



Reading Capital Politically

Harry Cleaver

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As social movements waned in the late 70s, the study of Marx seemed to take on a life of its own. Structuralist, post-structuralist, deconstructed Marxes bloomed in journals and seminar rooms across the US and Europe. These Marxes and their interpreters struggled to interpret the world, and sometimes to interpret Marx himself, losing sight at times of his dictum that the challenge is not to interpret the world but to change it. In 1979, Harry Cleaver tossed an incendiary device called *Reading Capital Politically* into those seminar rooms. Through a close reading of the first chapter, he shows that *Das Kapital* was written for the workers, not for academics, and that we need to expand our idea of workers to include housewives, students, the unemployed, and other non-waged workers. *Reading Capital Politically* provides a theoretical and historical bridge between struggles in Europe in the 60s and 70s and, particularly, the Autonomia of Italy to the Zapatistas of the 90s. His introduction provides a brilliant and succinct overview of working class struggles in the century since Capital was published. Cleaver adds a new preface to the AK Press/Anti-Thesis edition.

Reading Capital Politically Details

Date : Published July 1st 2001 by AntiThesis (first published 1979)

ISBN : 9781902593296

Author : Harry Cleaver

Format : Paperback 184 pages

Genre : Politics, Economics, Nonfiction, Philosophy, Theory, History

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Scott Neigh says

Reviewed here.

Chris Tempel says

The best companion book to Capital I've read, this relatively short book really gets to the essential point of Marxism which is the class war and the ability for a ruling class to compel people to work by any means, while the working class fights to survive and live well. You could nitpick on some details but this book provides much clarity to all the concepts introduced in Capital and how they ought to be viewed not as a dry tract of political economy but as a weapon in the hands of workers to clarify and reiterate their practical work.

Tim says

The single most influential book I have ever read in my life. It came at a time where I was lost in a wilderness of insane theory, bullshit historical events, and a practically dead left wing movement in the United States.

While those things still exist, Cleaver paints a clear way out. The basic genius of Marx was his ability to pinpoint that the most basic element of our interactions with each other is at the commodity exchange level - be it material or personal. Cleaver looks through the dense and sometimes boring nature of Capital and sees where the true power lies. Within each of us.

Also, the introduction to this edition is an awesome history of Marxist theoretical thought. Its worth it alone, even if you hate the theoretical points Cleaver makes.

Kevin A. says

Very helpful. It foreshadows a lot of the same themes I've read in later autonomist writing by Negri and Dyer-Witheford. And it's especially good on the root sources of autonomist thought and its differences from Old Left tradition (e.g. the struggle against work vs. Old Left workerism, working class self-activity and the working class as revolutionary subject vs. Old Left emphasis on institutions like unions and parties as stand-ins for working class agency, the contested nature of the "social factory," etc.). Cleaver's Introduction is probably more valuable than the actual text. The only boring part was the discussion in Ch. V of inflation, which seems really dated.

Alex says

This book is difficult to read, but I will return here later to distill some very important "cleavages" in Marxist theory that the author makes. I'm currently a student of his.

Siân O'matic says

Interesting idea, a little stretched and incoherent.

Operaista says

This, along with Harry Cleaver's Study Guide to Capital Vol 1 (<https://webspace.utexas.edu/hcleaver/...> - yes, the book is just on Chapter 1, but there's a lot there!), should be considered absolutely essential companions to Marx's Capital. I wish I had found this book many, many years ago. Not only does Cleaver brilliantly explain what Marx is doing and thinking, he also shows you what Marx was getting at, where we've taken it, and what it means now.

Jacob says

This is a really excellent book. The author's goal is to present Marx's Capital as a political tool. The first chapter, or introduction, gives an overview of the political-economic and philosophical readings of Marx that have been dominant throughout Marxism. Cleaver argues that these readings do not give an adequate interpretation of Marx. Instead, they function to (unintentionally or intentionally) prop up capital. They do this by focusing on capital and asserting that capital has power. This is done through a critique of capital. Cleaver shows that instead, Capital should be read politically, as a tool to be used by the working class against capital. This, he argues, has precedent in the autonomist and situationalist movements in Italy and France during the 1960's, as well as in certain worker movements in the United States.

After this long introduction, Cleaver goes through a number of ways Capital can be read through this political lens. He goes through a methodological approach of looking at value and labour in Capital, and how these are tools used by capital in order to perpetuate the system. This includes further criticism of Marxist authors who make claims that there will be "work" or "money" in a post-capitalistic society.
