
This work consists of a series of notebooks written by Marx in the winter of 1857-58, devoted to the analysis of money and of capital, along with a draft of a general introduction. They constitute a first attempt to synthesise the fruits of Marx's study of political economy during the 1840s and 1850s, as well as the basis for his subsequent work, which culminated in Capital.

Marx wrote these notebooks for his own use, not for publication. Apparently even Engels was unaware of their existence. David Ryazanov, the Director of the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow (who was later killed by Stalin) announced their discovery in 1923. It was not until 1939-41 that the Institute published them, in two volumes. However, only three or four copies of this edition reached the outside world and it was not until Dietz Verlag, the East German publishing house, issued a new edition in 1953 that the Grundrisse began to be widely known.

The entry of the Grundrisse into the English-speaking world has been a consequence of the renewed interest in marxism during the 1960s. In 1964, the forty-page section headed 'Forms which precede capitalist production (concerning the process which precedes the formation of the capital relation or of original accumulation)' was published as Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations by Lawrence and Wishart, with a long introductory essay by the British marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm. In 1971, David McLellan published a slim volume of selections from the Grundrisse, concentrating on the more philosophical sections. Now, Martin Nicolaus, a young Canadian-American marxist, has presented us with a complete translation as the first volume in the Pelican Marx Library. Lawrence and Wishart are also promising another translation as part of their forthcoming forty-volume edition of the collected works of Marx and Engels.

Marx did not even bother to give these notebooks a general title, simply numbering them (the title we have today originated with the editors of the 1939-41 edition); yet the most extravagant claims have since been made for them. McLellan states that the Grundrisse "is the most fundamental work that Marx ever wrote", and that any discussions of Marx which neglect it are "necessarily deficient", even "useless". Nicolaus asserts that "The Grundrisse challenges and puts to the test every serious interpretation of Marx yet conceived".

Both McLellan and Nicolaus believe that the Grundrisse demonstrates conclusively the Hegelian cast of Marx's thought. While McLellan simply asserts this, without offering a shred of supporting argument (or even evidence), Nicolaus presents a much more substantial case. With patience and care, he points out scores of formulations in the Grundrisse which parallel those of Hegel's Science of Logic. It is undoubtedly true that Marx leant heavily on Hegel when he wrote the Grundrisse. But surely what is most significant here is that as Marx refined, revised, and developed his ideas, these formulations were abandoned.
As he subsequently developed his own concepts and terminology, Marx was able to abandon these "borrowings" from Hegel. They are thus not proof of the Hegelian character of the thought of the mature Marx, but rather of the theoretical immaturity of the Marx who wrote the Grundrisse.

McLellan also places much importance on the frequent recurrence of the word "alienation". This word, he observes, "occurs much more in Capital than some writers would think, and is central to most of the important passages of the Grundrisse". This alone is supposed to establish basic continuities between the Marx of the 1844 Manuscripts, the Marx of the 1857 Grundrisse, and the Marx of Capital. In this way McLellan attempts to dismiss without further discussion any writers who argue that there is a "break" between the writings of the young Marx and those of the mature Marx.

But what McLellan fails to see is that the meaning of the term "alienation" undergoes a profound metamorphosis between these texts. In Marx's 1844 Manuscripts, the term is saturated with metaphysical significance: Man's "essence" is alienated from his "existence". In the "Grundrisse" it is used simply to denote the involuntary sale of property (this is the original legal meaning of the term). In the 1844 Manuscripts "alienated labour" thus means (in Marcuse's words) "a catastrophe of the human essence"; in the Grundrisse it means simply that the laborers are wage-laborers, compelled to sell their labor-power to the capitalist class because they own no means of production of their own. There is a world of difference here, but to all this McLellan is oblivious.

Nicolaus also argues that the Grundrisse is of fundamental importance to the study of Capital because it gives profound insights into the methods of study Marx used. "The inner structure (of Capital) is identical in the main lines to the Grundrisse, except that in the Grundrisse the structure lies on the surface, like a scaffolding, while in Capital it is deliberately, consciously hidden, for the sake of more graphic, concrete, vivid, and therefore more materialist-dialectical presentation". "The Grundrisse and Capital have opposite virtues of form. The latter is the model of the method of presentation, the former is the model of the method of working". This is to some extent a quite sound argument, but it does over-rate the importance of the Grundrisse. The difference between these notebooks and Capital is much more than one of form; there was a real process of maturation, development, and enrichment of Marx's thought in this period, as well. Many of the basic ideas of Capital appear first in the Grundrisse -- but in half-developed, obscure, and intuitive form.

In general, the importance of the Grundrisse has been greatly over-stated by commentators such as McLellan and Nicolaus. It is important because it is the grandfather of Capital, not because it is in some way more profound than Capital. One should not mistake obscurity for profundity. The importance of the Grundrisse lies not in directly enriching Marxist theory itself, but in adding to our knowledge of the formation, history, and development of marxist theory.

In my opinion, the central importance of the Grundrisse lies in the fact that it documents a nodal point in the development of Marx's thought. In it we see, for the first time, Marx's general theory of historical materialism really penetrating and transforming economic theory. It is in the Grundrisse that Marx establishes the determining role of the mode of production, contrasting it with the (subordinate) spheres of circulation, distribution, and consumption, thereby shifting his analysis of capitalism from the sphere of competition to that of production relations; he differentiated the capitalist mode of production from the other modes of production which preceded it in history, and defined the relation of exploitation specific to it; he discussed the problem of the origins of capitalism in the disintegration of the feudal mode of production; and its historical limits, represented in the fact that capitalist production is driven by capital's thirst for surplus-value while the mechanisation of production it induces constantly displaces labor (the sole value-creating element in the system) from the process of production, leading to a falling rate of profit. Now he is in a position to criticise Ricardo and the other classical bourgeois political economists, who analysed capitalism on the basis of the assumption that it was a
permanent and unalterable system — and he does this to devastating effect.

Important as all this is, however, it represents only the initial breakthrough, not the completion of Marx's analysis. He still has to carry out the detailed analysis of the capitalist mode of production, of the circulation of capital, of the relation between the sphere of production and the sphere of distribution in capitalism. These achievements are carried through only in Capital. Thus, as Keith Tribe has stressed, the Grundrisse is a "transitional work".

The Grundrisse is generally a difficult text to read. In part, this is because Marx's ideas are inchoate and half-formed, in part because he was writing for his own eyes alone. All too often he is content with a brief allusion to a writer or an idea, instead of giving a full explanation. The meaning of such passages was presumably clear in his own mind, but for us today they can only be ambiguous and uncertain in meaning. Yet there are also a number of passages of rough-hewn beauty, of great power and eloquence. Of these, I was particularly struck by a brief historical essay headed "competition" (pp. 649-52) and his justly famous notes on machines (pp. 690-711). The Introduction, devoted to discussion of general epistemological and methodological problems, is also of considerable importance for marxist philosophy.

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