

Chris Arthur (ed) Marx's Capital: A Student Edition, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1992, £11.99.

Reviewed by Simon Clarke.

Marx devoted the most productive years of his life to work on the text which became Capital. He made the conceptual breakthrough in the manuscript of 1857-8, published as the Grundrisse, and expected that he could complete the text in a matter of months. The first section of the next draft was published as the Critique of Political Economy, but the text went through three more full drafts before the first volume was published in 1867. However even this text was not sacrosanct, Marx making significant changes for the 1873 French Edition, and a major revision of the first part for the 1883 Third German Edition, which became the standard edition and the basis of the English translation. Yet, despite Marx's determination to write a book which would be accessible to ordinary workers, students have nevertheless continued to find the text intimidating and opaque.

Marxists down the years have sought to overcome this opacity by simplifying and summarising Marx's text, with Karl Kautsky's *The Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx* probably remaining the most adequate of such simplifications. However all such summaries have been based on restrictive and often contentious interpretations of Capital. The argument of Capital is unavoidably abstract and complex and, as Chris Arthur argues in his introduction to this edition, is developed as a totality. To simplify the argument, to make it more concrete, to reduce it to a linear exposition, to propose skipping the difficult first section, is necessarily to distort it and to destroy its theoretical and methodological originality.

Chris Arthur's edition of Capital is based on the belief that if you want to understand Marx's theory of capitalist society there is no substitute for reading it. My own experience is that those who actually read the text with an open mind do not find it opaque, but liberating. The text is only difficult to understand for those who approach it with preconceptions derived from a 'training' in the bourgeois social sciences, for those who insist on trying to read it as a radical economics rather than as a critique of political economy. The main problem for students is not the opacity of the text, but its length, and this is particularly a problem with a text which has to be grasped as a whole. The 'difficulty' of the first sections is not in what Marx says there, but in grasping the significance of that discussion as the kernel of Marx's analysis as a whole, of understanding that the contradictions elucidated in those sections in their most abstract form are not just verbal tricks, but define the constitutive contradictions that determine the development of the capitalist mode of production as a whole.

Chris Arthur's ambition has been to reduce the length of the text, without excluding any material which contributes to understanding the development of Marx's argument. This means that his is a rather conservative abridgement, reducing the text by something over a third, but leaving us with 380 dense pages. As he indicates in the Introduction, he has cut out footnotes, commentaries on other theories which will be familiar only to specialists, arithmetical examples, and has heavily edited Marx's descriptive materials, but has cut little of substance (the only omission I could find that I regret is Marx's discussion of time- and piece-wages). Chris's edition is based on the original Moore and Aveling translation, with only minor amendments. The decision was no doubt partly dictated by copyright, but in my view the language of the original translation is unsurpassed by any of the later efforts.

Chris's introduction provides a succinct statement of the fundamental methodological principles underlying Capital, but also includes a somewhat gratuitous defence of Capital against its feminist critics. Chris insists that 'the pure structure of capital is sex-blind', so that the question of gender has to be dealt with 'at a much more concrete level of analysis' (p. xix). However, this claim does not lie easily alongside Chris's argument that the basis of Capital is the analysis of the social relations of capitalist production, because it implies that those social relations can legitimately be analysed in abstraction from their gendered forms. Volume One of Capital concerns the reproduction of the capitalist system of production as a whole, and that includes the social relations within which labour-power is reproduced, relations which are in every capitalist society gendered relations. Whether the gendered character of the social relations of capitalist production is contingent or essential remains an open question.

Chris Arthur has certainly achieved his ambition of reducing the length of Capital without losing anything of substance, so making it more accessible to students. The big question, in this age of post-everything, is who

will invite their students to read Capital in any form? Or will the students have to read it for themselves, and thrust it before their teachers, as have so many other generations of students before them? In which case Chris's achievement in reducing Capital to a manageable size will be all the more important.