DISCOVERING DAS KAPITAL

BY ISAAC DEUTSCHER

The conditions in which a young Polish intellectual studied *Das Kapital* in the 1920's or 1930's were very different from those prevailing in most countries in the West. To us the Marxist forecast of the collapse of capitalism was not an apocalyptic vision related only remotely to the realities of our daily life. The old social order was crumbling before our very eyes. This was the overwhelming fact of our existence. We could not escape it. My own childhood and adolescence was shaken by it again and again. I grew up in Cracow and in a little town half-way between Cracow and Auschwitz, on a tip of land wedged between the frontiers of three empires. As a boy of ten and eleven I watched the downfall of the dynasties of the Romanovs, Habsburgs, and Hohenzollerns. Overnight there vanished the ancient powers, sanctities, and fetishes that had held our people in awe for many generations. We felt the hot breath of the Russian Revolution. Then, just across the frontier, the Commune of Budapest flared up and was drowned in blood.

At 13, I absorbed from the adults the tense mood in which they watched the news of the Red Army's advance on Warsaw. For years we lived almost constantly on the brink of civil war, amid galloping inflation, mass unemployment, pogroms, abortive revolution, and futile counter-revolutions. But even before these cataclysms, in the remote and spuriously idyllic pre-1914 era, Marxism had been, in our parts, the accepted ideology of almost the entire labor movement. Our right-wing Social Democrats no less than our Communists still considered *Das Kapital* as the "Bible of the working class," like the old Bible, dusty

This is the text of a talk given last summer on the BBC's *Third Programme*. It is reproduced here by permission. Isaac Deutscher is the author of distinguished biographies of Stalin and Trotsky, and at the time of his death at the age of 60 last August he was working on a biography of Lenin.—The Editors

and unread, but revered. Portraits of Marx and Lassalle stared at us from the wall of every trade union local and socialist youth organization and even of many Zionist clubs. I got my first inkling of historical materialism from older schoolmates; and although my own middle-class and orthodox Jewish upbringing inclined me against it, the shakiness of our social existence made me reluctantly receptive to some of the revolutionary ideas in the air.

I tried to read *Das Kapital* in late adolescence, but did not persevere. It seemed too hard a nut to crack, and I was not really interested in political economy. I had precociously started out as a poet and literary critic, and was in search of a philosophical approach to art. I was therefore interested primarily in the broad lines of the Marxist *Weltanschauung*. Turning away from *Das Kapital*, I tried to grasp these from Marx's and Engels' minor works, and from the writings of Plekhanov, Lenin, Mehring, Bukharin, and others. But their philosophical theories always pointed back to the socio-economic realities underlying the multiple forms of human consciousness.

And so I found myself scanning *Das Kapital* again and swallowing more popular expositions of its economic doctrine. I found these convincing enough, and I felt that they equipped me quite adequately for further literary and philosophical work and for political struggle. It was even with a hint of irritation that I read Marx's warning in one of his prefaces to *Das Kapital* that science knows no straight and broad highway and that "only those have a chance of attaining its clear summits who will not dodge the toil of climbing up its steep pathways." I wondered whether Marx had not made those pathways just a little too steep. Sometimes his dialectical subtleties seemed to me a trifle over-elaborate in an old-fashioned manner, and I wondered just how relevant they were. His exposition seemed to me too slow and leisurely for someone like myself, impatient to understand the world and to change it quickly. I was relieved to hear that Ignacy Daszynski, our famous Member of Parliament, a pioneer of socialism, an orator on whose lips hung the parliaments of Vienna and Warsaw, admitted that he too found *Das Kapital* too hard a nut. "I have not read

it," he almost boasted, "but Karl Kautsky has read it and has written a popular summary of it. I have not read Kautsky either, but Kelles-Krauz, our party theorist, has read him and he summarized Kautsky's book. I have not read Kelles-Krauz either; but the clever Jew, Herman Diamond, our financial expert, has read Kelles-Krauz, and has told me all about it." Unlike the great Daszynski, I had at least read Kautsky and a host of other popularizers.

Meanwhile I had committed myself politically: I had joined the outlawed Communist Party. For years I was busy editing literary journals, writing political commentaries, illegal manifestos and leaflets, addressing workers, organizing even peasants, conducting, as a soldier, underground propaganda in Pilsudski's army, and all the time dodging the *gendarmierie* and the political police. In these circumstances I could not even dream of tackling *Das Kapital* seriously.

The time for that came a few years later, in 1932, when I was expelled from the party as spokesman of an anti-Stalinist opposition. I felt the need to re-examine my own political thinking and the principles of communism and Marxism. I decided to take nothing for granted. Could Stalinist policy and practices be justified in terms of Marxism? Has Marx's analysis and critique of capitalism stood up to the events of our time? These were the questions that troubled me. I made up my mind to plough through the whole of *Das Kapital*, all three volumes of it, and also the many volumed *Theorien über den Mehrwert*, Marx's history of economic doctrines. I was determined to scrutinize this whole intellectual structure coolly and skeptically, keeping my eyes open to its possible flaws and cracks. The *esprit de contradiction* got hold of me; at moments I was almost bent on proving Marx wrong. Perhaps because of this intense involvement or because of my greater intellectual maturity, I did not this time find "the steep pathways" at all forbidding.

In the next three or four years I read and re-read the great work in its entirety five or six times. I also plunged into the vast economic literature to which Marx referred; studied his bourgeois, academic, and social democratic critics; and acquainted

myself with the varying interpretations and developments of *Das Kapital* offered by Kautsky, Lenin, Hilferding, Luxemburg, Bukharin, and others. I had left my starting point, poetry and aesthetics, far behind, and invested all my intellectual passions in monetary doctrines, the trade cycle, land rent, capital concentration in agriculture, the falling profit rate, the impoverishment of the working class, and other aspects of the dismal science. From explorations of Ricardo, Sismondi, Sombart, Böhm-Bawerk, and the early Keynes, I returned again and again to *Das Kapital* and was ever afresh captivated by the richness of its theoretical and historical texture and the crystal clarity of the analysis. The toil of the uphill climb was transformed into sheer excitement. I shall never forget the thrill with which from the "summit" I then viewed the boundless horizons on society that Marx, I felt, opened to me. No other work has ever impressed me with a comparable force.

But what about those flaws for which I had been on the look-out? Try as I did, I could not detect them. Every time I re-read the opus, I found it more rigorously argued and more convincing than I had thought it to be. I saw where, in the opening chapter, one might dissent from Marx and follow the theorists of marginal utility. That theory, however, failed to satisfy me—I could not accept it as an alternative to Marx's conceptions of value, commodity, and labor. And once I had accepted his premises, I could not help following him all the way through to his conclusions.

I was aware that Marx analyzed capitalism in its "pure form," as the chemist analyzes his elements, whereas in reality capitalism has absorbed and carries within itself the wreckage of all previous social orders. Yet no one underlines this more emphatically than Marx himself, and no one has elucidated the structural complexities of our society with anything approaching his historical realism. It is true that he dealt with laissez-faire and not with later quasi-monopolistic forms of capitalist organization. This, I reflected, did not render his analysis obsolete, for he shows precisely how the monopolistic forms grow out of laissez-faire; and he reveals, as no one else does, the organic connection between these phases of economic development. Even

as early as in *Poverty of Philosophy*, published 20 years before *Das Kapital*, while he argued against Proudhon's idealization of free competition, he demonstrated how free competition tended towards monopoly, its dialectical opposite. Then, in *Das Kapital*, he dramatically extrapolated the process of concentration of capital to describe the "historical tendency of accumulation" leading to the expropriation of many entrepreneurs by ever fewer "magnates of capitalism." Even when, for the sake of argument, he assumed perfect competition, he did it only in order to prove that that competition was necessarily self-destructive. And so I could not (and I still cannot) help being puzzled by those of his academic critics who argue that Marx was unaware of the "imperfect competition" of our time. In truth, all later treatises on monopoly capital, non-Marxist and Marxist, including those by Hilferding and Lenin, are but illustrations of the manner in which economic evolution has on this point confirmed Marx's predictions.

More important still, Marx shows how in relation to the workers, even laissez-faire capitalism was never anything but monopolistic. There never was nor could there be any perfect competition between capital and labor, for even under the most "just" wage system, in conditions of an ideal exchange of equivalents between employer and worker, capital alone is in command of the means of production; and it alone appropriates surplus value. As long as this is so, I concluded, Marx's theory cannot be outdated, no matter how much the secondary features of the social order might be modified.

Even at that time, 30 or 35 years ago, I saw the essence of Marx's theory, not in this or that aspect of his analysis of the trade cycle, or even in his views on the impoverishment, relative or absolute, of the working class, important though these views were politically. Admittedly, he left some issues unresolved and some loose ends. But for me the essence of his analysis lay in what he says about the central contradiction of our social system, the conflict between the socialized process of production and the unsocial character of the control which capitalist ownership exercises over that process. Inherent in this is the worker's estrangement from his own labor, from the products of his labor,

and from the structure of society which his labor perpetuates. Our "welfare state" has on the face of it toned down this estrangement, but only by deepening it: and it has cruelly aggravated the individual worker's alienation from other workers, that is from his own class.

The study of *Das Kapital* not merely confirmed me in my Marxist conviction and in the sense of its incompatibility with the tortoise nature of social democratic reformism; it also revealed to me the full depth of the gulf that lay between classical Marxism and the cynical expedencies, the dull scholasticism, and the inquisitorial methods of Stalinism. Ever since, it has seemed to me as incongruous to blame Marx for Stalin as it would be to blame the Bible and Aristotle for the dogmas of the medieval Church and the Inquisition. It was as a Marxist that I went on opposing Stalinism.

Slowly at first, but then irresistibly, I was entranced by the style of *Das Kapital*. It set what has remained in my eyes the highest standard of reasoning and expression, a standard none of his disciples, not even the greatest, has ever attained. While I realized that it would be unfair to apply this standard to other thinkers and writers, *Das Kapital* seems to have left me with something like a heightened sensitivity to the style of all reasoning on social and political problems. I thought that I could recognize the quality of any socialist or communist statement by its language and form. For a long time it was usually my aesthetic sense that was first offended by any piece of counterfeit or phony Marxism; only after this would I proceed to examine its political, philosophical, or economic content.

Even now it is usually a kind of aesthetic discomfort that first puts me on guard against any pretentious piece of pseudo-Marxist argumentation. I often experience this discomfort when I follow fashionable debates between the meta-Marxists, para-Marxists, Existentialists and Structuralists on subjects such as alienation, the young and the mature Marx, the "humanization" of Marxism, and the categories of dialectical reason.

Reading *Das Kapital*, I realized why its author never bothered to offer his readers a systematic exposition of the principles of dialectics, although occasionally he threatened to do so. He

evidently preferred to apply these principles rather than to expound them; and how right he was. The fact is that attempts to formulate the rules of dialectics usually result in arid scholasticism. Dialectics is indeed the grammar of Marxist thinking. But just as one shows one's mastery of grammar not in reciting its rules, but in living speech, so one shows one's grasp of dialectics not in mulling over its formulae, but in coming to grips with specific, large and vital issues in history and contemporary affairs. No doubt the rules of dialectics have to be learned; a good manual, like a good grammatical textbook, has its uses. But one-sided preoccupation with abstract methodology is often a form of ideological escapism, even if those who indulge in it love to dwell on Praxis and spell Praxis with a capital "p." *Das Kapital* is the supreme example of the dialectical mind in action, of the dialectical mind using all its power of abstraction to plough up layer after layer of empirical social experience.

Marx was, of course, greatly concerned with the problems of his philosophical workshop as well, and with the nature of his intellectual tools, those he had inherited from others and those he himself invented. But the workshop and the tools were not ends in themselves—they were there to process the economic and socio-political raw material and to turn out the finished product.

Last but not least, *Das Kapital* was for me a memorable artistic experience. I realized that like a few other epoch-making discoveries, it was the result not merely of rigorous reasoning and heroic research, but of a creative imagination which had harnessed reasoning and research for one of its tremendous leaps. In science, such leaps have produced new visions of the universe, of the structure of matter, and of the emergence and growth of the species. Copernicus, Newton, Darwin, and Einstein, each of them must have been endowed with an extraordinary capacity of image-making to be able to see the world in a startlingly new shape, perspective, and light, hidden from predecessors and contemporaries. A withdrawn artistic genius lived in each of these giants of science. The same, I think, is true of Marx. For how otherwise would he have been able to

focus his thoughts and ideas into that image of society's past and that vision of its future which have ever since inspired one section of mankind and haunted another?

Marx's artistry is more directly evident in the massive and classically pure architecture of *Das Kapital*, in the force and suppleness of its language, in his grave dramatic pathos, his satire and his imagery. I know that what I am saying may baffle those who have tried to tackle *Das Kapital* in the English translation and have found his prose involved and cumbersome. I once had a similar experience with Shakespeare whom I first read in wretched Polish translations. Only after I had learned English and heard his lines spoken on the English stage did I succumb to the full force of his poetry. *Wer den Dichter will verstehen, muss im Dichters Lande gehen*. Unfortunately, Marx's style and language cannot be easily Anglicized, although the existing translations are far more clumsy and stiff than they need have been.

As to the merits of the original, I would like to recall that Franz Mehring, a fastidious literary critic (and Marx's bitter opponent before he became his follower), devoted a special essay to the poetic quality of Marx's writing. He analyzed the similes and metaphors of *Das Kapital*, underlining their rare combination of imaginative inventiveness and conceptual precision; and he found a parallel for them only in Goethe's metaphors and similes. For a German literary critic this was, of course, the supreme tribute.

One final remark: for over 30 years after I had studied *Das Kapital*, I never went back to it. During all this time I merely glanced at its pages on a few very rare occasions. Recently, I began reading it anew because I had undertaken to write a full-scale study of *Das Kapital*. I have so far gone through the first three chapters, those reputed to be exceptionally involved and abstruse—Marx himself was slightly apologetic about their "abstract and Hegelian" style. I find myself still fascinated by the old familiar pages; but what strikes me about them now, as it never did before, is their essential simplicity.

(World copyright © by Tamara Deutscher)