern European countries, where enterprises were not free to set their prices. Therefore, market categories such as prices, profits, and interest differed substantially from the corresponding categories in the Western capitalist economies. Furthermore, the fetishisation in the former was caused not by market relations but, rather, by the bureaucratic structures. Alienation had appeared mainly between the bureaucratic elite and the people, Hofmann argued (*ibid.*, 352). Altvater, who had a year earlier published an analysis of the economic reforms in East Germany (Altvater 1966), agreed with Hofmann and the East Germans that the law of value (that I understand to be the mechanism whereby labour and capital are allocated to different branches of production through prices) differed qualitatively from the law of value in the West – and he agreed about its centrality for improving on the centralised, bureaucratic system of planning (Euchner and Schmidt 1968, 356).

Mandel addressed one question specifically to Behrens. The problems of a bureaucratic and centralised planned socialist economy were largely recognised. Behrens in his talk had praised the other end of the spectrum, the Yugoslavian-



style socialist group ownership coupled with a market economy. Mandel challenged Behrens thus: Did this other ‘extreme’ socialist market economy not have its problems too? After all, this model had already had several undesirable side effects in Yugoslavia (ibid., 345).

All these questions remained open, noted Fetscher, who concluded the session by expressing his gratitude that the atmosphere between the East and West Germans was so good (ibid., 358). When interviewed by Anderson (1998, 6), Fetscher recalled that he had ‘tried to be diplomatic’ because he ‘wished that we should continue to discuss and not just to shout at each other’. Furthermore, he retrospectively considered this effort to have succeeded (ibid.). The conference was important not only because it is considered to have proved crucial for the emergence of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* (see Hoff 2017 [2009], 80 and Elbe 2013; 2018, 307) but also because substantial face-to-face debate of such a nature was extremely rare in the Cold War years. It was not Fetscher alone who believed this to have been the only occasion on which members of the Frankfurt school and East Germans had come together. Steinitz agreed decades later that, as far as he knew as an East German delegate, this was a unique face-to-face discussion between East and West German scholars before the 1980s.<sup>28</sup> Would it ever have happened without Behrens’s manoeuvring?

While marking a beginning, with the emergence of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, the conference signalled an end too, that of Behrens’s career. Behrens’s paper appeared in *Gewerkschaftlichen Monatsheften* in December 1967, and *Marxistische Blätter* published Reinhold’s response in 1968 in its special issue for Marx’s 150th birthday (see Reinhold 1968). Of course, the disagreement was not resolved through solid argumentation. The same rules of play did not apply to the epigones of Marxism-Leninism and to scholarly readers of Marx. The work would continue quietly after Behrens, whose health was already anything but good, was forced to retire (Düppe 2021, 17; Kuczynski 2015, 45; Steiner 1999, 28). He spent the last 13 years of his life working on the history of political economy and on the question of what the nature of the Soviet-type economies truly is. How could this type of society be analysed – and criticised – in Marx’s terms? Was there something in Marx’s thought that led to the undemocratic and highly bureaucratic mode of governance in these countries? (Behrens 1992)

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<sup>28</sup> Personal communication with the author, 23.6.2017.

The career and work of Behrens exemplify both the possibilities and the difficulties bound up with any intellectually honest reading of Marx in the GDR. On one hand, there were few countries whose top economists displayed a thorough mastery of Marx's thinking and approached political economy in his terms, and this remains true today. At the same time, hardly any other government in the world would guard its own 'interpretation' of Marx as aggressively as the GDR's did. Behrens developed his ideas in dialogue with Western scholars: Adorno, Marcuse (see Behrens 1992, 46, 92), and many other colleagues. He was very well-versed with the insight offered by the neoclassical and other Western schools of economics (see Behrens 1981) and demonstrated serious engagement with the inevitable criticism of political economy of socialism. The fruits of his labours would have been immensely more beneficial to the GDR than endless deference to prevailing dogma, yet his case attests that the country's ruling party was not prepared to make full use of the great human resources at its disposal. It feared its own citizens too much. In the words of Boldyrev and Olessia Kirtchik (2016, 8),

the political authorities permanently hesitated between encouragement of the new social sciences and a fear of empirical knowledge about society contradicting the official dogma; between a desire to know and to control, and a fear that the new sciences with new epistemological standards would reveal the real weaknesses of the socialist system.

### 1.6.2. Backhaus and Ilyenkov: A Fichtean meets a Ricardian

Ilyenkov, who was born in 1924, had to interrupt his studies to fight in the Second World War as an artilleryman. He finished his studies in 1950, and four years later he presented 15 theses on the nature of philosophy with his colleague Valentin Korovikov (1924–2010) at Moscow State University (see Ilyenkov and Korovikov 2019).

For Ilyenkov and Korovikov (2019, 67, 74), philosophy was a 'science of scientific thinking' that arms for 'scientific knowledge with self-consciousness' (ibid., 75). Official ideology could not accept what followed from this conception of philosophy. 'The propositions formulated by philosophy, though they are abstracted from reality, ... are not laws of reality, but laws of thought' (ibid., 67). This contradicted the official, Marxist-Leninist megalomaniac definition of

dialectical logic as ‘the science of the most general laws of the development of nature, society and human thought’ (Bogomolov et al. 1975, 74).

For these two scholars, science rather than philosophy is the source of all positive knowledge related to thought, society, and nature, however detailed or general, as David Bakhurst (2019, 56) explained. For these young scholars, philosophy was not the ‘worldview of the proletariat’ but a method for approaching its specific object of research: ‘thought, or the apprehension of reality in or by thought’ (ibid., 56–7). As Bakhurst (2019, 61) noted, such a view was attractive to students but humiliating for the old guard of Soviet philosophy. Conducting philosophy in the manner recommended by their two younger colleagues would have required knowledge of the history of philosophy and of science, and it would have demanded a critical attitude to the classics. From the perspective of Ilyenkov and Korovikov, abstract schemata such as the transformation of quantity into quality – ‘philosophical twaddle’ in Ilyenkov’s view – were useless (ibid., 56, 61).

This time, Ilyenkov had a narrow escape from what Bakhurst called the old ‘zombies’ of Soviet philosophy (ibid., 65), the Marxist-Leninist philosophy professors of the Stalinist era. In the wake of Khrushchev’s secret speech in 1956, the sensation that Ilyenkov and Korovikov’s theses had caused became buried under a new, bigger scandal. Unlike Korovikov, who ‘became well-known in Russia as a journalist and international relations expert’ (Guseynov 2021, 388), Ilyenkov could continue his academic career at the philosophy institute of the Academy of Sciences. His career there was anything but easy. As discussed above, even though Khrushchev had denounced Stalin’s crimes, the Marxist-Leninist ideology was left nearly untouched. Consequently, those old philosophy professors maintained their positions, and they did not forget their animosity toward Ilyenkov (Bakhurst 2019, 65).

Ilyenkov’s first monograph, *Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx’s Capital* (1982, originally printed in Russian as *Dialektika abstraktnogo i konkretnogo v ‘Kapitale’ Marksa*, 1960), has to this day retained its standing as one of the most important works of philosophical enquiry into Marx’s method in *Capital*. Ilyenkov approached Marx (as well as his predecessor Ricardo) as an heir to the philosophy of substance by Baruch Spinoza (1632–77), as contrasted against the empiricist method of one of the fathers of political economy, John Locke (1632–1704).

The starting point of Marx's method, which Ilyenkov described as an ascent from the abstract to the concrete, was not an abstract universal based on empirical generalisation. It was a concrete universal not necessarily having any characteristics in common with those particulars that may be genetically deduced from it. In the field of political economy, this universal substance was the substance of all wealth, labour performed to produce commodities, which had first been discovered by William Petty (1623–87), Ilyenkov (1982 [1960], 181) explained. Whereas empiricism proceeds from the concrete and advances to successively 'thinner' abstractions, Marx began with a universal principle of a concrete whole and reconstructed his object of research by deducing its general characteristics from this genetic principle, from the substance, which was social labour (ibid., 183). This book would later become significant for the emergence of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, as an exemplary case of a 'pre-monetary' interpretation of Marx's theory of value.

Ilyenkov's most original contribution to Soviet philosophy was undoubtedly his conception of the 'ideal' (Ilyenkov 2014). For Ilyenkov with his polemics against positivists in Soviet psychology and pedagogy, those investigating neurological processes that occur within an individual's head were searching for human thought in the wrong place. The positivists defined the ideal as something that exists 'in the head of an individual' while everything else belongs 'under the rubric of the 'material'' (ibid., 31). Ilyenkov considered this a false dichotomy leading to an impasse. In Ilyenkov's materialist account, the ideal, or 'all historically formed and socially legitimised human representations of the actual world' (Ilyenkov 2014, 31; emphasis in original), is embodied in artefacts and must be realised in cultural practices involving those artefacts. The sphere of the ideal (comprising linguistic meanings, forms of conduct, works of art, and institutions such as law or money) exists outside any individual, in the cultural artefacts themselves (such as a spoon, shirt, chair, statue, book, or coin), and an individual encounters the ideal as no less objective and vital than those objects in the physical world. To be able to think, one must learn cultural practices in which the ideal is realised (eating with a spoon, wearing a shirt, sitting on a chair, feeling patriotic while viewing a statue, visiting other realities by reading a book, and regarding a coin as something apart from a lump of metal). For him, ideality was 'that very peculiar and strictly established relationship between at least two material objects (things, processes, events, states), within which one material object, while remaining itself, performs the role of a representative of ... the universal nature of this other object' (Ilyenkov 2014, 32).

Ilyenkov's conception of the ideal is based on a generalisation of Marx's analysis of the value-form, termed an 'ideal' form by Marx (MECW 35, 105). Not 'an atom of matter enters into' the composition of economic value (*ibid.*, 57). The value exists only in the material processes of an economy. It exists outside human consciousness and is independent thereof (Ilyenkov 2014, 40). It is nothing palpable, and at the same time we encounter it as something no less objective than physical objects. The consequences of fluctuations of market prices, for example, are often just as catastrophic to us as the consequences of gravity, as 'a house falls about our ears' (MECW 35, 86).

Building on Marx's analysis of the value-form, in which Marx explains how the (ideal) value of a commodity only finds its expression in the (material) body of another commodity, Ilyenkov explained the whole sphere of the ideal. The sphere of the ideal, which an individual encounters as objective, external reality, includes

all the common moral norms regulating people's daily life-activity, as well as the legal precepts, the forms of state-political organisation of life, the ritually legitimised patterns of activity in all spheres, the 'rules' of life that must be obeyed by all, the strict regulation of the workplace, and so on and so forth, up to and including the grammatical and syntactical structures of speech and language and the logical norms of reasoning. (Ilyenkov 2014, 47–8)

From early childhood, an individual's activities must be adapted to this objectively existing sphere (*ibid.*, 48).

The ideal is not immaterial; it is embodied in artefacts, such as a 'book, a statue, an icon, a drawing, a gold coin, the royal crown, banner, a theatrical performance' (*ibid.*, 31). Yet the ideal has little to do with the material properties of those artefacts. It exists only in a process in which humans intelligently apply those artefacts in their daily activities. Therefore, Ilyenkov wrote: 'Ideality, according to Marx, is nothing but the form of social-human activity represented in the thing, reflecting objective reality. Or, conversely, the form of human activity, which reflects objective reality, represented as a thing, as an object' (*ibid.*, 58).

It is evident from this that Ilyenkov's explication of what Marx meant when he spoke of the 'ideal' as 'nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind and translated into forms of thought' (MECW 35, 19) has little in common with the Marxist-Leninist theory of reflection. Ilyenkov always maintained that the question pertaining to the relationship between the 'consciousness' and the

‘external world’ is posed incorrectly. He considered a path-paving boarding school run by Alexander Meshcheryakov (1923–74), which taught deaf-blind children to read and write, as providing empirical evidence in support of ‘the sociohistorical theory of mental development’ (Bakhurst 1991, 223). Ilyenkov regarded the school as a laboratory where a philosopher could observe the development of human capacity to think: previously considered hopeless cases, blind and deaf children there learned to think as they were taught everyday practical activities involving various artefacts, such as a spoon or trousers. The ideal form (a thing representing another thing) involved in these everyday activities formed the basis for learning a language. In this unprecedented experiment, the children learned to read and write after learning to think ‘practically’. In Ilyenkov’s opinion, this experiment proved that thinking is a product of cultural practices rather than a product of chemical reactions in the human brain.

The old philosophical establishment, which understood the world through the lens of the ‘fundamental question of philosophy’ (pertaining to the primacy of ‘matter’ over ‘ideas’) seems to have found Ilyenkov’s ‘praxis-Marxist’ ideas, true to Marx himself but also inspired by Spinoza, Hegel, and the cultural-historical school of Soviet psychology (including Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) and Alexander Luria (1902–77)), more threatening than the ideas of those young philosophers of the thaw era who found inspiration from, for instance, analytical philosophy. In the words of Mezhuiev, Ilyenkov’s colleague,

[t]o be a creative, thinking Marxist, in a state at the head of which were Marxists, was the most dangerous thing of all. This is where the state had its monopoly. It preferred to recognize its opponents, rather than rivals within the sphere of its own ideology. You could be a positivist, study the Vienna School. ... But to write a book about Marxism, that was dangerous. ... That is why all the talent began to leave. It was impossible to work here. One had to rehearse dogma, and nothing else. (Mezhuiev in Levant 2008, cited after Levant 2014, 4)

As ‘the atmosphere of Soviet society changed for the worse’ under the reign of Brezhnev, ‘Ilyenkov found himself in a situation of growing isolation’ (Levant and Oittinen 2014, ix–x). He committed suicide in 1979.

Ilyenkov influenced philosophers in both German states. In the GDR, two chapters that Ilyenkov had written, on the ‘dialectics of the abstract and the concrete’ and on the ‘logical and historical’, for a Soviet collective work appeared in German translation (Rosental 1974 [1971], 211 ff.). Helmut Seidel (1929–2007),

known for advancing a praxis-Marxist philosophical account in the GDR, had studied in Moscow under Ilyenkov, and it was an article in which Seidel, in the words of Quaas (2005), appealed to Marx just as Luther appealed to the Christian bible that began the ‘second praxis-debate’ on the pages of *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* in 1966. For Seidel, the Stalinist ‘fundamental question of philosophy’, whether consciousness vs. matter is ontologically primary, was not the starting point of philosophy: Marxist philosophy revolved instead around social labour, praxis (*sinnlich-gegenständliche Tätigkeit*) (Quaas 2005). A guardian of official ideology, Rugard Otto Gropp (1907–76) nailed down the ‘official’ meaning of Seidel adopting labour as the fundament of Marxist philosophy – he grounded everything ontologically in subject and took an idealist position on ontology (Gropp 1967, 1097). Explaining the rationale for such extreme politicisation of epistemology, Klaus-Dieter Eichler (2011, 58) stated that the official party line was that the objective alone was true: one had better be subservient to the party’s discipline.

Ilyenkov was like the other orthodox heretics I discuss in that he communicated with Frankfurtian readers of Marx. Ten years before Ilyenkov’s *Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx’s Capital* appeared in German translation in East Germany (see Ilyenkov 1979), an abbreviated translation of its third chapter appeared in West Germany in a collection of essays, *Beiträge zur Marxistischen Erkenntnistheorie* (1969), edited by Schmidt in 1969.<sup>29</sup> Riccardo Bellofiore and Tommaso Redolfi Riva (2018) deem Backhaus’s contribution to this same collection, ‘Zur Dialektik der Wertform’, to be ‘the founding document of what is now known as the Neue Marx-Lektüre’. It is not always acknowledged that half of the authors featured in this collection were from Eastern European countries: Zelený was from Czechoslovakia, György Márkus (1934–2016) from Hungary, and Ilyenkov from the Soviet Union.

In their later writings, both Backhaus and Ilyenkov – authors for whom Marx’s analysis of the value-form was crucially important – made remarks criticising the other’s reading of *Capital* and, more specifically, of Marx’s theory of value. Ilyenkov (2010, 30) called Backhaus’s interpretation of Marx’s value theory ‘Fichtean’, while Backhaus (1975, 143) considered Ilyenkov a prime example of

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<sup>29</sup> The chapter was translated not from the original Russian but from a French translation by Francis Cohen, which had appeared in a Soviet-philosophy-themed special issue of the journal *Recherches internationales à la lumière du marxisme* in 1962.

‘premonetary’ readings of Marx’s theory of value. He quoted Ilyenkov’s assertion that the ‘[t]heoretical definitions of value as such can only be obtained by considering ... direct exchange of one commodity for another commodity’ (Iljenkow 1969, 124; Ilyenkov 1982 [1960], 198; emphasis in the original).

The fault Backhaus (1975, 144) found in such a ‘premonetary’ conception was that it broke the internal connection between value and money. According to Backhaus, this was exactly what Marx had criticised Ricardo for. Were we to accept Ilyenkov’s argument, it would be impossible to differentiate between Marx and Ricardo, Backhaus argued, and he quoted Ilyenkov, stating that Ricardo and his predecessors

worked out the universal category of his science ... by considering *a very rare exception from the rule* – direct exchange of one commodity for another without money. Inasmuch as they did so, they obtained a really objective theoretical conception of value. (Iljenkow 1969, 124–5; Ilyenkov 1982 [1960], 199; emphasis in the original)

Not only the dialectical connection between the categories of commodity and money but also the critical intention behind Marx’s analysis of the value-form were lost in this statement, Backhaus (1975, 144) complained. Commodities had value before money and independently of it.

Backhaus considered the subjective and objective variants of the premonetary value theories two sides of a single coin. Per Backhaus (1975, 125), in the subjective variant of the premonetary theory of value, value is utility; in the Marxist variant – fundamentally equivalent to Left Ricardianism – value is labour. In the Ricardian premonetary value theory, value was derived from moneyless barter, taking place in an indeterminate past between a primitive hunter and someone who fished. Commodities were reduced to their labour value consciously, and money did not seem to play any role in this transparent process of the formation of value. Money was introduced to ease the technical difficulties of moneyless barter. The veil of money was placed over an essentially moneyless economy, in which all transactions and calculations could, in principle, take place in kind.

Backhaus (1975, 139) traced this ‘undialectical’ reading strategy back to a historical interpretation of Marx’s method, which was supposedly first proposed by Engels in his review of Marx’s Critique of Political Economy (1859). He held that Engels based his conception of Marx’s method on a misunderstanding. It reappeared 34



years later, in the supplement Engels wrote to the third volume of *Capital*, where he presented his idea of the validity of the law of value within simple commodity production. Backhaus (1975, 142–3) declared said simple commodity production to be a fiction and stated that Engels had absurdly misunderstood Marx’s concept of simple circulation.

I believe that Backhaus might have evaluated Ilyenkov’s reading of *Capital* differently if he had been acquainted with more than a single chapter from *Dialectics* (1982 [1960]) in which Ilyenkov thoroughly discusses methodological differences between Ricardo and Marx (see Ilyenkov 1982 [1960], 223 ff.). From the perspective of Ilyenkov’s genetic reading of the first chapter of *Capital*, accepting the individualistic assumptions of the Ricardian Robinsonades, with exchange between isolated men hunting and fishing, would make little sense.

Not only the Iron Curtain but also a language barrier hampered communication between the two authors. Backhaus, who did not read Russian, probably was unaware at the time that Ilyenkov all but neglected Marx’s analysis of the value-form; his conception of the ‘ideal’ most definitely belongs to one of the most profound elaborations on its philosophical content.

Ilyenkov read Backhaus’s text in the original, and he translated it into Russian, as former director of Ilyenkov’s archives A.G. Novokhat’ko has reported (see Ilyenkov 2010, 35).<sup>30</sup> Perhaps Ilyenkov was especially interested in this text, given the comment by Novokhat’ko’s successor Andrey Maidansky that Ilyenkov translated only a few selected works ‘throughout all his life, such as Hegel, Fichte, Lukács and Orwell (from the German edition of “Animal farm”’).<sup>31</sup>

In his essay ‘Psychology’, Ilyenkov (2010, 30) made a note calling Backhaus’s interpretation of value theory ‘Fichtean’. One way of making sense of this cryptic and brief comment is to argue that it refers to an idea central to Backhaus’s reading of *Capital*: individuals participate in creating the objective economic reality through their unconscious, non-reflected, individual actions in the market. Afterward, they encounter the objective economic reality, which is of their own making, as external and alien. It becomes an object of their conscious reflection. Similarly, the ‘not-I’

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<sup>30</sup> In personal e-mail on 22.6.2019, Maidansky, now responsible for the Ilyenkov archives, told me that the translation cannot be found in the archives anymore.

<sup>31</sup> Maidansky, personal e-mail to the author on 25.10.2013.

in Johann Gotlieb Fichte's (1762–1814) philosophy is a result of the non-reflected activity of 'the I'. Only later does it become an object of its conscious reflection (Fichte 1982 [1794–5]).<sup>32</sup>

This notion that Backhaus (1992, 57; 1997c [1984]) held of the 'objective-subjective constitution of social reality' can be traced back to Adorno's reading of Marx. In a summer 1962 lecture that has been preserved only in Backhaus's shorthand notes, Adorno (2018 [1997], 159–60) emphasised that, even though the exchange abstraction results from people's own actions in the market, they nevertheless encounter its results as coercive external reality.<sup>33</sup>

Adorno's ideas of systemic irrationality following from isolated rational calculations of individual market actors came close to Sohn-Rethel's theorisation of real abstraction related to commodity production. Sohn-Rethel characterised the 'mode of thinking' of commodity production as 'rational' but its social practice as 'irrational (out of man's control)' (Sohn-Rethel 1978 [1970], 133–4; see also Sohn-Rethel 2018). In contrast, the theory of 'primitive communal modes of production, as they preceded commodity production' was irrational, 'mythological and anthropomorphic', but their practice, the way in which they organised the allocation of social labour and its product, was relatively rational (*ibid.*, 133).

A related idea of the reified nature of social relations had already been at the heart of Horkheimer's essay 'Traditional and Critical Theory' (1937). The positivistic approach to the social sciences took societal facts as given. Thereby it failed to recognise the subjective element in the constitution of the objective social reality. Following Marx's critique of political economy, critical theory dealt with its object of research, society, as a product of social labour. Not just the object of social science was a product of social labour. Even though an 'individual perceives himself as receptive and passive in the act of perception', our social life-process has historically shaped our perceptions (Horkheimer 2002 [1937], 200).

Society was an active subject, 'even if a nonconscious one' (*ibid.*). In Horkheimer's account, society was a subject but 'only in an improper sense', because 'in the bourgeois economic mode the activity of society' was 'blind and concrete' whereas

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<sup>32</sup> I have analysed the implications of Backhaus's thesis more thoroughly in a manuscript submitted for the book *Ihyenkov: Cosmos and Praxis* (edited by Sascha Freyberg).

<sup>33</sup> These notes on the lecture 'Marx and the Basic Concepts of Sociological Theory' were published in German in 1997 (Backhaus 1997b) and in English in 2018 (Adorno 2018 [1997]).

the activity of individuals was ‘abstract and conscious’ (ibid.). We perceive the society as ‘comparable to nonhuman natural processes, to pure mechanisms, because cultural forms which are supported by war and oppression are not the creations of a unified, self-conscious will’ (ibid., 207–8).

Through the above-mentioned essay, Backhaus considered similar questions in the context of value theory. Value as a product of our own labour ‘counterposes itself to consciousness as something alien’ (Backhaus 1980 [1969], 104). The mode of being of value is simultaneously subjective and objective (ibid., 112).

One way of making sense of Ilyenkov’s comment, it seems to me, is to suggest that Backhaus, in his reading of Marx’s critique of political economy, reasoned along the same lines as Fichte in his own philosophy. As Ilyenkov noted elsewhere (2008 [1974], 121), ‘[w]hat had appeared to Kant as the object or “thing-in-itself” (object of the concept) was in fact [for Fichte] the product of the unconscious, unreflecting activity of the I’. The task of philosophy was ‘consciously reproducing’ what the I ‘had produced earlier unconsciously, without giving itself a clear account of what it was doing’ (ibid., 122; emphasis in original). We may approach political economy analogously as an attempt to reflect on the reified results of our own actions. In Marx’s words, ‘whenever, by an exchange, we equate as values our different products we also equate, as human labour, the different kinds of labour expended upon them. We are not aware of this, nevertheless we do it’ (MECW 35, 84–5). Later, in political economy we ‘try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products’ (ibid., 85).

While the two philosophers had decidedly different readings of *Capital* and differed too in their interpretations of Marx’s theory of value, it is scarcely surprising that Ilyenkov and Backhaus were interested in each other’s writings. Marx’s analysis of the value-form is central for both authors, and both approached *Capital* philosophically.

The restricted contact between Soviet and Western European scholars notwithstanding and even though Backhaus could be considered a rather marginal West German author, his writings found resonance in Moscow. This was not limited to Ilyenkov translating Backhaus’s above-mentioned essay. Said essay was part of the course material there: it was used as a source in a seminar by Schkredov, who concurred with Backhaus that the first part of the first volume of *Capital* dealt

not with simple commodity production but with simple circulation (Hecker 1998, 89; Schkredow 1987, 235 ff.). Against Nikolai Chessin, Schkredov defended a position that Engels was misguided in describing the beginning of *Capital* as a presentation of simple commodity production (see ‘Supplement to *Capital*, Volume Three’, in MECW 37, 887). Schkredov agreed with Backhaus with his claim that Marx’s point of departure was simple circulation and not simple commodity production (see Chepurenko 2022; Hecker 2018, 201).

Moreover, it is commonly acknowledged that Backhaus was not the only Western author whose work Ilyenkov followed, even though ‘[c]ensors tightly blocked his efforts to initiate a dialogue with the European philosophical community’ (Maidansky 2013, 544–5). Andrey Maidansky (ibid., 537) has even called Ilyenkov a ‘Western mind on Russian soil’”. The latter’s Hegelian reading of *Capital* was no less influenced by Lukács’ thinking than the readings of it among the Frankfurt school were. If the young Lukács (1971 [1923], 17) rejected ‘contemplative dualism of thought and existence’, Ilyenkov, in Maidansky’s (2013, 540) words, ‘abhorred any “ontology”’. While trying to present ““general laws” of being’, philosophers, in reality, presented ‘abstract schemata of their own, historically limited thought’ (ibid.).

This ‘Western mind’ remained bound to ‘Russian soil’ – Ilyenkov was neither allowed to travel to the above-mentioned ‘Marx and the Western World’ conference in 1966 nor permitted on trips elsewhere very much. The story of Ruben, another ‘orthodox heretic’, is different. He was granted a year of academic exchange in the West, where he was able to meet his Western colleagues face to face.

### 1.6.3. Ruben: *Kapitallogik*

The third orthodox heretic studied philosophy in Berlin, where he had been born in 1933. Ruben later worked at the institute of philosophy at Humboldt University and at the Academy of Sciences of the GDR. He wrote about philosophy of mathematics and the natural sciences (Ruben 1966; 1969; 1975). Even though Ruben’s defence of the dialectics of nature against members of the Frankfurt school or his portrayal of Adorno’s and Schmidt’s conceptions of dialectics (without nature) as ‘neo-left-Hegelianism’ (Ruben 1969, 62, 63–4) might appear at

first to be orthodox Marxist-Leninist, this positioning did not prevent the guardians of the purity of Marxism-Leninism being upset.

Ruben (1969, 52–4) explained that Frankfurtians saw the applicability of dialectics as limited exclusively to the study of history. Against them, Ruben (1969, 69) defended a dialectical approach to nature, which he interpreted in the context of Marx's analysis of the labour process in the first volume of *Capital* (see MECW 35, 187 ff.). Working humanity did not create an atom of matter in the process of social production; it had to adapt its activities to the existing environment. Through the societal process of production, nature entered the realm of culture. Given that humanity had to maintain its metabolic relation with nature, the externality of nature with respect to humanity was a historical product. It was specific to a bourgeois society, in which immediate producers, the wage-labourer masses, were separated from nature as they were separated from the means of production – a separation which was an inevitable precondition for the capitalist mode of production. For this reason, Ruben (1969, 61) accused Schmidt, who stressed the 'social form' of things at the expense of their 'natural form', of adapting the point of view of the bourgeoisie, exclusively interested in the 'social' aspect of production, the self-valorising value.

In 1975–6, Ruben spent a year in Aarhus, Denmark, where he engaged in debate with two figures who have been extremely important for the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, Sohn-Rethel and Negt (Warnke 2009, 563).

In a debate about the genesis of the sciences, held at the Sandbjerg estate on 30 March 1976, Sohn-Rethel (2018, 890) argued that the epistemological theory of reflection (*Wiederspiegelungstheorie*) of Marxism-Leninism found no support from rational arguments and was backed merely by politics and force. In contrast against the Marxist-Leninist theory of reflection, Sohn-Rethel's Marxian epistemology took the societal process of reproduction as its point of departure. In his reading of Marx, theoretical abstractions were derived from the practice of commodity exchange and from the real abstraction involved in it. In 1970's *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit: Zur Theorie gesellschaftlicher Synthesis* (published in English as *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* in 1978), Sohn-Rethel posited that 'the socially necessary forms of thinking of an epoch are those in conformity with the socially synthetic functions of that epoch' (1978 [1970], 5). In commodity economies, social synthesis was grounded in the practices present in

the market. The ‘abstraction contained in exchange’ determined ‘the conceptual mode of thinking peculiar to societies based on commodity production’ (ibid., 23).

Ruben nominally defended the theory of reflection, but he reformulated it such in a way that it obviously approached Sohn-Rethel’s view. The focus of both authors was distinct from Marxism-Leninism’s in that neither was interested in the relationship between consciousness and ‘external reality’ (see Sohn-Rethel 2018, 907–8). Both considered epistemology in much broader societal and historical context.

Even though Ruben agreed with Sohn-Rethel that exchange had historically conditioned abstract modes of thinking, including mathematics and philosophy, he maintained that the social synthesis was only secondarily based on exchange. In Ruben’s opinion, Sohn-Rethel did not account for the fact that human beings became socialised primarily within production and only in a subsidiary manner in the market (Sohn-Rethel 2018, 901). In Ruben’s account (1976; see Sohn-Rethel 2018, 98), theoretical abstractions were formulated by general labour (*allgemeine Arbeit*) – i.e., scientific work that was a moment of the total social labour.<sup>34</sup>

Via an article that appeared in West Germany’s SoPo in 1976, Ruben elaborated further on his conception of science as general labour, or universal labour, the above-mentioned *allgemeine Arbeit*. The concept’s roots are in Marx’s ‘Grundrisse’ (see Haug 1994). In *Capital*, volume 3 it denoted ‘all scientific labour, all discovery and all invention’ (MECW 37, 106). General labour was co-operative labour, inclusive of co-operation across generations (ibid.).<sup>35</sup> Ruben (1969, 71; 1976) explained that scientific work as general labour produced ‘general use-values’, measurement results. Measurements are results of objective (*gegenständlich*) activity, involving all three ‘elementary factors of’ any ‘labour process’, listed by Marx as ‘1, the personal activity of man, i. e., work itself, 2, the subject of that work [ihr Gegenstand], and 3, its instruments’ (MECW 35, 188). The labour of measurement involves a measuring device (3) and the work of conducting comparison (1) with the object measured (2) by means of that measuring device – which itself is a product of general labour (Ruben 1976, 27).

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<sup>34</sup> ‘Die Widerspiegelungen oder Abbildungen sind mit anderen Worten Resultate eines Arbeitprozesses, der von Marx allgemeine Arbeit genannt wird’ (Sohn-Rethel 2018, 899).

<sup>35</sup> As Haug (1994, 126) has noted, Marx’s elaboration on the concept remained rudimentary.

Even though Sohn-Rethel anchored the genesis of scientific thinking in exchange and Ruben connected both of these to the other articulation point in the societal process of reproduction, the production process, the perspectives of both men on epistemology deviated radically from the Marxist-Leninist theory of reflection, dealing with the relationship between consciousness and external reality. No wonder that Sohn-Rethel (2018, 907) noted several times in the course of their discussion that, despite disagreements, the two were on the same page.

In 1977, Ruben published – again in SoPo – a critique of what roughly, and with many reservations, corresponds to the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, a ‘capital-logical’ reading of Marx’s *Capital* (*Kapitallogik*). The term itself was not invented by Ruben: another philosopher, Schanz, from Aarhus, had used it self-referentially (Haug 2008, 348; Oittinen 2008, 357). Ruben saw this tendency as visible in authors from both East and West. It encompassed ‘all, and only, those interpretations of Marx’s *Capital* and its preparatory manuscripts that are philosophically oriented and assume the analysis and development of the value-form (or commodity form) as their theoretical fundament’ (Ruben 1977, 42; translation mine).<sup>36</sup>

The label ‘Kapitallogik’ is sometimes used nearly interchangeably with ‘Neue Marx-Lektüre’ (see Oittinen 2008, 357), although those scholars who today identify with the latter find the term pejorative (Hoff et al. 2006b, 362). To me it seems clear that Ruben employed the word for a much broader phenomenon. This way of reading Marx’s main work extended beyond authors who could today be included under the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* umbrella (Schmidt, Reichelt, Backhaus, Krahl, and Sohn-Rethel), to Joachim Bischoff and Haug also – with the latter being known especially for his criticism of that very school (see Haug 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; 2006; 2007a; 2013). With regard to the object of my research, it is interesting that Ruben also included such Eastern European scholars as Zelený and Ilyenkov in the group of ‘capital-logicians’.

Ruben (1977, 52) divided the capital-logical readings of Marx into two branches of scholarship: a Hegelian one, represented by Backhaus, and a system-theoretical or Structuralist one, represented by Bischoff and his Projektgruppe Entwicklung Marxschen Systems (PEM 1973) colleagues. In reading Marx’s analysis of the

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<sup>36</sup> Original text: ‘Alle und nur die Interpretationen des Marxschen Kapital und seiner Vorarbeiten, die – unter vorausgesetztem philosophischen Interesse - die Analyse und Entwicklung der Wert-form (bzw. Warenform) als ihr theoretisches Fundament annehmen.’

value-form, the Hegelian scholars took a thing (the value of a commodity) as their starting point, whereas the Structuralist branch focused on the relationship (exchange relation). In Ruben's (1977, 57) view, both perspectives were one-sided, given that a thing and a relationship both are moments of expression of value ('x commodity A = y commodity B' (MECW 35, 58)), just as both are involved in any measurement. Value, the social property of a commodity (assuming the relative value-form), could not be expressed in any other way than in the body, or in the natural form of another commodity (assuming the role of an equivalent). In the work of measurement, the object measured is equated with the measuring device. Thereby, the expression of value, just as the expression of any measurable property (e.g., weight or length) does, involves both a thing and a relation.

Therefore, Ruben (1977, 58) argued against Backhaus and others who declared value an attribute that is 'purely social'. He could not accept the conclusion that the social would be entirely alien to materiality. For him, the idea of a 'purely' social sphere excludes the objects and means of labour, and it establishes opposition between human beings (the subjective element in all labour processes) and objective conditions of labour (tools and objects of labour) – just as the bourgeois society does (Ruben 1969, 61; 1977, 58).

Neither could Ruben (1977, 60) accept Krahl's (2008 [1971], 33) definition wherein the substance of value, abstract labour, is 'the most real mode of organisation of the capitalist production process, the labour of isolated and independently from each other privately working individuals'.<sup>37</sup> In the view of Ruben (1977, 61), isolation to a specific production process is a rather superficial appearance that should not be taken for granted. In reality, the productive apparatus in a bourgeois society was highly socialised.

As his critique of various capital-logical readings of *Capital* demonstrates, Ruben closely followed the work of his Western colleagues.<sup>38</sup> Soon after Ruben's visit to Denmark, the SED prohibited him from co-operating with the Hegel-Colloquium's project in West Berlin, whose scholars aimed to reconstruct Hegel's logic on the

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<sup>37</sup> 'Abstrakte Arbeit, der höchst reale Organisationsmodus des kapitalistischen Produktionsprozesses, ist die Arbeit isoliert und unabhängig voneinander privat arbeitender Individuen' in the original. Translation mine.

<sup>38</sup> Ruben was not the only scholar doing so, but, of course, only a few specialists in the GDR read the works of the Frankfurt school, as Ruben reminded in an e-mail message sent to me on 20.6.2014.



basis of Marx's analysis of the labour process as a union of the subject, the object, and the mediating tool (Warnke 2009, 564).

An article on the 'socialist value-form' that Ruben co-wrote with Wagner provoked an even stronger reaction (see Ruben and Wagner 1980; see also Ruben 1979; Wagner 1980).<sup>39</sup> What the two authors proposed was an application of Piero Sraffa's (1898–1983) neo-Ricardian value theory. Upon its publication, Ruben was dismissed from the party, he was barred from teaching, and his writings were censored, though he was allowed to continue as a researcher at the GDR's academy of sciences.

Perhaps that article does not suffice on its own to explain the harsh reaction. After all, Sraffa's *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities* had appeared in German translation in 1968 and was a product of the institute of political economy of the Academy of Sciences (see Sraffa 1968 [1960]). The ultimate problem throughout Ruben's career was, as Camilla Warnke (2009, 573) explains, that his thinking did not adhere to the lines of the 'fundamental question of philosophy': whether matter vs. consciousness holds ontological primacy.

In this sense, his approach resembles that of Ilyenkov and Korovikov, Seidel, or Kosing, whose working group published a praxis-philosophical textbook in 1967 (see Kosing 1967; Maffei 2007; 119 ff.; Röhr 2009). It goes without saying that the textbook precipitated another scandal in East German academia. If the more nuanced picture of Marx offered by non-communist traditions of Marxist theory and Marx-scholarship has remained the province of a few specialists in the West, where the influence of Marxism-Leninism upon most textbook presentations of Marx remains, equally the critical scholars in the East had to struggle to influence the textbook and other popular presentations of Marxist theory. The guardians of official ideology too needed to work hard, and they had to tolerate some deviations. Such output as Kosing's praxis-philosophical textbook testifies to the limits of such toleration, what was the *non plus ultra* of intellectually honest and serious engagement with Marx in the GDR (see Röhr 2009, 215).

Even though the struggle over such questions as the contents of that textbook was fierce and had serious consequences for the careers of the researchers involved, for a layman the differences between the orthodox and 'creative' readings of Marx

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<sup>39</sup> An 'orthodox' critique of Ruben and Wagner: Alfred Lemnitz (1981).

might seem insignificant: both sides talk about ‘historical materialism’, ‘dialectics’, or ‘Marxism-Leninism’. However much these disputes might have the appearance of scholastic hair-splitting, it did not prevent some participants in the discussions from fiercely accusing others of heresy, just as several early modern philosophers who creatively engaged with ‘God’ suffered excommunication. As Oleg Ananyin and Denis Melnik (2019, 78–9; emphasis in original) explain in their discussion of Soviet political economists, ‘[w]hile carefully following the established rhetorical canon’ they were ‘able to convey both theoretical and practical messages. But to grasp their meaning, such messages need *deciphering*’.

Heinrich (2018, 9–10) explains that,

as in many texts of the Baroque era [where] one had to subserviently thank the sovereign first for the kindness with which he promoted science, now a bow to the ruling party was necessary. It is not uncommon that Lenin, and the success of the ‘great socialist revolution’, and the latest resolutions of the umpteenth party congress of the CPSU or SED had to be acknowledged before the actual text could begin. What followed was now and then (and with time increasingly often) articles that examined problems of the emergence and development of Marx’s theory that went far beyond the textbook Marxism.<sup>40</sup>

The readers of *Capital* considered thus far – Ilyenkov, Behrens, and Ruben – all managed to adjust themselves to the prevailing societal preconditions in such a way that they still could say something interesting. All three built remarkable academic careers, and they all had several followers, not limited to members of the secret police.

One of the conclusions of this thesis is that East German academic Marxism was nowhere near as uniform a phenomenon as it might at first appear. It was a contradiction-rife phenomenon because the ‘state monopolistic socialism’ (Behrens 1992) of the latter part of the twentieth century, firstly, produced a great many independently minded scholars who were encouraged to read Marx – and often

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<sup>40</sup> My translation of the original ‘Wie in vielen Schriften des Barockzeitalters zunächst dem Landesfürsten für seine Güte, mit der er die Wissenschaft förderte, untertänigst gedankt wurde, war jetzt eine Verbeugung vor der herrschenden Partei notwendig. Nicht selten mussten zunächst Lenin und der Erfolg der “großen sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution“ bis hin zu den Beschlüssen des soundsovielten Parteitags der KPdSU bzw. der SED gewürdigt werden, bevor der eigentliche Text beginnen konnte. Was dann aber folgte, waren mitunter (und mit der Zeit immer häufiger) Artikel, die weit jenseits des bloßen Lehrbuchmarxismus Probleme der Entstehung und Entwicklung der marxischen Theorie untersuchten (Heinrich 2018, 9–10).

ended up questioning official state ideology. Secondly, the communist authorities simultaneously did their best to constrain the work of those scholars.

It is striking how fearful the communist parties were of the contradictions present in these societies, not to mention dealing with the traumatic past of Stalinism. Although contradiction cosmetically played a prominent role in the Marxist-Leninist philosophy, these contradictions' portrayal was carefully curated, and they could not lead to surprises, as real contradictions do (per the teaching of Brecht 2016 [1965]). It would not be easy to find an institution more afraid of genuine contradictions than the Marxist-Leninist party. The party (whether under the banner of 'socialism', 'communism', or the 'proletariat') was always, in each formula and every scenario, on the winning side. One obvious reason lies in the fundamental fear of the communist parties in the Cold War years: that the capitalist enemy could benefit from the disagreements (see Labica 1986 [1984], 94).

According to the official dogma, all societal contradictions – such as those between individual and society or between special and general interest – had been eliminated, because class conflicts had been resolved. The ones that remained were labelled as 'remnants of the capitalist society'. This is a belief that Oskar Lange (1959, 3) had reason to deem 'a Christian-eschatological and not a Marxist-scientific' one.

But the energy in the true, underlying contradictions had not been exhausted, and maintaining a uniform façade consumed large amounts of energy and resources. Instead of being funnelled into such an exhausting reactive fiction, the latter energy could have been directed productively. By restricting academic freedom, the Soviet regime, of course, damaged itself, as scholars such as Moshe Lewin (2005, 274) have noted.

The MEGA complete edition of the writings of Marx and Engels exemplifies the vast resources that the GDR's authorities invested in research into Marx. Simultaneously, they lacked the courage for fully utilising the expertise of the researchers who professionally engaged with Marx's original manuscripts.

#### 1.6.4. The MEGA editors: *Verbesserte oder verwässerte?*

*Pravda* and *Neues Deutschland* announced on the centenary of *Capital* that the editorial work for the MEGA project would resume in the Soviet Union and in the GDR.<sup>41</sup> The project employed an impressive number of experts, vastly outstripping the number of researchers professionally engaging with Marx at West German universities. Recently, *Beiträge zur Marx–Engels–Forschung Neue Folge* (2006) presented 160 short biographies of the editors of MEGA but also of the *Marx–Engels–Werke* (MEW) volumes and the Soviet collected works of Marx and Engels, *Sočinenija* (Vollgraf et al. 2006). Even though the work of these scholars has been decisive for our current image of Marx as a thinker, most serious readers of Marx today are familiar with very few of these names.

A by-product produced by MEGA was scholarship on the development of the pair's thinking, mostly published in the so-called MEGA-accompanying publications introduced in subsection 1.5.1, in journals and edited volumes (see Jahn et al. 1983; Nietzold et al. 1978). The MEGA researchers also published important monographs themselves, the influence of which extended to West Germany (see Hoff 2017 [2009], 316). I will cite just a few examples. Vitali Vygodsky's 1965 work *Die Geschichte einer grossen Entdeckung: Über die Entstehung des Werkes 'Das Kapital' von Karl Marx* (or *Istorii a odnogo velikogo otkrytii a K Marksa: k sozdanii u 'Kapitala'*) was published in German two years later (Wygodski 1967), quite some time before it appeared in English (see Vygodsky 1974 [1965]). Another book published in 1967 for the centenary was Rolf Dlubek and Hannes Skambraks's '*Das Kapital' von Karl Marx in der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung (1867 bis 1878): Abriß und Zeugnisse der Wirkungsgeschichte*, dealing with the early reception of *Capital* in the German workers' movement.<sup>42</sup> Jahn's *Die Marxsche Wert- und Mehrwertlehre im Zerrspiegel bürgerlicher Ökonomen*, discussing the reactions of bourgeois scientists to Marx's theories of value and surplus value, appeared for Marx's 150th birthday. Tuchscheerer's *Bevor 'Das Kapital' entstand: die Entstehung der ökonomischen Theorie von Karl Marx*, published posthumously in 1968, was equally aligned with Marx's 150th birthday and soon saw translation into Italian, Japanese, and Spanish in Venezuela (ABBAW). In the draft of his preface to the Japanese edition in 1973, influential economist Fred Oelßner (1903–77), who had written

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<sup>41</sup> 'Gesamtausgabe der Werke von Marx und Engels', *Neues Deutschland*, 14 September 1967a, 1–2.

<sup>42</sup> See 'Ein Buch macht Weltgeschichte', from *Neues Deutschland* on 12 September 1967b, 3.

the preface to the original German edition, cited a West German reviewer who wrote that ‘even though the work is written in the spirit of SED partisanship, it is still the best that has been written in the GDR in the field of economic history’ and that ‘it will occupy a central place in Marx–Engels scholarship’ (ibid.).<sup>43</sup> Worth mentioning also is Manfred Müller’s *Auf dem Wege zum ‚Kapital‘: zur Entwicklung des Kapitalbegriffs von Marx in den Jahren 1857–1863*, from 1978, which contributed to a discussion that crossed the border: the debate on the ‘architecture’ of Marx’s critique of political economy and how Marx’s original plan changed.

West German discussions of Marx’s method and of whether Marx himself had fully understood the method he applied (Althusser et al. 2015 [1965]; Negt 1968, 43; Rosdolsky 1968; 1977 [1968]; Schmidt 1968, 32) caught the MEGA editors’ attention (see, for instance, Jahn and Nietzold 1978; Lietz 1981; Müller 1978, 11), and it is easy to see why.<sup>44</sup> The editors, who were professionally dealing with Marx’s various manuscript versions, were more aware than anyone else of his impasses and changes of mind, with miscellaneous trains of thought having been evident in Marx’s letters, notes, and sketches. For them it was clear that Marx’s critique of political economy was not a unified whole and that he did not hold an orthodox and immutable position on each question.

As explained above, various manuscript versions (primarily Grundrisse (1953 [1939–41]), ‘Urtext’ (1941), and Resultate des unmittelbaren Produktionsprozesses (1968 [1933])) inspired the scholars later associated with the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* to attempt to reconstruct the original method allegedly behind the early manuscripts’ versions of Marx’s critique of political economy. In the early 1970s, Backhaus’s famous essays on ‘the reconstruction of Marx’s theory of value’ appeared in Suhrkamp’s Frankfurt-based book series ‘Gesellschaft: Beiträge zur Marxschen Theorie’.

The series captured the attention of the leader of one important MEGA research group, *Marx-Engels-Forschungsgruppe*, based at Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-

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<sup>43</sup> In the original, ‘Ein westdeutscher Rezensent charakterisierte das Buch mit den Worten: “Das Werk ist im Sinne der SED-Parteilichkeit geschrieben, dennoch ist es das beste, was in der DDR auf ökonomisch-historischem Gebiet vorgelegt wurde, in der Marx-Engels-Forschung darf es einen wesentlichen Platz beanspruchen“; translation mine (ABBAW).

<sup>44</sup> Various MEGA editors commented on West German publications, including the discussion examining the concept of capital in general (Müller 1978, 11, 13 ff.), literature on Marx’s theory of fetishism (Marxhausen 1979), and PEM work from West Berlin (see Jahn and Marxhausen 1983; Lietz 1981, 85).

Wittenberg, Halle/Saale. That was Jahn, who together with Roland Nietzold rhetorically asked the ‘bourgeois Marxologists’ of West Germany this question: what should be reconstructed? (Galander 2018, 138; Jahn and Nietzold 1978, 148).

What did Backhaus believe should be reconstructed? He found that ‘Marx left behind no finished version of the labour theory of value’ (Backhaus 1980 [1969], 100). Marx had published, all told, four versions of his analysis of the value-form. The first is found in his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), the second one in the first edition of the first volume of *Capital* (1867), and the third in the latter’s appendix. In the fourth and last version, which was published in 1872 and on which most subsequent editions of *Capital*’s first volume are based, ‘the dialectical implications of the value-form problematic pale more and more and Marx has already “popularised as far as possible the analysis of the value substance”’, Backhaus (1980 [1969], 100) argued. Therefore, ‘an urgent priority in Marx research’ would be, according to Backhaus, ‘to reconstruct out of the more or less fragmentary presentations and the numerous individual remarks strewn in other works, the whole of the value theory’ (ibid.).

Backhaus claimed that in the latest version of the first chapter of *Capital*, the dialectical transition from the analyses of the substance of value and its magnitude – both easily comprehensible – to the analysis of the value-form had been lost (ibid., 101). Therefore, ‘the theory of the value-form’ was ‘mostly understood only as an additional proof or as a “dialectical” ornament of what was plainly already derived in the first sections’ (ibid.). Backhaus concluded that this ‘break between the two first sections and the third section’ hampered understanding of Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism (ibid., 102). Namely, in the first edition of *Capital*, Marx presented the fetish character of the commodity as the fourth peculiarity of the equivalent form, in direct continuation of his analysis of the value-form. This is no longer the case in the fourth and final version of the text; therefore, Backhaus claimed, it is impossible to understand the matter accurately.

For these reasons, Backhaus asserted that most commentators, since they did not understand that Marx derived money dialectically in his analysis of the commodity, could not distinguish Marx’s theory of value from the classical, Ricardian labour theory of value (ibid.).

Backhaus claimed that Marx himself was to blame for his readers' evident difficulties in understanding the matter correctly; he had adjusted the way in which he presented the results of his research, for popular consumption (ibid., 100). As Backhaus (1997a, 11, 13) later opined, Marx had diluted his ideas.

As Heinrich (2022, 141) has explained, the authors later incorporated into the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* approach an angle from which the various other manuscripts of *Capital* are equal to the published version (for application of this approach in an introduction to *Capital*, see Heinrich 2021 [2008]). Therefore, it is no wonder that, later on, MEGA volume II/6, published in the GDR in 1987, which included the second edition of the first volume of *Capital* (1872) and the working manuscript *Ergänzungen und Veränderungen zum ersten Band des 'Kapitals'* (1871–72), caught the interest of various authors in the proximity of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*.<sup>45</sup> In this working manuscript, Marx combines the content of the value-form analysis in the first chapter of the first edition of *Capital's* Volume 1 with that of its appendix on the value-form (see Lietz 1987). Because Engels had, in a letter to Marx complained that the way of presenting the matter was unnecessarily complex (MECW 42, 382), Marx had, rather than change the draft of the first chapter, written a 'schoolmasterly' presentation of the value-form analysis to be attached to the first edition as an appendix. In that appendix, he presented the matter 'as simply and as much in the manner of a school text-book as possible' (ibid., 384). The letter in which Engels encouraged Marx to emphasise 'each dialectical transition ... by means of a special heading' (MECW 42, 382) so as to render the reading as easy for the *populus* as possible, inspired not only Backhaus but also Reichelt and Gerhard Göhler (1980) to argue that Engels apparently did not understand Marx's original, dialectical method and, furthermore, that he encouraged Marx to tune his output for popular consumption.

The editors of MEGA volume II/6 (Hecker, Jürgen Jungnickel, Wolfgang Focke, and Barbara Lietz) included very brief, largely implicit commentary between the lines of the preface to this volume. It seems to me that the editors took aim primarily at Göhler's idea of the 'reduced dialectics' in his book *Die Reduktion der Dialektik durch Marx: Strukturveränderungen der dialektischen Entwicklung in der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* (1980). The editors emphasised that Marx, as he continued working with the first chapter of *Capital*, improved it (*verbessert*) and did not in

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<sup>45</sup> For recent discussion of this manuscript, see Heinrich (2022), Fred Moseley (2021), and Schwarz and Lietz (2021; 2022).

reality dilute (*verwässert*) his original ideas (MEGA II/6, 24; see also Jungnickel 1987, 18, 24).<sup>46</sup> In this connection, the editors referred to the title page of the original publication from 1872, the ‘second, improved edition’ (*Zweite, verbesserte Auflage*; MEGA II/6, 55). They explained that in that edition of Volume 1, Marx distanced himself from Hegelian philosophy, as he replaced some philosophical expressions with the more specific and concrete concepts of political economy (MEGA II/6, 24).

I suspect that the immediate trigger to these comments was West German scholar Winfried Schwarz’s presentation at a seminar organised by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism, in which several editors of the above-mentioned MEGA volume had participated in October 1986.<sup>47</sup> In that presentation, Schwarz, representing the IMSF, made critical remarks on some of Backhaus’s and Göhler’s ideas. Schwarz explained that Göhler had argued that Marx had to abandon his initial, dialectical deductions because of the unresolvable problems he encountered (Schwarz 1987a, 101). Hence, I suggest, the editors of the MEGA volume put forth an opposing argument that, instead of regressing (*verwässerung*), Marx had made progress (*verbesserung*) over the years (see also Jungnickel 1987; Schwarz 1987b, 213).<sup>48</sup>

Other MEGA editors too referred to a ‘reconstruction’; however, their idea of it was different. When writing his preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* publication for 1859, Marx still planned to write six books, ‘in the following order: *capital, landed property, wage-labour, the State, foreign trade, world market*’ (MECW 29, 261). He had given up on this ambitious six-book plan in the course of writing the extensive manuscripts crafted in 1861–3. In a letter to Ludwig Kugelmann in 1866, Marx did not refer to any more than four books, three ‘theoretical’ ones on capital and a book on the history of the theory (MECW 42, 328). Marx, as is well-known, ultimately fulfilled only the first part of his plan for

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<sup>46</sup> ‘In der 2. Auflage hat sich Marx um die Beseitigung derartiger Bezüge zu Hegel bemüht, indem er philosophische Termini durch Begriffe der politischen Ökonomie ersetzte. Das war jedoch nicht mit einer Reduktion der Marx’schen Dialektik verbunden, wie der Überarbeitung der Wertformanalyse zeigt’ (MEGA II/6, 24).

<sup>47</sup> Die weitere Herausgabe der Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe (MEGA) und die Perspektiven der Marx-Engels-Forschung. Wissenschaftliche Konferenz des Instituts für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED und des Wissenschaftlichen Rats für Marx-Engels-Forschung der DDR vom 14. bis 16. Oktober 1986 in Berlin (see <<https://marxforschung.de/698-2/>>, accessed on 1.7.2022).

<sup>48</sup> Decades later, Haug (2006, 14) reassured that Marx’s decades-long work on his critique of political economy is better understood as a ‘learning process’ than as a process of popular notions watering down his ‘original’ ideas.



the four books on capital. He amended the materials and thematic structure for the last five books, sculpting the material into the manuscripts for the three volumes of *Capital*. The Halle research group, led by Jahn, were convinced that – counter to what Behrens, Rosdolsky, and others maintained – Marx did not abandon his six-book plan, and they hoped to reconstruct it (Galander 2018, 140; Jahn and Nietzold 1978, 167).

Ever since the 1980s, the MEGA editors and western German scholars have been able to meet at joint seminars.<sup>49</sup> Instead of merely reading each other's texts, they have been able to meet in person. In 2001, at a memorial seminar held in Jahn's honour, student of Adorno and member (alongside Backhaus) of the editorial board for the above-mentioned 'Gesellschaft: Beiträge zur Marxschen Theorie' book series Ernst Theodor Mohl (2002, 26) noted with some amusement that, even though Jahn had not accepted the West Germans' plans to reconstruct Marx's method, his own research group had embraced an even more ambitious goal: reconstructing Marx's 'original' plan! Mohl (*ibid.*, 27) compared the project to the attempts to reconstruct the unwritten teachings of Plato.<sup>50</sup>

Though I have argued that East German scholars were generally more interested in the work of their colleagues in the West than the other way round, some exceptions are worthy of note. For instance, Mohl followed the output of his colleagues in Halle long before the collapse of the Berlin Wall. So did Heinrich (2002, 92), who reported having kept a close eye on the work by Jahn's Halle-based working group on Marx's six-book plan and the architecture of *Capital*.<sup>51</sup>

The last director of the working group, Ehrenfried Galander, attributed that group's importance especially to the 'academization' of research into Marx in the GDR. It stood out as one of the MEGA editorial groups based at a university rather than a party-affiliated institute.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Personal connections of East German scholars were restricted. Primarily, only the trusted 'travel cadres' (*Reisekader*) could travel freely to the West. In 1976, Jahn visited 10 West German universities (Mohl 2002, 24). In 1983, Jahn was invited to a seminar in Hannover organised upon the completion of Marx's manuscripts from 1861–63 published in MEGA<sup>2</sup> (Galander 2018, 140).

<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Haug (2006, 14) has contrasted Backhaus's and Reichelt's project against the efforts of the Tübingen school to reconstruct Plato's unrecorded teachings. See also Wahsner 1998.

<sup>51</sup> On the Halle-based Marx-research group see also Hoff 2017 [2009], 137 ff.

<sup>52</sup> An email discussion with Galander 6.1.2023.

For West German readers of Marx, the MEGA editorial groups in East Germany and the physical existence of the Marx and Engels manuscripts in East Berlin and Moscow undoubtedly marked (even physical) appropriation of Marx and Engels by the communist parties. They have, however, acknowledged that the MEGA editors did not handle Marx's ideas as heavy-handedly as the party ideologues did. A good example of this other extreme is the pamphlet series 'Contributions to the Critique of Bourgeois Ideology'.

### 1.6.5. 'Contributions to the Critique of Bourgeois Ideology' and 'Marx-Killers'

One of the conclusions of my research is that the relationship between East and West German academic readers of Marx was asymmetric. As previous research has demonstrated, various asymmetries characterised Cold-War-era social and human sciences in general. Generally, the social sciences and humanities in the East lagged behind, and their funding was more limited than that in the West (Boldyrev and Kirtchik 2016, 7). With regard to my specific research topic, one of the most interesting asymmetries is that East German scholars assiduously followed the work of their Western counterparts while the converse cannot be claimed. Numerous published diatribes and attacks reveal that East Germans actively followed what was written in the West. In contrast, Frankfurtian readers of Marx in particular typically had little to no interest in the writings of their East German counterparts. This is no wonder given that the Soviet Union and the GDR had a veritable industry of rants 'exposing' the scholarship of the Frankfurt school as 'anti-Marxist'. It is easy to see why East German literature did not seem to hold any real interest for these scholars.<sup>53</sup>

Such phenomena as 'Contributions to the Critique of Bourgeois Ideology' (lit. *Beiträge zur Kritik der bürgerlichen Ideologie*), a book series edited by a guardian of official ideology, philosopher Manfred Buhr (1927–2008), are worth a closer look. Even though most of the 107 volumes in the series, published between 1971 and

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<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, Hoff (2017 [2009], 4) has reminded that the German academic Marxism was rather provincial overall. It is the resulting gap in perspectives that his *Marx Worldwide* (2017 [2009]) filled by investigating affinities between the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* and the various other novel readings of *Capital* that emerged on the global stage after 1965. This may be explained partly by deficient language skills – hardly any scholar in the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* school was proficient in Russian, for instance – but this could not have been the factor behind the lack of interest in the East German literature.

1986, are extremely tedious to read, we should consider them in their context. Volumes in this series not only revealed ‘the sins of the Frankfurt school’ (Beyer 1971). At the same time, these rants summarise the arguments of a wide range of non-Soviet Marxist and other Western contributions. As Djagalov explains with regard to a Soviet book series comparable to this,

the vast majority of Progress’s Russian translations were available to the general Soviet reader, offering the reader access to contemporary Western scholarship through special series such as Critique of Bourgeois Ideology and Revisionism, Western Economic Thought, [and] Social Sciences Abroad. While outwardly critical of the Western theories they were dedicated to, these series offered generous summaries of them, thus providing unique access to the adroit Soviet reader, who would easily skip the criticism. (Djagalov 2019, 90)

Several volumes in Buhr’s series were devoted to the Frankfurt school.<sup>54</sup> One interesting example is Soviet philosopher Narsky’s critique of Adorno (see Narski 1975). Narsky is best known as a rather analytical philosopher and as a rival of Ilyenkov. With his 1973 book *Dialektischer Widerspruch und Erkenntnislogik* (from the Russian original *Dialektičeskoe protivorečie i logika poznanija*, 1969), he may also be counted among the authors who contributed to the global boom in novel philosophical readings of *Capital* in the 1960s (see Narski 1973).

As Stefan Volle has explained, writings such as Marcuse’s output were classified in the GDR as ‘highly toxic’ and were available to researchers in special reading rooms only (Volle 2002). Scholars were free to devote their work hours to writing about this body of literature, however, if they merely took care to pepper the text with a few magic *ad hominem* expressions (‘Marx critic’ and ‘anti-Marxist’ among them), since the party required of researchers ‘ruthlessness against deviations from Marxism-Leninism’ (quoted in translation by Düppe 2021, 14). Whether the authors of these texts personally subscribed to these echoes of the official verdict on the Frankfurt school is secondary. As Mohl (2002, 19) – who, as a student of Adorno, numbered among the targets of the negative opinions – has noted, underneath such polemics was often hidden a thorough knowledge of this incriminated literature.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> The editors devoted Volume 4 to Marcuse; Volume 5 to Marcuse and Max Weber; volumes 6, 21, and 65 to Adorno; 10 to ‘the sins of the Frankfurt School’; and 66 to Sohn-Rethel.

<sup>55</sup> Fifty years on, as I later mapped literature that appeared on Marx in 1967 and 1968, I found a comprehensive review written by Erich Kundel and colleagues (1968) on the writings that appeared in West Germany in 1964–67 helpful.

Another particularly interesting example, preceding Buhr's series, is Jahn's monograph *Die Marxsche Wert- und Mehrwertlehre im Zerrspiegel bürgerlicher Ökonomen* (1968). One after another, Jahn turns down influential Western interpretations of Marx's theory of value and surplus value, for 438 pages in all. He summarises the arguments presented by these economists, among them Rosdolsky, Fetscher, Schumpeter, Paul Samuelson (1915–2009), Alfred Amonn (1883–1962), Joan Robinson (1903–83), Jan Tinbergen (1903–94), John Kenneth Galbraith (1908–2006), and Adorno's student Werner Becker (1937–2009). The book, irrespective of its monotonous defence of the validity of Marx's theories of value and surplus value, and notwithstanding Jahn's celebration of Marx's work as 'an unshakeable scientific fundament' (Jahn 1968, 6), informed a larger audience of the most important Western discussion.

When I checked with MEGA editor Hecker whether my impression that he and his colleagues carefully followed what was written on Marx in the West corresponded with reality, he answered that of course they did – it was a part of their work.<sup>56</sup> In confirmation, Hecker showed me his detailed handwritten notes on texts by such central *Neue Marx-Lektüre* authors as Rosdolsky, Reichelt, and Göhler. Another MEGA editor, Galander, who followed Jahn as leader of the research group in Halle, told me that even though the MEGA working group there never had very much Western money, they always found some for buying the most interesting West German publications for the institute's library.<sup>57</sup>

As Quaas (2005) has explained, those who took Marx seriously in those countries with 'really existing socialism' had to struggle. With this section of the dissertation, I have aimed to demonstrate that, when one considers all the hardships that 'creative' (Levant and Oittinen 2014, vii; Maidansky and Pavlov 2018, 215), 'genuine' (Bakhurst 1991, 3), or 'thinking' readers of Marx in the Eastern Bloc had to endure, it would be unfair to denounce all Soviet and East German literature on Marx as ideology.

In this subsection, I have given some examples of encounters between East and West German academic readers of Marx, focusing on what is today called the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*. Some of the examples discussed above are included in the articles, while others are not. Even though my focus is definitively aimed at the

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<sup>56</sup> Personal communication with the author, summer 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Galander in e-mail to me on 23.12.2017.

divided Germany, I have also included some Soviet authors, because of their presence and influence in East German discussion of *Capital*.

## 1.7. Summary

With this chapter I have discussed the societal context of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* in the divided Germany during the Cold War. Section 1.1 set forth my research questions: How did the Cold War atmosphere influence the readings of Marx's *Capital* in the divided Germany? What kinds of questions did the West and East German scholars posit about this classic? How and why did the knowledge interests of East and West German scholars differ? Did they communicate with each other?

I devoted Section 1.2 to explaining why it remains important to study not only Marx's legacy but also the paths of development of various Marxisms in the twentieth century. Even though numerous readers of Marx throughout that century emphasised that Marxism-Leninism, an ideology of legitimisation of the ruling party of the Soviet Union, did not do any justice to Marx, most textbook presentations of Marx and Engels still portray the 'Marx' of Marxism-Leninism, for whom the history of humanity supposedly is, as it always has been, advancing through certain developmental stages toward future communism.

I have highlighted the importance of acknowledging that not all Soviet or East German scholars accepted such Marxist-Leninist instrumentalisation of Marx's ideas. Following Brie's lead (1993, 40), I have called intellectually honest Marxian scholars in the Soviet bloc orthodox heretics. With Section 1.3, I offered a brief presentation of a few of these creative, independent, and courageous readers of Marx's *Capital*: Ilyenkov, Behrens, and Ruben.

Such figures came to prominence right after de-Stalinisation began, in 1956. East Germany's economic reforms throughout the 1960s inspired political economists to consider even the most fundamental questions of Marxian economic theory. Section 1.4 lays out the chronology, in which the era of greater freedom for academic discussion came to an end in 1968 as Soviet forces swept into Czechoslovakia. The years preceding that occupation are especially interesting with regard to the object of my study also because 1967 marked the centennial of

Marx's *Capital* and 1968 the 150th birthday of its author. In West Germany, those years witnessed the high point of the student movement, which brought with it unprecedented interest in Marx's main work.

In writing Section 1.5, I went through the approaches taken by various West German Marxist schools to East Germany and its official ideology, and I compared the work conditions of scholars of Marx in both German states, before turning my attention, with Section 1.6, to the communication between scholars in or near the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* sphere and their East German colleagues/counterparts.

With the groundwork above laid, I next explain why I became interested in the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* and its context. Then I summarise the arguments presented in each of the four articles.

## 2. THE PUBLICATIONS

I don't have to introduce you to Karl Marx, though one could apply Brecht's sentence to him: "Marxism has ultimately become so unknown largely through the many writings about it" (Haug 2007b, 143)

Upon first encountering the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, I was puzzled. Why was the first chapter of the first volume of *Capital* given such immense weight? Why was the monetary character of Marx's value theory considered to be so crucial? Why was it so important to emphasise the centrality of the theory of (commodity) fetishism, sometimes expressly to the detriment of the theory of surplus value? What was so exciting about 'value', and why would it be something specific to capitalism?

Initially, I believed I could best answer these questions with the conceptual tools provided by the history of philosophy – the numerous frameworks for the multitudinous ways in which thinkers have understood the categories Marx applied in his critique of political economy, including 'substance' and 'form', 'quantity' and 'quality', 'potential' and 'actual', and 'abstract' and 'concrete'.<sup>58</sup> What problems afflict the various ways the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* authors have understood those categories? Did Marx apply these categories in the way in which Aristotle (384–22 BC), Spinoza, or Hegel used them? How might one best understand all the various forms of existence of labour – 'abstract', 'concrete', 'embodied', 'living', etc.? What was the role of the 'historical' and the 'logical' in Marx's enquiry? And what kind of research object is 'political economy' in the first place?

I was surprised to read that Heinrich, the most well-regarded interpreter of Marx in Germany today, argued that, *Capital* was not a study of the development of capitalism, as the 'traditional' approach presupposed, but a categorical analysis of

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<sup>58</sup> It would be impossible to list all of the relevant literature, but the pieces I found important for the development of my own thought include works by Althusser et al. (2015 [1965]), Seidel (1966), Haug (2006; 2013), Tuchscheerer (1968), Rosdolsky (1977 [1968]), Lukács (1975), Ilyenkov (1982 [1960]), Zelený (1980 [1962]), Igor Hanzel (1999), and Eric Rahim (2011; 2018).

the capitalist mode of production in its ideal average (2001, 153).<sup>59</sup> I was highly sceptical as to whether it makes sense to argue that *Capital* would have been traditionally understood as an enquiry into the history of capitalism. And I understood the object of Marx's research very differently. I did not regard it as an analysis of the capitalist mode of production per se so much as a critique of political economy – that is, as critique of the theories of value, money, surplus value, capital, and land rent in the writings of François Quesnay (1694–1774), Smith, Ricardo, Thomas Malthus (1766–1834), Pierre Joseph Proudhon (1809–65), and numerous others.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, I did not entirely disagree with Heinrich's (2012 [2004], 29) contention that '[i]n *Capital*, Marx examines the capitalist mode of production', because said mode of production was the research object of political economy. As Schmidt (1968, 34) too stressed, the critique of political economy should be understood in this dual sense.

That said, I could not accept at all Heinrich's claim that Marx's *Capital* would be 'first and foremost a theoretical work (which analyses a fully developed capitalism) and not a historical work (concerned with the development of capitalism)' (Heinrich 2012 [2004], 32; emphasis in original). I disagreed because, given that Marx's research object – the discipline of political economy – evolved historically, an inevitable precondition of Marx's critique was historical sensitivity: each political economist had to be situated at a specific point in the development of the research object of this science: the various phases of modern hegemony with the capitalist mode of production in France, England, or the United States. Marx criticised his object, the science of political economy, from the perspective of the social relations between labour and capital, which is the nexus of the capitalist mode of production. Marx studied the development of this relationship in Europe and especially in England from the early modern age onward but focused especially on the zenith of its development, the middle of the nineteenth century.

Proceeding from an ideal type of 'fully developed capitalism', or perfectly functioning capitalism Heinrich (2012 [2004], 70) proposed modifications in Marx's central concepts, including 'money commodity', because the capitalism of Marx's day was not yet 'fully developed', as it is today. I was truly surprised, because for me it had remained clear that 'money commodity' referred to a historically central

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<sup>59</sup> Critique and alternative interpretations exist (see Demirović 2010; Haug 2013, 41 ff.; Krätke 2017, 13).

<sup>60</sup> For a similar view, see, for instance, Ilyenkov's chapter on the 'logical and historical' in *Geschichte der Marxistischen Dialektik* (Rosental 1974 [1971], 241).



form of money that had for centuries been an object of political economy. Numerous general equivalents – cowrie shells, tools, wheat, fish, jewellery, and metals – had emerged over the course of history as soon as the exchange of commodities had become regularised (Rubin 2018b [2011], 661; Smith 2001 [1776], 34; see Shaikh 2016, 170 ff.). The growth of money out of commodity exchange had repeated itself numerous times, in different cultures and on different continents. Anyone willing to criticise the tradition of political economy from Aristotle (384–322 BC) to Smith and Mill could not afford to neglect that history. For Heinrich, the notion of money commodity, or the concept of general equivalent, meant something entirely different. He believed that Marx, with this concept, had denoted a logical stage in analysis of the perfectly functioning capitalism ideal type but had made an error here, because ‘capitalism’ did not yet function perfectly midway through the nineteenth century, when currencies were still backed by precious metals.

In Heinrich’s view, capitalism now functions in perfect correspondence with its concept. Noting this, Haug (2013, 173) accused Heinrich and his disciples of what they most assuredly had always tried to avoid, a teleological philosophy of history, in which our particular standpoint is privileged over our predecessors’. The development of ‘capitalism’ is now complete – ‘there has been history, but there is no longer any’ (MECW 6, 174).

Contrary to Heinrich’s (2012 [2004], 32; emphasis in original) assertion that *Capital* was ‘not a historical work (concerned with the development of capitalism)’, for me it appeared self-evident that Marx’s object of research was historical. Thomas Mun (1571–1641) could not possibly have had a theory of, say, profits and wages similar to Ricardo’s 200 years later. Mercantilists were interested in circulation of money on account of the problems they, and their country, encountered in real life: the influx of gold and silver from the newly discovered mines of the Americas, which led to an unprecedentedly high rate of inflation called a ‘price revolution’ (see Rubin 1979 [1929], 366). Physiocrats were interested in such issues as the net product, or productive and unproductive labour, largely because the weak productivity of agriculture in France compromised that country’s success in the race for the world market (see Rubin 1979 [1929], 124 ff.). It is no wonder that Mun’s politics differed from Ricardo’s – England’s position in the world market changed entirely over the 200-year span that separated the two authors. An

unhistorical, or merely ‘logical’ approach to the research field of political economy would make little sense.

What was the meaning of the claim that Marx’s work was theoretical and not historical? To me, this assertion seemed to be grounded in a false dichotomy. Marx did not just take Aristotle’s, Mun’s and Ricardo’s theories into consideration; he possessed stupendous knowledge of their historical contexts. As Krätke (2017, 13) and Pertti Honkanen (2022, 148), among others, have emphasised, Marx’s study involved a wide range of empirical materials. Providing background for the theory of absolute surplus-value, the first volume of *Capital* meticulously reported on the actual work conditions in the British factories as exposed in the reports of the factory inspectors and of the Child Labour and Public Health Commissions.<sup>61</sup> He not only included statements of factory inspectors but also quoted interviews with young children working in factories (see MECW 35, 252, 255). Marx carefully investigated the methods actually used for extracting relative surplus value: co-operation, machinery, and modern industry (MECW 35, 326 ff.). With the aid of statistics-based information, he gave an overview of the living conditions of various segments of the labour force in England (MECW 35, 642 ff.). He not only devised the ‘logical’ formulae for the rate of surplus value ( $s/v$ ) and the rate of profit ( $s/c+v$ ) but also directed attention to the empirical reality of the development of the factors affecting these rates: the wage levels ( $v$ ) in various industries, the length of the work day (dictating the ratio between  $v$  and  $s$ ), and the development of the productivity of labour (affecting the ratio  $c/v$ ).

Furthermore, for Marx it was clear that the product value ( $c+v+s$ ), including the value product of living labour ( $v+s$ ), must be realised; therefore, he studied the market phenomena as meticulously as he studied the technical, economic, and social aspects of production processes in large-scale industry. He used, for example, statistics of exports and imports (MECW 37, 499). He followed the latest developments and referred to relevant articles in periodicals using several major European languages (see MECW 35, 852; MECW 36, 546; MECW 37, 932). His careful examination of distribution entailed poring over masses of empirical materials on land rents, banking, and phenomena related to fictitious capital (MECW 37, 407 ff.). How could we describe his study as anything other than historical and empirical?

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<sup>61</sup> Reports of this nature are listed in MECW 35 (842–50) and MECW 37 (929–31).

Marx followed economic developments globally by maintaining active readership of newspapers and literature in all the main European languages. Capital accumulated in England only because its owners mobilised natural and human resources globally. Colonies such as India provided not only raw materials but also markets for the expanding industrial production in England. North American slave labour provided low-price cotton for the needs of the industry in Manchester, where Engels worked in his family's factory. (From this vantage point, Engels enlightened Marx about day-to-day practices in business life.) This global perspective considered, what is the meaning of 'fully developed capitalism'? Is capitalism ever going to be fully developed in India, for instance? In what sense 'Capital is first and foremost a theoretical work ... and not a historical work' (see Heinrich 2012 [2004], 32)?

My understanding of the 'historical' and 'logical' in Marx's work differs quite considerably from that of Backhaus, Heinrich, and especially Elbe, who accuses Engels of absurdly misunderstanding the object of Marx's research as presented in the first pages of *Capital*. Elbe believes that 'Engels interprets the first chapter of *Capital* as a simultaneously logical and historical presentation of "simple commodity production" developing toward the relations of capitalist wage labor, "only stripped of the historical form and diverting chance occurrences"' (2013; see also Fineschi 2009, 67; MECW 16, 475).

I have understood the Engels-penned review of Marx's Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859) entirely differently. Engels explained that, while Marx could have arranged his critique of political economy in either historical order (discussing Mun (1571–1641) firstly, then Quesnay, followed by Smith, Ricardo, and finally Proudhon) or logical order (dealing with the previous theories of value initially, followed by the theories of money, capital, wages, and land rents), it would have been 'impossible to write the history of political economy without that of bourgeois society, and the work would thus be endless' (MECW 16, 475). Therefore, 'the logical method of approach was ... the only suitable one' (ibid.), Engels explained. Marx therefore first turned his attention to the *theories* of value and then the theories of money, only after that moving on to theories of capital and surplus-value. In contrast, Elbe believes that in the account by Engels, Marx pondered whether he should analyse *capitalism* historically vs. logically. My angle of approach was so different that it seemed we were reading a different book.

*Capital* opens a whole host of research questions for philosophers, but there are important aspects of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* reading of *Capital* that bothered me and that I would not approach primarily as a philosopher. It appeared to me that the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*'s ceaseless interest in value theory, its interest in the 'ontological' questions connected with the nature of economic value, its still unexhausted fascination with the logic of the value-form side-stepped the most topical questions of global capital accumulation in the twenty-first century.

I began my readings of *Capital* shortly before the global financial crisis that commenced in 2007. Even though English capitalism had profoundly changed by the end of the twentieth century, capital accumulation at global scale still seemed to be proceeding roughly along the lines of Marx's general law of capitalist accumulation. Oxfam's annual reports since 2011–12 have offered few surprises. Year after year, the organisation has painted pictures just as absurd as this one from 2022: 'If the richest 10 billionaires sat on top of their combined wealth piled up in US dollar bills, they would reach almost halfway to the moon' (Ahmed et al. 2022, 9).<sup>62</sup> Marx predicted that such insanity would ensue from the dynamics of capital accumulation, which was grounded in economic abuse of those who did not possess means of production. Marx's predictions about tendential polarisation between capital and wage labour did not, from a global perspective, appear to be exaggerations. Oxfam's 2022 annual report states that inequality is killing one person every four seconds (ibid., 11). The gender bias in the distribution of wealth and power, which was well known to Marx, had not changed in the big picture: according to Oxfam, 252 men held 'more wealth than all 1 billion women and girls in Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, combined' (ibid., 6). And the racial aspect of global wealth distribution, another factor of which Marx was keenly aware, persisted: '3,4 million Black Americans would be alive today if their life expectancy was the same as White people's' (ibid.). The report's authors wrote of 'economic violence' (ibid., 11), reminiscent of Marx's vilified term 'exploitation'.

Even though the textile industry had long since left England by the first years of this century, seeking lower-cost labour power, what we know about the production conditions in the textile industry in the 21st century show that Marx's enquiry into

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<sup>62</sup> Marx ridiculed Dr Price, who envisioned the accumulation of capital on similar astronomical scale. If a "shilling put out to 6% compound interest at our Saviour's birth" (presumably in the Temple of Jerusalem), the amount accumulated "would ... have increased to a greater sum than the whole solar system could hold, supposing it a sphere equal in diameter to the diameter of Saturn's orbit" (MECW 37, 393).

the empirical reality of British textile factories had still not become obsolete. Yet the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* seemed little interested in the fact that Marx not only categorised yarn and linen as assuming either ‘relative value form’ or ‘equivalent form’ in his philosophical elaboration on the form of value but had gathered plenty of empirical evidence related to exploitation of labour power and the other pole, accumulation of capital, in such key industries as spinning and weaving in England.

All the progress in gender relations in Europe notwithstanding, recent years show women at least globally still standing on the losing side in this formerly key industry of nineteenth-century British capitalism. Reports from this century refer to approximately 80% of garment workers being women.<sup>63</sup> Day-to-day reality especially for factory workers in the garment sector still features such phenomena as being overworked while underpaid, unhealthy work conditions, non-existent social security, occupational accidents, and child labour (Pimentel 2018; ILO 2019). Marx, reviewing the results of the Sixth Report on Public Health, from 1864, explained that the high infant mortality rate in certain poor districts was ‘principally due to the employment of the mothers away from their homes’ (MECW 35, 401). In the twenty-first century, according to Oxfam, women in Vietnamese garment factories who work ‘far from home’ may be unable to see their children for months at a time.<sup>64</sup>

Nine in 10 CEOs of the biggest fashion brands are men (Friedman 2018). Economic inequality between workers and owners in this industry had not diminished. In 2018, it took four days for a CEO from one of the top five global fashion brands to earn what a Bangladeshi garment worker will earn in her lifetime and in the US slightly over one working day was required for a CEO to earn what an ordinary worker made in a year (Pimentel et al. 2018, 11).

In 2012, some time after I had finished reading the three volumes of *Capital* for the first time, 1,124 garment workers were killed in the collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory in Bangladesh.<sup>65</sup> The owners of the facility, which was serving the labels of several Western brands, among them Benetton, Mango, Walmart, Gucci,

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<sup>63</sup> See <<https://cleanclothes.org/issues/gender>>.

<sup>64</sup> See <<https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/richest-1-percent-bagged-82-percent-wealth-created-last-year-poorest-half-humanity>>.

<sup>65</sup> See <<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/apr/23/rana-plaza-factory-collapse-history-cities-50-buildings>>.

and Versace, had ignored the building's widely recognised safety problems, even ignoring such visible evidence as cracks in its walls (Barenblat and Grasso 2020). Those who died and the 2,500 who survived but with injuries had not been able to organise without fear of violence from their employer. These women and children had little more in the way of political or other human rights than did the spinners and weavers – mostly women and children – described in Marx's study of nineteenth-century England. Any claim that Marx portrayed some masculine reality of 'old' industrial capitalism would be untrue. He was well aware and made it clear that women and children were crucial to the textile industry, which was the leading sector in British industrialisation and decisive for its rise to leadership in the world market.

J. Murray, age 12, explained that he 'worked all night last night, till 6 o'clock this morning' and that he had 'not been in bed since the night before last' (MECW 35, 252). When reading the extracts that Marx picked from interviews of small children working in England's factories in the middle of the nineteenth century, I found it easy to imagine, one and a half centuries later, that similar children had sewn my jeans and t-shirts and had mined the raw materials for my mobile phone. According to recent studies by United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, UNICEF and the International Labour Organisation, ILO, 'in 2020 160 million children under 18 were doing some kind of work' and half of them were 'between the ages of 5 and 11'. Furthermore, 79 million children were 'doing work that can seriously harm their health, safety or morals' and 'children in the youngest age group – between 5 and 11' were 'just as likely to be doing hazardous work as older children'.<sup>66</sup>

Yet *Neue Marx-Lektüre* discussion of *Capital* showed little interest in some of the most central aspects of Marx's study: the length of the work day, the intensity of the work, the level of wages, and the rate of accumulation of capital. The school instead stressed the lasting importance of Marx's theories of fetishism and form analysis. Heinrich was not the only one who saw a contrast between these and the 'simple ideas of traditional "Marxist political economy," centered around labor and exploitation' (Heinrich 2004, 57). Heinrich found that such ideas did not 'help very much to understand contemporary capitalism'. But a "critique of political economy", centered around "form analysis", fetishism and a monetary theory of value and capital can help very well' (ibid.).

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<sup>66</sup> See <<https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2021/06/15/interview-unicef-child-labour>>.

I did not see why the content of Marx's form-analysis, labour, should be neglected. In all three volumes, Marx unpacks social relations of production that may be discovered behind various value-forms: price, profit, wages, interest, land rent, etc. Those social relations encompass the relationship between buyer and seller, employer and employee, debtor and creditor, landowner and tenant. There are production processes involving people who work behind the various value forms. Why concentrate on the value-forms alone?

Finally, the political conclusions these authors drew from Marx's analysis in *Capital* confused me. Heinrich (2012 [2004], 222) wrote that Marx envisioned a world without 'commodity, money ... capital' and 'the state'. To me this appeared as utopian as dreams of a world without, for instance, bureaucracy. I was not at all convinced that Marx would have dreamt of abolishing money, and, in fact, Marx's value-form analysis had led me to nearly the opposite conclusion. In his discussion of the value-form, Marx demonstrated that the general equivalent, the elementary form of money, necessarily arises out of commodity exchange. From this perspective, money would disappear if people were to cease their regular exchange of commodities. To wish for people to cease exchanging appeared unrealistic to me. Attempting to prohibit people from exchanging commodities seemed not only impossible but also authoritarian. One could express this more provocatively: even Stalin's bloody dictatorship was not able to accomplish that. And why would it be desirable anyway?

Even though I believed myself able to examine and criticise the philosophical credentials of this approach, I wished to understand it first. To be able to do so, it seemed sensible to establish an understanding of the historical context of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre's* emergence.

We can, for instance, apprehend why early mercantilism was interested in the balance of trade if we consider the position of England in the world market in the sixteenth century (see Rubin 1979 [1929], 32). Likewise, paying heed to the structure of the French economy before the revolution aids in understanding why the physiocrats were interested in the 'net product (or surplus value)' (Rubin 1979 [1929], 99; emphasis in original). Perhaps I would be able to understand the centrality of form-analysis – or of Marx's theory of fetishism – for the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* if I strove to understand the reality of the divided Germany during the Cold War. West Germany, which boasted one of the most dynamic economies in

the world, could not escape a position near the centre of the Cold War tensions. The fact that the GDR was a next-door neighbour most probably had a strong influence on readings of *Capital* here, so it did not take me long to recognise that, as I strove to understand the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, I could not afford to ignore East Germany anymore.

After some readings of Marxism-Leninism, it was easy to imagine the frustration of most West German scholars with Marx's monopolisation by the autocratically ruling communist party of the neighbouring country. It must have been difficult to read Marx within the West German academe, knowing that most of your colleagues wondered why you were wasting your time on 'historical and dialectical materialism' or why you would dedicate it to complaining about how ruthlessly workers were exploited under capitalism. I understood why highlighting a clear break from what Heinrich today calls 'traditional Marxism' appeared necessary. But a new question started to bother me. Was the break between the 'old' and the 'new' as radical in its substance as the proponents of *Neue Marx-Lektüre* thinking advertised?

In trying to understand the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, I tried my best to apply the principles of the history of ideas. Alongside economic, political, and cultural contextualisation of these ideas, I have aimed to apply immanent critique, to evaluate the views of each party by its own standards (Beiser 2016, 518). I have tried to understand the meaningfulness of the questions that very different readers of *Capital* have posed about this book in very different historical situations. Also, I have attempted to approach the main arguments of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* not only in terms of their logic but, simultaneously, from a historical or, rather, genetic angle. I believe that examining the main theses of this school within the context of the historically specific political, economic, and cultural conjunctures of West Germany renders these ideas more comprehensible. It is not without reason that the *Neue Marx-Lektüre's* reading of *Capital* appealed to many – and still does.

Being interested in my research object as a philosopher rather than a historian, I approached a corpus consisting exclusively of published materials. To enrich my understanding of the societal context and the concrete circumstances behind this body of literature, I asked specific questions of a few East and West German scholars, face to face, on the phone, or by e-mail. Among these people are Backhaus, Galander, Ruben, Schwarz, Maidansky, Christoph Lieber, Günter



Krause, and Wolfgang Küttler. This rather informal dialogue was supplemented by interviews I conducted with Hecker, Steinitz, and Werner Röhr, to be published in Finnish journals. These too, while nothing resembling systematic research interviews, helped me navigate the published literature.

In the process of researching the early phase of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* in its relation to East German Marxism and Marx research, I ultimately concluded that the formation of this school's approach was affected in two main ways. The first and the more obvious influence is that Marxism-Leninism provided a warning: an example of how not to read Marx. When compared with the West's rather marginal phenomenon of reading *Capital* within academia, East German Marxism was a powerful adversary, backed by the state apparatus of a global superpower. Secondly, these two worlds were not totally separated, largely because both German states used the German language. Therefore, not only critique but also positive influences travelled from the East to the West and the other way round, though not without great friction. I strove for an integrative picture, taking these two kinds of influence together. Hence, my research traced the tensions, contradictions, controversies, and influences between East German and West German (more specifically, Frankfurtian) readings of Marx's *Capital*, with particular focus on the years 1967 and 1968.

The main conclusion from my project is that the East and West German researchers sought to answer decidedly different questions with the aid of this classic. In evaluating the arguments presented on the two sides of the wall, I had to face a certain incommensurability of these very different discourses. Most East German readers of *Capital* were in search of solutions to the mundane problems of their planned economy, while Frankfurtians followed in Adorno's footsteps, engaging with the most profound of philosophical questions. *Capital* is a rich book, and it provided material for both projects.

With the four articles at the heart of this dissertation, I have aimed to consider and address the main ideas of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* against the backdrop of the East-West conflict. While they tease apart their subject matter chronologically in methodical fashion (following the dates of the works' appearance), the papers are mutually connected in their logic too. One of the most fundamental ideas shared by most *Neue Marx-Lektüre* authors involves an argument regarding the fundamentally critical nature of Marx's critique of political economy. This is

discussed in the first article. Secondly, from this emphasis follows an argument – central to *Neue Marx-Lektüre* thinking – that the theory of fetishism, much more than that of surplus value, is the single most important notion presented in *Capital*. This thesis is dealt with in the second article. Publication III traces the origins of the third central idea of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, involving Marx’s supposed monetary theory of value. Finally, Publication IV, on Rubin, deals with all three of these vital substantial questions: the nature of Marx’s critical project, his theory of value, and his theory of fetishism.

## 2.1. Political economy (of socialism) or critique of political economy?

‘Will commodity–money relations exist in communism?’

There will hardly be any commodities, money yes, but relations will matter the most.’ (An East German joke, as presented by Nick (2011, 23)

East German political economy always considered commodity–money relations a vital part of the economy of the country. Horst Richter (2012, 37–8) explained that, whereas Soviet political economists were split into two camps, with *tovarniki* supporting commodity production and *anti-tovarniki* denying that socialism and commodity production could be compatible, the centrality of commodity–money relations was widely accepted among East German scholars. Nevertheless, Richter explained, related issues involving the law of value, money, and the like remained controversial themes throughout this field of study’s existence (*ibid.*).

The expression ‘commodity–money relations’ was rooted in a conviction that the socialist economy differs fundamentally from an unregulated market economy. Exchange relations between enterprises, or between enterprises and consumers, were subordinated to central planning. Even though the price formation was for the most part not free and the prices of most consumer goods were subsidised, the majority of the GDR’s existence saw the law of value officially considered to be one of the foundational economic laws of socialism (Ulbricht 1967, 39). If the law of value constantly reallocates labour and capital among the various branches of production in a free market economy, the economists of the Soviet-type societies believed, central planners were carrying out this regulatory function in their own societies in those laws’ stead. The functioning of the law of value was viewed as much more limited. Nevertheless, Marx’s critique of (bourgeois) political economy

furnished, at least nominally, also the other most fundamental categories for political economy of socialism, a field of study that started to take shape in the Soviet Union during the 1950s (Richter 2012, 41).

The Frankfurtians questioned the meaningfulness and sense of that field's undertaking altogether. The first article that the dissertation comprises (Publication I) discusses this fundamental principle of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*. *Capital* is a critique of inverted thought forms of bourgeois economic reality and of how those thought forms get reflected in the science of political economy. It does not offer any alternative 'socialist' political economy. Applying this work of Marx for such purposes constitutes abuse of it.

The article focuses on the 1967 colloquium held at Goethe University for the centenary of *Capital*, which Hoff (2017 [2009], 80) and Elbe (2013; 2018, 307) have cited as crucial for the formation of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*. What has gone less discussed is that this event was one of the very rare occasions on which West and East German academic readers of *Capital* could meet with each other and engage in discussion. In addition to the three key forerunners of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* (Schmidt, Negt, and Rosdolsky), four prominent economists from the GDR gave talks.

The article addresses three main questions debated at the conference: 1) the method behind *Capital*, discussed by Rosdolsky, Schmidt, Negt, and Nicos Poulanzas (1936–79); 2) political economy of socialism, tackled by the East German delegates and by Behrens, Mandel, Altvater, and Hofmann; and 3) the possibly changed nature of capitalism, discussed by the Western economists. These three questions are all intertwined.

The East German economists did not confine themselves to a philological reading and interpretation of *Capital*; they applied its categories to the ultimately practical ends of a planned economy. In their philosophical discussion of Marx's method, no matter how theoretical and abstract, the Frankfurtians rejected this approach (see Schmidt and Euchner 1968, 359). In the conference's opening address, presented by proxy in the absence of its ailing author, Rosdolsky (1968, 14–5) underscored the importance of form for Marx's critique of political economy.<sup>67</sup> Marx was investigating not things but processes that appeared in reified forms.

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<sup>67</sup> A version in English was made available later (see Rosdolsky 1974).

Where Marx focused on transformations (*Formwechsel*), on the history of forms, his predecessors had regarded bourgeois forms of production and distribution as self-evident, eternal, and given by nature. Rosdolsky went on to conclude that Soviet economics had reached its own dead end by taking the law of value as a fixed economic law of socialism; whereas the ‘substrate’ of value is, in fact, transhistorical; according to Rosdolsky, the value-form that the labour time assumes in commodity production should not be considered absolute (*ibid.*, 15).

In the same vein, in his posthumously published monograph on the ‘Grundrisse’ material, which appeared in the following year, Rosdolsky (1977 [1968], 435) wrote that ‘if today numerous economists in the Soviet bloc elevate the law of value to the ranks of a socialist principle of distribution, this shows ... how far social and economic relations in the Soviet Union have become separated from the original aims of the October Revolution’.

As for the talk by Schmidt on the epistemology of Marx’s critique of political economy, Hoff has called it ‘a kind of “birth document” for what was a new phenomenon in postwar West Germany: the intensive and sophisticated engagement with the critique of political economy’ (Hoff 2017 [2009], 81). Schmidt’s talk is so rich and multifaceted that any attempt at an exhaustive treatment of its themes would have pulled this dissertation in too many directions. Since my focus lay on the presence of the delegation of East German political economists at the conference, Publication I’s attention to Schmidt is concentrated on this claim made in the course of the general discussion: Marx did not provide a positive theory of political economy but dealt with the existing categories of political economy critically (Schmidt 1968, 33, 52).

Echoing Adorno’s (2019 [2008], 47) lectures on social theory, Schmidt emphasised that Marx’s historical materialism was not an ontological position on whether matter or ideas are primary, as statements pertaining to the Marxist-Leninist ‘fundamental question of philosophy’ claimed it to be. Marx’s thesis that ‘[i]t is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness’ (MECW 29, 263) accurately characterised bourgeois society, in which social being determines individual-level consciousness. It was bourgeois economy – in which each individual must follow the dictates of an impersonal economic force, capital – rather than Marx’s philosophy that reduced everything to the economic ‘base’, Schmidt (1968, 33) explained. Schmidt

argued that, even though Marx's words about individuals as 'personifications of economic categories' (MECW 35, 10) might seem Hegelian and idealistic, they form an accurate description of bourgeois society, in which abstractions governed individuals (Euchner and Schmidt 1968, 27).

Already in his book *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (1962), Schmidt had emphasised that people had 'allowed themselves to be degraded into objects of the blind and mechanical process' of the 'economic dynamic' (Schmidt 2014 [1962], 41). When writing *Capital*, Marx unpacked the automatism of an economic logic forming a second nature that constrains and directs the actions of individuals. Marx laid bare the artificial nature of these man-made 'natural laws', no less objective and forceful than the laws of the first nature.

At the conference, both Schmidt and, in response to him, Negt (1968, 44) problematised the language through which Marx seemingly compared the laws of society with natural laws (Euchner and Schmidt 1968, 51, 56). What Marx and Engels stated about the 'natural laws of capitalist production' must be understood in this ironic sense, and positivistic readings actually turn things upside-down, Schmidt emphasised (*ibid.*, 51–2; here too following Adorno 2018 [1997]; 2019 [2008]; 2022 [2011]). Individuals themselves reproduce these repressive economic structures, through their daily actions. Marx's categories – value, money, capital, profits, and interest – articulate precisely such subjective-objective forms, objects that are in themselves (*an sich*) mediated by our praxis (Euchner and Schmidt 1968, 49). Only once individuals have learnt to master their own societal powers can the 'conceptual realism' of the bourgeois society (wherein an abstraction, value in its many forms, determines the fate and life course of individuals) cease to be a valid theory (*ibid.*, 52).

As explained in Subsection 1.6.1, a delegation consisting of people whom organiser Fetscher deemed 'doctrinaire Stalinists' (Anderson 1998, 6) had ended up listening to Schmidt's talk. This happened because, while Behrens alone had been invited to speak at the conference, the distrustful SED decided to send a delegation of well-vetted political economists as an escort for him (Seickert 1999, 38). One unintended consequence of this peculiar course of events was an unlikely discussion between two very different readers of *Capital*: Schmidt (with the perspective of Adorno's assistant) and Behrens's former persecutor, the head of the Department of Political Economy of Socialism at the East German Academy

of Sciences, Bichtler. The latter challenged Schmidt's theses by underlining the difficulty of studying, not to mention controlling, the laws of the 'second nature' (Euchner and Schmidt 1968, 54). He told the story of physicist Max Planck (1858–1947), who had started out in economics but soon grown frustrated. Aggregate economic phenomena result from behaviour of atomic individual actors, where these atoms, unlike the atoms of physics, act voluntarily.

Bichtler illustrated the impersonal nature of capital by stating that if 'capitalists Meier and Schulze' as personifications of capital were to decide not to follow the profit motive, there would always be someone else who would be willing to advance the interests of this impersonal social force (ibid.). Here, Schmidt interrupted Bichtler to cite Gianbattista Vico's (1668–1744) distinction between natural laws and societal laws that are of our own making. Even though we contend with objective relationships when dealing with the society, Schmidt began to explain, 'if we did not do anything...'. It was now Schmidt's turn to be interrupted, with Bichtler remarking that 'in that case, there would be no objective economic laws, no political economy, and we could go home' (ibid., 56). The two obviously agreed on the nature of economic laws; these were results of, not the reasons for, the actions of individuals and collectives.

Schmidt nevertheless objected by arguing that Marx took a critical approach to the objectivity of economic laws whereas epistemological realism turns this false objectivity into a virtue. What was already thereby fetishised in reality should not be fetishised in theory. Marx was unequivocal that in communism consciousness should determine being, not the other way around, Schmidt concluded (ibid., 57).

The fact that the East German economists had made the economic categories and laws that Marx criticised in *Capital* into positive concepts of 'political economy of socialism' frustrated several of the Frankfurtians. The 'whole problem of constitution was' thereby 'repressed' (Herf 1981, xv). Just as any other form of positivism did, it took the societal objects as given, dealt with them quantitatively, and did not ask how these facts were socially constituted in the first place. In the Frankfurtian vision, '[o]nly when individuals collectively control the life processes that have previously ruled them with the force of blind fate will human freedom for the individual be ... possible' (ibid., xviii).

East German political economists, for their part, had grown disillusioned with collective control of the social life process and chosen to hold ‘objective’ economic laws in high esteem. They had learnt from experience that even a planning commission of an authoritarian centrally managed state was incapable of controlling the actions of individual enterprises and consumers. One of the key ideas of the New Economic System of Planning and Management, or NES, of 1963–67/1970 was that steering the economic actors indirectly, through objective market mechanisms, would be more effective. At the same time, introducing markets would allow enterprises, workers, and consumers alike more freedom and responsibility for their own performance.

For instance, in face-to-face planning discussions the managers of enterprises tended to underestimate the resources at the company’s disposal. Reformers argued that the planners could gain objective, more reliable information via the market mechanism. In this respect, the reform-minded economists’ perspective on economic laws differed from the stance of the Frankfurtians. It was precisely ‘subjectivism’, according priority to preferential political decisions, that was considered one of the greatest defects of an overly centralised Stalinist planned economy (see Röll 1966, 317).

In their talks, all of East Germany’s speakers emphasised, in the spirit of the economic reforms in progress, that market categories (prices, profits, interest, etc.) were now considered central elements of the East German economy. In a contrast against this stance, Schmidt promoted the view that ‘[a]ll the categories of Marx should be grasped with regard to the state of affairs in which they must not be valid anymore’ (Schmidt and Euchner 1968, 52).<sup>68</sup> With *Capital*, Marx had revealed the reified and inverted forms of socialisation of bourgeois society. Transforming Marx’s critical categories – ‘price’, ‘profit’, ‘wage’, etc. – into the building blocks of the new field of research called ‘political economy of socialism’ hence was a fundamental misunderstanding or abuse. Decades later, Diethard Behrens and Kornelia Hafner (2008 [1990]) expressed equivalent sentiments by explaining that political economy of socialism merely attached the adjective ‘socialist’ to all relevant terms. Enterprises participated in ‘socialist’ competition in which they could make ‘socialist’ profit; the personnel of an enterprise were promised

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<sup>68</sup> My translation of ‘Alle Kategorien von Marx sind konzipiert im Hinblick auf einen Zustand, wo sie nicht mehr zu gelten brauchen’.

‘socialist’ bonuses to be consumed in ‘socialist’ consumer goods; and the ultimate goal of all this ‘socialist’ activity was ‘socialist’ economic growth.

I find the main point of the Frankfurtians to be the following, if, as Schmidt (1968) did, we view political economy as constituting its own distinct research object (research into political economy directly affects the economy of the relevant country), our reasoning leads to the conclusion also that political economy of socialism not only reflects an inverted economic reality but contributes to that reality’s creation. It is quite probable that, if productivity, growth, or profit is made an official goal of economic policy, people will begin to act accordingly. The more political economists (of socialism) highlighted the centrality of market categories, the more economic subjects oriented their actions toward the related thought forms, such as individual-level success – just as Mandel highlighted (Euchner and Schmidt 1968, 350).

A couple of years after the conference, Reichelt wrote in his book *Zur Logischen Struktur des Kapitalbegriffs bei Marx* that ‘strictly speaking, economic theory can exist only in a bourgeois society; economic theory of a socialist society is a contradiction in terms (Reichelt 1973 [1970], 96–7).<sup>69</sup> The guiding principle behind Reichelt’s book was that Marx’s method manifested in *Capital* was a ‘method on recall’ (*Methode auf Widerruf*) (ibid., 81; Reichelt 1982, 167). As Fetscher (1973 [1970], 10) explained in the preface to Reichelt’s work, the method employed in Marx’s study belonged to the very object of his research – with Marx anticipating the revolutionary sublation of this object of study.<sup>70</sup> In Reichelt’s words, such a method is ‘a method on recall insofar as it forms its concepts only from the standpoint of the dissolution (*Aufhebung*) of that which is to be conceptualised’ (Reichelt 1982, 167). Marx’s dialectical method traced the logic specific to bourgeois economies, and such a dialectical ‘form of presentation’ was valid only as long as the object that was ‘presented in the form of presentation itself’ existed (ibid.). Influenced by Adorno’s musings, Reichelt understood dialectics not as universalising ontological theory but as a specific form of thought related to the capitalist mode of socialisation.

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<sup>69</sup> My translation of ‘Ökonomische Theorie ... kann es in einem strengen Sinne nur in der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft geben; ökonomische Theorie einer sozialistischen Gesellschaft ist ein Widerspruch in sich’ (Reichelt 1973 [1970], 96–7).

<sup>70</sup> From ‘diese “Methode“ so zu ihrem “Gegenstand“ gehört, daß sie zugleich mit seiner revolutionären Aufhebung zu verschwinden bestimmt ist’.



In the same vein as Adorno and Schmidt, Reichelt emphasised that the laws of the first and of the second nature should not be conflated. The observed development of the bourgeois commodity economy seemed to suggest that a ‘natural process’ was involved (*ibid.*, 168). Per Reichelt, it should be understood as ‘an overhang of social objectivity which is made by humans themselves, who are then fully subjected to this process’ (*ibid.*). As described by a young Engels, the law of competition, though ‘purely a law of nature and not a law of the mind’, was ‘a natural law based on the unconsciousness of the participants’ (MECW 3, 433–4).

Already decades earlier, Schmidt’s and Reichelt’s teacher Horkheimer (1973 [1942], 13) had explained that ‘Marxist science constitutes the critique of bourgeois economy and not the expounding of a socialist one’. Later, in 1964, Adorno clarified in his lectures on social theory that ‘all categories’ Marx ‘uses for society are critical’ (Adorno 2019 [2008], 47). He contrasted this stance against the Eastern Bloc’s, wherein ‘the theory ... has been elevated to a state religion ... distorting it to the point where it has virtually become the opposite of what it was once meant to be’ (*ibid.*, 46). And the reason for this

perversion or dogmatization and distortion lies in the fact that all possible categories, especially those concerning the supremacy of economics and referring to materialism, were simply elevated to positive categories in the dominant thought of the Eastern bloc, as if dependence on a material superstructure or the primacy of economics, or even the primacy of production, which is certainly an intra-capitalist category and was described and criticized by Marx as such – as if these could simply act as the categories of a non-capitalist society too. (*Ibid.*, 47)

I strove to underscore in my article that these seemingly abstract philosophical discussions among the Frankfurtian philosophers at the conference were tied in with the more practice-relevant themes discussed by both Western and Eastern economists. Among these was the third major theme of the colloquium: alleged changes in capitalism.

Many speakers compassed the possibility of changes having occurred in the nature of capitalism, as West German (and other Western European and also North American) wage workers appeared relatively well-off. Still, American economist Joseph M. Gillman (1888–1968), while not disputing that the standard of living of ordinary workers had improved of late, argued in his paper that the principles of capitalism are not – in the long run – compatible with the welfare state (Gillman 1967, 154). Insofar as the welfare state undermines the dominance held by the

owners of capital over production and distribution of surplus value, and thereby depresses the profit rate, it necessarily compromises capitalist relations of production.

The director of the archives of the world economy in Hamburg, Heinz-Dietrich Ortlieb (1910–2001), rebuffed Gillman's thesis in his own comments, by claiming that the economic system of the day seemed to have changed its nature (Schmidt and Euchner 1968, 162). His assertion that capital had become much more evenly distributed among households and that no fundamental contradiction between the welfare state and capitalist mode of production exists was accepted neither by Gillman nor by Mandel, Altvater, or Hofmann (*ibid.*, 164 ff.).

This discussion was bound up with a popular theme of the day: theories of convergence. If state socialist economies and their 'political economy of socialism' appeared as a mirror image of the Western, capitalist economies, the latter economies, in turn, had crept in the direction of Eastern ones. Differences in the distribution of property and income were decreasing in the West, as the welfare state and other measures started to even out vast differences in wealth and wellbeing between social classes (Tinbergen 1961, 334). While advanced capitalist states were increasingly applying economic planning, the authors of major economic reforms in the state socialist countries sought to infuse markets, competition, and self-interestedness of enterprises and individual workers into their system (*ibid.*).

Also Marcuse's influential *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), which had appeared in German translation (by Schmidt) earlier in the year of the colloquium, presented an analysis of the 'industrial society'. Marcuse addressed the one-dimensionality of the productivist and consumerist cultures of both major socio-economic systems.

From the perspective of Marx's analysis, the presence of markets does not imply capitalist development of any sort whatsoever. Prominent Austrian heterodox economist Kurt Rotschild (1914–2010) questioned some of the presuppositions behind the identification of economic mechanisms and forms of society (*Gleichsetzung von Wirtschaftsmechanismen und Gesellschaftsformen*). He discussed the (erroneous) identification of socialism with the plan as an outcome of contingent historical developments from the 1930s onward (Rotschild 1968, 227–8): in reality, the market and the plan were both instruments that could be used to serve any of

various political goals. Rotschild assumed that convergence between these two systems could help eliminate this association; thus far, although capitalist countries had incorporated elements of planning and socialist countries had introduced market elements, the opposition between the two remained (ibid., 236).

For publications I and II, I combed through the literature that appeared in the divided Germany in connection with the centenary of *Capital* and the 150th birthday of Marx.<sup>71</sup> The conference in Frankfurt shows stark differences from equivalent events held in East Germany. Even though the colloquium was furnished with only meagre resources (see Anderson 1998, 6), it stands out as the most interesting event of its kind. Unlike the conferences in the East, where the speakers unanimously praised Marx's 'genial' work and its 'creative' application by the SED (see, for example, Heinze and Tjulpanov 1968 13), the one in Frankfurt was organised around the principle of differing points of view. Each paper was paired with a corresponding one penned by someone with a very different background (a 'correspondent'), often even from 'the opposite camp'. Also, the opening of the conference was originally envisioned as a debate between a Hegelian reader of *Capital* and the 'Grundrisse' (i.e., Rosdolsky) and Althusser, who represented an opposing, anti-Hegelian position. While this did not go to plan – Poulanzas replaced Althusser (Stutje 2009, 130), and Rosdolsky fell ill so could not travel<sup>72</sup> – the conference still represented an incredibly wide range of perspectives. Mandel, a Trotskyist economist whose work was of decisive importance for West Germany's new engagement with *Capital*, encountered the most influential economists of the GDR here. Nonetheless, there were clear indications that the same rules did not apply to the powerful East Germans. One of these is that, apart from Behrens, they had no correspondents. That fact speaks for itself.

With Publication II, I extended my focus on the conference by asking why so many West German authors regarded Marx's concept of fetishism as more fruitful than his theory of surplus value. Furthermore, why did this emphasis cause friction between Western and Eastern European researchers?

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<sup>71</sup> For details of the conferences, books, and journals that I reviewed, see the first footnote to Publication I ('Readings of *Capital* in Divided Germany: 1967 and 50 Years Later').

<sup>72</sup> On the rift between 'Hegelian' and 'structuralist' readings of Marx, see Schmidt (1981). See also Elbe (2006).

## 2.2. Fetishism or exploitation: Marx 150 and Marx 200

‘What God is for its theoretical life, money is to the practical life of this inverted world: the alienated potentiality, the bartered life-activity of men.’ (Hess 1998 [1845], 190)

Just as with Publication I, the corpus with which the second portion of my enquiry dealt consists of the literature that appeared in the divided Germany on the centenary of *Capital* (in 1967) and in connection with the ‘Marx 150’ anniversary (in 1968), with the conference in Frankfurt (100 Jahre Kapital) remaining at the centre of attention. In the article, I also briefly contrast the reception of Marx’s *Capital* in those years against the discussions 50 years later, in 2017–18, again focusing on Germany, to shed light on what has changed in the intervening half a century.

I aimed to make sense of Hoff’s (2017 [2009], 138) thesis that ‘Marx’s critical theory of fetishism has become a central point of reference for a “modern” understanding of Marxism which is represented by, among others, intellectuals who wish to distance themselves from the antiquated dogmas of “traditional Marxism”’. I asked why the emphasis on fetishism differentiates between a ‘modern’ and a ‘traditional’ reading of *Capital*.

Those readers of *Capital* who followed the critical theory of the Frankfurt school typically perceived the concept of fetishism as key to the book (see Backhaus 1997a, 34; Brentel 1989, 15; Mohl 2002, 18–19). The central argument put forth in my article is that Marx’s concept of fetishism as opposed to a more traditional reading emphasising the theory of surplus value appealed to these young scholars for a reason. Marx’s theory of fetishism posits that the apparent social objectivity conceals more fundamental social relations; not all is quite what it seems. This point was understandably attractive to radical students and early-career scholars in a country where wage workers were probably better off than ever before, anywhere.

This generation pursuing a higher education was many times the size of previous generations of students: West Germany was among the countries seeing the number of university students multiply from what it had been before the Second World War (Hobsbawm 1995 [1994], 295). One specific factor increasing the need for a highly educated labour force in West Germany was the erection of the Berlin

Wall, which stemmed the brain drain from the GDR to the West as the early 1960s rolled in (Fülberth 2010, 48). With multiplication in the number of university places, children of lower middle-class or even working-class families gained access to higher education. Unlike ever before, students now formed a distinct social group, beginning to formulate its own specific interests and goals. As events in 1968 demonstrated, students were extremely effective in organising to reach those goals.

Students who found Marx's texts encountered a problem. Marx had identified wage workers as that class within an industrialised capitalist society that would have both interest in and means to challenge the bourgeois class's hegemony. Radicalised students, however, observed that the workers were relatively well-off and, accordingly, both satisfied and passive. Adorno stepped in here with social-theory lectures discussing the apparent integration of the wage workers into society and a complete lack of 'class-consciousness' among them (2019 [2008], 60). These unionised workers no longer faced their employers alone, in marked contrast against the age of classical liberalism, and wages were not set at subsistence level any longer (*ibid.*, 30). Therefore, he argued, 'the proletarians today genuinely have more to lose than their chains, namely their small car or motorcycle', and he asked 'whether these cars and motorcycles are perhaps a sublimated form of chains' (*ibid.*, 38).

From Adorno's Marxist perspective, which entailed envisioning increased autonomy of all members of a society, West Germany at that time was no more than a 'parody of classless society' (*ibid.*, 70). The working class was caught up in consumerist ideology and bribed to support the prevailing relations of domination and power. Marketing and the culture industry created false needs, and stable work contracts enabled satisfaction of those needs.

This is the backdrop against which I understand the Frankfortian emphasis on Marx's theory of fetishism and his theory of impersonal, or structural, forms of domination. The theory of surplus value was not helpful at all for explaining the apparent integration of the working class. Marx's theory of fetishism, which holds that the essential social relations are obscured beneath the immediately appearing, proved to be much more useful for these scholars.

Moreover, it seems to me that the concept of fetishism was useful both for targeting the two variants of modern industrialised society and for pointing out their converging elements. In 1967, Marcuse explained in his public talk at Freie Universität Berlin that the one-dimensional society had integrated the working class. The only opposition left consisted of intellectuals, hippies, and outcasts (Marcuse 1967, 399). This was one of the key ideas of Marcuse's above-mentioned monograph *One-Dimensional Man* also, which became available in German in the same year. Wage workers seemed to 'find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, [and] kitchen equipment', Marcuse (2002 [1964], 11) wrote. Such soft forms of domination could be observed in both variants of advanced 'industrial civilization'.

I read Marcuse's analysis of the 'industrial society' as a specific leftist variant of convergence theory, one that traced tendencies coming together between the two competing systems, the 'communist and the "free" economies according to western terminology) or the "socialist" and "capitalist" systems (according to the eastern vocabulary)' (Tinbergen 1961, 333). I find one pillar of Marcuse's book to consist of the observation that the state socialist countries seemed to be organised around core values similar to those of the Western capitalist societies. Workers had no control over production. Consent for some productivist ideology and authoritarian political order was bought with consumerist promises of a continually rising standard of living.

Marxist-Leninists, of course, disputed Marcuse's theses. *Neues Deutschland* triumphantly reported on 31 May 1968 that 'Marcuse's opinions did not find any proponents anymore' at a conference held in Frankfurt on the Marx anniversary<sup>73</sup> (given that *Marxistische Blätter* organised the event, this might be true).

Addressing this problematic, as discussed in Section 1.6, Mandel challenged the GDR economists present at the conference, asking why East Germans were not even trying to rid themselves of commodity production (Euchner and Schmidt 1968, 344). Were they not worried about the alienation and fetishisation that commodity production brings with it?

Commodity (or money) fetishism probably was one of the lowest priorities for the top economists of the GDR. After all, as Thomas Sauer (2015, 1636) stated, 'the

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<sup>73</sup> Wessel, Harald 1968, 'Karl Marx in Frankfurt (Main)', *Neues Deutschland*, 31 May, 4.

poverty of the state socialist societies' presented itself as 'an immense shortage of commodities, its elementary form being the emptiness of the shelves'.<sup>74</sup> On the contrary, therefore, the majority of the economists in the early 1960s advocated introducing some market elements to their planned economy to solve the problems of an economy later described, in line with the thinking of economist János Kornai (1980), as a shortage economy (*Mangelwirtschaft*) (see also Behrens 1992, 139–40; Brangsch 2015; Krause 1995; Nick 2011, 79 ff.; Sauer 2015; Weber 2021).

In consequence of full employment and generous social security, the incentives related to capitalist countries' dual freedom of wage workers were absent. So were the incentives created by competition among workers, among investors, and among enterprises. Low productivity was characteristic of the GDR economy. Shortages further reduced productivity and the effectiveness of resource use. Enterprises' struggles to find the necessary inputs led to production stoppages, and enterprises sometimes had to resort to more expensive or otherwise unsuitable substitutes (Nick 2011, 86). Bottlenecks thus seriously impaired the economy by posing obstacles to rational allocation of resources (Nick 1996, 13).

No true markets for consumer goods ever existed in these environments. A considerable proportion of the consumer goods was heavily subsidised, and the items were snapped up as soon as they reached the retail shelves (*ibid.*, 11; Nick 2011, 79 ff.; Roesler 2020 [2012], 63; Steiner 2010b, 89; Zatlin 2007, 6–7, 54). Shortages in the retail trade further depressed labour productivity, in that people often left the workplace in the middle of the work day for the necessary queuing and shopping. This exacerbated the problem, helping ensure that the shelves of grocery stores remained empty. As Vesa Oittinen wryly stated<sup>75</sup>, if only the people in the Eastern Bloc countries had had some commodities, they would not have minded a bit of commodity fetishism in the bargain.

Reformers believed that infusing some market elements would have encouraged enterprises to take the consumers' needs into better consideration and to increase productivity (Nick 2011, 55; Steiner 2010b, 110–11). As noted above, one of the overarching aims for the reforms was to make enterprises responsible for their use of resources. In the highly centralised planned economy, managers focused less on

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<sup>74</sup> 'Die Armut staatssozialistischer Gesellschaften erscheint als ungeheuerer Warenmangel, die Leere des Einkaufsregals als dessen Elementarform' (Sauer 2015, 1636) as translated by me.

<sup>75</sup> Per personal communication with Oittinen in spring 2018.

producing resources than on ‘blagging’ resources for their enterprises (Nick 2011, 55). The local information they had was a useful bargaining chip here, since the central planners lacked this asset (Steiner 2010b, 5). Reformers believed that the market mechanism would have provided objective, reliable information for the central planners.

Market relations are impersonal. This fact often leaves social critics wary, but economic relations of a formal nature do demonstrate some benefits over economic relations tied to a specific person. Purchases and sales are contracts that expire as soon as the commitments have been fulfilled. In his analysis of market relations between independent commodity-producers, Marx accentuated the ideals that arise from the market practices. Exchange is a temporary contract that presupposes that the two parties recognise their mutual equality and their shared freedom and self-interest (MECW 35, 95, 186). Marx’s critique of the capitalist mode of production did not rule it out as possessing some value.<sup>76</sup> He held equality, freedom, and even self-interest in high esteem. These were just limited to the sphere of the (labour) market. Even though the individual labourers sold their labour power freely and only on account of their own self-interest, those buying that labour-power consumed it as they pleased. The freedom, equality, and justified self-interest in a bourgeois society, while real, are superficial because they do not hold force in the place of work, where the employer alone rules (MECW 35, 186). Therefore, even though every market actor is formally free and equal to the others, certain patterns recurrently emerge. In rough terms, for instance, working-class women of colour tend to end up on the losing side while bourgeois white men often come out on top. The reasons for this must be sought in the relations of ownership and production that underpin the markets. Formally fair and impartial market relations linked to the capitalist mode of production involve yet conceal political and economic relations of power and dominance, and this domination is structural rather than personal.

In contrast, what Thomas Piketty (2020 [2019], 969) has called ‘hypercentralized state socialist’ economies, denoted as ‘state monopolistic socialism’ by Behrens (1992), and ‘statist socialism’ by Eric Olin Wright (2010, 131), was characterised by the opposite: personal relations of power and dominance. In the GDR, power was bound up with the positions of individuals within the party and the state apparatus. On the other hand, money, which is fundamentally not tied to any person, did not

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<sup>76</sup> For an alternative interpretation, see Rakowitz (2000).



grant individuals much power over others. It is no wonder, then, that even common people were rarely short of money. Money could not buy everything. Firstly, various consumer goods (and even raw materials) were available only sporadically. Secondly, markets for capital goods and doubly free labour power did not exist. Therefore, money could not function as capital, and one could not carry impersonal power of money (as capital) in one's pocket. 'Unable to command resources, socialist money circulated as an accounting unit that recorded centrally authorized transactions', Jonathan Zatin (2007, 6) has explained.

Power was tightly tied to the person, to each individual's social status and networks. According to Harry Nick (2011, 58), after the disappearance of the GDR, the most powerful man in the country, Honecker, was left with a sum that would not have sufficed even to buy a flat. Before the collapse of this peculiar statist political system, however, there were few things that he could not have obtained. The accordant highly personalised nature of power is one factor that must be considered by anyone contemplating the distribution of wealth and income in the Eastern Bloc. While, in Filip Novokmet et al.'s estimation (2018, 217), monetary wealth and income was probably more evenly distributed in the Soviet Union and in the countries under its influence than ever before in human history, societal power was decoupled from property and income. Therefore, monetary indicators such as wealth or income statistics do not reflect the differences in levels of consumption or wellbeing. Party elites were rewarded 'in kind' with access to special shops, holiday resorts, and luxury goods (*ibid.*, 214).

Equally for ordinary people chasing commodities that were in short supply, the hard currency was not the East German mark but personal relations. A system of favours, or reciprocal help, *blat* (see Shikalov 2020; see also Zatin 2007), emerged as a spontaneous, decentralised solution to the problems of a rigid, ineffective, and bureaucratic planned economy that often failed to deliver all but the barest necessities (goods that it may sometimes have provided too cheaply).

If we compare this system with a genuine market, and a monetary economy, the latter shows some obvious benefits. As Klaus Müller (2015, 136) explained, if the hypothetical consumer Detlev needed tiles in the GDR, he was probably not surprised to find empty shelves in all of the town's hardware stores. Without personal relations, his renovation project would have been doomed. Luckily, he knew Arno, who had some spare tiles. Unfortunately, Arno needed a bathtub,

which Detlev could not offer in return. After some queries, however, both got in touch with Bruno, who had a bathtub but needed a copper pipe, and Detlev happened to have heard in a pub that Carl had some spare copper pipes. Carl was in search of a car, so Detlev gave him his wife's queue number for a Trabant and received the copper pipe in exchange. He supplied this to Bruno, who then gave his bathtub to Arno, who supplied the tiles to Detlev.

One could, as Müller (ibid., 130) does, regard such exchange paths among three or more people (the *Ringtausch*) as a regression in the chain of value-forms. Each person offered a particular commodity as an equivalent, and none of the commodities was in the general equivalent form. Müller, just as Rubín (2018b) and others have, understood Marx's value-form analysis to be an illustration of the emergence of a general equivalent, and money alongside expansion and regularisation of commodity exchange. This is a reading that the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* vehemently opposes, but it is a reading that has its benefits. In the words of Rubín (2018b, 658–9), for Marx, '[m]oney was the result of a gradual expansion and growing complexity of exchange, [emerging] through countless repetition of a mass of unconscious actions'. From this perspective, the central lesson of Marx's analysis of the value-form is that money and its value is, as Rubín stressed, not a creation of the state but a spontaneous social result of decentralised commodity exchange (ibid.). Not even Stalin's heavy-handed dictatorship could dictate the value of money.

Neither could Stalin prevent citizens from exchanging things: as Müller (2015, 130) has explained through various illustrations, the planned economy of the Soviet Union would not have survived a single day without black markets (see also Lewin 2005, 365). Even though *blat*, rooted in mutual assistance, could be described as a network of unalienated and transparent face-to-face relations between individuals, it was not without its problems. As showcased by Detlev's predicament, transaction costs remained unnecessarily high. Citizens spent a considerable proportion of their non-work time searching for commodities and bargaining. This entailed not only an increase in the time expended on reproductive work, especially for women, but also a further decrease in the productivity of social labour.

The formal equality of modern impersonal market relations has its advantages over direct face-to-face relations between individuals. Anyone who possesses enough money can buy a bathtub at any time. Personal sympathies and antipathies should

not matter in the transaction. Someone who lacks an extensive network of personal contacts does not necessarily become marginalised.

This is the background against which I understand Bichtler's challenge to Schmidt. I do not think Bichtler meant his defence of 'the objectivity of economic laws' to be a true defence of the so-called 'natural laws' of the Marxist-Leninist philosophy of history (undermining individual agency) that the Frankfurt school so rightly has criticised. In contrast against Stalin and Stalinism, the reformers apparently understood the 'laws of the economy' as expressions of the actions of individuals, not their cause (see Röhl 1966, 317).

One of the main conclusions from my project is that the East and West German researchers sought to answer decidedly different questions with the aid of Marx's *Capital*. I argue that the theory of fetishism was in many respects a better resource for the West Germans than the theory of surplus value was (of course, as Meghnad Desai pointed out to me in May 2018, I could apply this part of the analysis to various other Western European countries too<sup>77</sup>). Given that the Frankfurtians applied the ideas of fetishisation, reification, and alienation in their condemnation of authoritarian state socialism, these concepts were potentially awkward for the East Germans. Even more importantly, however, East German economists were busy contending with the most mundane problems of their country's planned economy through the aid of Marx's book.

Given my view that the emphasis on the concept of fetishism had its roots in the historical peculiarities of West Germany (and partly also Western Europe more generally), I turn the critical gaze to whether this "modern" understanding of Marxism' (Hoff 2017 [2009], 138) is now, half a century later, up to date. Since many problematic societal conditions of yore, such as poverty, exploitation, and extension of work hours, seem to be returning even to Western Europe, is all the dogma of so-called traditional Marxism – primarily the theory of surplus value – so antiquated after all?

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<sup>77</sup> Desai's comment was in the context of an international conference on Karl Marx in Patna, India, on 19 June 2018. See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-fJBprIAq0&t=9434s>> at timestamp 2:26:30–2:27:40.

## 2.3. The *Neue Marx-Lektüre* and the ‘monetary theory of value’ in the East German labour-value measurement debate

‘Labour as a ground of the determination of value is no more measurable than utility.’ (Backhaus 1975, 127)<sup>78</sup>

Proponents of a monetary interpretation of Marx’s theory of value (*monetäre Werttheorie*) argue that one cannot estimate the amounts of socially necessary labour time that lie behind the prices. Whereas a more traditional interpretation would hold that the quantities of labour expended in production and the amounts of value produced correlate with each other, a monetary interpretation addresses only the latter factor. Labour inputs are not measurable independently of monetary value; Backhaus (1975, 127) even contrasts labour against utility, in an interesting manner. Hence, the labour times on which value is based would be no more measurable than are the perceived utilities in the competing marginal-utility theory.

In Heinrich’s framing, the monetary interpretation of Marx’s theory of value is one of three major substantial points of unity among those authors who could be cited as *Neue Marx-Lektüre* members.<sup>79</sup> Alongside 1) the monetary character of Marx’s theory of value, the other two are 2) rejection of a historical-logical or a genetic approach and 3) emphasis on Marx’s theory of fetishism (Heinrich 2022, 141). While publication II deals with the question of fetishism, the third article concentrates on the connection between Marx’s theories of value and money.

In the words of Elbe (2010 [2008], 184), the monetary interpretation of Marx’s theory of value is ‘one of the essential discoveries of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*’.<sup>80</sup> Heinrich argued that in the ‘substantialist’ reading of Marx’s theory of value, which ‘dominated in traditional Marxism’ (Heinrich 2009, 92), value would be ‘a substance found in a *single* commodity’ (ibid.; see also Heinrich 2012 [2004], 54).

Publication III demonstrates that both claims are deeply problematic. I highlight that when Hans Georg Backhaus first presented his monetary interpretation of

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<sup>78</sup> ‘Die Arbeit ist ... als Bestimmungsgrund der Wertgröße ebensowenig meßbar wie der Nutzen.’ Translation mine.

<sup>79</sup> An abridged version of my article, translated into German by Ehrenfried Galander and Winfried Schwarz, appeared in *Z. Zeitschrift Marxistische Erneuerung*, 130, in June 2022 (see Rauhala 2022).

<sup>80</sup> ‘[E]ine der wesentlichen Entdeckungen der neuen Marx-Lektüre, ihre Erkenntnis der Marxschen Theorie als *monetärer Werttheorie*’. Translation mine.

Marx's theory of value in the early 1970s, he referred explicitly to an early-1960s debate among GDR economists about the possibility of estimating quantities of labour value in terms of commodities' labour content. One camp in that discussion, comprising several highly distinguished economists, held that expressing labour value in terms of labour time is impossible: the substance of value is not a measurable quantity of labour time but, rather, a social relation (Neumann 1961). This position, often presented in official textbooks of the GDR (see, for instance, Zagolow et al. 1972 [1970], 263) corresponds to the 'monetary interpretation' represented by the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* today<sup>81</sup> – though not in all respects, as Müller (2022) has reminded me. One thing is clear, however. A substantialist interpretation, at least as presented by Heinrich, was far from mainstream in the GDR. Hence, it is problematic that *Neue Marx-Lektüre* adherents today maintain an inaccurate contrast between their reading of *Capital* and that of 'traditional Marxism'.

Earlier, Haug penned a brief note stating that Heinrich attributed a 'substantialist' interpretation of value to this straw-man traditional Marxism (2004b; 2013, 141). The problem here, according to Haug, is that several traditional Marxists, Lenin among them, have indeed emphasised that value should be understood as a relationship. Haug (2004b; 2013, 137–8) has compared the role of traditional Marxism in Heinrich's writings with the scrounger character in Sean O'Casey's (1880–1964) play *Purple Dust*. Throughout the play, this figure wanders around the stage with a half-empty bottle in his hand. He is never given an opportunity to speak. Haug supposes that, were Heinrich to give this character, traditional Marxism, a right to speak, a babble of voices would emanate from its mouth. His point is that disagreement and argument mark traditional Marxism. The aim of my project, then, has been to demonstrate that this was true even of Soviet and East German academic Marxism in the latter part of the nineteenth century – despite all the attempts of the party and its secret police to control or even silence independent-minded scholars.

In response to an abridged German translation of Publication III, Müller (2022) pointed out that it is not quite correct to present the various monetary interpretations expressed in the GDR as precursors to the 'monetary theory of value' articulated by current proponents of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*. While I agree, this does not mitigate the fact that there are striking similarities between Herbert

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<sup>81</sup> Helmut Dunkhase (2022, 12–13) has made a similar observation.

Neumann (1961) and Heinrich (1999; 2012 [2004]). Although proffering similar arguments before another author does not make one an influence on that author, Backhaus not only developed Marx-anchored arguments for the monetary nature of value prior to others but also explicitly referred to Neumann and other participants in this earlier discussion in the GDR.

With all four articles, I investigated the relationship between the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* and Marx scholarship in East Germany. One of the findings from my research – all four articles considered – is that, whereas East German scholars followed the work of their colleagues or counterparts in the West, the authors in the proximity of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, with the notable exception of Backhaus, appear to have been disinterested and even ignorant. Neither Heinrich nor Elbe exhibited awareness of this ‘labour-value measurement debate’ in the GDR. This is somewhat surprising because Backhaus explicitly referred to this debate in his celebrated essay ‘Zur Dialektik der Wertform’ (1980, 116) and also in the first part of his ‘Materialien zur Rekonstruktion Marxschen Werttheorie’ series, which he began in 1974 (Backhaus 1974, 56–8, 69). Both are significant texts for the entire tradition.

As I have indicated above, it is easy to understand the reasons for such indifference, chief among them the unprofessional and anything but collegial language that East German scholars used in their rants against the ‘Marx-falsifiers’ in the West. Serious East German scholarship must have appeared little more interesting than Marxist-Leninist tracts and propaganda leaflets. Therefore, I maintain that the reasons for which the authors in the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* sphere were ignorant with regard to the work of their counterparts in the East do not rest with the individuals involved. There are objective, structural factors rooted in the system-level confrontation. Regrettably, I have not made this point in the article itself.

The fourth article ties in with all three major substantial foci of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* discussed in this dissertation: the criticism fundamental to Marx’s project, Marx’s theory of fetishism, and his theory of value. All of these themes were central for Rubín in the Soviet Union of the 1920s. This is why various *Neue Marx-Lektüre* authors have presented Rubín as their predecessor.

## 2.4. The *Neue Marx-Lektüre* – followers of Isaak Rubin?

‘Konflikte zwischen Alleinerben

Mein Marx wird deinem Marx  
den Bart ausreißen

Mein Engels wird deinem Engels  
die Zähne einschlagen

Mein Lenin wird deinem Lenin  
alle Knochen zerbrechen

Mein Stalin wird eurem Stalin  
den Genickschuß geben

Unser Trotzki wird eurem Trotzki  
den Schädel spalten

Unser Mao wird euren Mao  
im Jangtse ertränken

damit er dem Sieg  
nicht mehr im Wege steht’

(Erich Fried 1978, 88)

Rubin is widely regarded as one of the most important experts in Marx’s theory of the early Soviet Union. His career simultaneously tells the story of the suppression and end of serious scholarship (on Marxist theory) in that environment. Rubin met a cruel end in conjunction with the execution of Riazanov and the dismantling of the MEGA1 project, which saw more than half of the project’s staff executed alongside these two scholars (Rokityansky and Müller 1996, 116–17 per Boldyrev and Kragh 2015, 367–8). Serious engagement with Marx was put on hiatus for decades in the Soviet Union.

Publication IV goes through the reception of Rubin’s ideas in the divided Germany during the years of the Cold War between 1949 and 1989. The analysis reveals a gap between words and deeds on both sides of the wall.

My research shows that in West Germany, even though such scholars as Hoff (2017 [2009], 15) and Elbe (2010 [2008], 29; Elbe 2013) have portrayed Rubin as a predecessor of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, the authors most often associated with this

school – including Schmidt, Backhaus, Reichelt, Sohn-Rethel, Göhler, and Brentel – barely discussed Rubin’s writings at all.

Moreover, in apparent contradiction with what the authors contributing to the later *Neue Marx-Lektüre* have argued, Backhaus in the second part of the *Materialien* (1975, 124, 150) counts also the early Soviet economist Rubin among the premonetary value-theorists. Contrary to what many of his followers believe, he did not consider Rubin’s work a precursor to his ‘monetary’ interpretation of Marx’s theory of value.

Yet it is abundantly clear that Rubin’s most central ideas, his emphasis on the concept of fetishism, and the intimate connection he articulated between value theory and the theory of fetishism coincide with the most central ideas of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, even if his reading of *Capital* diverges from the latter’s ideas considerably with regard to other, equally central questions.

The first disagreement pertains to the scope of the law of value: for most authors associated with the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, this law is valid exclusively for those markets dominated by competition between modern industrial capitals (Heinrich 2012 [2004], 39 ff.; Rakowitz 2000, 89), while for Rubin (1979 [1929], 308; 2018a [1929], 802, 809–10) it was a more general law pertaining to different forms of commodity production.

The second point of disagreement involves the nature of Marx’s analysis of the value-form. Whereas for the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* his analysis of it consists of a ‘conceptual reconstruction’ without any historical relevance (Heinrich 2012 [2004], 56), for Rubin (2018b, 658–9) it traces the genesis of money alongside the generalisation and regularisation of commodity exchange. Moreover, Marx’s teaching about the ‘genesis of money’ explained ‘the historical process of the emergence of money from the commodity (or more accurately, from products that find themselves in the process of conversion into commodities’ and, secondly, disclosed ‘the laws of the simultaneous and mutually conditioned movement of commodities and money in the developed capitalist economy’ (Rubin 2018a [1929], 767–8; emphasis in original).

If West German authors have tended to overestimate their knowledge of Rubin’s work and stress the similarities between his ideas and their own, East German scholars have over-accentuated the mutual differences. In East Germany, wherever



Marxist-Leninist political economy mentioned Rubin, it officially rejected his main ideas. Scholars of Marx and Marxist political economy (at least the MEGA editors and historians of political economy), however, knew Rubin from at least two sources. Firstly, two translations that appeared in West Germany in the early 1970s were available to many East German scholars too (see Rubin 1973 [1928]; Rubin et al. 1975). As for the second source, histories of political economy introduced Rubin and his school while taking care to echo Stalin's (1954) verdict on the two opposing views idealistic 'Rubinism' and vulgar-materialistic 'Mechanism'. Even though Stalin was no longer openly invoked, this constitutes further evidence of how incomplete the de-Stalinisation was – especially in the sphere of ideology.

The rejection of Rubin's ideas in East Germany did not only have its foundations in genuine disagreements of substance. As a victim of Stalin who was at the same time one of the most important early Soviet Marxist economists, he had produced writings the very existence of which was simply a taboo subject (Hecker 2012, 6). It was for the same reason that Rubin, just as Riazanov did (see Rabehl 1973), held appeal for many scholars in West Germany. He was not only an important Marxian economist, economic historian, translator, and editor of Marx's writings but also someone who had never compromised his critical approach to research into the history of economic thought, Marx's ideas included.

The gap between word and deed on both sides of the Berlin Wall may be explained by the fact that the reception of Rubin's ideas in both German states was politicised during the Cold War.

## 2.5. Questions for further research

The four articles together cohere around 'genetically' tracing why certain questions and answers might have been compelling for different readers of *Capital*, in different societal contexts. With this scope, I have often refrained from taking strong positions on substantive matters. Therefore, the questions pertaining to Marx's method and approach, value theory, and his theories of fetishism and surplus value themselves remain disputed.

My contextualisation work does point to frequently neglected angles for approaching such questions. Regarding the possible tension between Marx's theory

of fetishism and his theory of exploitation, I have argued that the Frankfurtians but not the East Germans had valid reasons for emphasising the former aspect of Marx's theory (see Publication II). It remains to be demonstrated elsewhere that fetishism and exploitation must be taken equally seriously. In this respect, the key element of my reading – greatly diverging from the *Neue Marx-Lektüre's* position – is that Marx found neither fetishism nor exploitation specifically characteristic of modern capitalist societies. According to him, both are age-old phenomena. What is unique to the modern bourgeois societies, I would argue following Marx, is the coincidence of these two phenomena.

As noted in the concluding portion of the second article, my treatment, while demonstrating the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* adherents' disproportionate emphasis on the 'fetishism of commodities' section from the beginning of the first book, leaves it to future research to demonstrate that said focus places them in danger of losing sight of the centrality of the concept and idea of fetishism – the fetishism of capital especially – throughout all three volumes of *Capital*, in the course of which Marx removes the shroud from mystification of the common sense and of political economy. The mystification stems from the unique way in which modern exploitation is mediated by complex market phenomena. Commenting on Publication II, Janaína de Faria (2020) states that

*Capital* indeed culminates in revealing that the capitalist mode of production encompasses a particular mode of distribution that reproduces the illusion that revenues (rent, interest, profit, wages) emerge out of things themselves (land, money, machines, labour) instead of from underlying exploitative social relations.

These words attest to the perspective provided and to the kinds of enquiry it can inform.

With respect to the substantive question behind Publication III, my own point of departure would be Ottmar Lendle's (1961, 1531) observation that Marx defined abstract labour consistently and repeatedly as 'expenditure of human labour power' (*Verausgabung menschlicher Arbeitskraft*) (see, for instance, MECW 35, 54, 55, 56, 78, 82, 84, 211). There is little textual evidence that he would have defined abstract labour as 'social relation'. Scholarship concentrating directly on this issue might be able to show that one can make sense of Marx's own definitions properly and in such a way that the *Neue Marx-Lektüre's* greatest fears – that we would thereby end up supporting a substantialist and naturalist 'pancake theory of value' (Elbe 2010 [2008], 217; Krause 1977, 143) – are not warranted.

Such an endeavour could prove challenging, though. It seems to me that Backhaus correctly concluded that the way Marx presented his theory of value must be inadequate (see, for example, Backhaus 1987, 42). As the third article highlights, readers of Marx have ended up embroiled in a major dispute every 50 years as to whether what he called the substance of value, abstract labour, is an indeterminate social relation (e.g., Rubin 1973 [1928]; Neumann 1961; Heinrich 2012 [2004]; Postone 1993) vs. a measurable quantity of labour time (e.g., Dashkovskij 2012 [1926]; Lendle 1960; Honkanen 2019; Shaikh 2016). It remains unclear whether the problem is substantial or, rather, lies just in the form of presentation. However, I do not believe that ‘the genius’ Marx had a watertight theory, and that the fault would be with the intellectual capacity of his followers.

Future scholarship could also more deeply consider Heinrich’s (2022, 141) third substantial point central to the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*. This involves the school’s critique of the historical-logical method. It appears that various authors critiquing Engels have misunderstood the essence of his review of *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.

Heinrich, for instance, supposes that the object of Marx’s critique was the ‘capitalist mode of production’, while Hecker, for his part, has asked whether Marx ‘investigated in the first chapter the historical process of development of simple commodity production or the simple circulation of the capitalistically produced commodities’ (2018, 45).<sup>82</sup> I would argue that someone reading Engels correctly understands him as explaining that Marx could have organised his critique of the *science* of political economy either historically or logically. The assumption by Elbe, Heinrich, Hecker, and others that Engels was speaking of economic history is rooted in a misunderstanding. This awareness could have profound implications for future work.

Finally, the history of ideas of Marxism in the twentieth century and of Marxism-Leninism in particular offers a wealth of research questions for further exploration. In what respects do today’s textbooks reflect Marxist-Leninist dogmas and present its tenets as Marx’s ideas? If the landscape is changing in this respect, what might that tell us? Another vital issue is how well textbooks (at university and high-school

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<sup>82</sup> ‘Wird im ersten Kapitel der geschichtliche Entwicklungsprozess der einfachen Warenproduktion oder die einfache Zirkulation kapitalistisch produzierter Waren untersucht?’ Translation mine.

level both) incorporate the numerous other Marxist traditions into their presentation, among them the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*.

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## PUBLICATIONS



# PUBLICATION

I

**Readings of *Capital* in Divided Germany: 1967 and 50 years Later**

Rauhala, Paula

*Beiträge zur Marx–Engels–Forschung Neue Folge*, 2018, 19: 113–51.

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# READINGS OF *CAPITAL* IN DIVIDED GERMANY: 1967 AND 50 YEARS LATER\*

Paula Rauhala

The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Marx's *Capital* in the autumn of 1967 was celebrated at various conferences in both East and West Germany.<sup>1</sup> One that is of particular

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\* This paper was presented at the International Conference "Das Kapital. Zur Entstehungs- und Rezeptionsgeschichte" in Berlin, October 29, 2017, organized by the Berliner Verein zur Förderung der MEGA-Edition e.V. and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

<sup>1</sup> A selected international bibliography on the literature that appeared on the centennial anniversary of *Capital*, collected by Inge Schliebe and Ingrid Mill, is published in *Beiträge zur Marx-Engels-Forschung 1968*.

Following is a list of the conferences and publications that took place in East and West Germany to celebrate *Capital*'s 100th anniversary that I have taken into account. In West Germany, in addition to the conference in Frankfurt am Main discussed in this paper: Suhrkamp Verlag published a collection of essays edited by Ernst Theodor Mohl titled *Folgen einer Theorie* (1967); Europäische Verlagsanstalt published the first West German edition of "Grundrisse"; it also published *Capital*; Marxistische Blätter published a special issue (February 1967); the Karl Marx Society of Hamburg celebrated with a conference (Neues Deutschland September 18, 1967); newspapers and periodicals like *Welt der Arbeit* (September 15, 1967), *Vorwärts* (September 14, 1967), *Frankfurter Allgemeine* (September 14, 1967), and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (September 15, 1967) published a number of articles.

In the East, the celebrations were, of course, held on a much broader scale. 1) Conferences: Official celebrations organized by the central committee of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) were held in East Berlin from September 12-13, 1967. Walter Ulbricht's keynote talk was published by Dietz Verlag as a separate booklet. *Neues Deutschland* (September 13, 1967) published Ulbricht's talk and its main points for a wider audience. The contributions of international guests were published in a volume: „*Das Kapital*“ von Karl Marx und seine Internationale Wirkung. Beiträge ausländischer Teilnehmer an der wissenschaftlichen Session "100 Jahre, 'Das Kapital'", veranstaltet vom ZK der SED am 12. und 13. September 1967 in Berlin, consisting of 37 contributions; Philosopher Wolfgang Eichhorn I and economist Hans Wagner organized a conference together with the Free German Youth (*Freie Deutsche Jugend*, FDJ) at the Humboldt University in March 1967, and a selection of talks was also published in a volume titled *100 Jahre Kapital. Ausgewählte Materialien des Symposiums von Lehrkörper und Studenten der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin 1967*; The Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the Central Committee of SED organized a colloquium on the early reception of *Capital* in the workers' movement September 28-29, 1967, and the materials were published in *Beiträge zur Marx-Engels-Forschung* in 1968; the Institute of Philosophy at the Friedrich-Schiller University in Jena organized a conference November 16-17 examining *Capital* from the perspective of philosophy, and the materials are published in a volume *Die aktuelle philosophische Bedeutung des "Kapital" von Karl Marx*.

2) Journals: The theoretical journal, published by the central committee of the SED, *Einheit. Zeitschrift für Theorie und Praxis des wissenschaftlichen Sozialismus* 22:7 (1967), published several articles and, for example, an interview with the most important publishers of the GDR and A.W.

interest took place at the Goethe University of Frankfurt in September 1967. The papers presented at this conference were published, and the discussions after each paper were documented in the volume *100 Jahre Kapital* edited by Alfred Schmidt and Walter Euchner (1968). This conference is notable because it enabled what at that time was a rare encounter between East and West German experts on Marx's critique of political economy.

In the Frankfurt conference, three central themes were discussed:

1. The method of Marx's *Capital* was of special interest for the organizers, who were the philosophers and social scientists from Frankfurt. This conference was probably the first important event in which the students of the first generation of the Frankfurt school started to focus on Marx's *Capital*, rather than on his earlier writings.

2. Although organized at the Goethe University of Frankfurt, and although the organizer was the famous "Marxologist" (as East Germans called him), the chief of the Institute of Political Science at the Goethe University of Frankfurt Iring Fetscher, the conference was not limited to gathering of philosophers concentrating on Marx's and Hegel's dialectical subtleties. A greater part of the papers and discussions focused on a very different topic: the political economy of socialism. The East German economists, especially, who were invited to the conference, discussed the

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Urojeva's review on the editions of *Capital* in different languages (220 editions in 43 languages by then); Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie August 15 (1967) published a special issue; Wirtschaftswissenschaft September 15 (1967) published a report of a big conference organized in Berlin June 20-22 with 532 scientists and party functionaries from the GDR and 35 international guests. A report of the conference and of the working groups was published in this issue. Keynote presentations were published in Wirtschaftswissenschaft throughout the year. The conference was organized by the Institute of Social Sciences of the Central Committee of the SED, the Central Institute of Socialist Economic Management of the Central Committee of the SED, the journal Wirtschaftswissenschaft, the Economic Research Institute of the State's Planning Commission, the Institute of Economics of the German Academy of Sciences of Berlin, and the High School of Economics, Berlin-Karlshorst. See also Neues Deutschland June 23, 1967, 6.

3) Books: Karl Marx University of Leipzig published a collection *Karl Marx "Das Kapital": Erbe und Verpflichtung: Beiträge zum 100. Jahrestag der Erstausgabe des Werkes "Das Kapital" von Karl Marx*. In addition, important monographs were published: Walter Tuchscheerer's study on how Marx's economic theory evolved during the years 1843-1858, *Bevor, Das Kapital entstand. Die Herausbildung und Entwicklung der ökonomischen Theorie von Karl Marx in der Zeit von 1843 bis 1858*; Vitaly Vygodsky's *The Story of a Great Discovery (Istoriia odnogo velikogo otkrytiia K Marksa: k sozdaniiu "Kapitala")* was published as a German translation; research by Rolf Dlubek and Hannes Skambraks on the early reception of *Capital*: *"Das Kapital" von Karl Marx in der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung (1867 bis 1878). Abriss und Zeugnisse der Wirkungsgeschichte*; Heinrich Gemkov's *Karl Marx. Eine Biographie* appeared as well.

current economic questions of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Unlike at the respective conferences in the GDR, in Frankfurt, the fundamentals of the official doctrine of the political economy of socialism were questioned. In Frankfurt, the East German economists encountered well-informed Western critics: Belgian Trotskyist Ernest Mandel was probably the most prominent. Another critique came from within the GDR. Fritz Behrens from the Department of Economics in the Academy of Sciences of the GDR, claimed that the political economy of socialism was still underdeveloped, given that the socio-economic system of the GDR itself was underdeveloped.

3. The third central issue debated was whether capitalism had essentially changed. During preceding decades, the public sector had grown and wages had risen in Western capitalist countries. This seemed to contradict Marx's predictions. Was his analysis of capitalism still valid, and if it was, to what extent?

A look at more than 150 articles, presentations, books, and newspaper articles celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Capital*, published in the GDR reveals that these three themes figured prominently in the publications and conferences in the GDR (in East Berlin, Leipzig, and Jena) as well.

First, the examination of the method applied by Marx in *Capital* was a hot topic among Marx and Marxism researchers in both camps in the late 1960s, and likely the most expertise on this topic resided in East Germany.

Second, in 1967 questions about the political economy of socialism had gained momentum with GDR researchers due to an economic reform program, the New Economic System of Planning and Management (*Neue Ökonomische System der Planung und Leitung*, NÖSPL/NÖS), which had started in 1963. During the years of the reform, scientists had an opportunity to debate the fundamental questions of the state socialist economy, as the plurality of views that the party establishment tolerated within economic sciences was greater than before and greater than in the later era of Honecker.

Third, the nature of the West German social and economic system and the possibly changed nature of capitalism were, following Walter Ulbricht's talk in the official celebrations, among the most popular themes in the conferences on the centennial anniversary of *Capital* in the GDR as well. East Germans placed emphasis on discussing the theory of convergence, according to which the co-existence of two

social systems—capitalism and state socialism—transforms both, leading to the formation of a single social system, a highly industrialized society. (See Tinbergen 1961.) This thesis was widely discussed, and resolutely refuted, by the social scientists in the East.

Only one theme gained attention in the East that was almost nonexistent at the Frankfurt conference: problems of the third world and imperialism. These were among the most discussed themes in the official celebrations in East Berlin. One likely reason for this is that representatives of numerous third world countries were invited to the official celebrations.

Each of the three highlighted themes—the method of Marx’s *Capital*, the political economy of socialism, and a critique of capitalism—is discussed in a separate section. In the conclusion, I illustrate that even if the approaches to the perennial questions about Marx’s method initially appear independent from the issues related to the problems of post-World War capitalism and state socialism, in reality, the perspectives on Marx’s method are, in fact, closely connected to the perspectives on the nature of capitalism and (state) socialism.

## Marx’s Method in *Capital*

The conference in Frankfurt lasted for three days.

The first day was dedicated to philosophical and methodological analyses of *Capital*, and two important ideas were raised in the papers and discussions. The first is the concept of critique. What is Marx’s relationship to the tradition of political economy? Is Marx a political economist? The second question relates to the nature of dialectics in *Capital*. Does Marx use dialectics in the sense of the traditional philosophy?

The opening speech was reserved for Roman Rosdolsky, a Ukrainian emigrant living in the United States. The session did not go quite as planned, as Rosdolsky fell ill and was not able to travel.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Louis Althusser, who had a decisively different take on Marx’s method, was originally meant to respond to Rosdolsky’s paper. Althusser, however, cancelled his participation at the last minute, and Nicos Poulanzas replaced him. (Stutje 2009, 130.)

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<sup>2</sup> Just a few weeks after the conference, Rosdolsky died in Detroit, Michigan, in the United States.

Rosdolsky's paper was, however, read aloud and discussed. Rosdolsky would become very important for West German readers of *Capital*, as the other organizer of the conference, *Europäische Verlagsanstalt*, published his monograph on the first draft of *Capital*, "Grundrisse," in the following year, 1968.

This book was a forerunner in the international discussion on "Grundrisse," for one reason because Rosdolsky had managed to obtain a copy of Marx's manuscript earlier than most other researchers in the West. The first edition of "Grundrisse," published in the context of the first *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA<sup>1</sup>) in the Soviet Union in 1939–1941, had not reached a large audience, given the limited print runs and the fact that many of those copies were lost, which Lyudmila Vasina (2008, 204) attributes to the edition being printed in the middle of the Second World War.<sup>3</sup> Rosdolsky (1977, xi) believed that he held one of possibly only three or four copies that existed in the West at the time.

One of the main reasons why Marx's method in *Capital* was a popular topic for discussion in 1967 was undoubtedly that "Grundrisse" was published as a photomechanical copy of the earlier Soviet edition printed in East Germany in 1953. This East German edition would serve the West German researchers as well (Mohl 2008, 190) until 1967, when *Europäische Verlagsanstalt* published the first West German edition of "Grundrisse," on the centennial anniversary of *Capital*.

As Rosdolsky (1968, 12) put it in his paper, the appearance of "Grundrisse" had rendered Lenin's advice to read Hegel's *Logic* in order to understand *Capital* superfluous. Reading "Grundrisse" would be enough.

Rosdolsky (1968, 9) considered Marx's dialectical method as the most durable part of his economics, and yet, he claimed, it had not received proper attention.

In his own reading, Rosdolsky (1968, 10) emphasized the concept of form in *Capital* in two senses. First, Marx is interested in the laws of a specific socio-economic formation, i.e., capitalism. What makes this formation historically specific is the form in which the more general content of economy appears. Secondly, Marx did not research objects, but rather he researched societal processes appearing in the forms of those objects. In the study of a process, one must focus on the transformations

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<sup>3</sup> The first volume of this edition consisted of only 3,140 copies, and the second volume of only 3,100 copies. (Vasina 2008, 204.)

or changes of the form. According to Rosdolsky (1968, 15), Marx's economics, then, represent the history of forms of capitalism.

Unlike the political economy classics, Marx did not consider the specifically bourgeois forms of production and distribution as eternal forms of nature. The bourgeois classics treat the form as external to the content, as a matter of no importance, while Soviet economists tended to treat the forms as absolute. (Rosdolsky 1968, 15.) Their belief, Rosdolsky claimed, that the category of value prevailed in socialism rendered these historical forms absolute.<sup>4</sup> They, hence, drew a false conclusion from Marx's note that future societies also must measure social labor time in order to distribute it according to the needs of society. They concluded that therefore, the category of value would prevail in socialism. In other words, they confused the trans-historical content of value with one of its historically conditioned forms. (Rosdolsky 1968, 15.) At this point, it becomes apparent that Rosdolsky's "philosophical" and methodological paper was relevant to the assessment of the contemporary issues of capitalism and (state) socialism.

Many West German theorists in the coming years and decades would come to emphasise the importance of form in Marx's *Capital* and to consider the utilisation of Marxian value-categories within a (state) socialist economy as a fundamental confusion. (See Elbe 2010, 21.) Hence, one possible answer to the question, why has the concept of form been so important for certain West German readings of *Capital*, is that it was triggered by the critique of state socialism and its economic doctrine.

One can also trace aspects of the critique of the state socialist application of Marx's book from the presentation by University of Frankfurt philosophy lecturer Alfred Schmidt. Schmidt's talk dealt with Marx's method, the meaning of Marx's dialectics, and the concept of law in *Capital*.

Following the tradition of Western Marxism, dialectics in Marx was, for Schmidt (1967, 26), not a generally valid metaphysical thesis. Neither was dialectics immanent for the thinking process for Marx, Schmidt (1967, 34) claimed. Dialectics is in the object itself, but this object is historically specific. Dialectics in Marx is specifically an expression of the structure of the bourgeois society, in which abstractions govern the lives of the individuals. (Schmidt 1968, 26, 34.) Furthermore, this is the case only

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<sup>4</sup> In his magnum opus, Rosdolsky (1977, 435) took the position that the law of value contradicts socialism in principle, and that the principle of distribution in socialism must be planning instead.

because individuals are constructing the society through their non-reflected and non-coordinated practices.

Hence, following Schmidt, the concept of “Marxian philosophy” as an investigation of the dialectical laws of thought and reality is a fundamental misunderstanding. The objects of research are not the laws of thought, reality, and society, but the economic laws of the bourgeois society.

In addition, from this perspective, the object of “Marxian economics” as a political economy of socialism is also questioned because for Schmidt, the sense of all of Marx’s categories appears to be essentially critical.<sup>5</sup> (See Euchner & Schmidt 1968, 52.) In socialism, the forces that are independent of human consciousness, appearing in the form of the categories of political economy, the ossified forms of human praxis, supposedly no longer exist. An implication of this position is that it is inappropriate to construct an alternative political economy of socialism on the basis of Marx’s critique. (See for example Fetscher 1971, 24.)

In discussion following his talk, Schmidt emphasized that in Marx’s analysis of capitalism, the social relations of individuals appear in objective economic forms, which have assumed a life of their own. He further noted that abstractions govern individuals. Therefore, Marx, ironically, is a peculiar kind of conceptual realist. Only when individuals are no longer governed by these objectified universals does nominalism apply again, and individuals are able to organize the totality of their society consciously and rationally, Schmidt explained. (Euchner & Schmidt 1968, 52.)

In another essay, published in a collection on the centennial anniversary of *Capital*, Schmidt (1967) highlighted similar points. He asserted that the laws of the economy are not like the laws of nature; economic determinism is not trans-historical reality. Rather, he noted, it applies in a bourgeois society, in which human beings produce with no common plan. (See Euchner & Schmidt 1967, 111.)

Therefore, in Schmidt’s reading, the categories in *Capital* are an expression of a society in which individuals become socialized through the market. In socialism, conversely, individuals take the forms of their socialization under their own

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<sup>5</sup> “Alle Kategorien von Marx sind konzipiert im Hinblick auf einen Zustand, wo sie nicht mehr gelten brauchen.”

conscious control. Therefore, one can imply that if we follow Schmidt, none of the value categories—prices, wages, interests, or profits—should exist in a socialist economy.

It follows, implicitly at least, that in Schmidt's reading of *Capital*, as well as in the tradition of the subsequent *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, capitalism is identified with the existence of the market as such, with the operation of the law of value. For Schmidt (1968, 38) and his followers, primitive accumulation, or the separation of the means of production from the direct producers, is constitutive of Marx's analysis of the commodity.

An alternative reading of *Capital*, the one generally preferred in the East, is that the capitalist mode of production is not essentially determined by the existence of the market as such, or by the existence of commodities and money, but by the existence of the labor market and the monopoly over the means of production by one class. This is a result of primitive accumulation, which brings capital, in the modern sense of the term, into the world. Commodities and money can exist, and have existed, even if the means of production were not separated from the direct producers.

For the economists of the GDR, the law of value was operative insofar as the exchange was organized through commodity–money relations. According to this interpretation of *Capital*, the presence of the law of value does not, however, bring the capital relation automatically into existence.

From the perspective of GDR economists who were present at the conference, Schmidt's view of communism, in which there would be no objective economic laws operating independently of men, must have seemed utopian. Influential GDR economist Karl Bichtler commented on Schmidt's deliberations on the difference between natural laws and the laws of the society. Bichtler said that it is a fact that individuals act in unpredictable ways, and that only as an aggregate result of their actions do certain economic laws emerge. (See Euchner & Schmidt 1968, 55.) If our individual actions had no unintended consequences at the aggregate level, we would not need economic theory, and we would not need to waste our time at this conference, Bichtler remarked.<sup>6</sup> (See Euchner & Schmidt 1968, 56.) In other words,

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<sup>6</sup> Bichtler pointed out that Max Planck had studied economics originally but then had moved on to studying physics because he considered economics far too difficult in comparison with physics, the difference being that an economist has to deal with an “atom” that has his or her own will.



when shifting from theory to practice, getting the economy under control is not a simple task. Schmidt (1968, 58) responded that one should not understand Marx's comparisons between "natural laws" (see Marx 1996, 10) and economic laws within modern bourgeois society affirmatively. Schmidt (1968, 57) stated that Marx had in mind a society in which consciousness would not be determined by being, but on the contrary, individuals' societal being would be determined by their consciousness.

I have discussed the debate between Schmidt and Bichtler elsewhere (Rauhala 2019), arguing that these readers of *Capital*, Bichtler and Schmidt, operated in very different social realities. The questions they sought to answer with the help of *Capital* were different. Whereas Bichtler was interested in finding solutions to the practical problems of the state socialist planned economy, Schmidt, being a West German philosopher, was not at all concerned with such questions. This fact is, of course, connected to their very different positions within the social division of labor within very different societies.

Moreover, the situation of the Cold War made the perspectives of each side ever more distant from each other. Before moving to the next discussion of the conference I will make a diversion to the conditions of such east-west exchanges.

## A brief diversion to discuss the relationships between East and West German Marxian or Marx researchers

It appears that Western Marxists were not well-informed on the research conducted in the East, or at least did not refer to it, but the Marxist researchers of the GDR followed Western research closely. As Rolf Hecker notes, the critique of Western Marxist and non-Marxist literature was a part of their job.<sup>7</sup> The research literature in the GDR reported regularly what was going on in the West, but the tone was sometimes aggressive. (The West German colleagues were often called "Marx-falsifiers."<sup>8</sup>)

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<sup>7</sup> Personal communication with the author, summer 2017.

<sup>8</sup> In the branch of philosophy, a series of books edited by Manfred Buhr, "Contributions to the Critique of Bourgeois Ideology" (*Zur Kritik der bürgerlichen Ideologie*), consisted of 107 booklets, published between 1971 and 1986. On one hand, the books in this series are characterized by their

An interesting example is Wolfgang Jahn's book *Die Marxsche Wert- und Mehrwertlehre im Zerrspiegel bürgerlicher Ökonomen* (1968), which shows that the author knew the Western economic literature very well. Another interesting example of Western literature being referenced by Eastern researchers is a report in the literature on the life and work of Marx and Engels published in West Germany between 1964 and 1967. The review consisting of over sixty pages was published in *Beiträge zur Marx-Engels-Forschung* on the centennial anniversary of *Capital*. (See Kundel et al, 1968.)

The conference in Frankfurt was also not an exception. Many important researchers in the GDR referred to the conference publication in subsequent years in numerous publications.<sup>9</sup>

The Marxian researchers in the West, however, sometimes appeared surprisingly ignorant on relevant research in the East. One reason might have been that face to face discussions between the researchers of the GDR and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) did not commonly take place before the late 1970s. Klaus Steinitz, who participated in the conference in Frankfurt, as he worked in the research institute of the Central Planning Commission of the GDR, observed that this was the biggest conference he had ever attended in the West.<sup>10</sup> The organizer, Iring Fetscher (1998, 6), made the following assumption: "I think it was the only occasion when Frankfurt School people, Trotskyists, East Germans (doctrinaire Stalinists), and French Marxists came together."

A letter sent by Bichtler to the West German publisher of the conference proceedings, *Europäische Verlagsanstalt*, expressed a certain friction between the East and West German actors. (ABBAW: NSch, Nr. 286.) In his letter, Bichtler wondered why his corrections to the transcript of the conference discussion had not been incorporated before the text was published. He claimed that the mistakes in the transcript were numerous and cited three examples. As one example, Bichtler noted that in the volume he is reported to have claimed that "historical materialism included the problem of the transformation of the values to the production prices." (See Euchner & Schmidt 1968, 53.) This is naturally nonsense, Bichtler wrote in his

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aggressive rhetoric; on the other hand, as noted, the volumes indicate that social sciences and philosophy researchers in the GDR followed discussions in the West closely.

<sup>9</sup> To mention a few examples, Catholic social scientist Oswald Nell-Breuning's (1968, 91) expression in the conference "we all stand on the shoulders of Karl Marx" was often quoted in the GDR, by, for example, the chief ideologist of the SED, Kurt Hager (1968, 8). See also Manfred Müller (1978b, 262) and Manfred Müller (1978a, 11, 51–53, 57, 61); Wolfgang Jahn (1978, 66).

<sup>10</sup> Klaus Steinitz, telephone interview with the author, June 23, 2017.

letter to the publisher. Another correction he referred to as “a trivial example,” which has in the publication turned into its opposite and become “a genial example.” (See Euchner & Schmidt 1968, 53.) It is not known why Bichtler’s corrections to the proof sheets were not reflected in the final publication, but one can imagine various reasons why communication over the Berlin Wall was difficult.

Given that *Neue Marx-Lektüre* has developed a profile as a specifically “Western” reading of Marx, it is interesting that such an East-West discussion as the one between Bichtler and Schmidt took place after Schmidt had presented his paper. Schmidt’s paper, as Jan Hoff (2017, 81) notes, would become very important for the formation of *Neue Marx-Lektüre* in the years following 1967.

Jan Hoff (2017), among others, also noted the new Frankfurterian *Capital*-reading concentrating on philosophical and methodological questions was not a peculiar phenomenon. Rather, its emergence was connected to international developments, and not only in the West, according to Hoff. “Grundrisse” provoked similar discussions internationally, such as in the Soviet Union and elsewhere in the Eastern bloc during the thaw period.

One could argue that the most important inspirations for such discussions came from the results of the editorial work on Marx’s and Engels’s writings. In this respect, there was an extraordinarily important announcement on the front page of *Neues Deutschland* on the centennial anniversary of *Capital* (September 14, 1967): the Institute of Marxism Leninism of the Central Committee of The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and Institute of Marxism Leninism of the Central Committee of the SED have started to prepare a historical-critical Marx-Engels edition, that is, the second MEGA.<sup>11</sup> The report informed readers about the preparations, the existing plan, and the editorial principles of the project.

Many of the editors of MEGA, like Vitaly Vygotsky, Georgij Bagaturija, and Johannes Skambraks, presented papers during the celebrations of *Capital* in the GDR in 1967. (See *Das Kapital von Karl Marx und seine internationale Wirkung*, 247 ff.)

The Soviet Union and East Germany educated the experts who were able to undertake the task of editing Marx’s and Engels’s literary estates. There are 160 names listed in short biographies of the editors of MEW, MEGA, and Sočinenija,

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<sup>11</sup> “Gesamtausgabe der Werke von Marx und Engels,” *Neues Deutschland*, September 14, 1967, 1.

published in *Beiträge zur Marx-Engels-Forschung, Neue Folge* (2006). This is not a small number of scholars. A similar project would not have been possible within Western academia.

## Political Economy of Socialism

Returning to the major themes of the Frankfurt conference, the second major theme, the political economy of socialism, concerned the difficulties of getting the economy under man's conscious control instead of letting the products of the individual's own labor dominate the individual.

The East German delegation consisted of five scientists, two of them, Heinz Petrak and Karl-Heinz Schwank, did not present papers. Nevertheless, four eminent economists from the GDR gave presentations. Along with Bichtler, Managing Director of the Department of Political Economy of Socialism in the Academy of Sciences of the GDR<sup>12</sup>, was Otto Reinhold, Director of the Institute of Social Sciences of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party.<sup>13</sup> The other two presenters were GDR representative Klaus Steinitz, Managing Director of the Research Institute of the State's Planning Commission,<sup>14</sup> and Fritz Behrens, director of a working group at the Department of Economics at the German Academy of Sciences in Berlin,<sup>15</sup> who presented a paper, even though, as Thomas Kuczynski (2015, 45) explained, Behrens did not belong to the official delegation of the GDR, but was present as a private person. He ended up being invited to the conference due to his personal relations.<sup>16</sup> He had been a regular speaker in West German universities. (Steiner 1999, 27.)

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<sup>12</sup> Stellvertretender Abteilungsleiter der Abteilung Politische Ökonomie des Sozialismus an der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin.

<sup>13</sup> Mitarbeiter des Instituts für Marxismus-Leninismus und Direktor des Instituts für Gesellschaftswissenschaften beim ZK der SED in Berlin.

<sup>14</sup> Stellvertretender Institutsleiter des Ökonomischen Forschungsinstituts der Staatlichen Plankommission.

<sup>15</sup> Abteilungsleiter am Institut für Wirtschaftswissenschaften an der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Berlin.

<sup>16</sup> Peter C. Caldwell explains that Behrens, a well-known speaker in West Germany, managed to participate in the conference by claiming that he had received a personal invitation from "a comrade," who was an editor of the *Generschaftliche Monatshefte*. The Academy of Sciences rejected his request to travel, but Behrens claimed that he had already sent the paper. "To avoid embarrassment, the academy felt compelled to grant Behrens permission to travel." (Caldwell 2000, 126–7.)

Behrens was certainly an important and eminent economist, but the SED had previously accused him of revisionism. Behrens's talk in Frankfurt, "Critique of Political Economy and Economic Theory of Socialism,"<sup>17</sup> was the tipping point. His research group was dissolved, and soon after the conference, he retired prematurely. (Steiner 1999, 28; Caldwell 2000; Kuczynski 2015, 45.)

Behrens's participation and its consequences are well studied (Krause 1998, 169; Steiner 1999, 27 ff.; Caldwell 2000; Lauermaun 2010, 87 ff.; Kuczynski 2015; Janke 2017). Therefore, I will comment only on the reception of Behrens's talk by the East and the West.

In his talk, greatly differing from the talks of other GDR economists, Behrens claimed that the political economy of socialism was an underdeveloped scientific discipline. The reason for this was, he claimed, that the socialist economy itself had been built up so far in underdeveloped conditions. Revolution in 1917 was limited to one backward country, he noted, asserting that this fact, then, formed the objective conditions for the Stalinist bureaucratic centralism with administrative coercion in the early Soviet Union. According to Behrens, scientific discussion was inhibited, and the questions of the commodity production and functioning of the law of value in socialism were taboo, if the answers differed from Stalin's view. The achievements of bourgeois economics were taboo as well. (Behrens 1968, 290.) Therefore, Behrens (1968, 292–3) claimed, the political economy of socialism in the East bloc degraded into apologetics of bureaucratic centralism, and the ideological reflex of bureaucratic centralism was dogmatism, and dogmatism inhibited the development of political economy of socialism as a science.

Behrens believed, however, that along with the economic reforms of the early 1960s, not only a societal change had started, but that a new phase had begun also in the field of political economy. As the forces of production within socialism had developed, the political economy of socialism had overcome the stages of cameralism and mercantilism and was now approaching the classical stage, Behrens (1968, 295) opined. The stage of the critique was, however, yet to come, he believed.

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<sup>17</sup> *Kritik der politischen Ökonomie und ökonomische Theorie des Sozialismus.*

The sanctions that Behrens faced after returning home demonstrated that against his hopes, the stage of criticism had not yet been reached in the development of the political economy of socialism.<sup>18</sup>

Behrens's critique of the political economy of socialism was bold, but even more daring was that he advertised group ownership, in which the society delegates the means of production for a group of people, as a higher form of property-relation than what the state ownership is. In his model, a group has a right to command a certain part of the means of production and can share the income according to certain societal norms. (Behrens 1968, 297.)

In a short discussion which is recorded in the volume, Otto Reinhold (1968, 302) emphasized that he disagreed with Behrens on the current state of the political economy of socialism. Reinhold continued his critique in the first issue of the West German communist publication *Marxistische Blätter* in 1968. This article was a response to Behrens's conference paper, which had been published after the conference in the theoretical discussion platform of the West German Trade Union Confederation, *Gewerkschaftliche Monatshefte* (December 1967).

In his article, Reinhold (1968, 210–11) defended the centralized state regulation. He reminded his readers that, given that capitalist economies are not free market economies, state regulation was no less necessary for the state monopolistic capitalist structure than it was for the state socialism of the GDR. In the capitalist system, the private profit motive constrains the state regulation and causes constant friction between private interests and the general interest, Reinhold noted. Such a conflict between private profit-making and central planning did not appear within socialism; therefore, socialist states should not give up this advantage. Reinhold (1968, 215) thus grounded his defense of the existing system, which Behrens (2010, 149) elsewhere, yet, of course, not publicly, characterized as “state monopolistic socialism.”

In a conference on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Capital* in Jena on November 16–17, 1967, keynote speakers Erhard Lange and Georg Mende (1968, 33) were probably referring to Behrens's talk, although without referring to specific names. They noted

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<sup>18</sup> In the first version of his speech, Behrens (1999, 137–8) put it even more bluntly. He noted that as the new relations of production were voluntarily forced on totally underdeveloped forces of production, the development of socialism from utopia to science was completed with the development of socialism from science to ideology.

that there were views for which social conditions in the GDR had not yet provided the basis for a well-developed theory to support.<sup>19</sup> Lange and Mende considered this view to be a schematic application of Marx's views on the development of economic theory, and they argued that such a view did not consider that the development of the theory cannot wait, as it could wait in the case of capitalism. This was because under socialism the theory was supposed to play a much more prominent role in the consciousness-shaping of societal conditions.<sup>20</sup>

The reactions of the East and West German press to Behrens's talk were, as one could expect, quite different. The organ of the SED, *Neues Deutschland*, did not even mention Fritz Behrens's presence at the conference.<sup>21</sup> Despite the fact that the party must have considered Behrens's appearance in the conference as an unfortunate accident, and that Behrens's talk was very awkward for the official party line, the tone of the whole conference report was quite delightful. West Germans seemed to be interested in Marx, the discussions were of a high quality, and West German scholars were eager to talk to their East German colleagues during the coffee pauses, reporter Otto Schoth wrote.

As a mirror image of the *Neues Deutschland*, the West German radio channel *Sender Freies Berlin* (September 18 and September 28, 1967) concentrated exclusively on Behrens's talk and did so quite selectively. The report also underlined that *Neues Deutschland* did not even mention Behrens's presence.<sup>22</sup> Generally, the West German reports, like the one published in *Gewerkschaftliche Monatshefte* (November 1967), concentrated on Behrens's talk.

The contributions of the other GDR economists in Frankfurt, naturally, differed from Behrens's. These talks can be best understood against the backdrop of the

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<sup>19</sup> "Es gibt Auffassungen, die besagen, dass die gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse bei uns in der DDR noch nicht die für die Ausarbeitung einer solchen Theorie erforderliche Reife erreicht haben. Offensichtlich wird hier die Situation, wie sie bei der theoretischen Analyse des Kapitalismus durch Marx gegeben war, auf die theoretische Analyse des Sozialismus schematisch übertragen und die wegweisende Funktion der marxistischen Theorie beim Aufbau des Sozialismus nicht genügend beachtet."

<sup>20</sup> "Es wird geradezu übersehen, dass die Theorie im Sozialismus der Wirklichkeit noch weit mehr voraussehen muss, als das im Kapitalismus der Fall war, wenn sie ihre Funktion als Instrument zur bewussten Schaffung der gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse erfüllen soll. Anders gesagt: Wir können mit der Ausarbeitung einer Theorie des gesellschaftlichen Systems des Sozialismus nicht warten, bis dieses gesellschaftliche System in voller Entfaltung in der Wirklichkeit existiert."

<sup>21</sup> "Marx-Fälscher hatten keine Chance," *Neues Deutschland*, September 20, 1967.

<sup>22</sup> *Sender Freies Berlin*, September 18, 1967, in *Informationen und Berichte zum Colloquium, Kritik der politischen Ökonomie heute. Hundert Jahre "Kapital"*, 25.

official celebrations of *Capital* in the GDR. A week earlier, the Central Committee of the SED of the GDR had organized a conference “Marx’s *Capital* and its International Impact” in East Berlin. At the conference, the first Secretary of the SED, Walter Ulbricht, gave a famous speech,<sup>23</sup> in which he launched the idea that socialism was not:

“a short transition phase in the development of society [...] but a relatively independent socio-economic formation during the historical epoch of transition from capitalism to communism.”<sup>24</sup>

This meant that the GDR, and Ulbricht as its leader, admitted that the transition to communism would not take place in the near future. Instead, socialism was consolidated as another social formation, like feudalism or capitalism. Therefore, Ulbricht (1967, 39) stated that once socialism had taken root, its development would start on its own ground. This implied, among other things, that the laws and categories of commodity production, including the law of value, had begun to develop on the socio-economic basis of socialism. Therefore, there would be no hurry in overcoming these categories and laws, because they were no longer simply remnants of capitalism. As Günter Krause (1998, 168) explains, in this talk, Ulbricht officially legitimized the existence of commodity production and the value and market categories within state socialism.

This emphasis on the utilization of the commodity–money relation was connected to the ongoing New Economic System of Planning and Management, which had been launched in 1963. The main goal of the reform was to increase productivity and to improve the functioning of the economy by granting companies more economic autonomy, improving the price system, and utilizing market mechanisms and economic incentives, like profits or bonuses.<sup>25</sup> In short, it was a shift from the administrative and bureaucratic steering of the economy into a system in which the steering was achieved through economic means. (Krause 2012, 19.)

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<sup>23</sup> Walter Ulbricht, *Die Bedeutung des Werkes “Das Kapital” von Karl Marx für die Schaffung des entwickelten gesellschaftlichen Systems des Sozialismus in der DDR und den Kampf gegen das staatsmonopolistische Herrschaftssystem in Westdeutschland. Internationale wissenschaftliche Session: 100 Jahre “Das Kapital,”* Dietz Verlag, Berlin, 1967. The contributions of the international guests are published in “*Das Kapital*” von Karl Marx und seine internationale Wirkung.

<sup>24</sup> Ulbricht 1967, 38; English translation McCauley (1979, 165).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, the special issue of *Das Argument* 39 (1966); Krause 1998, 139 ff.; Pankower *Vorträge*: booklets 23, 217, 221; *hefte zur ddr – geschichte* booklets 3, 37, 59.



As stated, the speeches of the GDR economists—in the conference in Frankfurt, as well as at other conferences in the GDR—often concentrated on the promotion of the themes in Ulbricht’s speech. This does not, however, mean that these economists would have just repeated Ulbricht’s ideas. On the contrary, most likely many of these speakers, working in different leading economic institutions, were themselves the ones who had elaborated on these ideas in the first place.

The economists, however, were understood first as party functionaries in the theoretical front, as Günter Krause (1998, 15) explained (following Gregor Schirmer 1993). Therefore, space for the development of the GDR economic science was narrow. Even in scientific articles, the policies and programs of the party were celebrated as “fundamental documents” or “path breaking resolutions,” as Krause (1998, 20) describes.

Unlike at the conferences in the GDR, the promotion of the official ideas by GDR economists did not remain unchallenged at the conference in Frankfurt. In the final discussion, the famous Belgian Trotskyist economist Ernst Mandel, known for his analysis and critique of the nature of Soviet style economies, presented tricky questions to the East German economists. The means of consumption clearly were commodities in the GDR, but were the means of production sold as commodities as well? (Mandel 1968, 343.) As far as commodity production prevailed in socialism, did the phenomena escorting it, namely commodity fetishism, ideology, and alienation also persist? (Mandel 1968, 344.) Was socialist commodity production not a transitory phase from capitalism into communism and should not the commodity production be withering away, then? (See Euchner & Schmidt 1968, 344–5.)

Karl Bichtler from the Academy of Sciences of the GDR explained, in response to Mandel’s questions, that even if socialism were definitively considered a transitional phase, the conditions for building up communism were simply not there yet. (See Euchner & Schmidt 1968, 346.) Not only the objective conditions but also the subjects must change, he explained, adding that otherwise, the transition from the distribution of commodities according to the performance to their distribution according to the need is not possible. Citizens with a “petty bourgeois” mindset cannot possibly develop communism, Bichtler asserted. Therefore, in addition to the need to increase the productivity of labor, there was still a lot of work to be done in the spheres of culture, education, and ideology, according to Bichtler. He noted that

these were also factors in the economy, given that the qualities of the most important force of production, the workforce, depends on these cultural and ideological issues.

To the question of commodity production, Bichtler countered that even if labor is, within the common ownership of the means of production, always social labor, the labor performed in individual companies is not immediately socially necessary. (See Euchner & Schmidt 1968, 347.) This is because work is completed in economically independent units; therefore, the values of the products must be realized in the market, according to Bichtler.

Finally, the existing socialism had to survive within the context of global capitalism and the arms race, Bichtler asserted. (See Euchner & Schmidt 1968, 346.)

Mandel agreed that the commodity production persisted because of the existence of socialism within the capitalist world market, but then one should not be talking about the development of socialism, he claimed. (See Euchner & Schmidt 1968, 349-350.) He renewed his question to Bichtler and other East Germans: are you making commodity production a norm, or are you trying to transcend it? This would be possible in the most developed socialist economies, and it would be morally and ideologically important, Mandel noted. He explained that generalized commodity relations mean generalized egoistic interests, which means that people work only to get money. Even if it is impossible to abolish this kind of individualistic mindset overnight, individual utility maximization should not be allowed to become a norm of social behavior, because of its detrimental ideological and moral consequences, according to Mandel. (See Euchner & Schmidt 1968, 350.)

Klaus Steinitz from the Research Institute of the State's Planning Commission took a mediating position. Steinitz agreed with Mandel in that the goal should be overcoming the commodity production, but he observed that this cannot be accomplished at once; rather, he noted, it must be understood to be a process. Therefore, he agreed with Mandel that all the distribution should not be based on an individual performance, but the distribution according to the need should be progressively applied. (See Euchner & Schmidt 1968, 350 ff.)

Indeed, the communist principle of distribution "according to need" was applied in some branches of production within the economy of the GDR, like childcare, education, or health care. Steinitz's position was that once the principle is introduced, and successfully applied, its scope can be expanded.

As this discussion also implies, the GDR economic science did not confine itself to narrowly economic or mathematical questions. In discussions concerning economic reforms, for example, the aspect of ideology was deemed central. The reasons for the dysfunctions in the old system of planning and economic management were not only questions of coordination, management, calculation, or logistics, but also questions of the motivation and commitment of the workforce. These issues, which could be tackled with the help of education, social psychology, management, or ideology, were discussed by the economists themselves.<sup>26</sup>

It is noteworthy that the problems of low work efficiency and commitment to work were addressed only through a system of economic incentives, like bonuses or profits. As Fritz Behrens's case shows, it was difficult or impossible to discuss the root cause of the lack of motivation and efficiency, which was for sure the fact that the workers had so little economic (and political) power. The workers, not having real stakes in the development of socialism, were offered economic incentives instead. This is, of course, a very narrow approach to the question of work motivation.

Returning to the debate between East Germans and Mandel, and to the exceptional context within which this debate took place, the gulf between the different interests of those who organized the conference, the West German philosophers, and their guests, the East German economists, is vividly illustrated in an interview about the conference between Kevin Andersson and Iring Fetscher that took place thirty years after the event. Fetscher (1998, 6) remembers that:

“we even had two East German people, one a party representative, Otto Reinhold, and the other a more or less marginal Marxist from Leipzig University. The debate was quite funny because they had a very strong critical debate with Ernest Mandel. [...] I think the debate between Mandel and the East Germans, with their pro-Soviet position, was quite funny because it had something to do with the actual problem of what they call markets in socialist society. The East Germans said there is a kind of market relation between independent enterprises that are state owned. Then Mandel and others said either they are state owned, there is a collective property structure,

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<sup>26</sup> It seems to me that whereas the questions of philosophy and social science permeated the discussions of economic science at the time, the themes traditionally deemed to belong to the economic science, in turn, appeared in philosophical discussions. For example, in the special issue on the centenary of *Capital* of the *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* (15:8), the topics range from ideology and sociology to state monopoly capitalism. Similarly, at the conference *100 Jahre Kapital* in Jena, which differed from the other conferences in the GDR by approaching *Capital* as Marx's main philosophical work, many papers dealt with management and prognoses instead of, for example, questions of epistemology or philosophy of science related to *Capital*.

and there is no market, or there is a market and there is no longer socialism. [...] So it was a quite funny theoretical debate, but in fact it had something to do with the lack of productivity of East Germany. The man from Leipzig made it clear that they had not succeeded in really developing the productivity of the country.”

Of course, one’s memories are more or less faded thirty years later (Fetscher talked about two East German economists instead of six, for example), but one gets the impression that Fetscher, the top expert in Soviet Marxism in the FRG at the time, was probably not very well informed on the economic discussions in the GDR. First, he assumed that the economist from Leipzig University was “more or less marginal.” Presumably he meant Fritz Behrens, who had been, on the contrary, probably the only internationally renowned economist of the GDR of all time. Secondly, Fetscher very straightforwardly concluded that the existence of the market and socialism excluded each other. Such a clear-cut position is, of course, a possible one, and, indeed, is shared by many others, but it is probably much easier to present as self-evident if one has not dealt with more concrete problems relating to the issue.

The participants of this discussion on the political economy of socialism, came from very different backgrounds, and sought answers from Marx’s texts for very different questions.

## The Nature of Capitalism

The third major theme of the Frankfurt conference was the critique of capitalism. One central topic was the possibly changed nature of the capitalist economy. The appearance of the capitalist socio-economic system had, indeed, changed. The standard of living had risen in West Germany and elsewhere in the West, the institutions of the welfare state insured the lives of the working-class people, and trade unions took care of their economic interests and work security.

In the mainstream discussions in the West, the rise of the welfare state in the West and the market-oriented reforms within the Eastern bloc were conceptualized in terms of the theory of convergence. For example, Jan Tinbergen (1961, 333 ff.) claimed that “the free economies” were approaching communism because of the increasing role of the public sector and “communist states” were approaching “free economies” due to their economic reforms, incorporating the market as an element of these societies.

The Soviets and the communist parties rejected the theory of convergence and discussed the changed nature of capitalism in terms of the theory of state monopoly capitalism. According to this theory, the prominence of the state in capitalist countries was not an indicator of the capitalist world approaching socialism, but rather a sign of the “aging” of the capitalist social formation. In line with this theory, capitalism based on free competition was not viable anymore, and therefore, the capital structure needed the state.

Whereas the changes of capitalism were seen as symptoms of the aging of this socio-economic formation, one attempt to conceptualize the current tendencies in the East was the official East German conception of socialism as a relatively independent socio-economic formation. In his talk at the conference on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Capital* in East Berlin, Ulbricht explained that such a formation (which was not included in the orthodox Marxist-Leninist scheme of the socio-economic formations following each other) was formed due to the co-existence and competition of the two systems.

In his talk, Ulbricht discussed not only the contemporary phase of state socialism, but a significant portion of his remarks were dedicated to the analysis of contemporary West Germany. Given that the talks at the conferences organized on the centennial anniversary of *Capital* in the East discussed, or rather promoted, the same topics Ulbricht had highlighted in his talk, the nature of the West German socio-economic system was among the most popular topics discussed. East Germans resolutely rejected the theories of convergence, such as, for example, John Kenneth Galbraith’s thesis on the “new industrial state.” They also devoted a lot of paper, which was in short supply in the GDR, on critiquing the respective West German political programs and conceptions, such as *Formierte Gesellschaft*, *Sozialpartnerschaft*, or *Konzentrierte Aktion*. These were clearly among the most popular topics discussed at the conferences on the centennial anniversary of *Capital* (along with the political economy of socialism, Marx’s method in *Capital*, the Western or the bourgeois readings of Marx, and the problems of the third world and imperialism).

For example, in his commentary on the keynote presentation by Otto Reinhold in the *100 Jahre Kapital* conference in Leipzig, Soviet philosopher Mark Rozenhal, from the academy of sciences of the central committee of CPSU, addressed the theories of convergence in the context of the method of Marx’s *Capital*. He defended the

thesis that the most durable part of *Capital* is Marx's method, noting that the book should not be taken too literally but instead used for an analysis of the current trends of capitalism. He, therefore, denied the thesis that the improving standards of living or the passivity of the working class would have rendered the analysis of capitalism in *Capital* outdated. (Drechsel, Reichardt, & Willkommen 1967, 1413–4.) For Rozenthal, the theories of convergence were grounded in the confusion between essence and appearance. He claimed that in the West, the improved standard of living concealed the essential relation of domination between workers and owners. With regard to the East, he claimed, even if commodities and money appear as formally similar as they are in the capitalist economy, the socio-economic content of those forms, commodities, and money was different within the realm of socialism. (Drechsel, Reichardt, & Willkommen 1967, 1415.)

What triggered the discussion in Frankfurt was Joseph M. Gillman's presentation during which he questioned whether capitalism is compatible with the welfare state. Gillman (1967, 154) argued that it is not. He asserted that the welfare state can never be consistently realized within capitalism, given that the welfare state modifies class relations between the working class and the owning classes, and at some point, it undermines the dominance of capitalists over production and distribution. According to Gillman, an ideal welfare state, permanent full employment with high salaries, would repress the profit rate; therefore, the fundamental ideas of the welfare state conflict with the rationale on which the capitalist mode of production is based: profit.

The director of the archives of the world economy in Hamburg, Heinz-Dietrich Ortlieb (1968, 162) denied Gillman's thesis in his supplementary presentation by claiming that the present economic system seemed to have changed its nature. He claimed that capital was increasingly in the hands of the households and the state, and not in the hands of the "capitalists." Ortlieb also claimed that capitalism at that time had a systemic tendency to increase wages, if trade unions and democracy functioned as they were supposed to; moreover, the capitalist companies were dependent on the purchasing power of the workers. Further, he claimed that his model of capitalism corresponded to the empirical reality better than Gillman's. (Ortlieb 1968, 163.)

In discussion, Ortlieb's argument was questioned empirically and theoretically by Gillman himself, and also by West German sociologist and economist Elmar

Altwater, by Ernest Mandel, and by the East German economists Klaus Steinitz and Otto Reinhold.

Other speakers discussed the changed appearance of capitalism and the theories of convergence in their presentations as well. One idea, which is relevant in assessing the validity of the theories of convergence, showed up several times: questioning the identification of capitalism with the market, and the identification of socialism with the plan. In his presentation, Kurt Rotschild (1968, 228ff.) traced how even the socialist tradition had come to identify socialism with planning and capitalism with the market. Instead of this questionable identification, in which an economic mechanism is identified with a form of a society, another perspective had recently gained popularity. From this perspective, the plan and the market were tools, which could be harnessed to serve different purposes.

Klaus Steinitz (1968, 127), representing the central planning commission of the GDR, explained in his presentation that regardless of whether capitalist states had increased their control of their national economies, and even if some central planning was used, it was done only to support the profit making of private companies. Conversely, even if the market was used as a means in the socialist states, the goal was not to increase surplus product at the cost of wage labor, as it is in a capitalist system, but to increase the national product, including different forms of consumption, Steinitz explained.

Not surprisingly, this point was raised in several presentations delivered in the GDR as well. In Jena, Walter Schafrenberger (1968, 212–3) asserted that state intervention and planning can be used as tools to advance different class interests. In the state monopolistic capitalism system, the objective of planning, he claimed, was not the rationalization of production as such, but the increase in unpaid labor time, and hence, an increase in profits.

In Frankfurt again, Otto Reinhold (1968, 143)—who had defined Germany as the *locus classicus* of state monopoly capitalism, just like England had been for the classic capitalist system of free competition—explained in his presentation that a new peculiar form of fetishism had appeared with state monopoly capitalism: the efforts of the state to support the accumulation of monopolies appearing on the surface as if it were acting in the interest of the whole society.

During the same year, Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (1964) appeared in Alfred Schmidt's German translation. Marcuse had talked about an "industrial society" merging, at least implicitly, both socio-economic formations, capitalist and state socialist, into one, which he described as a bureaucratic, thoroughly administered system, repressing its working people by soft means, including promotion of consumerism and entertainment.

Instead of focusing on the relations of production—on private profit-making as the essence of capitalism—Marcuse focused on the forces of production, i.e., technology. He blamed technology itself, or instrumental rationality, for the repression. (Offe 1968, 75.) If Marcuse's theory of the new kind of an industrial society can be seen as a Marxist variant of the theory of convergence (see Offe 1968, 79), the organizer of the conference in Frankfurt, Iring Fetscher, came much closer to the respective bourgeois theories.

Fetscher chaired the sessions but did not express his opinions on the question; however, at least five years earlier he had touched on the topic. In the seventh edition (1962) of his *Von Marx zur Sowjetideologie* (1957), Fetscher seemed to suggest that the improving standard of living of the working class following the Second World War was due to the inherent tendencies of the capitalist system itself. In other words, for him, capitalism did not seem to essentially contradict the interests of the working class.

Fetscher (1962, 33) claimed that in *Capital*, Marx presented a model of pure capitalism, which never became a reality. The polarization between the working class and the capitalists was a reality until 1900, Fetscher claimed, but since then, the direction had been rather the opposite. Against Marx's alleged prognosis, the middle classes were not destroyed, and society had not been polarized into two hostile camps—the workers and the capitalists. The working class had not been immiserated, neither absolutely nor relatively. Against Marx's predictions, the income gap between the richest and the poorest was not increasing, but shrinking, Fetscher (1962, 34) claimed. As proof, he claimed that in the United States, the share of the total income that the top 1% held had diminished; in 1929 the top 1% earned 19.1% of the total income, but in 1946 its share was only 7.7% of total income. (Fetscher 1962, 34.)<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Fetscher's (1962, 34) source is Fritz Sternberg, 1955, *Marxismus und die Gegenwart*, Köln, 62.



Fetscher contrasted this development in the United States with a greater income equality in the Soviet Union, where, he claimed, the bureaucracy exploited the masses, and hence, inequality had reached “almost unimaginable dimensions” (Fetscher 1962, 34) from the perspective of Western societies. In big companies in the Soviet Union, he claimed, the top incomes were 100 times the average wage, and 300 times the minimum wage, and due to the absence of independent trade unions, Fetscher (1962, 35) believed, the workers should not be optimistic for wage increases in the future.

Moreover, Fetscher (1962, 36) claimed that Marx was right in predicting the concentration of production. This was, however, only correct in the technical sense; the concentration of ownership on its part had not become a reality. On the contrary, the shares of the companies were distributed to small and medium-size owners. The owners of the means of production could not “rule” any more in the Western world, given that management was entrusted to professional managers. In addition, the state mediated between the capitalists and the trade unions, and the state was under the democratic control of the people, Fetscher claimed.

This is the way in which one of the leading “Marxologists” and political scientists in the early 1960s West Germany perceived the world. Retrospectively, we can say that, spatially, Fetscher was looking at the world from the standpoint of a globally privileged country. The reality of wage labor looked different in many other parts of the world. In temporal terms, his was the perspective of the year 1967, which, as we now know, is located at the bottom of the U-shaped curve illustrating the development of economic inequality.

As Thomas Piketty (2014, 32) shows, in the United States, income inequality was high in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but by the end of the 1940s, it had dropped and remained stable at a relatively low level between the 1950s and 1970s, until it increased rapidly in the 1980s. As Novokmet et al. (2018, 213) illustrate, in the United States the top 1% of income share dropped from approximately 20–25% in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to approximately 10–15% in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the late 1970s the share of the national income of the top 1% took off and rose to some 20% until the 2010s.

Fetscher assumed that the curve – the share of the national income owned by the top 1% – that had been coming down would continue to do so. The opposite happened.

Secondly, Fetscher's assumption, that income inequality had reached "almost unimaginable dimensions" in the Soviet Union, is wrong. In reality, the top 1% income share-curve of 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia and the Soviet Union has a similar U-shape as the respective curve in the West. According to Novokmet et al. (2018, 217) "Russia appears like an extreme version of the long-run U-shaped pattern observed in the West during the 20<sup>th</sup> century." In Russia, "[t]he top 1% income share was somewhat below 20% in 1905, dropped to as little as 4–5% during the Soviet period, and rose spectacularly to 20–25% in the recent decades." (Novokmet et al. 2018, 212) Thus, contrary to what Fetscher claimed, income inequality in the Soviet Union was probably less pronounced than it had ever been anywhere in the history of humanity, according to the estimate from Novokmet et al. (2018, 217).

Thus, the directions of both curves were quite the opposite of what Fetscher had anticipated. Despite the fact that in most capitalist countries the trade unions fight for their members' constant or rising wages, and the fact that in state socialism the trade unions could not work freely, income inequality was extraordinarily low in the Eastern bloc until the end of the Soviet era. After the demise of the Soviet Union, the top 1% income share rose "from less than 6% in 1989 to about 16% in 1996 and to over 26% in 2008", and then it has "stabilized around 20–22% since 2010". (Novokmet et al 2018, 215.) Even if the income of almost all had risen, the different groups experienced very different changes:

"The bottom 50% earners benefited from very small or negative growth, the middle 40% from positive but relatively modest growth, and the top 10% from very large growth rates [...] From that viewpoint, the 1989–2016 looks very different from the 1905–1956 period, when most of the growth went to the bottom 90%." (Novokmet et al. 2018, 215.)

In the United States, a similar development took place right after Fetscher had written his predictions. What Fetscher assumed to be a reality in the Soviet Union was actually true in the United States. According to *The Guardian* (August 14, 2019), in 1965, "the average CEO earned 20 times as much as the average worker at one of the US's top 350 companies. By 1978, the ratio was 30–1. By 1991, it was 121–1." In 2019, the wage gap between a CEO and a worker is 278–1, according to *The Guardian*.

Of course, as Novokmet et al. (2018, 214) noted, one must consider that the share of monetary income does not tell everything about the standard of living of different factions of society. Monetary dimensions of inequality do not take into account, for

example, the lack of certain rights of the lowest classes of the population, as was the case in Tsarist Russia, or that in Soviet style economies the elite had access to special shops or to exclusive vacation facilities. Therefore, as Novokmet et al. (2018) pointed out, in the Soviet Union the top 1% enjoyed in some cases substantially higher living standards than suggested by the monetary indicator. Novokmet et al. (2018, 214), however, believed that inequality during Soviet times was probably quite a bit lower than it was in post-Soviet Russia.

Moreover, if income inequality was at all significant in the Soviet Union, it was only in comparison with the other Eastern bloc countries and not in comparison with the West. In the other Eastern bloc countries, the income differences were even smaller than in the Soviet Union. (Novokmet et al. 2018, 218.) For example, according to André Steiner (2005, 246), the income difference between managers and workers in the Eastern bloc was 4–5:1. (See also Hauser et al. 1994.) According to Harry Nick (2011, 93), in the GDR it was 4:1.

Fetscher's data, thus, was partly misleading. (Another of his sources is Arthur Koestler's essay *Der Yogi und der Kommissar*.) From a theoretical perspective, he wrongly attributed a theory of immiseration of the working class to Marx.

It is, of course, true that from the perspective of Marx's analysis of capitalism, the gap between the share of wage labor and the share of capital, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, is expected to widen because "profit drives capitalism." (Shaikh 2016, 206.) Therefore, there are no investments without expected profits. Given that there is "no aggregate profit without surplus labour" (Shaikh 2016, 213), and that the amount of surplus labor depends on the wage costs (along with the length of the work day and the intensity of work), keeping the wage costs under control is essential for the survival of the whole system. As soon as rising wages undermine expected profitability, there is no reason to invest. This is Marx's grounding for the antagonistic interests of capitalists and wage laborers.

This does not, however, mean—contrary to what Fetscher suggested—that Marx's theory would imply immiseration of the working class, a constant decrease in their standard of living. The rising standard of living of the wage workers is compatible with the accumulation of capital as long as wages do not repress expected profits.

A balanced and well-informed view on the theory and reality of immiseration of the working class by Werner Hofmann was published in a West German collection of

essays on the centennial anniversary of *Capital, Folgen einer Theorie* (1967).<sup>28</sup> Hofmann asserted that wage was not a proper measure of the immiseration of the working class. He noted that immiseration is not primarily a question of a standard of living, nor is it a question of the price of labor-power. Immiseration, rather, according to Hofmann, follows from the expenditure of labor-power in production and from the lack of the possibilities of regeneration.

Hofmann (1967, 57–9) proposed that immiseration has also psychic, intellectual, and moral dimensions and explained that a spiritually immiserated working class has lost its class-consciousness and, hence, collectively alienated as a class, lost the sense of its own objective position in the society. Such a disorientation could also risk its already achieved material standard of living, Hofmann (1967, 60) warned.

For Hofmann it was clear that the existing welfare society and the reality of mass consumption were not essential features of the capitalist economy, and his anticipation that workers might lose the once achieved benefits now seems more far-sighted than Fetscher's predictions.

Further, Fetscher's (1962, 35) claim that Marx's "model" was no longer relevant, because it was clear that in the event of a crisis, the detrimental effects of that crisis can be alleviated with fiscal policies, appears in a new light when viewed from today's perspective, and so does Fetscher's claim that in the case of a threatening mass unemployment, the state can organize public relief works. Against Fetscher's anticipations, policies that could ease the suffering caused by crises were forgotten by 2008, as the global crisis broke out. Mass unemployment has now become a reality in most European countries,<sup>29</sup> and even globally.<sup>30</sup> In the Eurozone crisis, instead of the counter-cyclical fiscal policies anticipated by Fetscher, the elites of Europe have preferred austerity. The warnings of many economists or even of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that these measures would just deepen the recession have been ignored. (See Blyth 2013.)

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<sup>28</sup> See also an article by Theodor Prager (1967, 70 ff., 74) in the special issue on the centennial anniversary of *Capital* by *Marxistische Blätter*.

<sup>29</sup> In Spain, as the real estate bubble burst, unemployment increased from 8% to 25%, and youth unemployment increased to 52% until 2012. (Blyth 2013, 67.)

<sup>30</sup> "Official unemployment measures indicate that even without adjusting for part-time and discouraged workers there are currently almost 200 million people in the world without jobs, and almost 900 million workers live in dire poverty (ILO 2013)." (Shaikh 2016, 761.)

One more factor that Fetscher did not consider is that for the most part, the wage workers were in a relatively good position only in the global West. In countries like West Germany, the companies could and can afford higher salaries as long as the regulating, that is, the most productive and, hence, the most profitable, capitals were and are located in these countries. (See Shaikh 2016, 265 ff. on the concept of regulating capital.)

Finally, it likely is not a coincidence that the income distribution in both the United States and elsewhere in the West and in the Soviet Union and Russia forms a similar U-shaped curve. As Novokmet et al. (2018, 218) put it:

“The Bolshevik Revolution also helped to induce Western elites to accept policy changes which they had largely refused to do until World War 1. In turn, the failure and final fall of the Soviet Regime in the late 1980s contributed to the pro-market ideological shifts.”

Fetscher’s understanding of *Capital* appears to be rather superficial: he was, after all, better known for his studies of the early, “humanistic” Marx. In any case, he was an important expert on Marx’s thought in the West German academy. As a critic of Marxist-Leninist ideology and communism, Fetscher not only invited Fritz Behrens, who was an internal critic of state socialism with a high profile in the GDR, to the conference in Frankfurt, he also invited official representatives of the GDR economic science. By doing this he organized a rare occasion for Marxists from very different backgrounds to hold discussions. The conference was designed to bring differing points of view together. The presentations and the supplementing presentations of the correspondents, in most cases, are characterized by substantially differing points of view. This fact makes the conference volume more interesting than the respective volumes published in the East, celebrating Marx’s “genial work” and its “creative application” in the party programs of the SED.<sup>31</sup> (See, for example, Heinze and S.I. Tjulpanov 1968, 13.)

Fetscher was, at the time, perhaps the most prominent “Marxologist” of West Germany, and the editor in chief of *Marxismusstudien*, a publication of the Research Commission of German Evangelical Academies. He analyzed differences between Marx’s own thinking and Marxism-Leninism. Anyone who has read Marxist-Leninist

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<sup>31</sup> The conference was also organized with very little institutional support. Fetscher reports that the other organizer *Europäische Verlagsanstalt* financed the whole conference. According to Fetscher (1998, 6): “[w]e could not have received financial support from the University, which let us use an auditorium and that was all.”

textbooks and Marx himself can accept his claim that Marx's critical theory had to be distorted beyond recognition before it could be applied in the ideological indoctrination of party members in communist countries. (Fetscher 1985, 9.) As Fetscher (1971, 8) puts it, "[t]he mere inclusion of Marx's critical theory into a comprehensive and allegedly scientific *Weltanschauung* made an adequate understanding of all its complexities impossible".

Fetscher must have greatly contributed to the legitimation of Marx as a classic in philosophy and sociology in West Germany, and his student's editions brought Marx's original texts to the West German audience. The four volumes of Marx/Engels *Studienausgabe* (1966–1972), edited by Fetscher, consisted of texts from MEW and MEGA<sup>1</sup>, and the print runs were relatively large. (See Fetscher 2006.) Fetscher's own writings and the fact that he edited Marx's texts and brought those texts to the wider audience likely contributed to the dissemination of the insight that Marx's thought differs greatly from how it is represented in Marxism-Leninism.

## Conclusion

It is clear that two of the prominent themes discussed at the conference held at Goethe University of Frankfurt in September 1967—the nature of capitalism and the political economy of socialism—which were also discussed at conferences in the East, reflected the specific historical situation in divided Germany. The argument presented in this article is that there is a connection between one's perspective on these issues and one's perspective on the seemingly perennial methodological questions.

First, the way in which Marx's method is understood surely has implications for understanding the essence of capitalism. The key question is: what is essential in capitalism according to Marx? Is it the law of value? Is it the existence of the commodity production and the market? Is it the misery of the wage workers? Is it the inevitability of economic crises and the suffering following the crises? Or is it the production of surplus-value?

If the answer is "the law of value" or "the existence of commodity production," then Soviet style economies seem to be included within such "capitalist" societies. This does not, in my opinion, capture the historical specificity of these societies. The

domination in these societies was not based on the accumulation of private capital, but rather, on a more personal form of power within the party and the state apparatus. Therefore, the monetary measures of inequality do not reveal much about inequalities within these societies. In capitalist societies, money equals power and is, therefore, less bound to the individual.

If the answer to what is essential in capitalism according to Marx is “the misery of the wage workers,” then the Western capitalist societies during the years of the Keynesian compromise do not appear as capitalist. Indeed, the fact of the rising standard of living of the Western working class after the Second World War inspired the theories of the changed nature of the system. In 1967 even some Marxian scholars, like Iring Fetscher, still were optimistic that the essence of capitalism was something other than profiting at the expense of wage workers.

However, if what is essential in capitalism according to Marx is “the production of surplus-value,” the relatively high wages of workers do not yet contradict capitalism. Even if by 1967 the appearance of capitalism had changed in the global West, most of the Marxists still denied that its essence had changed. From their perspective, the essence of capitalism was the systemic drive to the accumulation of capital, and the crucial element of the capitalist economy was the profit rate.

From this perspective, a capitalist national economy can have different forms within the global economy, if its companies can expect high enough profits for their investments. State regulation and planning, or concessions to the wage workers and trade unions in the form of higher wages or social security, did not change the essence of the system, as far as it supported the accumulation of capital. This was the case in the globally privileged FRG.

During the years of the Keynesian compromise, and the post-World War economic boom, and especially during the years of the West German economic miracle, it was probably difficult to see the direction in which capitalism was headed. Yet, if one thought along the lines of Marx’s analysis of the nature of capitalism as a system of private profit-making by means of expenditure of the labor power of the wage workers, one came to a very different conclusion than the prevailing common sense opinion at the time. Such experts of Marxian political economy as Werner Hofmann anticipated that the working class could one day lose the position it had gained. In Hofmann’s reading of the concept of immiseration of the working class, such a development could follow if the wage earners started to imagine themselves as free,

individual, and independent *homines oeconomici*, as middle-class men and women who forged their own destiny.

Without Marx's analysis of capitalism, it must have been more difficult to see that the welfare state, and mass consumption, were not essential parts of capitalism, but instead belonged to a historically specific period of compromise between the wage workers and the owning classes, or between the state socialist (or state monopoly socialist [Behrens 2010, 149], if you will) and capitalist (or state monopoly capitalist) socio-economic systems.

From the Marxist perspective, why was income distributed much more equally in the 1960s than it is today? At the conference, Theodor Prager (1968, 305) argued that the fact that an alternative socio-economic order existed in the world presented a huge challenge for capitalism. He recalled the saying "socialism has proved a great success – for capitalism." He also observed that the capitalist world answered to the challenge of socialism dually, building not only the welfare state but also the warfare state.

The fact that state socialist countries existed within global capitalism, and that the character of these societies was so strongly influenced by this fact, offered for the official doctrine, on one hand, a justification for why these societies did not correspond to Marx's ideas of what a more advanced form of a society should look like. On the other hand, within such "state monopolistic socialism," a Marxist scientist was not allowed to draw such brutally realistic conclusions from this state of affairs as Fritz Behrens did. As Klaus Steinitz (2012, 38) explained, scientists were not really allowed to discuss the apparent convergence of both systems openly.

There is an interesting tension between the questions of Marx's method and the questions of the political economy of socialism. Frankfurtians clearly belonged to the camp for which, if Marx's method was understood correctly, *Capital* could not have anything to do with the political economy of socialism. For them, Marxian economics in a positive sense was a misnomer.

Karl Bichtler's comment on Alfred Schmidt's presentation, suggesting that the latter conflated the research objects of (Marxian) economics and philosophy, is an expression of fundamentally differing points of departure. (See Euchner & Schmidt 1968, 53.) Namely, if we take Schmidt seriously, then, unlike in a typical Marxist-Leninist point of view, which differentiates Marxian philosophy and Marxian



economics, we must ask seriously if “Marxian economics” or “Marxian philosophy” has a research object at all. If dialectics is contextualized within the bourgeois society and understood as an expression of the market-mediated social practice, then Marxian philosophy, especially in the sense of the schematic Marxism-Leninism, is simply nonexistent. Following the tradition of “Western Marxism,” for Schmidt, Marx’s research objects were not the general laws of thought, reality, and society, but the bourgeois society and its representation in a bourgeois political economy. Hence, “Marxian philosophy” and “Marxian economics” cannot be separated but are both components of a critical program.

From this perspective, given that Marx historicized his research object so much more radically than the classics of the bourgeois political economy, Marx’s work was a critique rather than positive science. The classical political economy took the objectified appearances of social relations within the bourgeois economy—prices, wages, or profits—for granted (and treated those as if they were eternal). Marx, in turn, distanced himself from the system of categories of political economy, and asked how these categories were constructed in the first place, within a specific form of a society, as Theodor Adorno (2018, 163) explained in his lecture in 1962.

From this perspective, a Marxian economist taking the appearance of certain practices (like profits or wages) within certain class relations at face value misses Marx’s critical point. In *Capital*, Marx shows what kind of practices and relations exist behind the objectified forms of appearance of social labor, like the profits, rents, and wages. (See also Haug 2013, 20.) The whole point of Marx’s critique of political economy was to show the historical specificity, the transitory and changeable nature of those ossified forms of praxis. Taking these historically specific, objectified forms of appearance of social labor and forms of its organization within bourgeois societies at face value and building up a socialist political economy on this foundation misses the essence of Marx’s critical point.

This is exactly what the East Germans seemed to be doing, and even worse, they constructed a whole (state) socialist economic practice on the fundament of Marx’s critical categories. Therefore, in the short conclusion of the volume *Kritik der politischen Ökonomie heute. 100 Jahre “Kapital,”* in which the presentations and the discussions of the Frankfurt conference are published, the editors Alfred Schmidt and Walter Euchner wrote that while the West Germans concentrated on the dialectical subtleties of Marx’s method, the economists from socialist countries

attempted to develop “a socialist political economy.” The editors claimed that the critical sense of Marx’s work was in danger of getting lost in the latter project. (Euchner & Schmidt 1968, 359.)

It is, of course, true that one does not find “a political economy of socialism” in *Capital*, only some general impulses concerning the issue. This was also admitted in the GDR. Already the persistence of commodity production seemed to contradict Marx’s and Engels’ ideas of socialism. The editors of an East German collection on the centenary of *Capital*, *Karl Marx “Das Kapital” Erbe und Verpflichtung*, A. Heinze and S.I. Tjulpanov (1968, 23) opined that for Marx and Engels, commodity production and socialism were incompatible. Marx did not, however, write “recipes for the cookshops of the future,” they continued. (Marx 1996, 17.) L. Leontyev (1967, 19), however, presented another opinion in his article on the centennial anniversary of *Capital* in *Marxistische Blätter*. He claimed that the little that Marx and Engels wrote about the future society does not flatly deny the possibility of commodity production within socialism.

I believe both parties of this controversy have valid points, and I believe that it is possible to keep in mind that Marx’s analysis of the categories of the bourgeois economy is critical in nature, while at the same time applying his ideas to a wholly new project. If one holds that Marxist scientists should not content themselves with the critique of existing social relations, but that they should also imagine and construct alternatives, a theory is still needed. Therefore, those who take the extreme position and claim that any step from the critique of political economy to the political economy of socialism is inappropriate, should consider the following: If they do hold that developing alternative economic practices and institutions should not be informed by the existing traditions of Marxian economics, then they should point out an alternative theoretical basis, and they should address whether this alternative should be classical, Ricardian, neo-classical, or other.

One of the lessons of the state socialist experiment certainly is that the worker’s movement should not reject the elements of “bourgeois” scientific traditions on ideological grounds; instead, these elements should be examined with scientific rigor and utilized, if they are found useful. In this respect, scientists in the GDR also seem to have done their best to do this within the confines of the official ideology.

Therefore, to what extent Marx’s analysis of capitalist and pre-capitalist social formations is useful in constructing an alternative political economy must be left

open. However, pursuing alternative economic structures and institutions without any theory is not an option.

There are probably, however, useful concepts, ideas, and practices within the existing traditions of Marxian economics as well. Therefore, the same applies to the Marxian economics just as well as to the bourgeois economics: it is worth the effort to critically examine the political economy of socialism developed in the Eastern bloc to see if there is something useful for future reference.

An immanent critique of the political economy of socialism can help to imagine and critically examine alternative socio-economic models. Scientists from the East, like Fritz Behrens and Klaus Steinitz, and from the West, like Wolfgang Abendroth and Elmar Altwater, for example, have contributed to this critical analysis. This critique was started but could not be completed during the existence of the GDR as a state. Either the objective conditions or the courage for an honest and critical discussion was lacking.

As Günter Krause (1998, 98) explains, in the early phase of GDR economics, Marx's categories were applied schematically to quite another "content" (to the political economy of socialism) than what Marx himself had meant. In this early phase, at least, the applicability of these categories to this new context was not reflected or critically discussed. Today, such a discussion is possible.

Today, Marxist economic theory has no reason (no pressure from the ruling party) to label the other traditions on political grounds as "bourgeois" or "revisionist," like Günter Krause (1998, 15) described GDR economics. If the works of domestic and international Marxist heretics were taboo subjects, as Krause (1998, 20; 1996, 176) explains, this is no more the case. Moreover, if the representatives of the political economy of socialism in the GDR did not participate in discussions within the international, pluralistic scientific community, as Krause (1998, 98) claimed, the situation has, of course, changed radically today.

After the fall of the Berlin wall, economists (and other scientists) of the former GDR, such as Klaus Steinitz, who also took part in the conference in Frankfurt in 1967, have analyzed the achievements and faults of the economy and the economic theory of the GDR from a critical perspective and with hindsight. As Steinitz emphasized,

even though a critical self-reflection is necessary, there is no reason to underestimate or negate the achievements of the GDR economics.<sup>32</sup>

To conclude: the discussions on the centennial anniversary of *Capital* in Marx's native country, Germany, were bound to the specific time and place of the divided Germany, but they are not irrelevant for Marxist discussions today.

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<sup>32</sup> Joachim Bischoff, „Gegen die verdinglichte Gesellschaft. Heute wird der Berliner Ökonom Klaus Steinitz 80,“ *Neues Deutschland*, November 12, 2012.

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# PUBLICATION

## II

### **Fetishism and Exploitation – Marx 150 and Marx 200: What Has Changed?**

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# FETISHISM AND EXPLOITATION – MARX 150 AND MARX 200: WHAT HAS CHANGED?

Paula Rauhala

## Abstract

*Neue Marx-Lektüre* was probably the most popular school of Marxism in Germany at the time of the 150th Anniversary of *Capital* and the Bicentennial of Marx's Birth in 2017–18. In its reading of *Capital*, *Neue Marx-Lektüre* emphasizes Marx's theory of commodity fetishism instead of the theory of surplus value. This reading of *Capital* was formulated by the students of the first generation of the Frankfurt School around the centennial anniversary of *Capital* and 150th anniversary of Marx's birth in 1967–68. It will be argued that an interpretation of *Capital* that emphasized the concept of fetishism and impersonal domination in Marx's theory of capitalism, instead of class rule, answered the problems encountered by some readers of *Capital* in Frankfurt in the late 1960s better than a more traditional reading. It will be argued, however, that these ideas are becoming more and more anachronistic, as the world has changed from what it was in 1968. It is claimed that a more traditional reading, in which the concept of fetishism can only be understood correctly in connection to the theory of surplus value, is a more topical reading of *Capital*, and it answers better the problems of today.

## I. Introduction

“Marx's critical theory of fetishism has become a central point of reference for a 'modern' understanding of Marxism which is represented by, among others, intellectuals who wish to distance themselves from the antiquated dogmas of 'traditional Marxism,’” Jan Hoff, a proponent of the contemporary German New Reading of Marx (*Neue Marx-Lektüre*), probably the most popular Marxist approach in Germany today, wrote in 2009.<sup>1</sup> This position raises an interesting question: Why

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Hoff, *Marx Worldwide: On the Development of the International Discourse on Marx since 1965*, trans. Nicholas Gray (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 138.

does the emphasis on fetishism differentiate between a “modern” and an “antiquated” reading of *Capital*?

The modern reading to which Hoff refers dates back to around 1968 and is especially connected to the Frankfurt school. A glance at the literature that appeared in Germany at the time of the centennial anniversary of *Capital* (1967) and on the 150th anniversary of Marx’s birth (1968) indicates that readers of *Capital* who followed the critical theory of the Frankfurt school typically perceived the concept of fetishism as key to the book. In East Germany, the fetishism theme was not as central in the most important readings of *Capital* at the time. Later, the leading East German expert on Marx’s use of this concept, Thomas Marxhausen, even once made the pun that some West German authors fetishize the concept of fetishism.<sup>2</sup>

Many valid reasons justified the increased interest in reading *Capital* through the lens of fetishism in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in the 1960s. This chapter presents the argument that these reasons were not pertinent in the East at the time and were no longer relevant at Marx’s bicentennial in 2018.

In this chapter, discussions on the centennial anniversary of *Capital* and the 150th anniversary of Marx’s birth in 1967–68 are considered, as are discussions that took place 50 years later, in 2017–18, prompting the question—what has changed? It will be argued that an interpretation of *Capital* that emphasized the concept of fetishism answered the problems encountered by its West German readers in the late 1960s much better than a more traditional reading, in which Marx’s theory of surplus value plays a more prominent role. The interpretation of the 1968 generation of the Frankfurt school is, however, still popular today, 50 years later. The argument presented in this chapter is that some of the key ideas of this approach to *Capital* are becoming more and more anachronistic, as the world has changed from what it was in 1968.

There are a number of possible explanations for why a reading of *Capital* that focuses on Marx’s theory of fetishism made more sense than a more traditional reading in Frankfurt during the 1960s. The first and most obvious is that it follows in the tradition of Western Marxist discussions on alienation and reification. Unlike the

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Marxhausen, “Fetischismusfetischismus ‘linker’ Marxologie. Bemerkungen zur Marxverfälschung durch Ulrich Erckenbrecht, ‘das Geheimnis des Fetischismus’ Grundmotive der Marxschen Erkenntniskritik,” *Hallesche Arbeitsblätter zur Marx-Engels-Forschung* 6 (1979).

first generation of the Frankfurt school, this generation of their students, inspired by the publication of *Grundrisse* in 1953 in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), embraced *Capital* as Marx's main philosophical work, rather than viewing it primarily as a study in economics. Instead, they thought *Capital* contains a much broader social theory. This is probably partly because most readers of *Capital* in the West were philosophers or sociologists, whereas in the East, mostly economists were considered competent commentators on *Capital*. This fact may seem trivial, but the reasons for this state of affairs are connected to the fundamental differences between West and East German societies.

Another reason why the focus on the concept of fetishism in *Capital* made sense in Frankfurt in the 1960s is that Marx's theory of fetishism was applied in the West German context to both forms of modern, industrial societies, that is, capitalism and state socialism—at least implicitly. Thirdly, the fetishism theory offers an explanation for the ongoing question of Western Marxists: Are workers still interested in overthrowing capitalism? This question was especially urgent in West Germany during the years of the *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle), an exceptionally long period of economic growth after World War II that benefitted not only owners but also workers. The theory of fetishism brings to the forefront the structural effects of the capitalist market economy. The real relations appear in inverted forms. The system of class exploitation appears as an egalitarian market system in which individuals pursue success in the sphere of equality and freedom. In 1968 FRG, it seemed that workers, who were relatively well off, had taken this appearance more or less for granted. The rebelling students' theoretical role model, Herbert Marcuse, even announced on the podium of the Free University in West Berlin, at the height of the student revolts in 1967, that workers were no longer able to see the destructive nature of the system, which offered comfortable unfreedom. Only outcasts and intellectuals were able to see the real relations.<sup>3</sup>

During the past 50 years, which separate the Marx jubilee of 1967–68 from that of 2017–18, the world has changed. After decades during which a challenger to the capitalist system still existed, global capitalism is now returning to business as usual. The shortening of the work day in the West has stagnated since the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> Income

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<sup>3</sup> Herbert Marcuse, "Ziele, Formen und Aussichten der Studentenopposition," *Das Argument* 45 (1967): 399–400.

<sup>4</sup> Christoph Hermann, *Capitalism and the Political Economy of Work Time* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 1.

inequality has increased.<sup>5</sup> Also, the link between productivity growth and the growth of real wages has been broken. Even in Germany, the link between the increase in labour productivity and the growth of real wages has been severed since the 1990s, and the level of inequality between the rich and the poor has increased.<sup>6</sup> For these reasons, the main argument of Marx's *Capital* that capitalism is a system of private profit making by exploiting wage labour, rather downplayed in the *Neue Marx Lektüre*, is today much more relevant than it was in 1960s West Germany. Therefore, in contrast to much of the Frankfurterian reading of *Capital*, today, a more topical reading of the book appreciates fetishism as a crucial concept of Marx's critique, and yet, according to this reading the concept of fetishism can only be understood correctly in connection to the theory of surplus value.

## II. The 150th Anniversary of *Capital* and the Bicentennial of Marx's Birth, 2017–18

The reading of *Capital*, formulated by the students of the first generation of the Frankfurt school around 1968, was still popular in Germany on the 150th anniversary of its publication and on the bicentennial of Marx's birth in 2017–18, and it has gained popularity elsewhere in the world. This reading does not consider the imperative of profit making at the expense of wage labour as the most important aspect of Marx's analysis of capitalism. Rather, it finds the key insights of *Capital* within the first chapter of the first volume, in the analysis of the commodity, in which Marx does not yet comment on wage labour and capital. Indeed, this reading connects Marx's theory of fetishism primarily to the topics of the first three chapters—that is, commodities and money.

Unlike in the reading defended here, in the *Neue Marx Lektüre*, the essence of capitalism is not found in bourgeois class relations, but in commodity production and in the fact that labour produces value in the first place. In the words of Michael Heinrich, probably the most notable follower of the Frankfurterian tradition of reading *Capital* in Germany today, the problem of capitalism is “the rule of value over

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<sup>5</sup> Anwar Shaikh, *Capitalism, Competition, Conflict, Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 755.

<sup>6</sup> Oliver Nachtwey, *Germany's Hidden Crisis: Social Decline in the Heart of Europe*, trans. David Fernbach and Loren Balhorn (London and New York: Verso, 2018), 112–3, 116.



humans.”<sup>7</sup> Politically, it follows that the goal is not primarily overcoming class exploitation and capital as an objectified form of bourgeois class relations, but overcoming the various forms of “impersonal domination,” that is, commodities, money, capital, and the state.<sup>8</sup> Heinrich motivates his reading with a critique of traditional Marxism.

The simple ideas of traditional ‘Marxist political economy,’ centered around labor and exploitation and heavily relying on the false falling rate of profit, cannot help very much to understand contemporary capitalism. But a ‘critique of political economy,’ centered around ‘form analysis,’ fetishism and a monetary theory of value and capital can help very well.<sup>9</sup>

Another influential reader of *Capital*, who contrasts his own reading to traditional Marxism, is Moishe Postone. Being a student of Iring Fetscher, the political science professor at the Goethe University of Frankfurt from the early 1960s until the late 1980s, Postone is probably the most eminent proponent of the Frankfurterian reading of *Capital* in the Anglophone world.

In Postone’s reading of *Capital*, the target of Marx’s critique is not class domination, that is, the private ownership of the means of production and the exploitation of wage labour. Rather, the problem of capitalism is the form of social labour itself, the fact that labour produces value as abstract social labour. According to Postone, “The system constituted by abstract labor embodies a new form of social domination. It exerts a form of social compulsion whose impersonal, abstract, and objective character is historically new.”<sup>10</sup>

Consequently, the working class should not seek the abolition of the appropriation of unpaid surplus labour by the owning classes. Instead, it should aim to overcome the “value creating labour” itself.<sup>11</sup> This is because, according to Postone’s reading of Marx, “social domination in capitalism does not, on its most fundamental level, consist of the domination of people by other people, but in the domination of people

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<sup>7</sup> Heinrich, Michael, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx’s Capital*, trans. Alexander Locascio (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012), 77. See also Rakowitz, Nadja, *Einfache Warenproduktion. Ideal und Ideologie* (Freiburg: ça ira, 2000), 86.

<sup>8</sup> Heinrich, Michael, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes*, 222.

<sup>9</sup> Heinrich, Michael, “Relevance and Irrelevance of Marxian Economics,” *New School Economic Review* 1, no. 1 (2004): 57.

<sup>10</sup> Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination. A Reinterpretation of Marx’ Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 158–9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

by abstract social structures that people themselves constitute.”<sup>12</sup> Fetishism instead of exploitation is the key concept of Marx’s book, because capitalism is characterized by “self-generated structural domination,” which “cannot be fully grasped in terms of class exploitation and domination,” but rather, as “a historical dynamic beyond the control of the individuals constituting it.”<sup>13</sup>

In the more traditional reading of *Capital* defended in this writing, the specificity of a society in which the capitalist mode of production is dominant, compared to other class societies, is that the appropriation of surplus labour is mediated by the market, and therefore, is not observable and not personal. Like in all other forms of class societies, the work day of a worker is divided into necessary and surplus labour. In capitalism, however, the distribution of the product of both parts of the work day among the working class and the owning classes (industrial capital, money-dealing capital, commercial capital, and landed property) is mediated through market mechanisms. The value added appears in the fetishized forms of wage, profit, commercial profit, interest, and land rent. Therefore, fetishism is a crucial concept, and it is present in all three books of *Capital*. The fetishisms of commodities and money are just the beginning of the story, and after the fourth chapter of the first volume, the concept of fetishism is always related to surplus value and to the mechanisms of its production, circulation, and distribution.

Unlike this reading, in which the essence of capitalism is explained by the concepts of capital and wage labour, for Postone, “Marx seeks to grasp the core of capitalism with the categories of commodity and value.”<sup>14</sup> Hence, if we follow Postone’s reading, it follows that Marx would present his critique of capitalism already before presenting the transformation of money into capital, and before demonstrating how the division of the work day into necessary and surplus labour is under bourgeois relations of production, reflected in the monetary categories of wage, profit, interest, commercial profit, and land rent. The political implication of Postone’s reading is that the primary goal should not be overcoming the system of class exploitation based on the appropriation of surplus labour, but overcoming “value” altogether.<sup>15</sup> In a more traditional reading, as defended herein, the essence of capitalism cannot be found in the first chapter of *Capital*, and the political conclusions drawn from the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 26.

book are related to the bourgeois class relations and not to the existence of value, commodities, and money, as such.

The Frankfurtian reading of *Capital* has also influenced contemporary readers of the text in the Anglophone world. Among them is Peter Hudis, who writes that Marx's

primary concern is with the way social relations in modern society take on the *form* of value. His main object of critique is the *inverted* character of social relations in capitalism, where *human* relations take on the form of relations between *things*. There is little doubt that Marx's critique of capitalism centres upon a critique of value-production.<sup>16</sup>

As noted, this interpretation of *Capital*, which identifies commodities and money, and fetishism escorting these forms, as the main target of Marxian critique of capitalism, has its roots in West Germany around the year 1968. In the coming sections, it will be argued that 50 years ago in West Germany, there were good reasons to emphasize Marx's theory of commodity fetishism instead of the theory of surplus value and to emphasize impersonal domination in Marx's theory, instead of class rule. These reasons are embedded in the specific context of reading *Capital* in divided Germany around 1967–68. The next section will provide an overview of this peculiar historical situation.

### III. Centennial Anniversary of *Capital* and 150th Anniversary of Marx's Birth in East and West Germany, 1967–68

In 1968, Germany was divided into the GDR and the FRG. The settings for Marx and Marxist research in both states were very different. The year 1968 marked a historical break in both German states, and also for the research on Marx and Marxism. What is common in both states is that Marx's works became more readily available during the jubilee. The years preceding 1968 had been also politically interesting in both states. With regard to the argument presented in this chapter, the most important factor in West German society at the time was the rise of the student movement, while in the East, the most important events were de-Stalinization and economic reforms.

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Hudis, *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 8.

In GDR, Marx belonged to the official canon of the socialist state, which professed a Marxist-Leninist ideology. This meant not only that Marxist research had plenty of resources, but also that the Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, SED) interfered with the research, which made genuine research difficult.

East Germany is, however, especially interesting for research on Marx, and increasingly so from 1967 on, when editorial work on the historical-critical edition of Marx's and Engels' works, *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA), started in East Berlin. The project, which Stalin had suppressed, was continued on the centennial of Marx's *chef d'oeuvre*. On that day, September 14, 1967, the organ of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (*Pravda*) and the organ of the SED (*Neues Deutschland*) announced that the Institute of Marxism Leninism in Moscow and the Institute of Marxism Leninism in East Berlin would continue to work on MEGA.<sup>17</sup> The darkest years of Stalinism were over. New volumes would not appear before 1975, but during the 1950s and 1960s, serious research on Marx's work, Marxian economics, and Marxism were revived. Also, the 41 volumes of *Marx-Engels-Werke* (MEW), which first appeared during the "Karl Marx year" in 1953, were completed on the sesquicentennial of Marx's birth—May 5, 1968.<sup>18</sup>

Another factor enforcing the revival of credible scientific research and relatively free and critical discussion on the Marxian political economy was the New Economic System (*Neues ökonomisches System*, NES), a promising reform programme of the socialist economy during the early 1960s.<sup>19</sup> The NES spurred not only practical but also theoretical debates on fundamental problems of Marxian economics, Marx's method, and interpretations of *Capital*.

In West Germany, the Cold War atmosphere—not in the form of communism as in the East but in the form of anti-communism—presented challenges for Marxist

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<sup>17</sup> "Gesamtausgabe der Werke von Marx und Engels," *Neues Deutschland*, September 14, 1967, 1–2.

<sup>18</sup> "Marx-Engels-Werkausgabe vollständig erschienen," *Neues Deutschland*, May 5, 1968, 2. Both publication projects trained a considerable number of experts on Marx's and Engels' thought: *Beiträge zur Marx-Engels-Forschung. Neue Folge* (2006) presents 160 short biographies of the editors of MEW, MEGA, and the Soviet collected works of Marx and Engels, Sočinenija. "Kurzbiografien," in *Beiträge zur Marx-Engels-Forschung. Neue Folge. Sonderband 5. Die Marx-Engels-Werkausgaben in der UdSSR und DDR (1945–1968)*, ed. Carl-Erich Vollgraf, Richard Sperl, and Rolf Hecker (Hamburg: Argument Verlag, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Klaus Steinitz and Dieter Walter, *Plan–Markt–Demokratie. Prognose und langfristige Planung in der DDR—Schlussfolgerungen für morgen* (Hamburg: VSA-Verlag, 2014); Günter Krause, *Wirtschaftstheorie in der DDR* (Marburg: Metropolis-Verlag, 1998).

research and for dealing with Marx's ideas in an academic context. During the 1950s, the country had only a few Marxian academics, and until 1968, few of Marx's works had been published in the West. This situation changed during the 1960s. What was important for the Marx research in Frankfurt was that during the 1960s, Iring Fetscher published a student edition of Marx's and Engels' texts. Fetscher, known for his critiques of Soviet Marxism, was a professor of political science at the Goethe University of Frankfurt, and Moishe Postone's teacher.

One of the volumes of Fetscher's student edition contained the first section "commodities and money" from the first edition of *Capital*. This text became important for new readings of *Capital* among the younger generation of the Frankfurt school, given that Marx's presentation of the value form and commodity fetishism differ in this first edition from the subsequent, commonly used editions.<sup>20</sup> Michael Heinrich reports that this text was seen as "the 'missing link' between the 'Grundrisse' and later editions of 'Capital'."<sup>21</sup>

The Marx jubilee of 1967–68 made Marx's works more available not only in the East, but also in the West. In 1967, on the 100th anniversary of *Capital*, an edition of the three volumes appeared, as *Europäische Verlagsanstalt* (EVA) published a licensed edition of *Capital* by East German Dietz Verlag. At the same time, the *Grundrisse* appeared for the first time in the West, and later, *Theories of Surplus Value*. The jubilee was the formal reason for the publication of Marx's original texts, but another reason was the increased demand for those texts among radicalized youth.

Frankfurt was not only the stronghold of the Marxist critical theory, but also, from the mid-1960s, the hub of the "anti-authoritarian wing" of the student movement. The reading of *Capital*, emphasizing fetishism and impersonal domination in Marx's critique, came into being in close proximity to this group of students and young researchers.

In 1968, university students changed the whole of West German society, but especially shook its highly elitist university culture. The appearance of what is nowadays called the *Neue Marx Lektüre* is tightly connected to these events. Hans-

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<sup>20</sup> See Hans-Georg Backhaus, "Zur Dialektik der Wertform," in *Beiträge zur Marxistischen Erkenntnistheorie*, ed. Alfred Schmidt (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969), 129.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Heinrich, "Reconstruction or Deconstruction?," in *Re-reading Marx: New Perspectives after the Critical Edition*, ed. Riccardo Bellofiore and Roberto Fineschi (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 73.

Jürgen Krahl, who was a student of Adorno, was politically and theoretically the leading figure of the movement in Frankfurt, as Rudi Dutschke was in Berlin. Krahl was not only a political figure, but also one of the most important representatives of the new philosophical readings of *Capital*.

The background for the rise of the student movement was, as Georg Fülberth explains, the short supply of fresh labour power in the FRG after the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961.<sup>22</sup> After World War II and until 1961, the miraculously growing economy of the FRG benefitted from educated labour streaming from the East to the West. After erection of the wall, the sudden increased need for highly qualified labour opened the doors of the academy to the children of non-academic parents. These students encountered a conservative university culture and the rigid, undemocratic structures of the university institution. This generation of students relaxed the academic culture, and they revolted outside universities by opposing the emergency laws (*Notstandsgesetzgebung*), the Vietnam War, and the bourgeois media embodied by the *Springer* house, which was central in stirring up negative attitudes towards the protesting students.

At the same time, the meaning of being academically educated changed. Before World War II, university students in the most educated countries (Germany, France, and Britain) accounted for no more than “one tenth of one per cent of their joint populations.”<sup>23</sup> By the late 1980s, “in educationally ambitious countries, students formed upwards of 2.5 per cent of the *total* population.”<sup>24</sup> FRG was among the countries where the number of university students multiplied by four to five from 1960 until 1980.<sup>25</sup> This meant that the children of the middle class or even of working-class families gained access to the West German academy.<sup>26</sup> This partly explains the shift among academic students from conservative attitudes to leftist attitudes.

Even if the anti-authoritarian wing of the West German student movement had assumed the typical West German anti-communist attitude, as Wolfgang Abendroth

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<sup>22</sup> Georg Fülberth, “Linke Hoffnungen, linke Chancen, linkes Versagen?” in *Pankover Vorträge* 152. 1968—*Bilanz und ungelöste Probleme* (Berlin: Helle Panke, 2010), 48.

<sup>23</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991* (London: Abacus, 1995), 295.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>26</sup> Wolfgang Abendroth, “Der Weg der Studenten zum Marxismus,” *Z. Zeitschrift für Marxistische Erneuerung* 113 (March 2018): 104.

puts it, the lasting result of the happenings of the year 1968 in West Germany was the end of official anti-communism and anti-Marxism.<sup>27</sup> The Communist Party of Germany (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*, KPD) was legally banned from 1956 onwards. In 1968, the state cancelled the ban on the KPD. Dealing with Marxism was no longer “a cardinal sin,” as Adorno had described it in 1962, in his lecture on Marx’s critique of political economy.<sup>28</sup> This is the context from which the new reading of *Capital* emerged.

## IV. The Concept of Fetishism in the Reading of *Capital* Around 1968

Although he taught many students, Adorno himself did not write much about *Capital*, but he made good use of the concepts of Marx’s critique of political economy, such as commodity fetishism, ideology, and the idea of real abstraction. Many of Adorno’s students came to emphasize these themes as well. Ernst Theodor Mohl explains:

In an exclusive tutorial at the beginning of the 1960s, he [Adorno] explained to me the section on fetish and the subject-object inversion which follows from it in such a way that I was subsequently able to avoid taking an economistically foreshortened perspective on Marx’s critique of capitalism.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, Jan Hoff explains that,

according to [Hans-Jürgen] Krahl, Adorno’s legacy was the transmission of the consciousness of emancipation characteristic of the Western Marxism of the interwar period through his specific reference to the categories of reification, fetishisation, mystification and second nature.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 107–8.

<sup>28</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Theodor W. Adorno on ‘Marx and the Basic Concepts of Sociological Theory’: From a Seminar Transcript in the Summer Semester of 1962,” *Historical Materialism* 26, no.1 (2018): 164.

<sup>29</sup> Ernst Theodor Mohl, “Ein Reisebericht,” in *In Memoriam Wolfgang Iahn: Der ganze Marx—Alles Verfasste veröffentlicht, erforschen und den ‘ungeschriebenen’ Marx rekonstruieren* (Hamburg: Argument Verlag, 2002), 18–19. Quoted after: Hoff, *Marx Worldwide*, 77.

<sup>30</sup> Hoff, *Marx Worldwide*, 28–29.

Another student of Adorno, Hans Georg Backhaus, later noted that “essentially, all of my writings deal with one and the same theme: the problem of fetishism.”<sup>31</sup>

Why was the concept of fetishism so central for the young generation of readers of Marx from the Frankfurt school? Why is this concept supposed to make a difference between “a traditional” and a “modern,” or a “non-dogmatic,” reading of Marx’s mature work?

In one important event in the context of the student revolts, in the fully packed Auditorium Maximum of the *Freie Universität* in West Berlin in 1967, Herbert Marcuse explained that the one-dimensional society had managed to integrate the working class. According to Marcuse, the only opposition left consisted of intellectuals, hippies, and outcasts.<sup>32</sup> Only these groups were able to see behind the thoroughly bureaucratized order, which was repressing the majority of the people by satisfying their needs and creating more and more false needs.

Similarly, a key question for Marcuse, in his talk at the Summer school in Korčula in 1964, had been:

[W]hy should the overthrow of the existing order be a vital necessity for people who own, or can hope to own, good clothes, a well-stocked larder, a TV set, a car, a house and so on, all within the existing order?<sup>33</sup>

Also, in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), which appeared in a German translation by Alfred Schmidt in 1967, Marcuse traces the reasons for the diminishing revolutionary potential of the Western working class. As Marcuse puts it, people seemed to “find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, [and] kitchen equipment.”<sup>34</sup> Marcuse and those following him suggested that workers were not able to see the true nature of the system.

What “system” does Marcuse actually address in his critique? It is interesting that Marcuse, more or less explicitly, targets his critique at both systems—capitalism and

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<sup>31</sup> Hans-Georg Backhaus, *Dialektik der Wertform: Untersuchungen zur Marxschen Ökonomiekritik*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg: Ça ira, 2011), 34; translation mine.

<sup>32</sup> Marcuse, “Ziele, Formen und Aussichten,” 399.

<sup>33</sup> Herbert Marcuse, “Socialism in the Developed Countries,” in *Marxism, Revolution and Utopia: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, ed. Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 6: 179.

<sup>34</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 11.



state socialism. An indication of this is that he also applies the general terms “industrial civilization” and “industrial society” more often than the word “capitalism.” Marcuse claims that “[t]echnology serves to institute new, more effective, and more pleasant forms of social control and social cohesion.” Then, the “totalitarian tendency of these controls” is “creating similarities in the development of capitalism and communism.”<sup>35</sup> This is a “comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom” which “prevails in advanced industrial civilization.”<sup>36</sup> Instead of the satisfaction of true needs, industrial society offers “repressive satisfaction.”<sup>37</sup> Hence, one possible interpretation of Marcuse’s assertions is that the real social relations remain hidden in both forms of industrialized and consumerist societies. As Douglas Kellner explains in the preface to the second edition, the book was “taken up by the emergent New Left as a damning indictment of contemporary Western societies, capitalist and communist.”<sup>38</sup>

Claiming that the workers were alienated in their comfortable everyday existence can, of course, also be criticized as patronizing, as if the radical students or university professors who came from middle-class families knew better what the workers should aspire to. From today’s perspective, it seems likely that the continually rising standard of living, shortened weekly work hours, and relatively good working conditions in both German states did, after all, satisfy many true and vital needs of wage workers.

Even if Marcuse traces some real developments, not all of the working class was satisfied. Especially in France and Italy, revolting students joined forces with striking workers. In West Germany, common struggles of students and workers were not so common, despite the economic recession, which had set in by 1966. One reason might have been, along with the relative weakness of the West German worker’s institutions, as Wolfgang Abendroth explains, the students’ “Adornian” language.<sup>39</sup> It is not easy to draw practical conclusions from Adorno’s Marxism, and Adorno himself warned against doing so. As Alex Demirovic puts it, some of those who wanted to turn theory into practice reasoned that practice equals confrontation with

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., xlvi.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 9

<sup>38</sup> Douglas Kellner, “Introduction to the Second Edition,” in *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), xi.

<sup>39</sup> Abendroth, “Der Weg der Studenten zum Marxismus.”

the police.<sup>40</sup> As Adorno predicted, those who drew such an extreme conclusion often got disappointed, and therefore, became turncoats later.<sup>41</sup> The distance between the Frankfurtian students, the forms of their practice, and the workers might explain, in part, why Marx's description of how things are not as they immediately appear appealed to the followers of the Frankfurt school much more than a reading in which class conflict is seen as apparent.

Adorno was an influential teacher of the students. In the transcript made by Adorno's student Hans-Georg Backhaus of Adorno's lecture on 1962, the ideas of fetishism, real abstraction, character mask, and second nature play a prominent role. In Adorno's reading of *Capital*, the main problem Marx deals with is the constitution of economic facts. Whereas neoclassical economics aims at a mathematically precise description of established facts, Marx's critique, instead, reveals the mechanisms that constitute these facts in the first place.<sup>42</sup>

For Adorno, exchange is a process of abstraction, which does not take place in thought, but in social reality. The parties of exchange, whether they are conscious of it or not, reduce use values into their labour values during the process of exchange. Thus, they conduct a real abstraction, a conceptual operation in reality.<sup>43</sup> This abstraction is a result of people's own actions in the market, and yet, they encounter it as a coercive external reality, which becomes more violent, the less people are conscious of its operation. This abstraction also makes the relations behind the things appear as properties of these things themselves.<sup>44</sup> This is not just an appearance; it is not a question of a false consciousness. The structure of social reality is such that consciousness really is determined by being.<sup>45</sup> Individuals are at the mercy of the market forces.

Adorno does not present, however, a circulationist model of the "commodity economy." He emphasizes that not only products are commodified, but labour power also is sold as a commodity. Workers are free to change from one employer

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<sup>40</sup> Alex Demirovic, "Die 'Ideen von 1968' und die inszenierte Geschichtslosigkeit," in *Emanzipation als Versöhnung. Zu Adornos Kritik der »Warentausch«-Gesellschaft und Perspektiven der Transformation*, ed. Iring Fetscher and Alfred Schmidt (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Neue Kritik, 2002), 39.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Adorno, "Theodor W. Adorno on 'Marx and the Basic Concepts of Sociological Theory,'" 163. See also Backhaus, "Zur Dialektik der Wertform," 139.

<sup>43</sup> Adorno, "Theodor W. Adorno on 'Marx and the Basic Concepts of Sociological Theory,'" 156.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 159–60.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

to the other, but are, in any case, forced to sell their labour power and to give away unpaid labour to the capitalist class. A contract without the compulsion to perform unpaid surplus labour is not an option. Capitalists, for their part, are also at the mercy of external forces. They do not have personal reasons to strive for profit. They do it because they carry the character mask of capital.<sup>46</sup> Fetishism and the impersonal form of domination are at the centre of Adorno's reading of *Capital*.

What about the East German readers of *Capital*? Did they represent "the traditional reading," in which the concept of fetishism was neglected? At the least, it is safe to say that East German readers of *Capital* did not neglect this concept.<sup>47</sup> For example, Walter Tuchscheerer, in his book *Bevor das Kapital entstand* (1968), claims that the concepts of commodity and money fetishism offer the key to understanding Marx's theory of value.<sup>48</sup> However, Fred Oelßner, an important politician and the head of the Institute for Social Sciences at the Academy for Social Sciences of the central committee of SED (*Akademie für Gesellschaftswissenschaften beim ZK der SED*), writes in his preface to the book that the author, in places, overemphasizes the importance of commodity and money fetishisms in *Capital*.<sup>49</sup> Oelßner also refers to the examiners of Tuchscheerer's doctoral thesis, who criticized the same point.

Tuchscheerer's book is certainly one of the most important East German books on how *Capital* came about. Later, one of the most important figures of the Frankfurtian student movement and of the new readings of *Capital*, Ernst Theodor Mohl, calls the chapter of Tuchscheerer's book that traces the development of Marx's theory of fetishism "admirable."<sup>50</sup> This is because it "avoids the economic foreshortening

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 161–2.

<sup>47</sup> As also Jan Hoff emphasizes, especially the research carried on a few years later by an East German researcher of the MEGA project, Thomas Marxhausen, is still worthwhile for anyone interested in the development of the concept of fetishism in Marx's thought. See Thomas Marxhausen, "Die Theorie des Fetischismus im dritten Band des 'Kapitals'," in *Beiträge zur Marx-Engels-Forschung* 25 (1988): 209–43; Thomas Marxhausen, "Fetischcharacter der Ware," in *Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*, ed. Wolfgang Fritz Haug (Hamburg: Argument Verlag, 1999), 4: 343–54.

<sup>48</sup> Walter Tuchscheerer, *Bevor das Kapital entstand. Die Herausbildung und Entwicklung der ökonomischen Theorie von Karl Marx in der Zeit von 1843 bis 1858*, ed. Gerda Tuchscheerer (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1968), 373.

<sup>49</sup> Fred Oelßner, "Vorwort," in *Bevor das Kapital entstand: Die Herausbildung und Entwicklung der ökonomischen Theorie von Karl Marx in der Zeit von 1843 bis 1858*, ed. Gerda Tuchscheerer (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1968), 15.

<sup>50</sup> Ernst Theodor Mohl, "Germany, Austria and Switzerland," in *Karl Marx's Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later*, ed. Marcello Musto (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 194.

characteristic of previous discussion in the East,” and instead, highlights “the qualitative, socially critical aspects of Marx’s doctrine of value.”<sup>51</sup>

Tuchscheerer’s book appeared in the GDR during the Karl Marx jubilee in 1968 and was published simultaneously in FRG. The book probably influenced the new readings of *Capital* in the West as well,<sup>52</sup> as did probably another important book, *The Story of a Great Discovery (Istorii a odnogo velikogo otkrytii a K Marksa: k sozdanii u “Kapitala”, 1965)* by Vitaly Vygodsky, translated from Russian into German in the GDR to honour the centennial anniversary of *Capital* in 1967. The book deals with Marx’s different manuscripts during the course of his research from 1850 until 1863. In the beginning of his book, Vygodsky notes that Marx overcame the fetishism (in addition to the empiricism and ahistoricism) typical of the bourgeois political economy very early, by explaining that the objective appearances of human labour are essentially forms of the appearance of the relations between human beings.<sup>53</sup> In *Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), Marx “formulated the most important theses of his economic doctrine: The relations of production are not, as in the opinion of bourgeois economists, relations between things but relations between people with reference to things,” Vygodsky reminds readers.<sup>54</sup> Thus, Vygodsky by no means ignores the centrality of fetishism in Marx’s critique of political economy. However, even if the concept of fetishism gained some attention in the East German discussions, the Frankfortian way of elaborating on it was a distinctively Western phenomenon.

## V. An Encounter Between East and West

In a talk at the conference organized for the centennial of *Capital*, *100 Jahre das Kapital* in Frankfurt am Main, the translator of Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* and Adorno’s assistant, Alfred Schmidt, presented an influential interpretation of Marx’s method in *Capital*. According to Jan Hoff, “Schmidt’s paper represents a kind of ‘birth

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Rolf Hecker, “Hans-Georg Backhaus: Die Dialektik der Wertform,” *Utopie kreativ* 94 (August 1998): 90.

<sup>53</sup> Vitaly Vygodsky, *The Story of a Great Discovery*, trans. S.V. Salt (Tunbridge Wells: Abacus Press, 1974), 20.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. See also, Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in MECW (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), 6: 165.

document' for what was a new phenomenon in postwar West Germany: the intensive and sophisticated engagement with the critique of political economy."<sup>55</sup>

Given that the *Neue Marx Lektüre* is known as a distinctively Western way of reading Marx, it is noteworthy that in the context of Schmidt's presentation, an interesting discussion between Schmidt and an East German delegate took place. This discussion helps to examine why the concept of fetishism was so central in the West, and at the same time, perhaps caused some unease in the East. This conference was an exceptional event in the sense that the organizer, the Institute of Political Science of the Goethe University of Frankfurt, headed by Iring Fetscher, had invited a very heterogeneous group of Marxist and non-Marxist researchers—among them, an official delegation consisting of the top political economists of GDR.

Schmidt's reading of *Capital* differed fundamentally from the East German reading of the work. For Schmidt, a sense of all of Marx's categories is critical. The laws of the political economy are an expression of such a society in which people do not yet control their own societal forces. Schmidt explained that the objectified appearances of human labour are products of our activity, forming a coercive, objective second nature. Different from capitalism, in communism, there would not be any forces or conditions existing independently of us, Schmidt announced.<sup>56</sup>

In other words, this philosopher claimed that all of the categories researched by Marx—commodities, money, capital, and wage—emerge from our own separate and non-reflected actions and belong exclusively to capitalism. Then, under socialism, *Capital* would be a useless book. From Schmidt's perspective, dialectical materialism was by no means an ontological hypothesis of the structure of reality, but instead, a description of the state of affairs in a capitalist society, in which thought is determined by being. People face the objectified appearances of their own labour as independent forces, and their own actions result in the laws of the economy, reminiscent of natural laws.

Schmidt also expressed the same idea in a collection of essays titled *Folgen einer Theorie*, which appeared on the centennial of *Capital*: economic determinism applies as long

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<sup>55</sup> Hoff, *Marx Worldwide*, 81.

<sup>56</sup> Alfred Schmidt, "Zum Erkenntnisbegriff der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie," in *Kritik der politischen Ökonomie heute: 100 Jahre 'Kapital'*, ed. Walter Euchner and Alfred Schmidt (Frankfurt am Main and Wien: Europäische Verlagsanstalt and Europa Verlag, 1968), 57.

as humans do not control their own societal forces.<sup>57</sup> Ingo Elbe sums up Schmidt's conclusion: Marx's message was not an automatism of liberation, but liberation from the automatism of an irrational mode of socialization.<sup>58</sup>

Karl Bichtler, the head of the Department of Political Economy of Socialism in the East German Academy of Sciences, criticized Schmidt's basic premise, saying that as an aggregate result of the intersecting actions of individual economic actors, certain economic laws emerge. This is why we need to sit in this conference, Bichtler quipped.<sup>59</sup> In other words, for him, it was clear that laws and forces that are independent of economic actors still existed not only in capitalism, but also in state socialism.

Why did Alfred Schmidt's reading of *Capital* seem so problematic to Bichtler? In the Eastern bloc, every student of political economy had to read *Capital*, even if the book was not read as a manual for a planned economy. Most of Marx's categories and laws were considered specific to capitalism, but some very general laws were thought to operate in socialism as well. In the official celebrations of *Capital*, organized two weeks earlier in East Berlin, the Head of State Walter Ulbricht ascertained that the laws included the law of value, the law of the economy of time, and the so-called law of the congruence of the forces and relations of production.<sup>60</sup>

The law of value was considered to apply because some means of production, most of the raw materials, intermediate goods, and consumption goods were produced as commodities for exchange.<sup>61</sup> Unlike in capitalism, even if the products of labour appeared as commodities and money, the utilization of the commodities and money as capital was to be prevented.<sup>62</sup> Still, the law of value, it was believed, had not lost its validity.

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<sup>57</sup> Alfred Schmidt, "Über Geschichte und Geschichtsschreibung in der materialistischen Dialektik," in *Folgen einer Theorie: Essays über das Kapital von Karl Marx*, ed. Ernst Theodor Mohl (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), 111.

<sup>58</sup> Ingo Elbe, *Marx im Westen. Die neue Marx-Lektüre in der Bundesrepublik seit 1965*, 2nd rev. ed. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2010), 68.

<sup>59</sup> See *Kritik der politischen Ökonomie heute. 100 Jahre 'Kapital'*, ed. Walter Euchner and Alfred Schmidt (Frankfurt am Main and Wien: Europäische Verlagsanstalt and Europa Verlag, 1968), 56.

<sup>60</sup> Walter Ulbricht, *Die Bedeutung des Werkes "Das Kapital" von Karl Marx für die Schaffung des entwickelten gesellschaftlichen Systems des Sozialismus in der DDR und den Kampf gegen das staatsmonopolistische Herrschaftssystem in Westdeutschland* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1967).

<sup>61</sup> N. A. Zagalow et al., *Lehrbuch politische Ökonomie: Sozialismus*, trans. Hermann Mertens, Ingrid Stolte, and Günter Wermusch (Frankfurt/Main: Verlag Marxistische Blätter, 1972), 252ff.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

However, commodity–money relations were considered subordinate to the socialist relations of production.<sup>63</sup> Whereas the determining characteristic of commodity production is the anarchistic regulation of the social production *ex post*, via the functioning of the law of value, in the state socialism, it was considered the task of the central planners. By the 1960s, however, it had become evident that the economy was not under the control of the central planners, partly because they had to base their decisions on incomplete information.<sup>64</sup> Companies did not always give correct information to the central planners, because it was not in their own best interests.<sup>65</sup> This is because the directors of the companies wanted to secure as many resources and encumber as few obligations for their companies as possible. The interests of the companies, and of individuals, did not coincide with the interests of the rest of the society—“yet,” as was often added. Hence, the relations between producers were not transparent, so to say, which was one of the challenges of centralized planning.

The problems related to the diverging interests and incomplete information given to planners were among the most important reasons reform was needed, which GDR realized in the form of the New Economic System, launched in 1963. New Economic System aimed to improve the productivity of labour, the utilization of material resources, and the system of planning by introducing market elements in the form of enforcing monetary categories, increasing the independence of companies, and providing economic incentives.

Against this backdrop, it is easy to understand why Bichtler criticized Schmidt’s presentation. From Bichtler’s perspective, in a complex modern society, certain economic laws emerge from the actions of individual producers and consumers. The task of economics was to understand and make use of these laws for the purpose of achieving political goals. Getting these laws under control was not a simple task, nor was the abolishment of such laws in a complex modern system of production and exchange.

Schmidt’s answer to Bichtler’s critique was that Bichtler wrongly considers the objectivity of the laws of political economy as a positive aspect of *Capital*; the objectivity of these laws was the object of Marx’s critique. One should not fetishize

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Elmar Altvater, “Rationalisierung und Demokratisierung. Zu einigen Problemen der neuen ökonomischen Systeme im Sozialismus,” *Das Argument* 39 (1966), 286.

<sup>65</sup> Jiří Kosta, Jan Meyer and Sibylle Weber, *Warenproduktion im Sozialismus; Überlegungen zur Theorie von Marx und zur Praxis in Osteuropa* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1973), 159.

in theory what is already fetishized in reality.<sup>66</sup> Schmidt also got support from Oskar Negt, another important Frankfurtian theorist, who insisted that the scientific (*Naturwissenschaftlichen*) concepts—meaning the objective laws of the economy—in Marx’s work have to be understood with their disappearance in communism in mind.<sup>67</sup>

Hence, one aspect of the disagreement could be that Marx’s concept of fetishism—not so much fetishism of capital, but fetishism of commodities and money—enables a critique of the Eastern reading of Marx, and of some aspects of the state socialist society. Ernest Mandel also explicated such a critique in the conference. Mandel inquired of Bichtler whether fetishism, alienation, and ideology necessarily escort the state socialist variant of commodity production.<sup>68</sup>

The abolition of commodities and money was surely far from the realities of the GDR at the time. The country was struggling with much more concrete and acute problems. However, the critique presented by Western Marxists is interesting from the perspective of both theory and practice. With regards to social reality, state socialism seemed to be far from how Marx had envisioned post-capitalist society. A top-down order and lack of democracy and freedom of speech characterized the state socialism of the twentieth century. In addition, the state socialism seemed to share some core values with the Western capitalist societies of the time. In both systems, productionism and consumerism reigned. The workers did not have control over production and were offered a subordinate role in the workplace. Consent for the top-down order was bought with the promise of a rising standard of living and increasing possibilities to consume. In this respect, Marcuse’s pairing of the two systems traces something interesting, even if his poetic critique does not offer a precise analysis of either one.<sup>69</sup>

From the perspective of Frankfurtian readers of *Capital*, East Germans seemed to fetishize the socially specific economic forms (such as commodities, money, profit, interest, and wage) and laws (such as the law of value) presented by Marx in *Capital*. In the opinion of the Frankfurtians, Marx used these categories exclusively in a critical sense, including the categories of commodities and money. In the postscript

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<sup>66</sup> See *Kritik der politischen Ökonomie heute*, 57.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 343–4.

<sup>69</sup> See Wolfgang Fritz Haug, “Das Ganze und das ganz Andere,” in *Antworten auf Herbert Marcuse*, ed. Jürgen Habermas (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968), 50–72.



from the editors of the conference publication *100 Jahre Kapital*, Walter Euchner and Alfred Schmidt write that economists from East Germany formulate Marx's critique of political economy as a positive theory of economics, and therefore, the critical sense of Marx's project tends to get lost.<sup>70</sup> In the same spirit, the "father" of the *Neue Marx Lektüre* Hans Georg Backhaus claims later that as Marxism-Leninism understood Marx's political economy affirmatively as a positive political economy, it functioned as a legitimation of the new system of domination.<sup>71</sup> Different from this, critical theory understands Marx's critique negatively, as a critique of fetishized forms. In other words, for the East German economists, it was clear that state socialism was essentially a commodity-producing society; for the Frankfurtians, instead, the term "socialist commodity production" did not make any sense.<sup>72</sup>

As readers of *Capital*, Bichtler and Schmidt operated in very different social realities. The questions they sought to answer with the help of the book were different. In the East, economists were mainly considered competent commentators of *Capital*, whereas in the West, Marxian theory was rarely studied in economic departments. While Bichtler was interested in finding solutions to the practical problems of the state socialist planned economy, Schmidt was not at all concerned with such issues. Moreover, the Cold War drove the perspectives of each side ever farther away from each other.

The mainstream of the East German reading of *Capital* was grounded on very specific historical circumstances and on the practical problems of a centralized planned economy. Similarly, reading *Capital* in the context of the 1968 generation of the Frankfurt school and the anti-authoritarian wing of the student movement was peculiar. For the radicalized students, reading *Capital* through the concept of fetishism made much more sense than a more traditional reading. The historically specific societal conditions of the divided Germany during the years of the Cold War

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<sup>70</sup> Walter Euchner and Alfred Schmidt, "Nachwort der Herausgeber," in *Kritik der politischen Ökonomie heute: 100 Jahre »Kapital«*, ed. Walter Euchner and Alfred Schmidt (Frankfurt am Main and Wien: Europäische Verlagsanstalt and Europa Verlag, 1968), 359.

<sup>71</sup> Hans-Georg Backhaus, "Über den Doppelsinn der Begriffe "Politische Ökonomie" und "Kritik" bei Marx und in der Frankfurter Schule," in *Wolfgang Harich zum Gedächtnis: eine Gedenkschrift in zwei Bänden*, ed. Stefan Dornuf und Reinhard Pitsch (München: Müller & Nerdling Verlag, 2000), 2: 19. Similar views are expressed by Heinrich, "Relevance and Irrelevance," 54, and Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, 170–1.

<sup>72</sup> See Backhaus, Hans-Georg, "Materialien zur Rekonstruktion der Marxschen Werttheorie," in *Gesellschaft. Beiträge zur Marxschen Theorie*, eds. H. G. Backhaus, G. Brandt, and G. Dill et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978), 11: 59.

are, however, no longer current. Therefore, it is time to reconsider both readings, including the now dominant Western interpretation.

## VI. Conclusion

There were many good reasons for the emphasis on fetishism, second nature, and real abstraction in West Germany around 1968. First, in the FRG, the readers of *Capital* were not economists, but philosophers acquainted with the “Western Marxist” discourse of alienation and reification. Even if Marxist theory entered the West German academy during the 1960s, mainly the social sciences and humanities departments tolerated it. Second, Marx’s theory of fetishism—not related to capital and wage labour, but to commodities and money—offered tools for the critique of both forms of the “industrial society,” capitalism and state socialism.<sup>73</sup> Third, and most important for emphasis on fetishism might be that around 1968, students arose as an independent force in society. Their revolutionary mood clashed with the objective conditions of the working class. Until the late 1960s, there had been a long period of growth, and not only capital but also labour had benefitted. The globally “regulating capitals,” that is, the most competitive capitals, were—in many cases—located in West Germany. These companies could pay much higher wages than the companies in other countries were able to pay.<sup>74</sup>

In such exceptional historical conditions, focusing on the problem of fetishism was, for many radicals, more interesting than focusing on the theory of surplus value. These reasons are less weighty today, because the move to shortening of the work day has stagnated, the connection between the growth of productivity and of wages has been broken, and the welfare state is under attack. A more traditional reading of *Capital*, focusing on the theory of surplus value, provides better justification than the reading of the 1968 generation to explain why the length of the work day is a question of life and death for the representatives of capital today.

Moreover, what remains to be done elsewhere is to demonstrate that a more “traditional” reading of *Capital*, focusing on the theory of surplus value, not only makes more sense in present times, but also is more accurate. The main targets of Marx’s critique are bourgeois relations of production and how these relations are

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<sup>73</sup> See Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 7.

<sup>74</sup> See Shaikh, *Capitalism, Competition, Conflict, Crisis*, 265ff. I thank Miika Kabata for this comment.

portrayed in the bourgeois political economy, and not the fetishism of commodities or money as such. Fetishisms of commodities and money are, to a lesser or greater degree, present wherever a market exists. Therefore, it might make sense to apply the concept of fetishism of commodities and money to the state socialism of the twentieth century as well.

Fetishism of capital is, however, another story. Fetishism of capital is related to the specifically capitalist relations of production—the relationship between capital and wage labour. Only in the beginning of the first volume of *Capital* does Marx talk about fetishism of commodities and money. From the fourth chapter of volume I onwards, Marx discusses the bourgeois relations of production, and from this chapter on, he links the concept of fetishism to the capital relation—that is, to the theory of surplus value—and the theme of fetishism runs through all three volumes. The problem of fetishism of capital is related to the constant and variable, fixed and circulating capital, to the production of relative surplus value, to the wage form, to the yearly rate of surplus value, to the rate of profit, and finally, to the commercial profit, interest, and land rent. Thus, what remains to be done elsewhere is to demonstrate the meaning of the concept of fetishism in all three volumes of the book, and how, even if eminently central, the concept of fetishism gains its proper meaning only in connection to the theory of surplus value. In capitalism, fetishism serves to hide the fact that the source of all value is labour, and thus, covers exploitation of wage labour, even if the social relations immediately appear as free and equal market exchanges.

There are, however, positions in the structure of production and exchange, where the social relations are much less covered by the objective appearances of these relations, by the commodity form, money form, wage form, or by the forms of profit, rent, and interest. These positions are the positions of the employer and the employee, in the “fierce struggle over the limits of the working day.”<sup>75</sup> As Marx goes through the early legislation restricting the length of the work day, he quotes factory inspectors who talk about “‘small thefts’ of capital from the labourer’s meal and recreation time.”<sup>76</sup> Marx comments on this by saying that, “it is evident that in this atmosphere the formation of surplus value by surplus labour, is no secret.”<sup>77</sup> In the struggle over the length of the work day, the real relations are laid bare.

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<sup>75</sup> Karl Marx, *Marx’s Economic Manuscript of 1864–1865*, ed. Fred Moseley (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), 894.

<sup>76</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, in MECW (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1996), 35: 250.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

Today, the struggle over the length of the work day is once again apparent, even in Germany. Marx's theory of surplus value makes much more sense today than it did 50 years ago in the globally privileged FRG. In the changed circumstances, the "traditional" reading does not seem quite so antiquated anymore, but instead, seems plausible, even common sense. Therefore, Jan Hoff and other followers of Alfred Schmidt should reconsider "the antiquated dogmas of traditional Marxism." The only reason for this is that the antiquated form of society was restored in the decades following 1968.

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III

**The *Neue Marx-Lektüre* and the “Monetary Theory of Value” in the East  
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# THE *NEUE MARX-LEKTÜRE* AND THE ‘MONETARY THEORY OF VALUE’ IN THE EAST GERMAN LABOUR-VALUE MEASUREMENT DEBATE

Paula Rauhala

## Abstract

Proponents of a monetary interpretation of Marx’s theory of value (*monetäre Werttheorie*) argue that one cannot estimate the amounts of socially necessary labour time that lie behind the prices, an interpretation usually ascribed to the West German *Neue Marx-Lektüre*. As Hans-Georg Backhaus began fleshing out his monetary interpretation in the early 1970s, he referred explicitly to debate among economists in early-1960s East Germany about the possibility of estimating quantities of labour value in terms of commodities’ labour content. In fact, scholars who articulated a powerful position in the latter discussion closely approximated the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*’s ‘monetary interpretation’. They held that expressing labour value in terms of labour time is impossible: the substance of value is not a measurable quantity of labour time but, rather, a social relation. Hence, it is problematic that *Neue Marx-Lektüre* adherents today should maintain an inaccurate contrast between their reading of *Capital* and that of ‘traditional Marxism’.

## Keywords

monetary theory of value – abstract labour – value theory – *Neue-Marx-Lektüre* – political economy of the GDR

## 1 Introduction

Proponents of a monetary interpretation of Karl Marx’s theory of value (*monetäre Werttheorie*) argue that one cannot estimate the amounts of socially necessary labour

time that actually lie behind the prices charged.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation, in which labour-time accounting is unable to inform identification of the labour-value system underlying prices, is usually attributed to the West German *Neue Marx-Lektüre*.<sup>2</sup> In articulating his own version of the monetary interpretation, Michael Heinrich establishes a contrast vis-à-vis a ‘substantialist’ reading of Marx’s theory of value, which he portrays as a conviction that value could be ‘an attribute of a single commodity ... and already determined by production’.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Heinrich claims that such a ‘substantialist view dominated in traditional Marxism’.<sup>4</sup> That claim is deeply problematic. This article presents a more accurate picture of the relationship between the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* and so-called traditional Marxism.

Analysis reveals that the ‘substantialist’ view of value and the ‘naturalistic’ interpretation of abstract labour – which Heinrich characterises as typically coupled with this view – were by no means dominant in the German Democratic Republic (GDR).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it emerges that Heinrich’s monetary interpretation of Marx’s theory of value can be regarded as a successor to an interpretation espoused by various prominent GDR economists. Accordingly, the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*’s conceptualisation of itself as the inventor of the monetary interpretation is problematic, and that school’s characterization of readings of *Capital* on the part of ‘traditional Marxism’ is, at least in the case of economics in the GDR, not correct. Here, I present the grounds for this conclusion and, in so doing, lay bare the origins of problems that persist today.

As Hans-Georg Backhaus, considered to be the father of the ‘monetary interpretation of Marx’s theory of value’ among the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* school, began to elaborate a monetary interpretation of Marx’s theory of value (in the first part of his essay series *Materialien zur Rekonstruktion der Marxschen Werttheorie*, published in 1974), he referred explicitly to a debate among GDR economists in early-1960s East Germany that pertained to the possibility of estimating quantities of labour value in

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<sup>1</sup> Heinrich 1999, p. 219; Rakowitz 2000; Elbe 2010, pp. 184ff.; Backhaus 2011, pp. 97–8; Elbe 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Heinrich 1999; Rakowitz 2000; Heinrich 2009b; Elbe 2010; Heinrich 2012; Hoff 2017; Bellofiore and Riva 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Heinrich 2009a, p. 92; see also Heinrich 2012, p. 54.

<sup>4</sup> Heinrich 2009a, p. 92.

<sup>5</sup> Ascribing a ‘naturalist’ interpretation of the concept of abstract labour to Marx himself, Heinrich concludes that Marx, by ‘relating abstract labour to the spending of “human brains, muscles, nerves, hands etc.”’ (see Marx 1996, p. 54), ‘connects abstract labour to natural features which might characterize any form of labour but which do not help to characterize abstract labour’ (Heinrich 2009a, p. 91).

terms of commodities' labour content.<sup>6</sup> From here onwards, I shall refer to this as the 'labour-value measurement debate'.

In 1960, economist Johannes Rudolph recommended that state-socialist countries try to estimate the labour value of various product groups by ascertaining their labour equivalent relative to the labour content of the money commodity, gold.<sup>7</sup> One year later, another economist, Ottmar Lendle, echoed this recommendation.<sup>8</sup> These proposals were rejected on the grounds that it is impossible to express labour value in terms of labour time: the substance of value is not a measurable quantity of labour time but, rather, a social relation that gets manifested only in the prices attached.<sup>9</sup> Today, of course, this position is usually attributed to the 'monetary theory of value' of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*.

The problem is that *Neue Marx-Lektüre* adherents today express an inaccurate contrast between their readings of *Capital* and that of 'traditional Marxism'. For Ingo Elbe, the monetary interpretation is 'one of the essential discoveries of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*'.<sup>10</sup> Elbe claims that '[t]raditional ... Marxism had completely ignored ... Marx's ... *theory of the monetary constitution of value*' (emphasis in original) and taken an approach wherein 'categories such as abstract labour, value, and the elementary form of value were reinterpreted in an empiricist way, and the connection between commodity, money, and capital – considered essential by Marx – was transformed into a coincidence'.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Heinrich refers to traditional Marxism's labour theory of value as a 'labour-quantity theory', or *Arbeitsmengentheorie*, and stresses that such a labour-quantity-oriented theoretical approach often entails overlooking the value-theoretical importance of money.<sup>12</sup> Further, he states that within traditional Marxism the "substance of value" ... has ... been understood in a quasi-physical, "substantialist" manner: the worker has expended a specific quantity of abstract labour and this quantity exists *within the individual commodity*' (emphasis in original).<sup>13</sup> The problem is that this characterization cannot be applied to anyone participating

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<sup>6</sup> Backhaus 2011, pp. 70ff.

<sup>7</sup> Rudolph 1960, pp. 556ff.

<sup>8</sup> Lendle 1961a, pp. 406ff.

<sup>9</sup> Neumann 1961, p. 413; Zurawicki 1961, pp. 1545ff.; Mann 1962, p. 59; Nick 1965, p. 88; Schilar 1979, pp. 70–1; Braun 1981, p. 41.

<sup>10</sup> Elbe 2010, p. 184. Translation mine.

<sup>11</sup> Elbe 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Heinrich 2001, p. 156: 'Die *werttheoretische* Bedeutung des Geldes ... wird weitgehend ignoriert' (emphasis in original).

<sup>13</sup> Heinrich 2012, pp. 49, 54.

in the labour-value measurement debate of the early-1960s GDR. Neither did any of the participants endorse ‘*pre-monetary theories of value*’ and thereby ‘attempt to develop a theory of value without reference to money’.<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, Rudolph, one of the scholars involved in this debate, explained in 1960 that, under the official doctrine of GDR economics, directly determining the quantity of value via grounding in the socially necessary labour time is impossible.<sup>15</sup> Something’s value appears only in its price. Hence, the way in which *Neue Marx-Lektüre* adherents present what they call a traditional Marxist interpretation of Marx’s theory of value does not seem to square with the Marxian economics of the former East German Democratic Republic.

Further, Heinrich claims that ‘[w]hether the use values produced faced a corresponding monetary demand appeared to play no role in the determination of value’ in the labour-quantity theory of ‘traditional Marxism’,<sup>16</sup> yet this cannot be said for any participant in the debate.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, his claim, regarding the concept of ‘abstract labour’, that the ‘substantialist view dominated in traditional Marxism’ and that such a substantialist view ‘relates value to a substance found in a *single* commodity’ does not reflect any of the readings of *Capital* in the GDR identified for this article.<sup>18</sup> On the contrary, Heinrich’s own ‘monetary interpretation of Marx’s theory of value’ comes close to a very influential position manifest in one of the two main stances in the labour-value measurement debate. If even the mainstream readings of *Capital* in East Germany cannot be classified as ‘traditional’, where is the traditional Marxist reading of *Capital* as defined by the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* to be found?

Hence, the landscape of thought becomes obscured when many proponents of a monetary interpretation of Marx’s theory of value, including Heinrich and Elbe, craft a dichotomy between their readings of *Capital* and what they call the labour-quantity theory of traditional Marxism or Marxism–Leninism.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, Backhaus’s discussion of political economy does not set ‘revisionist Neo-Marxism’ in opposition to ‘dogmatic Soviet-Marxism’. In this, the views expressed by Backhaus, whose own

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<sup>14</sup> Heinrich 2012, p. 64.

<sup>15</sup> Rudolph stated: ‘Die Möglichkeit der direkten Ermittlung der Wertgröße auf der Grundlage des gesellschaftlich notwendigen Arbeitsaufwands wurde in der offiziellen Lehrmeinung der letzten Jahre faktisch verneint’ (Rudolph 1960, p. 553; emphasis in original).

<sup>16</sup> Heinrich 2012, p. 51.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Lendle 1958, p. 26.

<sup>18</sup> Heinrich 2009a, p. 92.

<sup>19</sup> Heinrich 2001, pp. 156, 159; Heinrich 2012, pp. 51, 54; Elbe 2013, n. 43.

personal origins lay in the GDR, are quite unlike those of Elbe or Heinrich. He notes that, although the Marxist theorists of the Eastern bloc agreed on the questions pertaining to the ‘philosophical’ state-ideology of Marxism–Leninism, no consensus existed on matters related to Marx’s *Capital*.<sup>20</sup>

I believe Backhaus’s observation makes sense in light of the different nature of the two sets of questions. While the simplistic state-ideology, Marxism–Leninism, was never supposed to be questioned, it seems that tolerance existed for a greater variety of perspectives in the rather more specialised realm of questions related to political economy, or interpretations of *Capital*, even if, as Günter Krause reminds us, the discipline of political economy in the GDR was not independent from politics and clearly served legitimising functions.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the GDR’s ‘official’ political-economics comprised heterogeneous positions on even the most fundamental questions of Marxian political economy and its main foundation, Marx’s theory of value. In the labour-value measurement debate, something approaching the ‘monetary interpretation of Marx’s theory of value’ was in a very preeminent position, while the perspective that could be deemed ‘substantialist’, calling for the estimation of the socially necessary labour times for various product groups, appears to have been rather more of a challenger to the prevailing stance. While Backhaus made this very observation, for some reason later proponents of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* agenda have not adopted his differentiated approach to the Marxian political economics of the Eastern bloc.

With the next section of this article, I provide the necessary grounding in how the Marxian economists of the early Soviet Union approached Marx’s ideas concerning the withering-away of commodity production and the law of value. This brief examination addresses an important shift as the October Revolution receded into the past: initial hopes for the naturalisation and de-fetishisation of the economy waned after the first few decades of the Soviet Union’s existence. Soviet (and East German) economists came to consider the law of value, and the price system supposedly based on it, an essential law of the state-socialist planned economy. As monetary categories gained ever more importance, so too did political economy as science. Accordingly, the section also discusses the emergence of the political economy of socialism as a field of research, alongside the development of its object of research, Soviet-type state-socialist economies. With this groundwork on

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<sup>20</sup> Backhaus 2011, pp. 137–9; see also pp. 78–9, 209.

<sup>21</sup> Krause 1998, p. 15.

contributing factors laid, the later sections chronicle the course of the debate over the possibility of measuring labour value in the GDR in the early 1960s. Sections 3 and 4 – addressing the debate’s evolution – set forth the evidence that runs counter to the usual *Neue Marx-Lektüre* argument. It cannot be said that the official political-economy of the GDR represented a premonetary interpretation of Marx’s theory of value. On the contrary, what adherents to *Neue Marx-Lektüre*-thinking today regard as their own monetary interpretation of Marx’s theory of value has its roots in GDR economists’ work in the 1960s, and it already featured prominently in their discussions.

## 2 Soviet Economics and the Political Economy of the GDR

### 2.1 Evolution of New Perspectives

Marx’s law of value states that the prices of commodities are regulated by the socially necessary quantities of direct and indirect labour required to produce them. Competition executes the law of value, bringing about constant redistribution of social labour, and its means, within the economy. Commodity production is not, however, the only way to organise the distribution of social labour and its products. Marx invokes a more universal principle underlying both the law of value operating in commodity production and other ways to organise production and distribution, stating that, ‘[u]ltimately, all economy is a matter of economy of time. Society must also allocate its time appropriately to achieve a production corresponding to its total needs’.<sup>22</sup>

Economists in early Soviet Russia were confident that, in socialism, this could be achieved through centralised planning and that the blindly operating law of value could be replaced with a consciously formulated plan. As time passed, however, such optimism waned, with little of it remaining by the early 1960s. Getting rid of the market and replacing the blindly operating laws of that market with politically-deliberated choices no longer appeared practicable over the course of the near future.

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<sup>22</sup> Marx 1986, p. 109.



The latter mood came to dominate in the GDR too, which was affected by Soviet developments. It is crucial, then, to consider the history leading up to the time of the labour-value measurement debate and how discussions evolved with regard to the role of the law of value in socialism. Therefore, it is worth reviewing the history of the relevant discussions over the first decades of the Soviet Union's existence before examining the debates in the GDR – from the time immediately following World War II and building on the political-economic tradition of the Soviet Union.

Before the October Revolution, most Marxists believed socialism and commodity production to be incompatible. In their view, the very existence of commodity production sets capitalism apart from socialism. After the revolution too, many participants in early Soviet discussions, following Marx, Engels, and Lenin, considered it self-evident that the market would play no role whatsoever in socialism.<sup>23</sup> In early 1920s Soviet Russia, they maintained the classical line that a socialist society should measure the expenditure of labour directly in terms of labour time and no longer through the value of that labour's product.<sup>24</sup> Given that this belief, under which the commodity-form, money, and the market would all eventually be rendered superfluous, was so widespread in those years, the political-economics of socialism did not initially appear as a field in need of research. Social relations were supposed to become transparent under socialism, with conscious regulation replacing objectively functioning economic laws. With such vestiges of capitalism as the law of value withering away, political-economics as a science would lose its very object of research – namely the objectified and fetishised relations between persons, appearing in the guise of things.<sup>25</sup> A somewhat technical organisation of production and distribution would take the place of the system of alienated social relations.

It would not be long before these orthodox Marxist views in the Soviet Union began to change. Already in 1925, Ivan Skvortsov-Stepanov challenged the notion that political economy should be conceived of as limited to the capitalist economy, though the majority of those responding to him continued to support the long-prevailing position that this science is specific to the spontaneously-functioning commodity economy.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Lenin himself, in his notes on Bukharin's

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<sup>23</sup> Trifonow and Schirokorad (eds.) 1973, p. 25; Petrakowa 1975, p. 109.

<sup>24</sup> Paschkow 1975, p. 82.

<sup>25</sup> Röhl 1966, p. 312; Trifonow and Schirokorad (eds.) 1973, p. 24; Paschkow 1975, pp. 78–9.

<sup>26</sup> Trifonow and Schirokorad (eds.) 1973, p. 26; Paschkow 1975, pp. 79–80; Meißner (ed.) 1978, pp. 384–5.

*Economics of the Transformation Period*, posthumously published in full in 1929, rejected the view that the end of capitalism would automatically mark the end of political economy as a field of research.<sup>27</sup>

As the 1920s drew to a close, the emergence of Stalinism suppressed genuine debate on this point.<sup>28</sup> Though commodities and money had not disappeared, their value was deemed not to be regulated by the law of value. Moreover, even if measurement in terms of prices had clearly not lost its relevance in the system of planning, which relied on measurement in kind, in terms of weights, lengths, or labour time, the law of value ostensibly was no longer operating. After all, that law was considered able to assert itself only spontaneously, while the Soviet economy – officially – was subject to a system of conscious regulation. Nonetheless, it was regarded as impossible to measure each worker’s performance and distribute consumption goods on the basis of labour-time accounting along the lines of Marx’s first phase of communism. The reason cited was that reconciling the differences between manual and intellectual labour, and between simple average labour and highly educated labour, was found impossible to handle in terms of labour time.<sup>29</sup> Measuring worker performance and determining compensation accordingly – officially in line with the rule ‘for each according to the quantity and quality of labour input’ – required the aid of pricing.<sup>30</sup>

Characteristic of the Stalinist era is that the ‘plan’ or the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ itself was held up as the fundamental law of the socialist economy.<sup>31</sup> Only later, during de-Stalinisation, did the Stalinist conception of a law-like character for such essentially political matters as the plan get denounced for constituting an excessively subjectivist position.<sup>32</sup> The claim that the seemingly all-powerful party could have dictated the economic laws in force had only served to justify its voluntarist decisions.<sup>33</sup> As Konstantin Ostrovityanov explained, there were hazards associated with believing that the laws of the economy could be planned just as the production of coal can be planned.<sup>34</sup> In one of the system’s more obvious examples,

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<sup>27</sup> Trifonow and Schirokorad (eds.) 1973, p. 27; Paschkow 1975, p. 80; Meißner (ed.) 1978, p. 388.

<sup>28</sup> For a list of important debates on the fundamental questions of Marxian theory in the early 1920s, consult W. Manewitsch (Manewitsch 1975a, pp. 143–4).

<sup>29</sup> Manewitsch 1975b, p. 203.

<sup>30</sup> Braun 1979, p. 117.

<sup>31</sup> Weinholz 1979, p. 105.

<sup>32</sup> Röhl 1966, p. 315.

<sup>33</sup> Paschkow 1975, p. 84; Trifonow and Schirokorad (eds.) 1973, pp. 54–5.

<sup>34</sup> Trifonow and Schirokorad (eds.) 1973, p. 55.

prioritising a sector that produces means of production (i.e., accumulation for investment) over one producing means of consumption (i.e., consumer goods) is not the fruit of an objective economic law but a political decision favouring the development of industry over the standard of living of the workers.<sup>35</sup>

In time, the general approach began to admit of a position wherein the law of value, along with numerous other externally originating, non-planned economic laws, did function within the Soviet economy.<sup>36</sup> This awareness led to a push for a new textbook on the political economy of socialism. While the need for such a work had been expressed by the late 1930s, the outbreak of World War II protracted the preparations.<sup>37</sup> Finally, a milestone in the reconsideration of economic laws functioning within state-socialism arrived in 1951 with a discussion related to a long-anticipated draft version.<sup>38</sup>

Released in the following year, Stalin's commentary on this discussion, 'Economic Problems of Socialism of the USSR', finally changed the official doctrine.<sup>39</sup> Stalin argued that the law of value must hold throughout the development of socialism, on account of the co-existence of the two main forms of property and the exchange between those forms: the state-owned companies and collectivised farms.<sup>40</sup> He emphasised that only consumer goods are exchanged as commodities, however. Stalin claimed that, thanks to central planning, their exchange was influenced – rather than regulated – by the law of value.<sup>41</sup> For the most part, means of production, even if nominally priced, were not distributed through purchase and sale, and so did not appear as commodities.<sup>42</sup>

Soon after this, the notion of a political economy of socialism became well-established, as did research on the role of commodity–money relations within state-socialism, with 1954's publication of the political-economy textbook that had been called for since the late 1930s.<sup>43</sup> In 1958, key questions of commodity–money

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<sup>35</sup> Weinholz 1979, p. 111.

<sup>36</sup> Röhl 1966, p. 316; Trifonow and Schirokorad (eds.) 1973, pp. 33ff.; Meißner (ed.) 1978, p. 399; Braun 1979, p. 116.

<sup>37</sup> Trifonow and Schirokorad (eds.) 1973, p. 33.

<sup>38</sup> Trifonow and Schirokorad (eds.) 1973, p. 34; Weinholz 1979, p. 106; Paschcow 1975, p. 85.

<sup>39</sup> Röhl 1966, p. 316.

<sup>40</sup> Stalin 1952, pp. 20, 23.

<sup>41</sup> Stalin 1952, pp. 23, 27.

<sup>42</sup> Stalin 1952, pp. 58–9.

<sup>43</sup> Meißner (ed.) 1978, p. 376.

relations were debated at a conference devoted to the theory of value and of price.<sup>44</sup> While the law of value's operation within state-socialist economies was generally accepted, precisely how it might function and to what extent were subject to much discussion.<sup>45</sup> For example, was the law of value effective only in the sphere of exchange, or did it regulate production as well?<sup>46</sup> In other words, the relationship between the so-called law of the planned, proportionate development of the national economy (*Das Gesetz der planmäßigen [proportionalen] Entwicklung der Volkswirtschaft*) and the law of value was highly contested.<sup>47</sup>

Most participants in the 1958 conference questioned Stalin's explanation for the persistence of commodity–money relations. For Marx, juridical relations, such as those connected with exchange contracts, express real socio-economic relations between producers, and not, as Stalin had suggested, the other way around.<sup>48</sup> The exchange of products in themselves, transferring a title of ownership, did not suffice to explain why products appear as commodities.<sup>49</sup>

## 2.2 The Push for Reform

The labour-value measurement debate in the GDR tied in especially strongly with the revival of these theoretical discussions, which culminated in the economic reforms of the early 1960s. Importantly, many political economists of the GDR took positions ever more distant from the visions Marx and Engels held for the decommodification of economic relations. Below, I explain why this is, for the light it sheds on the labour-value measurement debate and Backhaus's comments on that debate.

A need for reform became apparent in several of the Eastern-bloc countries as their initial, quantitative-growth model reached its limits. The 'more is better' ideology,

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<sup>44</sup> See Zagolow (ed.) 1960.

<sup>45</sup> Zagolow (ed.) 1960, p. 10.

<sup>46</sup> Zagolow (ed.) 1960, p. 13.

<sup>47</sup> In his private notes, Fritz Behrens opines that the favourite activity of the economists of the GDR was to discover new 'objectively functioning' economic laws. That dedication notwithstanding, the law of planned and proportional development found very little, if any, empirical support. Behrens recalls that the planned economies did not evolve in a very planful way; neither were their proportions usually correct. Rather, these economies were characterised by constant corrections to the plan, overproduction, and – most notably – shortages (Behrens 1992, pp. 139–40).

<sup>48</sup> Hessin 1960, p. 53.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

coupled with direction from the centre, was no longer capable of generating growth.<sup>50</sup> Means for overcoming the problems of an overly centralized planned economy were found in the application of ‘commodity–money relations’, meaning regulated market exchange, as a tool for decentralization of decisions.

Before the official doctrine changed, the most eminent economist of the GDR, Fritz Behrens, had already by the 1950s distanced himself from the idea of the naturalisation of economic relations. In 1957, he penned an article wherein he proposed economic reforms, including self-management and decentralisation of economic decision-making.<sup>51</sup> He did not find nationalisation of production to be synonymous with its socialisation. Behrens’s views were considered heretical, and both he and Arne Benary had to face charges of revisionism.<sup>52</sup>

Many of Behrens’s early views would, however, become mainstream just a few years later, when Walter Ulbricht launched the New Economic System (*Neues Ökonomisches System der Planung und Leitung*) in 1963. Value categories such as prices, profits, and interest had by then officially gained a central status within the GDR’s planned economy. When Ulbricht, in 1967, declared socialism to be a ‘relatively independent socio-economic formation’ (as opposed to a subordinate, transition phase), commodity–money relations had been consolidated into essential features of the state-socialism of the day.

Jiří Kosta, Jan Meyer, and Sibylle Weber later explained that representatives of the Western New Left have typically adopted a stance in which socialism and commodity production are incompatible, polar opposites.<sup>53</sup> The reformers, however, spoke not of commodity production but about the application of commodity–money relations. In commodity-production proper, the market mechanism allocates social labour to various distinct branches of production through anarchic *ex post* regulation that involves price fluctuations, overproduction, surplus profits, economic losses, and bankruptcies. In contrast, even after the economic reforms, the GDR state-socialist economy’s planners aimed at optimal allocation of social labour, with the aid of commodity–money relations.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Schmid 1966, p. 290; Roesler 2018, p. 7.

<sup>51</sup> Behrens 1957.

<sup>52</sup> Steiner 1999, p. 25.

<sup>53</sup> Kosta, Meyer and Weber 1973, p. 83.

<sup>54</sup> See Kosta, Meyer and Weber 1973, p. 98.

This was a pious wish, as a sidelined Behrens privately noted. Instead of the business-cycles of a capitalist market economy, the state-socialist economy, as a result of the inflexibility of its planning system, experienced regular monthly and yearly fluctuations: periods of idleness and feverish work, as the targets were alternately unmet and exceeded.<sup>55</sup>

Two interconnected problems arose from the old centralised system of planning, stemming from information and incentives.<sup>56</sup> The information problem was rooted in the distorting effect of the system of fixed prices but also in the fact that company managers found it in their best interests to give systematically inaccurate information to planning officials.<sup>57</sup> The system of centralised planning encouraged managers to negotiate, on behalf of the firm, for plan goals that were as easy to reach as possible and, by underestimating the resources at their disposal, for the largest possible supply of resources for reaching those goals.<sup>58</sup> For this reason, the planning authorities received imperfect, delayed, or downright bogus information about the resources of the national economy and, therefore, could not take optimal decisions.<sup>59</sup> Even though the system of planning was overtly centralised, those at the centre were nearly powerless in the face of company managers' bargaining power exercised through information beneficial to the respective companies. The central planners could not see past the distortions.<sup>60</sup> The economic reformers sought to solve these problems with the assistance of monetary incentives: the system had to be designed to reward negotiation of optimal goals for the plan rather than 'soft' ones (*weiche Pläne*) that were not ambitious enough.<sup>61</sup> To this end, companies were made responsible for putting their own resources to effective use.

The point of departure for planning came to be the conviction that, while individual consumers, companies, and other institutions act in unpredictable ways, their individual actions at the aggregate level create certain predictable patterns. Rather than attempt to dictate what individual economic actors should do, the planners needed to reward desirable actions by employing economic incentives and 'levers', such as prices, credit, interest, wages, and profits.<sup>62</sup> In short, many of the old,

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<sup>55</sup> Behrens 1992, p. 141.

<sup>56</sup> Kosta, Meyer and Weber 1973, p. 94; Steiner 2010, pp. 5–6.

<sup>57</sup> Kosta, Meyer and Weber 1973, p. 159; Steiner 2010, p. 5.

<sup>58</sup> Steiner 2010, p. 5; Nick 2011, p. 55.

<sup>59</sup> Kosta, Meyer and Weber 1973, pp. 91ff.; Steiner 2010, p. 6.

<sup>60</sup> Kosta, Meyer and Weber 1973, p. 159.

<sup>61</sup> Schmid 1966, p. 295.

<sup>62</sup> Kosta, Meyer and Weber 1973, p. 93; Steiner 2010, p. 111.

bureaucratic methods were replaced with economic ones. For example, where many workers had exercised the small amount of power they held within the state-monopolistic system by working sloppily, premiums for individuals were made dependent on the profits of the firm – to reward good performance by the personnel.<sup>63</sup> In an example of incentives at another level, giving companies greater freedom to decide on such matters as their product range and allowing them to profit from good decisions could facilitate a better match between the supply of consumer goods and demand than that achieved via reasoning at the desk of the central planning agency.<sup>64</sup>

The old centralised administrative planning system inhibited not just initiative but innovation. In the worst instances, implementing an innovation served only to disturb the normal course of production at the company deploying it and complicated meeting the objectives set in the plan. In other words, innovating was not beneficial enough for companies; on the contrary, it could well prove detrimental to their goals.<sup>65</sup> The reformers found scientific and technical development to be crucial at the same time for successful transition from the quantitative growth model to the newer, qualitative model.

They recognised also that avoiding the above-mentioned issue of shortages of some goods and overproduction of others required means additional to the company-level incentives. The central planners and companies needed more information about the specifics of demand for consumer goods. Therefore, price-mechanism and market research gained in importance, for developing a more comprehensive picture.<sup>66</sup>

Perhaps more obviously bound up with conceptualisations of pricing, another shortcoming related to the old system's quality and effectiveness was the reward it gave companies even if producing 'with the greatest possible inputs and costs'.<sup>67</sup> While a company with plan targets set in terms of weight could meet its targets by producing as heavy a product as possible, for the national economy this meant nothing short of a waste of resources. To overcome the problem, the reformers determined that the goals should be set in terms of 'value' rather than 'in kind' (by weight, length, kilowatts, etc.). The reformers believed that application of value

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<sup>63</sup> Schmid 1966, p. 299.

<sup>64</sup> Schmid 1966, p. 303.

<sup>65</sup> Steiner 2010, p. 6; Nick 2011, p. 83; Roesler 2018, p. 8.

<sup>66</sup> Röhl 1966, p. 321.

<sup>67</sup> Steiner 2010, p. 79.

indicators such as prices, profits, or interest, instead of in-kind measurement, was better suited to managing rational use of society's resources.<sup>68</sup>

For solving these various problems, many of the reformers expressed hopes that simulation of the market mechanisms might provide assistance. Perhaps the most pressing issue was that the existing system of fixed prices did not reflect the products' actual scarcity or their production costs.<sup>69</sup> Rationality in this type of planned economy is impossible without correct pricing.<sup>70</sup> Reform of the pricing system became the top priority, with its implementation beginning in 1964.<sup>71</sup> As Kosta and colleagues have explained, with the economic reforms of the 1960s, the theory of value – a theory fundamental to Marx's critical analysis of the bourgeois political economy – was curiously transformed into a theory of prices within a state-socialist economy.<sup>72</sup>

In light of practical pressures, it may not be altogether surprising that economic theory in the Soviet Union and later the GDR was transformed from a science attempting to overcome commodity production and fetishisation of production relations into a science pursuing economic rationality and effectiveness, as Günter Krause put it.<sup>73</sup> Through this evolution, not only the hopes for de-fetishisation of the economy but also the initial aspirations for directly measuring labour time, as opposed to letting the law of value operate blindly, disappeared from the mainstream of economic thought – at least for a while.

By the early 1960s, the problem of pricing led economists of the Soviet Union and of the whole Eastern bloc to consider once again the fundamental questions underlying how prices are formed – the functioning of the law of value.<sup>74</sup> One such discussion in East Germany, that I have named the labour-value measurement debate, attracted the interest of Backhaus in West Germany.

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<sup>68</sup> Kosta, Meyer and Weber 1973, p. 97.

<sup>69</sup> Schmid 1966, p. 300; Kosta, Meyer and Weber 1973, p. 194.

<sup>70</sup> Altwater 1966, p. 277.

<sup>71</sup> Steiner 2010, p. 113.

<sup>72</sup> Kosta, Meyer and Weber 1973, p. 196.

<sup>73</sup> Krause 1998, p. 162.

<sup>74</sup> Braun 1979; Zagolow 1960.



# 3 The Labour-value Measurement Debate and its Influence in the Monetary Theory of Value of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*

## 3.1 The Labour-value Measurement Debate in the GDR

In 1960, Rudolph posed a question in an article published in the most prestigious economics journal of the GDR, *Wirtschaftswissenschaft*: How can one consciously set a price that differs from the actual value if the value is not known?<sup>75</sup> While value-based pricing was claimed to be common practice and a central tool in steering the planned economy, at the same time it was generally claimed that something's actual value appears only in its price. Rudolph outlined an approach to the problem by sketching out a simple way of estimating the labour content of gold and any fiat currency.<sup>76</sup>

In the following year, Lendle proposed that state-socialist countries begin measuring the labour content of their products.<sup>77</sup> He did not, however, recommend that the monetary economy be abolished in favour of labour-time accounting. His goal was much more modest. He argued that estimation of labour value could be utilised alongside monetary categories, thereby supplying information for the planners. For instance, one could better assess the productivity of labour or the quantity of surplus product. And, indeed, prices could be set consciously to either correspond to or diverge from the actual value, as ostensibly was already being done.<sup>78</sup>

Lendle explained that the prevailing reading of *Capital* rejected the possibility of estimating the labour value of a product. In contrast, he denied what was commonly believed at the time – that value-producing labour cannot be measured in terms of time.<sup>79</sup> Citing Alexander Kulikov's claim that labour time is suitable merely for measuring *concrete* labour while abstract labour, the substance of value, can only be expressed in terms of prices,<sup>80</sup> Lendle derided such expressions as vague. He also

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<sup>75</sup> Rudolph 1960, p. 554.

<sup>76</sup> Rudolph 1960, p. 557.

<sup>77</sup> Lendle 1961a.

<sup>78</sup> Lendle 1961b, p. 1543.

<sup>79</sup> Lendle 1961a, p. 390.

<sup>80</sup> Lendle 1961a, p. 391; Kulikov 1959, p. 318.

referred to Robert Naumann's claim that value is not a quantity but a social relation.<sup>81</sup> Lendle explained that the problem with the commonplace claim that value is a social relation is that the concrete nature of the relation is not explicated,<sup>82</sup> and he argued that any social-relation-based definition of value that cannot be quantified does not amount to a theory of value and its determination in any real sense. Moreover, the assertion that value-producing labour cannot be measured comes close to complete denial of the labour theory of value.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, Lendle proposed an alternative definition. For him, value was neither a relationship nor a quantity alone but a relation grounded in the fact that, on average, equal quantities of objectified labour get exchanged in the marketplace.<sup>84</sup> Positing that one can observe and measure value-producing labour, compare its amounts, and calculate it, he proposed a simple model for doing so.<sup>85</sup> Given that value as embodied labour must find its expression in a commodity, which also embodies a certain amount of labour time, Lendle proposed that a gold-producing socialist country should measure the labour input to a certain quantity of gold.<sup>86</sup> With this information as a reference, Lendle claimed, it should be possible to calculate the labour value of any product. Presenting a simple numeric example that covers both labour time and money, he concluded that this model should render it possible to estimate the labour times corresponding to the value added and the value transferred from the means of production in diverse branches of industry and parts of society.<sup>87</sup> Then, it should be possible to estimate the relationship between the proportion of the working-day generating the workers' wages, corresponding to the necessary labour time, and the surplus labour time – the value the workers contribute to society. Anchoring his approach in tradition, Lendle claimed that this calculation corresponds to Marx's presentation in *Capital*.<sup>88</sup>

The majority of those who penned responses to him, among them Fritz Behrens, Seweryn Zurawicki, Helmut Mann, Harry Nick, and Herbert Neumann, characterised Lendle's proposal as confused or utopian.

As did other critics, Neumann insisted that Lendle's proposal was rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of Marx's theory and that the model proposed had

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<sup>81</sup> Lendle 1961a, p. 391.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Lendle 1961a, p. 404.

<sup>85</sup> Lendle 1961a, pp. 405ff.

<sup>86</sup> Lendle 1961a, p. 406.

<sup>87</sup> Lendle 1961a, pp. 407ff.

<sup>88</sup> Lendle 1961a, p. 407.

nothing whatsoever to do with value. He called it measurement in kind, merely disguised in ‘value-form’.<sup>89</sup> Neumann’s arguments are strikingly similar to those made by proponents of the so-called monetary interpretation of Marx’s theory of value today. I unpack these parallels next.

## 3.2 Monetary Interpretations of Marx’s Theory of Value: Comparing Neumann and Heinrich

Heinrich’s arguments in support of the ‘monetary theory of value’ in the twenty-first century resonate especially strongly with Neumann’s arguments from some fifty years earlier, though it would be equally valid to compare conceptualisations by other representatives of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, such as Elbe or Nadja Rakowitz, with those of others responding critically to Lendle, among them Behrens, Mann, and Nick.

With this comparison, I seek to demonstrate that such a reading of *Capital* as Neumann’s in the GDR labour-value measurement debate is a far cry from what Heinrich has characterised as the ‘substantialist’ or ‘non-monetary’ labour-quantity theory (*nicht-monetäre Arbeitsmengentheorie*) of traditional Marxism.<sup>90</sup> It appears to me that, in actuality, Neumann’s position was the one represented more strongly in the labour-value measurement debate in the GDR, and it is reminiscent of the ‘monetary theory of value’ of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, as exemplified by Heinrich. In this section, I compare Heinrich’s views with Neumann’s, to demonstrate their commonality and, thereby, the ignorance that Heinrich showed when claiming the Marxist–Leninist interpretation of Marx’s value theory to be the polar opposite to his ‘monetary interpretation’.

Firstly, Neumann claimed that Rudolph and Lendle’s fundamental mistake, from which the rest of their confusion followed, was that they neglected the socio-economic character of the concept of abstract labour and understood it to refer to labour in a physiological sense, as an ‘expenditure of human labour-power’.<sup>91</sup> Heinrich’s work half a century later echoes this notion but goes further than Neumann’s via the explicit claim that the problem lies in Marx’s own definition,

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<sup>89</sup> Neumann 1961, p. 412.

<sup>90</sup> Heinrich 2001, pp. 156ff.; Heinrich 2012, p. 54.

<sup>91</sup> Neumann states: ‘Abstrakte Arbeit ... ihres sozialökonomischen Charakters entkleidet und ... als Arbeit im physiologischen Sinne ... Verausgabung menschlicher Arbeitskraft ... verstanden wird’ (Neumann 1961, p. 413).

whereby ‘abstract labour’ is the ‘expenditure of human labour-power’.<sup>92</sup> Heinrich found fault with the latter definition because ‘this formulation suggests that abstract labor has a completely non-social, natural foundation’.<sup>93</sup> His attribution of this naturalistic conception of abstract labour to Marx is rather valid, although he also pointed to a definition in which Marx contradicts this ‘naturalist’ one.<sup>94</sup> Neumann, in contrast, ascribed this ‘fundamentally naturalistic’ conception of value and its substance<sup>95</sup> not to Marx but to Lendle and Rudolph.

Neumann found Rudolph and Lendle’s definition problematic because he believed that regarding abstract labour as the ‘expenditure of labour-power’ eternalises value by attributing the capacity to produce value to the physiological properties of labour rather than to the societal character of labour.<sup>96</sup> In other words, according to Neumann, the physiological definition entails problems because it covers all of human labour, in all times and all societies.<sup>97</sup> While aimed at Marx’s own definitions of the substance of value, for being transhistorical and applicable to any society,<sup>98</sup> Heinrich’s critique follows similar lines, stressing that abstract labour exists only within a specific societal context.<sup>99</sup>

While Neumann did not call out Marx directly, his work does offer an alternative definition in lieu of Marx’s: ‘abstract labour is a specific form of general social labour’ (translation mine).<sup>100</sup> Instead of being defined as ‘expenditure of labour-power’, Neumann argued, abstract labour is more properly characterised as an ‘expression of societal relations’.<sup>101</sup> Heinrich argued similarly that abstract labour is an objective

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<sup>92</sup> Here, Heinrich (2012, p. 50) refers to Marx (1996, p. 56). Indeed, Marx’s work consistently defines abstract labour as ‘expenditure of human labour-power’ (*Verausgabung menschlicher Arbeitskraft*). See, for instance, Marx 1996, pp. 54, 55, 56, 78, 84, 211.

<sup>93</sup> Heinrich 2012, p. 50. Elsewhere, he makes the reference ‘abstrakte Arbeit eine... ungesellschaftliche ... natürliche Grundlage habe’ (Heinrich 2005, p. 48).

<sup>94</sup> ‘[N]aturalistische Auffassung von abstrakter Arbeit’ (Heinrich 1999, p. 214).

<sup>95</sup> ‘[I]m Grunde naturalistische Wertauffassung’ (Neumann 1961, pp. 413, 415).

<sup>96</sup> He stated: ‘Wert zu einer “ewigen” ... nicht mit der gesellschaftlichen Natur der Arbeit verbundenen Kategorie zu machen’ (Neumann 1961, p. 416).

<sup>97</sup> ‘[D]er menschlichen Arbeit zu allen Zeiten und in allen Gesellschaftsformationen eigen ist’ (Neumann 1961, p. 416).

<sup>98</sup> ‘[Ü]berhistorische Bestimmungen, die für jede Gesellschaft zutreffen’ (Heinrich 2009b, p. 166).

<sup>99</sup> ‘[A]bstrakte Arbeit existiert nur in einem bestimmten gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhang’ (Heinrich 2009b, p. 72).

<sup>100</sup> ‘[A]bstrakte Arbeit ist ... spezifische Form der allgemein gesellschaftlichen Arbeit’ (Neumann 1961, p. 414).

<sup>101</sup> That is, ‘[a]usdruck gesellschaftlicher Verhältnisse’ (Neumann 1961, p. 414).

reflection of a specific kind of social relationship.<sup>102</sup> His argumentation elsewhere goes further, stating that abstract labour not only *expresses* social relations but *is* a societal relation in its own right and, therefore, cannot be expended.<sup>103</sup> With regard to what it expresses, Heinrich's claim that the equality of private labour as abstract labour makes abstract labour a specific social form of labour within commodity production<sup>104</sup> is quite similar to Neumann's argument that abstract labour is the specific social form of labour within commodity production.<sup>105</sup>

Likewise, both thinkers extended their argument into the realm of measurability, agreeing that abstract labour cannot be measured in terms of labour time. Neumann opposed Lendle by claiming that value is measurable only in money,<sup>106</sup> while Heinrich's similar claim is that 'value-constituting labor-time cannot be otherwise measured except through money'.<sup>107</sup>

We find both Neumann and Heinrich taking the position that value appears only in a relationship between two commodities. In Neumann's view, value, as a social and not a natural property of commodities, can only appear in the relationship between two commodities, as Marx indeed stated.<sup>108</sup> Heinrich's writings too emphasise that value can only appear in a societal relation of commodity-to-commodity,<sup>109</sup> however unclearly he expressed the connection between that position and the claim that value can only appear in prices.

Elaborating on the issue, Neumann claimed that it is naïve to think that an hour of concrete labour could equal an hour of abstract social labour,<sup>110</sup> let alone give these

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<sup>102</sup> '[G]egenständliche Reflexion eines spezifischen gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisses' (Heinrich 1999, p. 215).

<sup>103</sup> 'Abstrakte Arbeit als gesellschaftliches Verhältnis kann ... nicht "verausgabt" werden' (Heinrich 1999, p. 218).

<sup>104</sup> 'Warenproduktion *spezifische* gesellschaftliche Charakter der Arbeit' (quotation converted from accusative to nominative case) (Heinrich 1999, p. 209).

<sup>105</sup> 'Warenproduktion eigene *spezifische* Form der gesellschaftlichen Arbeit' (Neumann 1961, p. 413).

<sup>106</sup> 'Gold als Geld ... das einzig mögliche Maß des Wertes bildet' (Neumann 1961, p. 417).

<sup>107</sup> Heinrich 2012, p. 65, with echoes in other work: 'Messung "abstrakter Arbeitszeit" ... erfolgt ... nur vermittelt des *Geldes*' (Heinrich 1999, p. 219). See also Heinrich 2009a, p. 91.

<sup>108</sup> "'[N]ur im gesellschaftlichen Verhältnis von Ware zu Ware" erscheint' (Neumann 1961, p. 418; see also Marx 1962, p. 57).

<sup>109</sup> '[N]ur im gesellschaftlichen Verhältnis von Ware zu Ware ... kann sie ... zum Vorschein kommen' (Heinrich 2009b, p. 107).

<sup>110</sup> '[N]aïve Vorstellung ... eine Stunde konkreter Arbeit sei gleich einer Stunde abstraktgesellschaftlicher Arbeit' (quotation originally in dative case) (Neumann 1961, p. 418).

hours of concrete labour a formal monetary expression, as Lendle did.<sup>111</sup> Explaining that Lendle had recommended measuring concrete labour with a clock, whereupon one is advised to imagine that the thing thus measured is abstract labour,<sup>112</sup> Neumann argued that trying to measure value with the aid of measurements of concrete labour time is demonstrably wrong.<sup>113</sup> Heinrich's opposition to the notion that measuring concrete labour with a clock equates to measuring abstract labour is just as clear as Neumann's. Heinrich's contention is that the concrete labour actually measured in the former procedure gets imagined to be abstract labour, whereas 'every hour of labor measured by a clock is an hour of a particular *concrete* act of labor' and abstract labour 'cannot be measured in terms of hours of labor'.<sup>114</sup> Heinrich's reproach here is directed at Marx himself for suggesting an equivalence between the measurement of concrete labour and the measurement of abstract labour.<sup>115</sup>

There are several other respects in which the two exhibit parallels in their criticism.

In Neumann's eyes, the key problem with Rudolph's and Lendle's proposals is that comprehending the socially necessary expenditure of labour in terms of time is impossible in practice.<sup>116</sup> He described Lendle's assumption that measurements of labour time could yield information about the value created by that labour as an incorrect conclusion based on the false belief that the real expenditure of labour is equal to the socially necessary expenditure of labour.<sup>117</sup> Heinrich too identified abstract labour with the socially necessary labour time.<sup>118</sup> However, Lendle did not actually do so.<sup>119</sup> This is, I believe, a strength of Lendle's reading of *Capital*.

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<sup>111</sup> Neumann 1961, p. 413.

<sup>112</sup> '[D]ie Zeit der Verausgabung von Arbeitskraft in konkreter Form zu messen und sich diese als abstrakte Arbeit *vorzustellen*' (Neumann 1961, p. 416).

<sup>113</sup> '[U]nmittelbar in Stunden konkreter Arbeit' (Neumann 1961, p. 418).

<sup>114</sup> Heinrich 2012, p. 50. His opinion elsewhere (Heinrich 1999, p. 218) is very similar to Neumann's that the measurement of what these authors call 'concrete labour time' is not the same thing as the measurement of what they call 'abstract labour time'. See also Heinrich 2009a, p. 91.

<sup>115</sup> Heinrich 1999, p. 218.

<sup>116</sup> In at least two places: 'Erfassung des gesellschaftlich notwendigen Arbeitsaufwands in ... Zeit, unmöglich ist' (Neumann 1961, p. 414) and '[A]bstrakte Arbeit ... Messung des gesellschaftlich notwendigen Arbeitsaufwands direkt in Zeit objektiv ausschließt' (Neumann 1961, p. 413).

<sup>117</sup> 'Werts substanz ... unter der Hand der notwenige Aufwand' (Neumann 1961, p. 413).

<sup>118</sup> Heinrich 2012, p. 51.

<sup>119</sup> Lendle 1958, pp. 24ff.

Neumann claimed that, according to Marx, a certain quantity of concrete labour counts as (*Geltung erhält*) a smaller or larger quantity of abstract social labour.<sup>120</sup> Heinrich, for his part, wrote that, ‘in exchange, the concrete acts of expended labor count [*gilt*] as a particular quantum of value-constituting abstract labor’.<sup>121</sup> Neumann held that, in Lendle’s reading, the reduction of concrete labour to abstract labour becomes an abstraction of thought,<sup>122</sup> and Heinrich took issue with Marx’s own physiological definitions of abstract labour for their foundations in ‘purely mental abstraction’.<sup>123</sup> While the two criticised different parties, the sentiments are similar: Neumann stated that it was forgotten how, in reality, this is a practical reduction: concrete labour is practically equalised in the exchange;<sup>124</sup> Heinrich agreed that concrete labour is reduced to abstract human labour, not in thinking but in the exchange.<sup>125</sup>

What happens in Lendle’s procedure, according to Neumann, is that the substance of value is replaced with the quantity of value, and thus the question pertaining to qualitative determination of the substance of value is evaded altogether.<sup>126</sup> It is for the same reason that Heinrich reproached traditional Marxism – for concentrating on quantitative problems and neglecting the qualitative question related to the substance of value.<sup>127</sup> Finding immediate labour-time accounting to be impossible, neither Neumann nor Heinrich appreciated the idea of time chits.<sup>128</sup> Neumann may have put the matter best by claiming that Lendle’s notion of measurement of labour time is a variant of the altogether utopian ideas related to labour money.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> ‘[K]onkrete Arbeit ... als abstrakt gesellschaftliche Arbeit Geltung erhält... Mehr oder Minder’ (Neumann 1961, p. 417).

<sup>121</sup> ‘Im Tausch *gilt* die verausgabte konkrete Arbeit als ein bestimmtes Quantum ... abstracter Arbeit’ (Heinrich 2005, p. 49; Heinrich 2012, p. 50). On the concept of validity (*Geltung*) and its putative relationship with the concept of abstract labour, see Reichelt 2007.

<sup>122</sup> ‘[Z]u einer rein gedanklichen Abstraktion wird’ (Neumann 1961, p. 417).

<sup>123</sup> Heinrich 2012, p. 50. ‘Eine reine Denkabstraktion’ (Heinrich 2005, p. 48).

<sup>124</sup> ‘[D]iese Reduktion *objektiv* vollzieht, indem im Austausch ... konkreten Arbeiten qualitative als ein und dieselbe abstrakte gesellschaftliche Arbeit gleichgesetzt sind’ (Neumann 1961, p. 417).

<sup>125</sup> ‘Im Tausch... unterschiedlichen Arbeiten werden auf ... abstrakt menschliche Arbeit reduziert’ (Heinrich 2009b, p. 275).

<sup>126</sup> ‘Ersetzung des Begriffs der Werts substanz durch den Begriff der Wertgröße’ (Neumann 1961, p. 413).

<sup>127</sup> ‘Die Frage, wie diese Gleichsetzung überhaupt möglich ist, spielt aber weder in der bürgerlichen Ökonomie noch im traditionellen Marxismus eine zentrale Rolle, allenfalls werden ihre quantitativen Aspekte diskutiert’ (Heinrich 2001, p. 158).

<sup>128</sup> ‘[U]nmittelbare Arbeitszeitrechnung der verschiedenen “Stundenzettler” ... unmöglich ist’ (Heinrich 2001, p. 159).

<sup>129</sup> ‘[F]aktisch nur eine Art Arbeitsgeld ... das unmittelbar die Arbeitszeit selbst repräsentiert’ (Neumann 1961, p. 418).

The readings presented above show, in summary, that Neumann and Heinrich were ‘on the same page’ with regard to several important points. Neither of the authors accepted (Marx’s) definitions of abstract labour as ‘expenditure of human labour-power’, and they considered such a definition naturalistic at base. Both held that such a definition eternalises value. They found, in contrast, that value-producing abstract labour should be conceptualised as a historically specific form of labour within commodity-producing societies. Both Neumann and Heinrich stated that abstract labour, rather than its being the ‘expenditure of human labour-power’, expresses social relations in one of these societies. They stressed also that abstract labour can only be measured in money and that only concrete labour can be measured in time. Yet another claim held in common by Neumann and Heinrich is that concrete labour time, measurable via a clock, should not be confused with the socially necessary labour time (which they identify with abstract labour). In both authors’ view, abstract labour, described by Marx as an ‘expenditure of human labour-power’, is an abstraction of thought, whereas they found a certain amount of concrete labour to be practically valid (*gelten*) as value-producing abstract labour in the act of exchange. Neumann and Heinrich both claimed that any attempt to estimate labour value with the aid of labour-time accounting goes astray in replacing the qualitatively determined substance of value with the quantity of value, and both vocally portrayed any attempt to estimate the socially necessary quantities of labour time for various products or product groups as an effort to establish a system of labour vouchers, a system, they stated, that Marx himself never would have accepted.

We can now zoom out a little, to stress the role of other critics, not least among them the most famous economist of the GDR, Behrens. He too took Rudolph and Lendle to task for eternalising the category of abstract labour through conceiving of it as the expenditure of labour-power in a physiological sense.<sup>130</sup> Likewise, Mann rejected Lendle’s and Rudolph’s naturalistic views, and he defended the position that money is the only possible measuring stick for value, whereas value itself is a social relation.<sup>131</sup>

Moreover, the bigger picture reveals that the ‘substantialist’ *cum* ‘naturalist’ position depicted by Heinrich and other exponents of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* is, if not a straw man, quite close to the view that appears to have been the *challenger* to the mainstream position in the discussion that unfolded in the GDR of the early 1960s. As I argue

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<sup>130</sup> Behrens 1961, pp. 424ff.

<sup>131</sup> Mann 1962, pp. 59, 61.



below, it is not the ‘monetary interpretation’ that is most accurately regarded as the potentially subversive one. On the contrary, it was Rudolph, Lendle, and Hans Schilar who suggested that the real relations of the GDR economy (those between workers and companies) should be rendered more transparent with the aid of labour-time accounting, even if, as I believe, doing so would have been unrealistic at the time.

## 4 How to Set Prices to Diverge from Values that are Unknown

Lendle and Rudolph did not encounter criticism alone. They received support from Schilar, who explained that pricing in the GDR was supposed to be grounded in values and that officially the planners consciously utilised the differences between values and prices, even though they concurrently explained that the quantity of value could not be observed independently from prices. This was one of the contradictions that a teacher of political economy must explain to his students, Schilar complained.<sup>132</sup>

Schilar issued a reminder that Lendle and Rudolph took their definition of the concept of abstract labour directly from Marx’s ‘expenditure of human labour-power’,<sup>133</sup> also pointing out that Lendle had cited more than fifty places in *Capital* and related texts where Marx defines the substance of value as the ‘expenditure of human labour-power’.<sup>134</sup> Schilar insisted, then, that Neumann and Behrens were criticising Marx’s own definitions and that the burden was on them to explain the origins of the interpretation of the concept of abstract labour as an ‘expression of social relations’ rather than the expenditure of human labour-power.<sup>135</sup> Schilar quite correctly highlighted that Marx was consistent in his definition of the concept of abstract labour. As he and Lendle both claimed, a position according to which abstract labour would be a ‘relation’ finds little support in Marx’s writings.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Schilar 1961, p. 1517. See also Csikós-Nagy 1961, p. 553.

<sup>133</sup> Schilar 1961, pp. 1518–19.

<sup>134</sup> Lendle 1961b, p. 1531.

<sup>135</sup> Schilar 1961, p. 1519.

<sup>136</sup> See footnote 92. I have presented in a paper delivered at the sixteenth Historical Materialism Conference, in 2019, a more-thorough analysis of the quotations often cited to support the case that

Schilar emphasised that measuring abstract labour in terms of time and estimating the value added by that labour are different operations. Even if Marx conceived of abstract labour as nothing more than the ‘expenditure of uniform labour-power’, this use of human energy only gains its function as a substance of value within commodity production, in certain social relations.<sup>137</sup> Accordingly, even though Schilar concurred with Lendle that, in essence, the abstract aspect of labour enables comparisons, he stressed that its specific social function as a substance of value is executed only within commodity production.<sup>138</sup> On this basis, Schilar claimed that the capacity to produce value is not inherent to labour – not even in its abstract aspect, as the mainstream view implies.<sup>139</sup> Rather, Schilar agreed with Lendle that value is neither a social relation *per se* nor a certain quantity of labour. Instead, it is a social relation coupled with the fact that, on average, market exchange takes place between equal amounts of objectified labour.<sup>140</sup>

Moreover, Schilar emphasised that any estimation of labour value hinges on the social relations involved. In capitalism, this estimation is impossible, he argued, because data on these are not available. Companies’ primary interest is in keeping their trade secrets safe from competitors and in hiding the exploitation involved rather than revealing it to the workers.<sup>141</sup> This comment might inspire one to consider what an attempt to find a monetary equivalent of labour time could have revealed about societal relations in the GDR. Lendle proposed estimating the value transferred and that added in terms of the labour time connected with each and, likewise, judging both the necessary and the surplus labour time in the course of a working-day. Would approximation of these figures have run counter to the interests of the ruling party within the GDR’s state-monopolistic socialism?<sup>142</sup>

In light of this question, there may have been something potentially subversive in the very idea of trying to estimate the labour equivalents of various quantities of money, however correct Lendle’s and Rudolph’s critics most likely were in claiming

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abstract labour is a relation, along with my full listing of Marx’s definitions of abstract labour as ‘expenditure of human labour-power’.

<sup>137</sup> Schilar 1961, p. 1522.

<sup>138</sup> Schilar 1961, p. 1520.

<sup>139</sup> Schilar 1961, p. 1522.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Schilar 1961, pp. 1522–3.

<sup>142</sup> On the concept of ‘state-monopolistic socialism’ or ‘socialist variant of state monopolism’, see Behrens 1992, pp. 34–5.

that the data and technology for reliably doing so did not yet exist in the GDR of the early 1960s.

There were also other, more concrete proposals for the estimation of labour value both in that setting and in the late-1950s Soviet Union. For instance, the early 1960s saw Rudolph, together with Gerhard Wittich, develop numeric estimation of labour-value figures for various fields of production by working from the statistical data available.<sup>143</sup> Later, Rudolph described these results as politically sensitive, especially with regard to pricing for foreign trade. This, he believed, was the reason the study ended up being suppressed and the materials confiscated.<sup>144</sup>

In 1965, Nick brought the labour-value measurement debate to an end of sorts – via an article published not, as the previous contributions had been, in the flagship economics journal *Wirtschaftswissenschaft*, but by the theoretical-work mouthpiece of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, or sed), *Einheit: Zeitschrift für Theorie und Praxis des Wissenschaftlichen Sozialismus* – by announcing that the time was not yet ripe for labour-time accounting.<sup>145</sup> Nick's rebuttals to Rudolph and Wittich are not so different from Neumann's. Arguing that value is a social relation and that it can only appear in prices,<sup>146</sup> Nick rejected the possibility of labour-time accounting, especially on the grounds of its dependence on a solution to the reduction problem, which he found notoriously difficult.<sup>147</sup>

It appears to me that, if the position of any East German economist I am aware of could be described as 'substantialist' and 'naturalistic', it would be that of Lendle, Rudolph, and Schilar, albeit with some reservations. Such a position seems to have been, however, a challenger to the 'monetary view' that finds support in the political-economics textbooks of the day. Tellingly, *Lehrbuch Politische Ökonomie Sozialismus* (1972) warns that measuring concrete labour directly in terms of labour hours does not yield information about the social character of that labour and, thus, value.<sup>148</sup> Moreover, similar debates were sparked until the very end of the GDR's existence as a state.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Rudolph and Wittich 1965.

<sup>144</sup> Rudolph 2007, pp. 194–5.

<sup>145</sup> Paraphrased from Nick 1965, p. 94.

<sup>146</sup> Nick 1965, p. 88.

<sup>147</sup> Nick 1965, p. 91.

<sup>148</sup> 'Im Sozialismus ist die *gesellschaftliche* Erfassung der konkreten Arbeit unmittelbar in Arbeitsstunden nicht möglich' (Zagolow (ed.) 1972, p. 263).

<sup>149</sup> See Jahn 1986; Köhler 1986; Asmus 1988.

If one adheres to the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*'s monetary interpretation of Marx's theory of value, it is Lendle and Rudolph's writings, not the textbook presentation of GDR economics, that express thinking along 'left-Ricardian' lines, whereby the substance of value consists of the labour time expended in production and this value-producing labour time can be estimated. While Elbe has characterised official Marxist–Leninist political economy as manifesting such a 'regression' to left-Ricardianism,<sup>150</sup> this view was, in reality, not shared by all GDR economists – such key *Neue Marx-Lektüre* tenets as 'only concrete labour can be measured in time' and 'value is not a quantity but a social relation' were fairly mainstream views expressed in the labour-value measurement debate in the GDR of the early 1960s, with Nick even endorsing a monetary interpretation in the theory-focused mouthpiece of the Socialist Unity Party, as noted above. The problem in Elbe's argument may lie in his recourse to the well-known East German *Philosophical Dictionary*, according to which value is an instrument of the socialist process of production and reproduction that is administered in a planful way. In his argument, Elbe concludes that state-socialism aimed not at wholesale elimination of the capitalist form-determinations but merely at their alternative application. Although Elbe's point about similar form-determinations for the social labour is an important one, I would claim that he mistakenly took the dictionary's claim that the 'value-relation is ... applied in a planful way'<sup>151</sup> at face value. Its language about 'conscious application' of the law of value within state-monopolistic socialism appears to be little more than rhetoric.

Moreover, the labour-value measurement debate is a direct precursor to the monetary theory of value (*monetäre Werttheorie*) of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* school. Some years later, in West Germany, Backhaus's attention was drawn to this debate, with the first part of his series of essays *Materialien zur Rekonstruktion der Marxschen Werttheorie* noting an absence of consensus among Marx's followers on how the most fundamental concepts should be interpreted. He pointed to a confusion of the very fundamentals (*Grundbegriffswirrwarr*).<sup>152</sup> Most notably, there is no agreement as to how the concept of abstract labour, which forms the 'substance' of all economic value in Marx's theory, should be interpreted.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> See Elbe 2010, p. 31.

<sup>151</sup> Eichhorn 1975, p. 1291; Elbe 2010, p. 21. Translation mine.

<sup>152</sup> Backhaus 2011, p. 79.

<sup>153</sup> Backhaus 2011, pp. 70–1.

To back up his contention that consensus had not yet been reached on the meaning of some of Marx's most basic concepts, such as the key notion of abstract labour,<sup>154</sup> Backhaus quotes Schilar here, who noted that Lendle had compiled a dozen distinct (and partly contradictory) interpretations of the dual character of labour. On this basis, Backhaus points out that the East German economists involved in the debate had to contend with quite a shocking fact: opinions differed hugely with regard to how best to understand the 'pivot on which a clear comprehension of political economy turns'.<sup>155</sup> For evidence, Backhaus cites the claim by Behrens that Lendle's interpretation of abstract labour as the essence of human labour and concrete labour as its form of manifestation is perverted. If the categories 'essence' and 'form of manifestation' have any meaning at all in this context, only the opposite would make any sense; Behrens states in his essay: concrete labour would be the 'essence' and abstract labour the 'form' in which concrete labour is manifested under certain historical conditions.<sup>156</sup>

Backhaus's essay then quotes Schilar, who asked whether such confusion precludes further development of political economy, whether in practice or as a system of thought.<sup>157</sup> This question remains topical today, with the nature of abstract labour having occasioned particularly lively debate in recent years in the Anglophone world.<sup>158</sup> Furthermore, it is likely to arise again and again: debate over the nature of abstract labour as a measurable quantity vs. an indeterminate social relation rears its head every half century or so. As this article elucidates, similar arguments are repeated, revealing much about both the past and the future.

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<sup>154</sup> Referring to Schilar (1961, p. 1518), Backhaus (2011, pp. 71–2) deems this to constitute confusion in the basic concepts (*Grundbegriffswirrwarr*).

<sup>155</sup> Marx 1996, p. 51.

<sup>156</sup> Behrens 1961, p. 424; Backhaus 2011, p. 79.

<sup>157</sup> Backhaus 2011, p. 72; Schilar 1961, p. 1518.

<sup>158</sup> For examples, see Mohun 1983; Postone 1993; Reuten 1993; Likitkijomboon 1995; Moseley 1997; Saad-Filho 1997; Murray 2000; Arthur 2001; De Angelis 2004; Bellofiore 2004; Kincaid 2005; Kliman and McGlone 2004; Mavroudeas 2004; Reichelt 2007; Kicillof and Starosta 2007, 2011; Heinrich 2009a; Bonefeld 2010; Carchedi 2011. Simultaneously, debate has been taking place in Germany, with various players: Heinrich 1999, 2005, 2009b; Rakowitz 2000; Wolf 2003–6; Haug 2013; Reichelt 2013; Müller 2015. More generally, highly influential debate on the nature of abstract labour can be traced back to discussion in the Soviet Union among Isaak Rubin, Isaak Dashkovskii, Igor Shabs, and Igor Kon (see Boldyrev and Kragh 2015).

## 5 Conclusion: Backhaus, His Followers, and the ‘Monetary Theory of Value’

When Backhaus first began elaborating his thoughts related to a monetary interpretation of Marx’s theory of value (in the first part of his essay series *Materialien zur Rekonstruktion der Marxschen Werttheorie*, published in 1974), he referred to the East German labour-value measurement debate. My discussion of that debate serves to demonstrate that the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* ‘monetary interpretation of Marx’s theory of value’ actually came into existence with direct reference to the discussions in the GDR, in which one can identify a monetary interpretation as, in fact, by no means a marginal view. From one prominent perspective, which held great sway in the debate, value only appears in prices and the social relations underlying commodity–money relations necessarily remain hidden.

Soviet Marxism had not always been sceptical about the possibilities of quantifying labour value: most Marxian economists of the early Soviet Union were optimistic about opportunities for grounding economic planning in units of labour time – this would, they thought, enable greater transparency than monetary accounting does. By the early 1960s, only a few economists believed in the rather utopian ideas that had prevailed in the immediate wake of the October Revolution. This decade was characterised by greater freedom for economic debate in the GDR,<sup>159</sup> and questions about even the very fundamentals of Marxian theory were debated. Backhaus was acquainted with the East German discussions in the 1960s, yet, while he himself explicitly refers to the labour-value measurement debate in his famous essays, his followers have not paid any attention to those discussions. Instead, they have ended up misrepresenting ‘traditional Marxist’ or ‘Marxist–Leninist’ positions on value theory.

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<sup>159</sup> See Krause 1998, pp. 139ff.

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# PUBLICATION IV

**(preprint) Isaak Rubin in Germany: On the Reception of Rubin's Ideas in  
East and West Germany (1949–89)**

Rauhala, Paula

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## 4 ISAAK RUBIN IN GERMANY: ON THE RECEPTION OF RUBIN'S IDEAS IN EAST AND WEST GERMANY (1949–89)

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### Abstract

The divided Germany's reception of Isaak Rubin's thinking, among the greatest contributions from early-Soviet Marxian economic theory before Stalinist suppression of related scientific debate, is best understood in light of the trauma-ridden East–West ideological conflict. Analysis reveals a gap between words and deeds on both sides of the wall. In West Germany, Rubin was typically characterised as among Marxist theory's last legitimate scholars before Marxist theory was pressed into serving the ruling party's agenda, with recent scholarship even painting him as a predecessor of the West German *Neue Marx-Lektüre*. However, contemporary literature reveals that the latter school did not discuss his ideas so deeply; moreover, the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* reading of *Capital* and his diverge considerably. In East Germany, the Marxist-Leninist political economy officially rejected his main ideas, yet scholars of Marxist theory discussed them implicitly, with textbook presentations of such central matters as Marx's theory of value closely tracking them. Probably for ideology-bound reasons, East German scholars tended to exaggerate the differences between Rubin's views and their own, while West Germany's did the reverse. Those seeking an unbiased, history-aware reading of Rubin could consider the core thoughts', contexts', and ideologies' interplay in the intellectual history behind twenty-first-century Marxism – and how that history still affects our judgements.

**Keywords:** Isaak Rubin, East German political economy, West German Marxism, value theory

# 1. Introduction

Isaak Rubin (1886–1937) is widely considered one of the most important Marxian economists of the early Soviet Union, from the years before the emergence of Stalinism brought an end to scholarly debate in the field of Marxist theory. The reception of Rubin's ideas in the divided Germany, as the Cold War raged between 1949 and 1989, can be best understood against the backdrop of this tragic history, and in the context of the ideological conflict between the East and the West, in which the trauma of Stalinism always played a role.

In the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the existence of Rubin's writings was a taboo subject because the author had been executed in Stalin's purges alongside his friend and colleague David Ryazanov (1870–1938), *Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe*, or MEGA, editor-in-chief. In the 1930s, not only Rubin and Ryazanov, then director of the Marx–Engels Institute, but alongside the two '127 of the institute's 244 members of staff ... among them many skilled translators, archivists, economists, philosophers, and historians' were executed.<sup>1</sup>

On the western side, in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), in contrast, Rubin was typically highly appreciated as one of the last serious scholars of Marx before Marxist scientific discussion degenerated into ideological legitimisation for the Marxism-Leninism of the relevant states' ruling Communist parties. Rubin had appeal for many scholars in the FRG not only because he had been deemed an important Marxian economist, economic historian, translator, and editor of Marx's writings but also since many West German scholars were highly critical of the ideological instrumentalisation of Marx's ideas in Marxism-Leninism: though risking his life, Rubin never compromised his critical approach to research into the history of economic thought, Marx's ideas included.

How his writings were received in the divided Germany is worth examining because it offers a prime example of the interconnectedness of substantial and historical or contextual questions in the intellectual history of Marxism. Not only substantial but also political considerations play a role in how Marxist authors get received. This became highly evident as I browsed through the literature on Marx's *Capital* across the divide between the establishment of the GDR, in 1949, and the fall of the Berlin

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<sup>1</sup> Boldyrev and Kragh 2015, pp. 367.

Wall, in 1989. In my search for comments on Rubin's work, I observed a discrepancy between words and actions.

I expected to find the West German reception of Rubin's writings to have cohered around the school that later became known as the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, because its adherents – highly critical of Marxism-Leninism and Soviet communism – have portrayed themselves more recently as Rubin's followers.<sup>2</sup> My foray into the literature, though, revealed that the scholars nowadays included in the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, did not really discuss Rubin's ideas before the fall of the Berlin wall. Moreover, delving into questions of reading Marx's *Capital* revealed substantial differences between Rubin's conceptualisations and the various *Neue Marx-Lektüre* readings of the book.

In the East German literature too, there appears to be a gap between words and deeds. Wherever Rubin's ideas were explicitly discussed in the GDR, they were expressly rejected, yet East Germany's mainstream understanding of such central matters as Marx's theory of value was not as far from Rubin's position as one might suppose.

It appears that, in the prevailing Cold War atmosphere, West Germans tended to overestimate their alignment with Rubin's ideas while their eastern counterparts tended to downplay the validity of those ideas.

This article's discussion of these matters is divided into four main parts. The first prepares the ground by giving a brief overview of Rubin's relationship with the German political economy. After this, I lay out a chronological outline of the most important West German publications mentioning Rubin, followed by a presentation dealing with his views' reception in the East German literature. The final major section contrasts engagement with his ideas between the two German states.

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<sup>2</sup> Hoff 2017, p. 15; Elbe 2010, pp. 29, 33.

# 1. Background: Rubín and Germany

Rubín maintained a general interest in Western economic theory but had a special relationship with the German political economy and was acquainted especially well with German discussions of Marx's *Capital*. His writings considered such German-speaking economists as Otto Bauer, Rudolf Hilferding, Karl Kautsky, and Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk, and he penned reviews of works in German by scholars such as Franz Petry, Heinrich Dietzel, and Rudolf Stolzmann.<sup>3</sup> He even translated books by Wilhelm Liebknecht, and Schaja Rosenberg.<sup>4</sup> Still more important are his Russian-language translation of Marx's *Randglossen zu Adolph Wagner's Lehrbuch der politischen Ökonomie* and Marx's *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*. The preface to the latter book was translated by another creative reader of Marx and victim of Stalin's terror, the renowned legal scholar Evgeny Pashukanis (1891–1937). Even though Rubín's translation, inclusive of its annotations (*wissenschaftliche Apparat*), would serve as the basis for all subsequent Russian editions of Marx's book, Rubín's credit as the translator was scrubbed from these editions.<sup>5</sup>

In the wake of Rubín's murder under campaigns launched against *rubinshchina* ('the terrible time of Rubín'<sup>6</sup>), his writings became a taboo subject in the Soviet Union, and their existence was seldom acknowledged. The ban encompassed the Soviet-occupied Germany after the Second World War and the newly formed German Democratic Republic from 1949 onward. In West Germany, things were different. Since the publication of his two major works there, in 1973 and 1975, Rubín was known at least by name and much appreciated among Marxian scholars. A closer look, however, reveals a more complicated picture.

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<sup>3</sup> Among these works were Petry's *Der soziale Gehalt der Marxschen Werttheorie* (1916), Dietzel's *Vom Lehrwert der Wertlehre und vom Grundfehler der Marxschen Verteilungslehre* (1925), and Stolzmann's *Grundzüge einer Philosophie der Volkswirtschaft* (1920).

<sup>4</sup> Namely, Liebknecht's *Vom Lehrwert der Wertlehre und vom Grundfehler der Marxschen Verteilungslehre* (1925) and Rosenberg's *Ricardo und Marx als Werttheoretiker* (1903).

<sup>5</sup> Vasina 1994, pp. 129–30.

<sup>6</sup> The translation comes from Vasina and Rokityansky (2018, p. 833).

## 2. Rubin in West Germany

### 2.1. Rosdolsky, Neusüss-Fögen, and *Projekt Klassenanalyse*

Even though Roman Rosdolsky makes only brief mention of Rubin in his pioneering study of Marx's *Grundrisse*, first published in 1968 as *Zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Marxschen ‚Kapital‘. Der Rohentwurf des Kapital 1857–1858* (*The Making of Marx's 'Capital'*, 1977), the background and effects of this short note are interesting. While the book was written in the USA, Rosdolsky had some insider knowledge of Soviet scholarship dealing with Marx: He had worked as a correspondent for Ryazanov's Marx–Engels Institute since 1926 and was aware of Rubin's fate.<sup>7</sup> Not only had he himself been regarded as an enemy by the Stalinists but, in addition, he had nearly died 'as an anti-fascist resistance fighter in the concentration camps of Auschwitz, Ravensbrück and Oranienburg'.<sup>8</sup>

With his book, acknowledging the influence of Hegel's *Logic* on Marx's *Grundrisse*, Rosdolsky emphasised that it was the economic form, not the content, that distinguishes various modes of production from each other.<sup>9</sup> Rosdolsky quoted Rubin in arguing that 'from the standpoint of Hegel's philosophy ... the content itself gives birth to the form which was already latent in the content. Form necessarily grows from the content itself'.<sup>10</sup> Rubin had stressed that this conviction is fundamental to Hegel's epistemology and exists in tension with the philosophy of Kant, who 'treated form as something ... which adheres to the content from the outside'.<sup>11</sup>

Rosdolsky's book gained a wide audience, and it stands out especially for inspiring a variety of readings of *Capital* focusing on Marx's idea of economic form-determinations (*Formbestimmungen*). Rosdolsky explained to his readers that 'the heyday of Soviet economics in the 1920s provided many valuable methodological discoveries – to name only the works of Preobrazhensky, and the Rubin school'.<sup>12</sup> It had not taken long for this advanced theoretical understanding to degenerate into

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<sup>7</sup> Radziejowski and Leogrande 1978, p. 202. See also Rabinbach 1974, 57.

<sup>8</sup> Hoff 2010, p. 74.

<sup>9</sup> Rosdolsky 1974a, p. 104 ff, also 1968, p. 14, 1974b, p. 66, and 1977, p. 78.

<sup>10</sup> Rosdolsky 1974a, p. 104, also 1977, p., 78; Rubin 1990, p. 117.

<sup>11</sup> Rubin 1990, p. 117.

<sup>12</sup> Rosdolsky 1977, pp. 569–70, also 1968, p. 11, 1974a, p. 674, and 1974b, p. 64.

Marxist-Leninist ideology. For textual evidence, Rosdolsky quoted Soviet philosopher Mark Rosenthal's book on Marx's method in *Capital*.

Rubin's adherents and the Menshevik idealists, who spread their mischief in the 1920s and 1930s into the fields of political economy and philosophy, have written a great deal on the 'dialectic of capital', but they treated Marx's revolutionary method in the spirit of Hegelianism, and turned it into a scholarly game of concepts, a complex system of artifice and intricacy, far remote from science ... The Communist Party has destroyed this tendency, which is quite alien to marxism, and assisted Soviet philosophers and economists to unmask its essence.<sup>13</sup>

In the opinion of Rosdolsky, given that 'the Rubin school was in the main "destroyed" by the execution of Rubin and his comrades in Stalin's concentration camps and prisons ... Soviet philosophers would be better advised at least to keep silent about this painful subject, rather than make such comments'.<sup>14</sup> Rosdolsky's book had a great influence on those critical of Marxism-Leninism.

Rubin's *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value (Studien zur Marxschen Werttheorie)* was translated into German some five years after Rosdolsky's book, in 1973. The abridged translation was based on the manuscript of the English translation, not yet published at that point, which follows the third Russian edition, from 1928. As Riccardo Bellofiore has explained, this US edition was 'partial, missing a short Preface, the Introduction, an appendix on "Marxian terminology" (labor and value, "crystallization," thing and social function) and the "Answer to the Critics" (Dashkovskii, Shabs, Kon)'.<sup>15</sup>

Even though the important chapter on commodity fetishism was missing from the German translation, the translator, Annette Neusüss-Fögen, highlighted in a contextualising introduction to the work that the idea of commodity fetishism is crucial for the book.<sup>16</sup> The categories of political economy were reified expressions social relations within anarchic commodity production. Neusüss-Fögen explained that Rubin's book pointed toward the fact that the Soviet political economy neglected Marx's fundamentally critical discussion of the categories of political

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<sup>13</sup> Rosenthal 1957, p. 19 (English translation from Rosdolsky 1977, p. 570).

<sup>14</sup> Rosdolsky 1977, p. 570, and 1974a, p. 675.

<sup>15</sup> Bellofiore 2020, p. 495.

<sup>16</sup> Neusüss-Fögen 1973, p. 17 ff.

economy; these categories were taken as given and instrumentalised for the purposes of the planned economy.<sup>17</sup>

Rubin's sociological approach to *Capital* hinted at the fundamental contradiction between the emancipatory spirit of the Russian Revolution and the cynical model of socialism in one country.<sup>18</sup> The official Marxist-Leninist dogma held that the revolution had resolved all fundamental contradictions, such as that between the individual and society. Crucial contradictions remained, however, in that the top-down nationalisation of the means of production never abolished social domination – it merely modernised the latter's form. The categories and laws of the centralised, hierarchical planned economy were no less an expression of alienated social relations than the laws of the capitalist commodity economy were. Rubin's emphasis on commodity fetishism should be understood in this context, Neusüss-Fögen explained. Though Rubin did not comment on matters of the economic policy of the time, the theoretical points that he repeated over and over again – about the need to differentiate between the material-technical and social aspects of economic phenomena and, secondly, the impossibility of reducing quality to quantity – are reasonably understood only as a defence of Marx's critical theory against its technocratic instrumentalisation.<sup>19</sup>

Besides acknowledging this fundamental significance of Rubin's book, Neusüss-Fögen asked critically whether it makes any sense to present the labour theory of value without reference to the capital-relation.<sup>20</sup>

Limiting his investigation to Marx's theory of value, Rubin neither discussed exchange between labour and capital nor analysed the labour process and the simultaneous valorisation process, let alone Marx's theory of the accumulation of capital. He mentioned the theory of surplus-value only in the context of his discussion of productive and unproductive labour. Production prices, a phenomenon connected exclusively with capitalist production, are discussed only in the last two chapters of the book, dealing with modifications to the law of value.<sup>21</sup> Marx's theory of crisis is barely mentioned in Rubin's book,<sup>22</sup> an omission that left Neusüss-Fögen expressly dissatisfied.

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<sup>17</sup> Neusüss-Fögen 1973, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Neusüss-Fögen 1973, p. 21

<sup>19</sup> Neusüss-Fögen 1973, p. 26–7.

<sup>20</sup> Neusüss-Fögen 1973, pp. 28–9.

<sup>21</sup> Neusüss-Fögen 1973, p. 28.

<sup>22</sup> Neusüss-Fögen 1973, p. 29.

It appears to me that *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* addresses the law of value as a law common to all the various forms of commodity-production: simple, and capitalist commodity-production, while questions specific to capitalist commodity-production largely fell beyond the scope of this specific book. In Rubin's words, '[t]he theory of capital presupposes the theory of value, but Marx constructs the latter without the aid of presuppositions that underpin the former'.<sup>23</sup>

Penning a book review in the following year, 1974, Paul Mattick affirmatively referred to Neusüss-Fögen's critique of Rubin's dismissal of the central features of capitalism, class antagonism, accumulation, and crises.<sup>24</sup> Though recommending the book, Mattick criticised Rubin for an invalid interpretation of Marx's theory of value as a theory of economic equilibrium.<sup>25</sup> Where Rubin characterised the law of value as allocating social labour proportionally among diverse branches of production, corresponding to social need; he presented that law as accomplishing the same thing the central planners are tasked with achieving in a socialist economy. (Rubin 1990, p. 156) Mattick emphasised that Marx's view differed from this: in a capitalist market, not only is social labour distributed in line with social needs, but the market mechanism mediates reproduction of the existing class relations, given that the exchange between labour and capital is only nominally equivalent. Rubin paid little to no attention to class relations and did not discuss exchange between labour and capital. He investigated value relations of a fictitious market economy comprising simple commodity-producers. As Rubin concentrated on simple commodity-production and economic equilibrium rather than capitalist commodity-production and disequilibrium, he was not equipped to deal with the accumulation of capital or crises. Finally, echoing numerous other authors, Mattick criticised Rubin for separating value-producing abstract labour from real labour.

In the next year, VSA Verlag published a volume resuming the discussion conducted by the Institute of Red Professors in the late 1920s, *Dialektik der Kategorien*. The first part of the 1975 publication included Rubin's article 'Abstract Labour and Value in Marx's System', which had been published in 1927 in *Under the Banner of Marxism*.<sup>26</sup> The second part dealt with the debate between Rubin and S.A. Bessonov over the former's essay 'Dialectical Development of Categories in Marx's Economic System', published in *Problems of Economics* in 1929, and paraphrased the general debate that

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<sup>23</sup> Rubin 2018e, p. 626; see also Rubin 1990, p. 32.

<sup>24</sup> Mattick 1974.

<sup>25</sup> See Rubin 1990, p. 67.

<sup>26</sup> For an English translation see Rubin 1978.



followed the two talks. The third part of the volume consisted of a contextualising critical essay with collective authorship under the name ‘Projekt Klassenanalyse’, or PKA.

One thread of the discussion in the Institute of Red Professors was this: what was the scope and content of Marx’s critique of political economy? Does the political economy, in a Marxian sense, study purely the laws of motion of capitalist production and distribution, as theorists such as I.D. Laptev insisted?<sup>27</sup> Or could the political economy be conceptualised in a broader sense, with the implication that Marx’s economic ideas might have validity in other than bourgeois contexts?

One aspect of the debate on the object of research of into political economy ran parallel to a central dispute in philosophy between two fundamentally different approaches. On one side were mechanists, influenced by positivism, and on the other were dialecticians, who rather followed Hegel and who took Rubin as their ‘leading figure’.<sup>28</sup> The mechanists maintained that the object of political economy consists of the forces and relations of production, while the dialecticians, with Rubin as their most prominent representative, excluded the forces of production from the object of their study.<sup>29</sup>

Yet another point discussed was Rubin’s understanding of Marx’s theory of value and, more specifically, his concept of the substance of all economic value: abstract labour. In fact, Marx defined abstract labour consistently and repeatedly as ‘expenditure of human labour power’ (*Verausgabung menschlicher Arbeitskraft*).<sup>30</sup> However, Rubin wrote:

[A]bstract labour, which creates value, must be understood as a social category in which we cannot find a single atom of matter. One of two things is possible: if abstract labour is an expenditure of human energy in physiological form, then value also has a reified-material character. Or value is a social phenomenon, and then abstract labour must also be understood as a social phenomenon connected with a determined social form of production. It is

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<sup>27</sup> Rubin and Bessonow 1975, p. 105.

<sup>28</sup> See Shirokorad and Zweynert 2012, p. 658.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid; Trifonow and Schirokorad 1973, p. 46.

<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, *Marx/Engels Collected Works* (MECW) Volume 35, pp. 54, 55, 56, 78, 84, 211; *Marx-Engels-Werke* (MEW) Volume 23, pp. 52, 58, 59, 61, 81, 86, 88, 215.

not possible to reconcile a physiological concept of abstract labour with the historical character of the value which it creates.<sup>31</sup>

Even though it might appear that Rubin rejected Marx's definitions of abstract labour and reformulated the concept, he, in fact, primarily opposed the 'energetic' or 'physiological' reinterpretation of the notion. Some of Rubin's vulgar-materialist adversaries attempted to reduce economic value to expenditure of energy.<sup>32</sup> They espoused the view that the market mechanism could be replaced by measurements of the mental and physiological energy expended within production. Rubin could not accept such a mechanistic reading of Marx, and he emphasised that '[t]he labor theory of value does not affirm the *physiological equality* but the *social equalization* of labor'.<sup>33</sup>

Rubin argued that concrete labour is 'material-technical' labour, which does not even belong to the ambit of political economy.<sup>34</sup> Concrete labour is 'expended in the process of production' and is the 'material-technical content' of production. Concrete labour, via exchange, is equalised with abstract labour, which he linked to the 'social form of the social process of production'.<sup>35</sup>

G. Motylev criticised Rubin harshly for displaying a circulationist understanding. For Rubin, the substance of value was abstract labour, which, curiously enough, is actually concrete labour that has been 'reduced' to abstract labour in exchange.<sup>36</sup> Motylev complained that a picture in which concrete labour gets 'transformed' into abstract labour via exchange utterly neglects the dual character of the labour process – it is simultaneously a process of valorisation. In Marx's account, the concrete aspect of labour transfers the value of the means of production and of the raw materials (c) to the product. Simultaneously, the abstract aspect of labour adds value (v+m) to the product. Were this value addition to occur not in the process of production but in the market (as concrete labour becomes transformed into abstract labour), how should the whole process be understood?<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Rubin 1990, p. 135.

<sup>32</sup> See Rubin 1990, pp. 103–4, 132ff. For description of the course of the debate among Kon, Bessonov, Shabs, Dashkovskij, and Rubin regarding the concept of abstract labour in *Under the Banner of Marxism* see Boldyrev and Kragh (2015, pp. 375ff) and Takenaga (2017).

<sup>33</sup> Rubin 1990, p. 169 (emphasis in original).

<sup>34</sup> Rubin and Bessonow 1975, p. 11; Rubin 1978, p. 111, Rubin 1990, pp. 12, 70, 71, 136, 141, and 2018a, pp. 561, 562, 565.

<sup>35</sup> Rubin and Bessonow 1975; Rubin 1978; Rubin 1990, pp. 70, 71, 72, 73, 135, 140, 141, 147.

<sup>36</sup> Motyljew 1975, pp. 108–9; Rubin 1990, p. 141–2.

<sup>37</sup> Rubin and Bessonow 1975, p. 109.

Bessonov took Rubin to task for separating abstract labour from real labour, since he saw Rubin as claiming the substance of all economic value to stem from the sphere of the market. He held that Rubin, not being able to deal with the contradictory unity of twofold social labour, simply excluded its other pole, concrete labour, from the research object of political economy, just as he excluded the other forces of production.<sup>38</sup>

The third part of the volume consists of a contextualising critical essay written by ‘Projekt Klassenanalyse’, or PKA. Its writers were a group of young scholars concentrating on class analysis. Taking the critique presented in the early Soviet Union further, this working group argued that Rubin, by situating ‘abstract labour’ in the act of exchange, actually separated the form from the content.<sup>39</sup> Rubin thereby neglected analysis of the immediate production process and of the specific way of extracting surplus-labour, which is characteristic of the capitalist mode of production.<sup>40</sup>

In this neglect for the immediate production process, PKA saw an inversion of Marx’s critique, which yields perspectives behind the market phenomena that convey an impression that everyone’s income is based exclusively on said person’s own labour.<sup>41</sup> Rubin examined the development of the forms in which social labour appear in the market, but he did not properly connect those forms to the expenditure of social labour.<sup>42</sup> Whereas Marx had traced the forms of appearance of societal wealth, commodities, and money – and, thereby, the relations between commodity-owners – back to the relationship between wage labour and capital Rubin, for his part, ended up grounding the capitalist production process in the forms of the simple circulation of commodities.<sup>43</sup>

Is the criticism justified? Regarding circulationism it probably is. Regarding the last-mentioned point, it appears to me that this critique stands or falls on the basis of an argument that the law of value operates exclusively in ‘capitalist’ markets. This does not, however, reflect Rubin’s position. In *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value*, Rubin discusses the value theory, presented at the very beginning of *Capital*, in Part 1. Only

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<sup>38</sup> Rubin and Bessonow 1975, p. 73. Bessonov’s critique had not spared him from being accused in the Moscow show trials himself. See Bürgel (2016).

<sup>39</sup> PKA 1975, pp. 149–50.

<sup>40</sup> PKA 1975, p. 163.

<sup>41</sup> PKA 1975, p. 165.

<sup>42</sup> PKA 1975, p. 177.

<sup>43</sup> PKA 1975, p. 172.

from Part 2 of the first volume of *Capital* onwards, Marx analysed the capitalist mode of production, and this work was oriented as discussion not of the value theory but of the theory of surplus-value, which was beyond the scope of Rubin's book.

Rubin analysed the capitalist mode of production in his other writings. By his account, whereas 'simple commodity economy was based upon the exchange of equivalents, in capitalist economy we are dealing with the capitalist's appropriation of the workers' unpaid labour'.<sup>44</sup> The mode of operation of the capitalist commodity economy is based, on one hand, on applying the principle of equivalence in exchange and, simultaneously, on violating this principle in production.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, 'capitalist economy' represented for Rubin 'both a further development and the negation of the simple commodity economy'.<sup>46</sup> The negation is due to the unequal exchange between classes, on the basis of the exchange of equivalents. From this standpoint, a capitalist economy also entails further development of the law of value. In 'the simple commodity economy', the law of value asserts itself '**directly**', and in the capitalist economy – for reason of the competition between capitals – this happens 'only **indirectly** through the medium of a complex social process of forming the average rate of profit and prices of production'.<sup>47</sup>

That extract proves that Rubin understood Marx's theory of surplus-value and his theory of capitalist class relations perfectly; he just found meaning in leaving these questions aside when dealing with theories of value and money – just as Marx himself had done. Rubin considered Marx's theories of value and money to be laws of all forms of commodity-production. The two theories, of value and money, could not be separated from each other, and the theory of capital was based on both. The theory of value and of money, for their part, were not based on the theory of surplus-value.<sup>48</sup> From this perspective, it makes perfect sense for Rubin, in a book devoted to the theory of value, to have abstracted from the specificities of the capitalist valorisation process, from the theory of surplus-value, and from the underlying class relations in a capitalist society.

It is worth noting that PKA, while expressing criticism, did not take the side of Rubin's critic here. Rather, the group argued that Bessonov failed to recognise the fundamental importance of Rubin's book and that he too, therefore, was incapable

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<sup>44</sup> Rubin 2018d, p. 790.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Rubin 1979, p. 308 (emphasis in original).

<sup>48</sup> Rubin 2018e, p. 626.

of appropriately wrestling with its shortcomings. Rubín's critics apparently never understood how important the form-determinateness of social wealth was for Marx.<sup>49</sup> They never recognised the critical potential of Marx's theory.<sup>50</sup>

## 2.2. The *Neue Marx-Lektüre*: Followers of Rubín?

Ingo Elbe and Jan Hoff have portrayed Rubín, alongside Pashukanis, as a precursor to the so-called *Neue Marx-Lektüre*.<sup>51</sup> Hoff even wrote that 'the New Marx-Reading ... first began to develop in the 1960s and 1970s (if early precursors are disregarded, such as Isaak Ill'ich Rubín and Evgeny Pashukanis)]'.<sup>52</sup> On this basis, I initially assumed that the reception of Rubín's works in West Germany was concentrated in this school, consisting predominantly of philosophers and social scientists influenced by the Frankfurt school, most prominently Theodor Adorno (1903–69). However, a glance at the works of the scholars cited by Hoff and Elbe as early representatives of this school – Hans-Georg Backhaus (born in 1929), Helmut Reichelt (born in 1939), Gerhard Göhler (born in 1941), and Helmut Brentel – swiftly revealed that these authors wrote surprisingly little about Rubín. This impression remains even when one widens the scope to include such 'inspirers' as Alfred Schmidt (1931–2012), Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1899–1990), and Hans-Jürgen Krahl (1943–70).

In his famous essay 'Zur Dialektik der Wertform', from 1969, Backhaus does not mention Rubín. He had not even read Rubín's works yet.<sup>53</sup> Neither did Reichelt refer to Rubín in his *Zur Logischen Struktur des Kapitalbegriffs bei Marx*, from 1970.

In 1978, Backhaus wrote, in the third part of his essay series *Materialien zur Rekonstruktion der Marxschen Werttheorie*, that

[t]he contrast between Marx's and Marxist theory of value is especially striking in the textbooks and treatises on the theory of value that merely summarise concepts of the 'labour theory of value', simultaneously ignoring the theory of money or

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<sup>49</sup> PKA 1975, pp. 176–7.

<sup>50</sup> PKA 1975, p. 184.

<sup>51</sup> Elbe 2010, pp. 29, 32ff.; Hoff 2017, p. 15.

<sup>52</sup> Hoff 2017, p. 15.

<sup>53</sup> Bellofiore 2020, p. 499. Backhaus's essay was translated into English under the title 'On the Dialectics of the Value Form' (1980).

representing nominalist theorems that contradict Marx's theories of value and money.<sup>54</sup>

In a footnote, Backhaus cites Rubín's *Essays on Marx's Theory of value* as one of several books to ignore money. He explained that, in contrast against Marx's own theory, such 'Marxist' theories of value accord no importance to whether commodities are bartered *versus* sold at money prices.<sup>55</sup> The fact that Backhaus listed Rubín's book among the books that neglected the importance of money suggests that he certainly did not consider Rubín as a predecessor of his 'monetary' interpretation of Marx's theory of value.

More positive, equally brief, mention may be found a couple of years later from Gerhard Göhler's book *Die Reduktion der Dialektik durch Marx* (1980). The author mentioned in passing Rubín as an author, alongside Petry, had already in the 1920s emphasised the social aspect of Marx's value-form analysis.<sup>56</sup>

About a decade later, Brentel mentioned briefly that Rubín was an early Soviet economist who understood astonishingly well the connection between value and value-form and, therefore, the connection between Marx's theories of value and money. In his book *Soziale Form und Ökonomisches Objekt*, Brentel points out that Rubín had stressed that Marx dealt with value as a 'unity of the form, substance and magnitude of value'.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, 'the concept of abstract labour is inseparably tied to that of the universal equivalent for Marx'.<sup>58</sup> By emphasising this point, Brentel explained, Rubín showed appreciation for the relationship between form and content in a Hegelian manner.

Nevertheless, Brentel admitted PKA's critique of Rubín's circulationist neglect for the capital-relation to be somewhat justified.<sup>59</sup> Brentel was suspicious of Rubín's discussion of social equalisation of labour in socialism, and he considered this able to compromise the contributions Rubín made to reconstruction of Marx's categories.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> In the original: 'Die Diskrepanz zwischen Marx'scher und marxistischer Werttheorie kommt besonders deutlich in jenen Lehrbüchern und werttheoretischen Abhandlungen zum Ausdruck, die lediglich 'arbeitswerttheoretische' Begriffe referieren, die Geldtheorie jedoch stillschweigend übergehen oder gar nominalistische, der Marx'schen Wert- und Geldtheorie widersprechende Theoreme vertreten', per Backhaus (2011, p. 95). Translation mine.

<sup>55</sup> Backhaus 2011, pp. 95, 120.

<sup>56</sup> Göhler 1980, p. 71.

<sup>57</sup> Rubín 1975 p. 17; Rubín 1978, p. 115.

<sup>58</sup> Rubín 1974, p. 118; Rubín 1975, p. 21; Brentel 1989, p. 403.

<sup>59</sup> Brentel 1989, p. 404.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

How should we evaluate the assertion that Rubín was a ‘predecessor’ of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*? The authors most readily associated with the school did not discuss Rubín’s writings. As for substance rather than influence, one major difference is that Rubín dealt with the law of value as a law that holds generic validity for the various forms of commodity-production. In Rubín’s account, competition of simple commodity-producers – that is, among independent petit producers, such as small-scale entrepreneurs, artisans, or farmers – was enough to give rise to the law of value, in which ‘the average prices ... are proportional to their labour-value’.<sup>61</sup> In this, Rubín understood Marx’s discussion of the twofold character of commodities and labour, of the emergence of money (or the commodity’s ‘doubling’ into commodities and money), and of the functions of money as laid out at the beginning of the first volume of *Capital* to be addressing the ‘categories of a simple commodity economy’.<sup>62</sup> Only after immediate producers have been transformed into wage labourers and the means of production into capital, ‘the division of commodity society into classes occurs’.<sup>63</sup>

The laws of the simple commodity economy, such as the law of value, are modified in such capitalist economy, and Rubín attempted ‘to separate those features’ in Marx’s writings ‘that are typical of any commodity economy from those specific to capitalist economy’.<sup>64</sup> This demonstrates that Rubín regarded the theories of value and money as theories analysing ‘relations between people as autonomous commodity producers’, whereas the theory of surplus-value was a tool for analysis of ‘the relation between capitalists and workers’.<sup>65</sup>

The fundamental tenets of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, as specified by Elbe, the ‘history writer of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*’, contradict Rubín’s point of departure. Elbe, Backhaus, and Reichelt have insisted that, as Marx speaks about commodities and money, these determinations are valid exclusively for commodities and money as forms of existence of capital.<sup>66</sup> Proponents of *Neue Marx-Lektüre* thinking have directed a large proportion of their energies toward arguing against Rubín’s position that ‘the capitalist economy ... arose historically from the simple commodity economy’.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Rubín 2018a, p. 555.

<sup>62</sup> Rubín 2018d, p. 788.

<sup>63</sup> Rubín 2018d, p. 795.

<sup>64</sup> Rubín 2018b, p. 462.

<sup>65</sup> Rubín 2018a, p. 575.

<sup>66</sup> Elbe 2010, pp. 21, 85; Backhaus 1997, p. 23; Reichelt 1974, p. 131.

<sup>67</sup> Rubín 2018d, p. 789; Brentel 1989, pp. 138ff.; Backhaus 1997, p. 70; Elbe 2010, pp. 21, 87; Hoff 2017, pp. 318–9.

What unites Rubín and the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, however, is their focus on the first few chapters of the first volume of *Capital*. In Rubín's case, with respect to both *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* and *Essays on Marx's Theory of Money*, this focus might be related to the fact that Rubín translated *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* into Russian. The two 'Essays' volumes reflect the first three chapters of *Capital*, and the two main chapters of the 'Contribution', in Rubín's words, constitute 'the first published version of the thoughts that later became the contents of chapters 1–3 of the first volume of *Capital*'.<sup>68</sup>

An earlier version of the first chapter of the first volume of *Capital*, dealing with analysis of the commodity, reached general awareness in West Germany only after the republication of the first chapter of the first edition of *Capital* (from 1867), in 1966.<sup>69</sup> This text inspired Backhaus and others to compare the four published versions of Marx's analysis of the value-form (specifically the ones in his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in the first edition of *Capital* (1867), in its appendix, and in the second edition of *Capital* (1873)).<sup>70</sup>

When preparing his translation of *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Rubín had similarly analysed the development of Marx's analysis of the commodity from this early publication through various versions of the first volume of *Capital*.<sup>71</sup> The adherents to the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, have not, to my knowledge, discussed this Rubín's text first published in English in 2018.

This common interest aside, the way in which Rubín understood the development of the value-form sharply contradicts the fundamental principles of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*. For Rubín, analysing the value-form demonstrates money's emergence as a 'result of a gradual expansion and growing complexity of exchange'.<sup>72</sup> The first form of value (singular, or accidental) corresponds to a situation in which primitive communist communities accidentally exchange products not originally produced for exchange.<sup>73</sup> The expanded form of value reflects expanding exchange relations. Using the exchange relations between slaves and cotton of 'the Darfurs of Central Africa' as an example, Rubín explained how equivalence relations between certain types of commodities begin to stabilise, with each product obtaining various

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<sup>68</sup> Rubín 2018c, p. 586.

<sup>69</sup> Fetscher 1966.

<sup>70</sup> See Backhaus (1997, p. 42).

<sup>71</sup> Rubín 2018c.

<sup>72</sup> Rubín 2018e, pp. 658–9.

<sup>73</sup> Rubín 2018e, pp. 659–60.



equivalence relations with other types of products.<sup>74</sup> Only regularisation of exchange and stabilisation of several exchange relations brings about the general equivalent (referred to by Marx as the general form of value), which regularly expresses the value of all other commodities.<sup>75</sup> The social form of the general equivalent has been embodied in various commodities historically but most commonly in metals; in ‘Babylon ... precious metals first took the role of money’.<sup>76</sup>

Resolute rejection of such a ‘genetic’ exposition of the value-form analysis is decisive for the identity of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*.<sup>77</sup> The school has vigorously defended its claim that Marx’s analysis of the value-form depicts a ‘conceptual unfolding of the necessary connection between commodity and money’, as Elbe stated when paraphrasing Reichelt’s perspective.<sup>78</sup> Rubín, on the contrary, explained that Marx’s teaching ‘concerning the genesis of money must, in the first place explain the **historical** process of the emergence of money from the commodity ... and secondly ... disclose the laws of the **simultaneous** and mutually conditioned movement of commodities and money in the developed capitalist economy’.<sup>79</sup>

Comprehensive analysis of the differences between the substance of Rubín’s and *Neue Marx-Lektüre* thought remains to be put to paper. As more of Rubín’s texts get translated into German and other major European languages, comparisons of some facets are likely to emerge, though. For instance, the German edition of Rubín’s *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value* excluded the chapter on Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism, and it was translated into German from the original Russian only decades later, in 2010 by Devi Dumbadze.<sup>80</sup>

Why is there such a gap between the self-image of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* and its actual practice? In the Cold War years, substantial engagement with Rubín’s ideas was difficult for West German scholars, on account of limited access to the relevant sources. It is likely that some followers of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* have later on portrayed Rubín’s work as presaging their own reading of Marx partly for reason of their political sympathies: even in the darkest years under the shadow of Stalinism,

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<sup>74</sup> Rubín 2018e, p. 660.

<sup>75</sup> Rubín 2018e, pp. 659ff.

<sup>76</sup> Rubín 2018e, p. 663.

<sup>77</sup> See, for instance, Elbe (2010, pp. 90ff.).

<sup>78</sup> ‘Begriffliche Entfaltung des bestehenden notwendigen Zusammenhangs zwischen Ware und Geld’, in the words of Elbe (2010, p. 84); see also Reichelt (1974, p. 139). Translation mine.

<sup>79</sup> Rubín 2018d, p. 767 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>80</sup> Rubín 2010.

Rubin remained unflinching in approaching Marx, as any other object of his research, in an analytical and critical manner.

It would be anachronistic to talk about the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* before 1997. Backhaus first used the term in 1997, and only after that did such scholars as Elbe and Hoff start to list the fundamental tenets of this approach (the logical character of the value-form analysis, a tight connection between abstract labour and money, and denying the relevance of the concept of simple commodity-production) and list its representatives (citing mainly Backhaus and Reichelt) and its inspirers, or ‘predecessors’ (Rubin and Pashukanis).<sup>81</sup> It remains to be seen whether the history Elbe and Hoff have offered of this approach withstands critical examination.

### 3. East Germany: Meißner, Širokorad, and Tuchscheerer

In response to the author’s fate in the Soviet Union as ‘a key victim in one of the first political show trials targeting former social democrats (Mensheviks) in 1931’,<sup>82</sup> Rubin’s writings were banned and a taboo subject in Soviet science. His ideas were not openly discussed in the Sovietised East Germany either. This state of affairs was exacerbated by East German scholars’ poor access to the details of Rubin’s life and fate – the documents pertaining to the controversy around his writings in the early Soviet Union ‘belonged to the list of prohibition and were conserved secretly in various archives during the era of [the] ex-Soviet Union’.<sup>83</sup>

Where the GDR’s economic historians did mention him, the comments did not deviate substantially from the official line, formulated by Stalin, who had called for a struggle ‘on two fronts: both against “Rubinism” and against “mechanism”’.<sup>84</sup> The editors of Stalin’s works defined the two as anti-Marxist revisionist trends in political economy. Rubin, a Menshevik, revised Marx’s teaching from an idealist bourgeois standpoint, emasculated its revolutionary content and criminally diverted the attention of economists from the study of questions of Soviet economy and led them into the realm of scholastic disputes and abstractions.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Elbe 2010, p. 29. Elbe admits (on p. 33) that Rubin cannot be listed among the ‘sources’ for the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, because reception of his writings began only in the 1970s.

<sup>82</sup> Boldyrev 2015, p. 364.

<sup>83</sup> Takenaga 2017, p. 161; Vasina and Rokityansky 2018, p. 820.

<sup>84</sup> Stalin 1954, p. 196.

<sup>85</sup> Stalin 1954, p. 392.

The judgement made of ‘Mechanism’ was no less fervid: it ‘distorted Marxism in philosophy and political economy from the vulgar mechanistic standpoint, and was equivalent to denying materialist dialectics and replacing it by the bourgeois theory of equilibrium’.<sup>86</sup>

Textbook presentations of Rubin, even after de-Stalinisation began, followed in this vein of judging both schools to be deviations from orthodoxy. A history of political economy edited by Herbert Meißner and Gertraud Wittenburg is noteworthy for its inclusion, in translation, of an article written by V.E. Manevich,<sup>87</sup> whose ‘brief biographical note in the encyclopedia of “Political Economy”, which had been published in the Soviet Union, provided what Lyudmila Vasina and Yakov Rokityansky have characterised as ‘just about the only mention of Rubin’ in the later Soviet economic literature.<sup>88</sup> Manevich’s presentation in the encyclopaedia article follows standard Stalinist dogma, according to which ‘Rubin led the so-called idealistic tendency in political economy (sometimes called the “Rubin school” in the literature)’.<sup>89</sup>

In the article translated into German, Manevich picks up from the early Soviet discussions of the methodology of political economy. He cites Lenin as an authority against the mechanistic views of Nikolai Bukharin, Alexander Bogdanov, Alexander Kon, Igor Shabs, Isaak Dashkovsky, and Bessonov – all of whom had identified production relations with technical relations and had attempted to reduce economic value to the expenditure of energy in production. Rubin, for his part, championed the view that value is a relation of production established in exchange.<sup>90</sup> While both Rubin and the above-mentioned authors understood value nominally correctly as a production relation, Manevich argued, the mechanists erroneously boiled these production relations back down to technical relations, whereas Rubin argued that said relations were established in the market.

Furthermore, the textbook *Geschichte der politischen Ökonomie des Sozialismus: Grundrisse*, presented the Rubin school as one of the two influential schools of the 1920s. Echoing the prevailing Stalinist dogma and the aggressive tone permeating it, the author of the chapter in question, Leonid Širokorad, passed judgement on both the mechanist and the idealist school: Both Rubin and his critics identified the forces of

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Manevitch 1975.

<sup>88</sup> Vasina and Rokityansky 2018, p. 820. The ‘just about’ is noteworthy, in indicating that there were other sources.

<sup>89</sup> Vasina and Rokityansky 2018, p. 821.

<sup>90</sup> Manevitch 1975, p. 144.

production with technology and tended to forget that the human being ultimately is the most important force of production.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, in this argument the Rubin school excluded the productive forces from the research object of political economy, while the mechanists included these forces, falsely identified with technology, as part of the science's research object. This chapter described the Rubin school as reducing production relations to exchange relations, which that school erroneously treated as 'immaterial' on account of its incapability of differentiating between two fundamentally distinct meanings of 'material'.<sup>92</sup> After all, in German, it makes perfect sense to characterise production relations as material (*materiell*) yet not 'stuff-like'.<sup>93</sup>

The same author wrote likewise in *Die politische Ökonomie des Sozialismus in der UdSSR während der Übergangsperiode: Methodologische Probleme* (1977). Here, Širokorad criticised Rubin for excluding the forces of production from the research object of political economy and noted that the latter, in so doing, had followed Karl Kautsky, Hilferding, Bucharin, and Rosa Luxemburg but taken the idea further.<sup>94</sup> Širokorad suggested that the reason Rubin did so lay in erroneously identifying the relations of production with exchange relations (relations of wills) and falsely equating the productive forces with their natural form.<sup>95</sup> Although the forces of production do belong to the field's research object, Širokorad stated, they should not be identified with technology; political economy is interested not in material or technical properties of the means of production, or physical features of various types of labour power, but in their role and function in the social process of production.<sup>96</sup>

Even though the textbook presentations display faithfulness to the official doctrine, it would be disingenuous to assume that the scientists behind them submitted to Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy with no independence of mind. In considering the research on Marx and Marxist theory in the Eastern bloc, it is important to factor in the historically unique, nearly paradoxical conditions under which these scholars worked. On one hand, the Marxist-Leninist party granted generous resources for research into Marxist theory, yet simultaneously it directly meddled in the research significantly, thereby seriously impeding it.

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<sup>91</sup> Trifonow and Schirokorad 1973, p. 47.

<sup>92</sup> Trifonow and Schirokorad 1973, p. 46.

<sup>93</sup> The translation for the notion of *stofflich* comes from Haug (2017, p. 70).

<sup>94</sup> Širokorad 1977, p. 62.

<sup>95</sup> Širokorad 1977, p. 61.

<sup>96</sup> Širokorad 1977, p. 63. Braun and Dittmann (1978, pp. 170–1) reserved a couple of pages of their book review published in the country's most prominent economics journal, *Wirtschaftswissenschaft*, for a summary of the Rubin debate discussed in the book.

It takes little ‘reading between the lines’ to see that the East German literature on Marx and Marxism offers many valuable contributions that extend far beyond Marxist-Leninist ideology. These usually were penned cautiously enough to avoid outright conflict with the ideologues.

As Rolf Hecker (2012) has stressed, Walter Tuchscheerer (1929–67) listed Rubín’s works in the bibliography of his important book *Bevor „Das Kapital“ entstand: Die Entstehung der ökonomischen Theorie von Karl Marx*, which was an extended version of his dissertation, edited by his wife Gerda Tuchscheerer for publication a year after his death. Before dying, at age 38, Tuchscheerer had studied economics in Moscow and, in the words of Adorno’s student Ernst-Theodor Mohl, amassed a ‘stupendous knowledge of Soviet Marx scholarship’.<sup>97</sup>

The bibliography of Tuchscheerer’s book is divided into two sections. Rubín’s two well-known works are listed in the first portion, which covers the literature cited in the dissertation that was an earlier version of the book.<sup>98</sup> In the second part, listing the sources the author had used in preparing the manuscript for the present monograph, one finds six works by Rubín.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, Tuchscheerer listed several contributions to the debates centred on Rubín’s works in the 1920s Soviet Union.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Mohl 2008, p. 194.

<sup>98</sup> I. Rubín, ‘Abstraktny trud I stoimost w systeme Marksa’ in *Pod Snamenem Marksizma*, Moscow 1927, Book 6, and *Otscherki po teorii stoimosti Marksa*, Moscow–Leningrad, 1929.

<sup>99</sup> *Otscherki po teorii stoimosti Marksa*, 2-oje isdanije, Moskwa 1924; *Sovremenneye ekonomisti na sapade*, Moscow 1927; Problema obščestvennogo truda w ekonomitscheskoi sisteme Marksa, Moscow–Leningrad 1928; Abstraktny trud i stoimost w sisteme Marksa, Moscow 1928; Protiv wulgraiszii marksizma, in: *Problemy Ekonomiki*, Moscow 1929, Nr. 3, 4, 5; Rubín I./Bessonow, S. u.a. Dialektitscheskoje raswitiye kategori w ekonomitscheskoi sisteme Marksa, in: *Problemy Ekonomiki*, Moscow 1929, N. 4–5.

<sup>100</sup> Including at least the following ones: Abesgaus, G./Dukor, G./Mejerson, D; Rubinstschina ili marksizm (Sbornik statei pod redakzijei S. Bessonowa i A. Kona) – Rez., in: *Problemy Ekonomiki*, Moscow 1930, Nr. 1; Bessonow, S.A. Protiv wycholastshiwanija marksizma (K 3-mu isdaniju “Otscherkow” Rubina), in: *Problemy Ekonomiki*, Moskwa 1929, Nr. 1, 2; Bessonow, S./Kon, A., u.a. Rubinstschina ili marksizm?, Moskwa–Leningrad 1930; Brudny, M. Krititscheskije sametki (Protiv tolkowanija I. Rubina teorii stoimosti Marksa), in: *Westnik Kommunistitscheskoi Akademii*, 1927, kniga XXI. Daschkowski, I. Abstraktny trud i ekonomitscheskije kategorii Marksa, in: *Pod Snamenem Marksizma*, Moscow 1926, Nr. 6, 196–219; G. Dukor/Notkin A., Kak nelsja borotsja “protiv mehanitscheskich tendenzi w polititscheskoi ekonomii. In: *Bolschewik*, 1929, Nr. 18; Gurwitsch, E. K kritike osnovnykh metodologitscheskich polosheni konceptzii I. Rubina, in: *Problemy Ekonomiki*, 1929, Nr. 7–8; Leontjew, L.A. Kak menschewik Rubín poddelywal Marksa, in: *Bolschewik*, 1932, Nr. 7; Malkis, A. Rubinstschina jestscho shiwa, in: *Problemy Marksizma*, 1931, Nr. 2.; Reichardt, W. Protiv primirentscheskogo odnoschenija k rubinstschine, in: *Problemy Marksizma*, 1931, Nr. 2; Sagaki, A. Zena proiswodstwa kak proiswodstwennoje odnoschenije (K kritike metodologii I.I. Rubina), in: *Pod Snamenem marksizma*, Moscow 1927, Nr. 12; Saiguschkin, M. Abstraktny trud kak materialistscheskaja kategorija, in: *Problemy Ekonomiki*, Moskwa 1929, Nr. 4–5; Schabs, S. Problema obščestvennogo truda w ekonomitscheskoi sisteme Marksa. Kritika „Otscherkow po teorii stoimosti Marksa“ I. Rubina, Moscow–Leningrad 1928; Wosnessenski, A. A. K woprosu o ponimanii kategorii abstraktnogo truda, in: *Pod Snamenem Marksizma*, Moscow 1925, Nr. 10–11; Wosnessenski, A. A. Protiv idealistscheskich i mehanitscheskich schatani w polititscheskoi ekonomii, in: *Problemy Marksizma*, 1931, Nr. 3.

As Hecker has stated from his standpoint as an East German MEGA researcher, the GDR reader, thereby, obtained quite a bit of information on the prior literature.<sup>101</sup> Hecker explained that Tuchscheerer had photocopied Rubin's writings in Moscow and brought the copies to the institute of Marxism-Leninism of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party in East Berlin, where these materials then were treated as if they were 'contraband goods'.<sup>102</sup> This does not mean that the materials were of no interest to the researchers there; Tuchscheerer's widow specifically mentioned to Hecker that they might be of use to the compilers of a forthcoming MEGA volume.<sup>103</sup>

With so few other East German authors ever having referred to Rubin's writings, what accounts for the number of mentions of Rubin in Tuchscheerer's book? Hecker speculated that the copy editor for Akademie Verlag, the publisher for the German Academy of Sciences in Berlin, did not read the manuscript carefully enough to censor the work.<sup>104</sup>

Whether or not the references to Rubin were in the bibliography 'by accident', the book was certainly appreciated even by the ideologically hegemonic institutions of the GDR, such as the Academy of Sciences, and the organ of the Socialist Unity Party, *Neues Deutschland*. On 6 March 1968, the latter listed it as recommended reading for the 150th anniversary of Marx's birth, and a salesman for Akademie Verlag sold a licence to a West German publisher, who printed Tuchscheerer's work nearly simultaneously.<sup>105</sup> Fred Oelßner (1903–77), a member of the Academy of Sciences and formerly a powerful Communist politician – certainly a trustworthy guardian of the official ideology – wrote in the draft preface to the Japanese edition that Tuchscheerer's work was 'one of the most important contributions in Europe to ... historical development of the economic theory of Karl Marx – if not the single most important one'.<sup>106</sup> He went on to quote a West German book-review describing the work as 'the best that has appeared in the GDR in the field of economic-history',

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<sup>101</sup> Hecker, personal communication from July 2021.

<sup>102</sup> Hecker 2012, p. 9.

<sup>103</sup> Hecker 2012, p. 6.

<sup>104</sup> Hecker 2012, p. 9.

<sup>105</sup> BBAW.

<sup>106</sup> In the original: 'Das Werk von Walter Tuchscheerer ... ist einer der bedeutendsten – wenn nicht überhaupt der bedeutendste – Beiträge der in Europa zur geschichtlichen Entwicklung der ökonomischen Theorie von Karl Marx erschienen ist', BBAW, Akademie Verlag, no. 2571 (translation mine).

one that ‘must reclaim a central place in Marx-Engels-scholarship’.<sup>107</sup> Oelßner proudly mentioned the Spanish, Italian, and Japanese editions of the book.

The fact that Tuchscheerer went to the effort of photocopying Rubin’s writings might indicate that he had a special interest in them. The two men apparently shared some common interests. Both gave special focus to Marx’s theory of value. Just as Rubin had, Tuchscheerer dedicated an entire book to the theory of value: the above-mentioned *Bevor „Das Kapital“ entstand: Die Entstehung der ökonomischen Theorie von Karl Marx* traces the development of Marx’s understanding of the law of value from 1843 until 1858. To justify the choice of this research subject, Tuchscheerer explained that the theory of value was the most fundamental and central problem of Marx’s critique of political economy. It formed the nexus for dealing with all the subsequent problems.<sup>108</sup>

It was important to engage with the theory of value, given that not only did bourgeois economists question it but also no consensus existed among the GDR’s Marxian economists on the nature of the substance of value, abstract labour, or on the possibility of its quantification.<sup>109</sup> For an example of an erroneous understanding of the term, Tuchscheerer referred to Ottmar Lendle’s (1958) ‘physiological’ definition for the concept of abstract labour (this position is in some respects reminiscent of that of Rubin’s mechanist rivals Kon, Shabs, and Dashkovskij in the 1920s).<sup>110</sup>

Tuchscheerer’s position was not uncommon. As I have previously shown, it is hardly true that the orthodox Marxist-Leninist position on the question of abstract labour and on the possibility of quantifying labour-value amounts would have been the ‘substantialist’ or ‘naturalist’ one (the camp of Rubin’s critics) as some authors have recently suggested.<sup>111</sup> On the contrary, Tuchscheerer’s and, I would argue, even Rubin’s stance comes close to what was the mainstream view in the GDR. Economists in that milieu quite often argued that abstract labour, which forms the substance of all value, is not a measurable quantity of labour time, let alone ‘an expenditure of human labour power’ but, rather, a social relation that is constituted in the market.<sup>112</sup> It was typical for not only prominent economists but also political-

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<sup>107</sup> ‘Das Werk ... ist ... das beste, was in der DDR auf ökonomisch-historischem Gebiet vorgelegt wurde, in der Marx-Engels-Forschung darf es einen wesentlichen Platz beanspruchen’, (ABBAW, Akademie Verlag, no. 2571), (translation mine).

<sup>108</sup> Tuchscheerer 1968, p. 21.

<sup>109</sup> Tuchscheerer 1968, p. 22.

<sup>110</sup> See Rauhala 2021

<sup>111</sup> Rauhala 2021. See, for instance, Heinrich 2012, pp. 49, 54; Elbe 2013.

<sup>112</sup> Rauhala 2021, p. 52.

economy textbooks of political economy to deem the quantification of abstract labour impossible.<sup>113</sup>

Some East German readers of *Capital* challenged this popular view by claiming that value, expressed in terms of money, is grounded in labour time, and that labour time itself is measurable and indeed measured.<sup>114</sup> For these authors, the core problem was not the quantification of abstract labour but how to understand the relationship between the labour power expended (that is, abstract labour) and the value this labour adds to the value of the final product.

It is telling that Oelßner, who wrote the preface to Tuchscheerer's book, hoped that said volume would help to 'overcome for good the incorrect conceptions of important categories, such as abstract labour as simple physical expenditure of human labour power, with no regard for its social determinateness'.<sup>115</sup> It could be said that Oelßner himself was a prominent proponent of the 'monetary interpretation' of Marx's theory of value. He was critical of any attempt to estimate labour values by quantifying labour times.<sup>116</sup>

Even though Oelßner *de facto* positioned himself closer to the 'Rubinian' camp and against his vulgar-materialist opponents, some 35 years earlier he had attacked Rubin for presenting 'the theory of value and price of social fascism'.<sup>117</sup> It seems that, notwithstanding substantial agreement on the most central theoretical questions, denouncing Rubin was obligatory for ideological reasons.

A second interest shared between Tuchscheerer and Rubin is evident. Just as Rubin saw a 'deep and inseparable connection between the Marxist theory of value and ... his theory of commodity fetishism', Tuchscheerer found the theories of commodity fetishism and money fetishism to be 'an irreducible part of Marx's theory of value' and even that these 'could be understood, in a certain sense, as the key to Marx's theory of value'.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Zagolow 1972, p. 263.

<sup>114</sup> Schilar 1961; Lendle 1961a and 1961b; Rudolph 1960; see also Kosolapov 1979, p. 177.

<sup>115</sup> In the original: 'Sie wird dazu beitragen, die z.T. auch heute noch vorhandenen falschen Auffassungen wichtiger Kategorien, wie z. B. der abstrakten Arbeit als einfache physische Verausgabung von menschlicher Arbeitskraft ungeachtet ihrer gesellschaftlichen Bedingtheit, endgültig zu Überwinden', per Oelßner (1968, p. 8) (translation mine).

<sup>116</sup> Oelßner 1967, p. 12 ff.

<sup>117</sup> Oelßner 1932.

<sup>118</sup> Tuchscheerer 1968: 'Theorie des Waren- und Geld-fetischismus ... ist ein untrennbarer Bestandteil der Marxschen Werttheorie und kann in gewissem Sinne als der Schlüssel zur Marxschen Werttheorie aufgefasst werden' (p. 373) (translation mine). Rubin 2018a, p. 562. See also Rubin 1990, p. 72.



With the preface, Oelßner expressed doubts as to the validity of connecting the value theory and the theory of fetishism as intimately as Tuchscheerer did. Oelßner pointed to one criticism that had been levelled at the dissertation precursor to Tuchscheerer's book:

Tuchscheerer had, in some parts of his dissertation, somewhat overemphasised the quantitative determination of value via the socially necessary labour time, as contrasted against the qualitative side of value, the understanding of value as social relation, as a reference of the labour of an individual to the total social labour. ... At these points, the author does not express clearly enough that Marx discovered the qualitative side, the substance of value in the abstract social labour, whereas Ricardo – as we know – understood value only quantitatively. This has led the author to present a dubious thesis that the theory of commodity and of money fetishism could 'in a certain sense be understood as a key to Marx's theory of value'.<sup>119</sup>

Oelßner stressed that Tuchscheerer, while having admitted when defending his dissertation that he might have accentuated the quantitative determination of value too much, had not acknowledged giving excessive emphasis to the theories of commodity and money fetishism. Oelßner explained that for Tuchscheerer, the theory of fetishism was intimately connected with the theory of value in that Marx came to accept the labour theory of value only after having realised that the relations of production that underlie the categories of commodity-production must be analysed, with Marx's theory of fetishism summarising the ensuing analysis of the relations of production.<sup>120</sup>

It is easy to imagine why articulating a connection between Marx's theory of value and his theories of commodity fetishism and money fetishism might have aroused objections in East Germany. Economists in the GDR routinely discussed the law of value and its various forms of manifestation in alternative price systems within state

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<sup>119</sup> In the original, Oelßner wrote (1968, p. 15): 'So wurde beispielsweise bemängelt, dass ... Tuchscheerer in einzelnen Partien seiner Dissertation die quantitative Wertbestimmung durch die gesellschaftlich notwendige Arbeitszeit etwas überbewertet gegenüber der qualitativen Seite, der Auffassung des Wertes als gesellschaftliches Verhältnis, als Bezug der Arbeit des einzelnen zur gesellschaftlichen Gesamtarbeit (siehe Seite 279, wie auch die Seiten 351–357). Es kommt an diesen Stellen nicht genügend zum Ausdruck, daß Marx gerade die qualitative Seite, die Werts substanz in der abstrakt gesellschaftlichen Arbeit, entdeckte, während Ricardo bekanntlich den Wert nur quantitativ auffaßte. Dies hat den Autor wohl auch zu der zweifelhaften These verleitet, die Theorie des Waren- und Geldfetischismus könne „in gewissem Sinne als der Schlüssel zur Marxschen Werttheorie aufgefaßt werden (Siehe S. p. 373)'. Translation mine.

<sup>120</sup> 'Jedoch konnte er nicht zustimmen, den Fetischcharakter der Ware überschätzt zu haben, weil, wie er schreibt, er dies in historischem Sinne auffaßt, „derart, dass Marx über die allgemeine Analyse der Produktionsverhältnisse in der Warenproduktion, wie sie in der Theorie vom Fetischcharakter der Ware in reifer Form zusammengefaßt ist, zur Anerkennung der Arbeitswerttheorie gelangte“, per Oelßner (1968, p. 16).

socialism while showing little concern about commodity or money fetishism. From the perspective of West German Marxian scholarship, as Mohl explained, Tuchscheerer, on the contrary, ‘avoids’ such ‘economistic foreshortening characteristic of previous discussion in the East, highlighting, instead, in an admirable chapter entitled “Aufdeckung des Fetischcharakters” [“The Discovery of Fetishism”], the qualitative, socially critical aspects of Marx’s doctrine of value’.<sup>121</sup>

The wealth of those societies in which the state monopolistic socialist mode of production prevailed, presented itself largely as accumulation of commodities (albeit not an ‘immense’ accumulation).<sup>122</sup> In the Eastern bloc, a large proportion of the social labour was done privately in companies, getting socialised only through the sale of its products. The social production relation of the producers still appeared in a reified form of money. The official explanation was that these societies might still display, as remnants of the social relations of a bourgeois society, some vestigial alienation and fetishisation.<sup>123</sup>

The question of fetishism prompted uneasiness already in the early 1920s. Bessonov claimed that, in Rubin’s account, in both Soviet society and the West, ‘relations between people are enveloped in reification’.<sup>124</sup> He opined that Rubin did not make it sufficiently clear that, however much things all appear within the same ‘social form’ of money across every form of the commodity economy (simple, capitalist, and socialist commodity-production), the forms manifested are expressions of different production relations.<sup>125</sup>

The fact that Tuchscheerer listed the articles in the constellation around the debates linked to Rubin opens an interesting perspective on the reception of the latter’s ideas in both German states. On one hand, Tuchscheerer (and other East German scholars who read Russian and studied or worked in the Soviet Union) had access to materials completely unknown to most West German scholars. Despite the scanty textual evidence as to the reception of Rubin’s ideas in the GDR, East German scholars were generally aware of the early Soviet debates, as Hecker pointed out in his capacity as MEGA editor and scholar of Marx. These always played a role in

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<sup>121</sup> Tuchscheerer 1968, pp. 369–81; Mohl 2008, p. 194.

<sup>122</sup> On state monopolistic socialism, see Behrens 1992.

<sup>123</sup> See Rosenthal 1973, pp. 288ff.

<sup>124</sup> Rubin 2018d, p. 747.

<sup>125</sup> Rubin and Bessonow 1975, p. 71.

discussion within East German academia,<sup>126</sup> though some important discourse in the GDR remained confined to small circles and was never committed to paper.

Another noteworthy factor here is the lack of a language barrier between the two states. As Hecker and fellow MEGA editor and researcher Ehrenfried Galander have explained, at least the East German MEGA editors keenly followed Marxist research in West Germany.<sup>127</sup> The researchers with the MEGA-specific research group (Marx-Engels-Forschungsgruppe) at the Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg had access to the West German publications of Rubin's writings in addition to literature commenting on them.<sup>128</sup> The translations of Rubin's texts were available nearly simultaneously to these East German researchers and their West German counterparts.<sup>129</sup>

All these relativising perspectives notwithstanding, Rubin's writings remained a taboo subject in East German scholarship. Only after the fall of the Berlin Wall did MEGA editors, Hecker and others, begin to engage overtly with his thinking.<sup>130</sup>

## 4. Differences and commonalities between East and West Germany

My analysis revealed a clear gap between words and deeds on both sides of the Berlin Wall. The Western scholars later classed as followers of the so-called *Neue Marx-Lektüre* did not discuss Rubin's writings to any considerable extent in the Cold War era. Moreover, profound theoretical disagreements between Rubin and that school are evident, yet its adherents today admire Rubin as a predecessor. The contradiction displayed by East German scholars runs in the opposite direction: while they made, at best, highly negative remarks about Rubin, his ideas may not have been very far from their own in actual substance. These discrepancies can be explained in light of the Cold War atmosphere, which constrained and otherwise conditioned the work of scholars on both sides of the Berlin Wall.

A conference held in Frankfurt am Main in autumn 1967 for the centenary of *Capital* illustrates the Cold War's influence in the sphere of ideology well. It provided a rare and quite possibly unique occasion for East and West German readers of *Capital* to

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<sup>126</sup> Hecker, per e-mail 19.7. 2021.

<sup>127</sup> Interview with Hecker in July 2015; personal e-mail from Galander 11.12. 2017.

<sup>128</sup> Galander, per e-mail 12.7. 2021.

<sup>129</sup> See Lietz 1981, p. 92.

<sup>130</sup> Hecker (2012) provided a German-language translation of *Essays on Marx's Theory of Money*.

meet each other and engage in discussion. A delegation of six prominent political economists from the GDR participated. For a paper submitted to the conference without the author being able to present it in person, Rosdolsky referred to Rubin as one of the last representatives of creative engagement with Marx's theory in the early Soviet Union.

The short-lived *blossoming of the Soviet economy in the 1920s* meant a radical break with the neglect of Marx's economic method. Of particular significance in this regard were the outstanding contributions of *E. Preobrazhensky* as well as the methodological investigations of *I.I. Rubin* and his school. Nevertheless, this promising development was cruelly interrupted a decade later, and what followed was for social and political reasons, which we need not describe, so crude and mindless, that the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s can now be described as a dead and barren time for Marxist economic theory.<sup>131</sup>

*Frankfurter Allgemeinen* summarised Rosdolsky's talk thus for its West German readers:

Without refutation by any of the conference participants, Rosdolsky could also point out that the past forty years had not been fruitful for the development of Marxist critique of political economy. Regrettably, the communist scientists present at the conference did not take up his reference to the interesting Rubin school in the first years following the October Revolution.<sup>132</sup>

It is, of course, no accident that the West German press chose to pick up on this single mention of Rubin from the three-day conference. *Frankfurter Allgemeinen* did not miss the opportunity to write about comments that could cast doubt on the credibility of East Germany's social and economic system. It reported on how Austrian economist Theodor Prager 'received enthusiastic applause' as he criticised the inhumanity of the non-socialist doctrine of primacy for increases in productivity; how Belgian Trotskyist economist Ernest Mandel challenged East German economists for their uncritical application of the law of value within the state socialist

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<sup>131</sup> Rosdolsky 1974b, p. 64, emphasis in original, also 1968, p. 11.

<sup>132</sup> 'Ohne von irgendeinem der Tagungsteilnehmer widerlegt zu werden, konnte Rosdolsky aber auch konstatieren daß die letzten vierzig Jahre für die Entwicklung der marxistischen Kritik der politischen Ökonomie nicht eben fruchtbar gewesen sind, Sein Hinweis auf die interessante Rubin-Schule in den ersten Jahren nach der Oktoberrevolution wurde leider von den anwesenden kommunistischen Wissenschaftlern nicht aufgegriffen' was the original wording of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, of 27th September 1967 (translation mine).

economy; and on the most prominent East German economist, Fritz Behrens, openly questioning his country's model of a centrally planned economy.<sup>133</sup>

Apparently, the Communist Party of East Germany attempted to preclude such humiliating reports in the main newspaper of its neighbouring state by controlling East German scholars' public appearances in the West. Even though the reception of Rubin's ideas in Germany, for these reasons and others, remained highly politicised and polarised until the end of the Cold War, the reception of Rubin's ideas **internal** to **both** German states dismissed one crucial aspect of his work. Since 1979, those conversant with the English language could access Rubin's incredibly well-written and insightful *History of Economic Thought* (1926), which had served as the most important textbook for the early Soviet Union's courses on the history of economic thought, with a new edition being published each year from 1928 until 1930.<sup>134</sup>

Why is it important? The book chronicles the main theories in the field of political economy, beginning the story with mercantilism. It proceeds to discuss physiocracy and the classical school, goes through the degeneration of the Ricardian school, and then contends with the vulgarisation of bourgeois economics in the hands of such figures as Frédéric Bastiat and Henry Carey. Thus, Rubin contextualised the emergence and formation of the most important theories of political economy. He explicated the importance of earlier theories by connecting them to the stage of development of the modern capitalist mode of production in each country. He made sense of mercantilist ideas in the context of early commercial capitalism before England gained hegemony in the world market, and he considered physiocratic ideas in the context of a France in dire need of modernisation, before revolution. Likewise, the book explains how the classical school, first and foremost David Ricardo, articulated the economic interests of the industrial capitalist class while, on the other hand, theoretically formulating and grounding the (highly explosive idea of) antagonistic class interests between wage labourers and the bourgeoisie. Rubin explained how rejection of this idea created the impulse for degeneration of the Ricardian school and of classical political economy.<sup>135</sup> While Germany knew Rubin the controversial interpreter of Marx's value theory, Rubin 'the most prominent and influential Soviet specialist in the history of economic thought of the 1920s' did not

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Vasina and Rokityansky 2018, p. 833.

<sup>135</sup> Rubin 1979, p. 365.

receive the attention he deserved on either side of the Berlin Wall.<sup>136</sup> After all, a vast proportion of Rubin's 93 published works deals with nothing less than the rich and complex history of political economy.<sup>137</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

The translation of a couple of Rubin's works into German in the West afforded recent representations of him – by Hoff and Elbe, among others – as a predecessor to the West German *Neue Marx-Lektüre*.<sup>138</sup> My analysis of the reception of Rubin's thought in East and West Germany, however, revealed that his ideas have not been as well-known or by any means as thoroughly discussed among members of that school as these declarations imply. It is still possible to insist that Rubin anticipated the ideas of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, since the latter need not have been intimately familiar with the ideas of any predecessor; however, a problem remains: a couple of substantial differences between Rubin's reading of *Capital* and that of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* that relativise the claim of Rubin being a predecessor of the latter. The disagreement coalesces around such crucial matters as the functioning and the scope of the law of value: is it a law exclusively valid for those markets dominated by modern industrial capital, or is it a general law pertaining to all forms of commodity-production? The two disagree also on the nature of Marx's analysis of the value-form. Does Marx 'logically' or 'conceptually' unpack the commodity form? Or does he trace the genesis of money alongside the generalisation and regularisation of commodity exchange?

In the East, researchers of Marx's ideas and Marxist theory, at least the editors of MEGA and the historians of political economy, knew Rubin – from the textbooks on that history if nothing else – but did not expressly discuss his ideas. While Marxist-Leninist political-economy dogma officially rejected Rubin's interpretation of Marx's economic theory, I contend that, in their substance, many textbooks that followed and many prominent trusted guardians of Marxist-Leninist ideology demonstrated agreement with Rubin on the central questions of value theory. Principally, abstract labour is not a measurable quantity of expended human labour power; rather, the substance of value is a social relation constituted in exchange.

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<sup>136</sup> Shirokorad and Zweynert 2012, p. 659.

<sup>137</sup> Hecker 2012, p. 6.

<sup>138</sup> Hoff 2017, p. 15; Elbe 2010, p. 29.

The reception of Rubin's ideas in the divided Germany was always coloured by the fact that the man behind them had been executed in Stalin's purges. For the East Germans, this made his writings' existence, in Moscow and in photocopied form at the GDR's party institute, an awkward fact. For the West Germans, especially those critical of Soviet communism, Rubin's personal destiny probably increased the attractiveness of his writings. Those who criticised the instrumentalisation of Marx's ideas in the official state ideology of the Eastern bloc's Marxism-Leninism apparently perceived Rubin as their early heroic predecessor, even though very few of his writings were accessible to the majority of these researchers.

For a scholar to be able to read Rubin today in an unprejudiced and historically informed way, it is useful to reflect on how the substantial and contextual considerations intertwine in the intellectual history of Marxism, and on how this history still affects our judgements.

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