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Learning Marx in the Podcast Era: A Review of “Reading ‘Capital’ with Comrades”

[Education](#), [Marxist Studies](#), [Social Economics](#), [Social Movement Studies](#), [Labor Issues](#)

By Peter McLaren

Karl Marx’s *Capital* is a book that keeps me going, thinking, organizing, writing, teaching; it’s a book that might even keep me alive. The trenchant analysis, the clarity of the exposition, and most importantly the insights that are crucial to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism energize me. It’s a book that radically transformed my own life, one that made me move from working toward “social justice” and within “critical pedagogy” to working toward communism and within “revolutionary critical pedagogy,” a praxis I and comrades have been developing for over two decades now. [Reading Capital with Comrades](#), a new Liberation School podcast series — now available on [Spotify](#), [Soundcloud](#), [Apple Podcasts](#), and other platforms — advances that project in significant ways. It’s an amazing offering to not only revolutionary critical pedagogy and education, but the overall struggle to overthrow the capitalist mode of production and institute a new one that is organized for people and the earth, not for the profits. The class series makes the book incredibly accessible but—and this is an important qualifier—without sacrificing any of the richness of the text.

The series consists of 12 episodes that go through each chapter from beginning to end. Derek Ford, a revolutionary Marxist organizer and one of the brightest minds and leading figures in radical educational theory, teaches the entire course. It’s intimate, as if he’s in the room speaking with you. This is no doubt due to the high production quality, with superb audio mixing by Nic de la Riva, editorial direction by Mike Prysner, original music and sounds by Anahedron, and the show’s host and listener advocate, Patricia Gorky. Her introductory remarks to each episode are clarifying and encouraging, and she interjects throughout the episodes with questions that help the listener better grasp the more difficult concepts and their applications.

Peter McLaren

Even though I’ve extensively written about, taught, studied, and discussed the book—along with companions, commentaries, extensions, and debates about it—*Reading Capital with Comrades* still helped me uncover new ideas and applications in Marx’s magnum opus. This is because the course takes the same standpoint that allowed Marx to write the book in the first place: that of the oppressed and exploited. In the first episode, Ford emphasizes this when discussing the afterword to the 2nd German edition, where Marx insists that “so far as such criticism represents a class, it can only represent the class whose vocation in history is the abolition of the capitalist mode of production and the final abolition of all classes—the proletariat.” [1] The standpoint isn’t that of an isolated academic idealist, but a fighter for liberation. As someone who’s spent a life in the university, it’s refreshing and rare. In my own academic career, I’ve had to struggle not only against the myriad of “progressive” anti-Marxists but also the armchair Marxists who

critique without investigation and action. As Ford observes in episode 8 on technology, Marx approached the Luddite movement with revolutionary optimism. He understood the reasons they attacked machinery and the capitalists producing it, and asserted that experience eventually taught them the correct enemy: the capitalist system. Similarly, being educated in the 1980s I was initially a “critical postmodernist.” It was through befriending Paulo Freire in 1994, learning from Marxists like Paula Allman and Glenn Rikowski, and working with the Bolivarian government, Zapatistas, and various social movements that my own realizations came about.

The 1990s were a period of intense reaction. In the first episode, Ford cites Brian Becker’s thesis about the break in ideological continuity in the U.S. Becker writes that “The greatest danger to a revolutionary process is not the experience of a political downturn, such as we have experienced during the past decades. In fact, it is not uncommon at all for the working-class movement to experience periods of decline, setback and retreat. If one examines the history of the class struggle, the periods of downturn and reaction are more common than revolutionary advances.” [2] Instead, the main obstacle is the fact “that revolutionary Marxism and the very idea that the working and oppressed classes can take power is no longer prominent in the movement and that many activists and fighters today are no longer familiar with Marxism.” That’s what I’ve dedicated the last decades of my life to, and I’m ecstatic that we’re advancing step by step. When I embraced Marxism, many attacked me for “economic reductionism” or ignoring identities. But even before I was a Marxist I was working against identity-based oppression. What Marxism did was let me see that we can *take power* and change society. [3]

Overview

This podcast makes an enormous contribution to that task. Let’s be real: *Capital* is a long and dense book written in specialized and dated language. It’s hard to read. Yet it’s also a lively read once you get past the first few chapters, and Gorky’s supportive introductions really make you feel like you can do it. Both Gorky and Ford remind us, too, that we shouldn’t expect to understand everything. We just keep pushing through. In episodes 2 and 3 we cover these rich but dense chapters with contemporary examples to help us relate it to today. In episode 2 we also get Marx’s first sketch of a possible communist future—a thread Ford weaves throughout the entire class. This sketch is of freely associated laborers working in common and thus, according to a centralized plan. This tension—between freedom and centralization—will return throughout the series. [4]

In episode 4 we move on to the search for surplus-value, which brings us to episode 5 where Mr. Moneybags finds that special commodity of labor-power, special in that its use value is that it produces value and special in that its part of actual people. This is a foundational contradiction of capitalism: it needs labor-power but it can only acquire it through actual people. Episode 6 is all about chapter 10, that glorious exposition on the class struggle. What’s noteworthy here is how Ford attends to the dual function of the state Marx articulates: that it manages inter-class *and* intra-class conflicts; how the ability to command time is central to the struggle; the way capital transforms and exacerbates slavery and colonialism in capitalism, and the call for such a modest reform at the end. He asks us to keep this in mind for our later episodes. The next episodes, which cover chapters 11-15, show how capitalism comes to stand on its own feet as a mode of production, how the means of production in handicraft and manufacture lag behind the capitalist

relations of production, and then how machinery transforms capitalism into a proper mode of production. The key here is that with machinery dead labor rules over living labor and, as such, capital's dictatorship strengthens. Yet so too does resistance. Class struggle frames the development of technology. Yet we also pay attention to Marx's articulated historical materialist approach to technology in a footnote, with Ford providing another contemporary example, this time of noise-cancelling headphones.

Episode 9 covers chapters 16-22, where Ford clarifies Marx's oft-misunderstood definition of productive labor and how it relates to organizing and then transitions from the value of labor-power to its wage forms. In addition to revealing the ideological role that wages play in capitalism—what Ford calls a “wage fetish”—we think through different forms of wages and the distinct functions each form embodies for capitalists and workers in the class struggle. We learn how piece and time wages embody different strategic function and agitational possibilities for both classes before looking briefly on national differences in wages and the relevance this has for analyzing imperialism and international trade.

Episode 10: Reproduction

Episode 10 is on reproduction, chapters 23 and 24, the build-up to Marx's big look at capitalist production as a whole. What I found most intriguing here was how reproduction lets us see that the reproduction of capital is the reproduction of the class relationship and that the working class—even those unemployed—are still essential to capital. Ford returns us to the definition of productive labor here as an opening to social reproduction theory. And episode 11 is the main event in many ways: the general law of capitalist accumulation, which Ford tells us should be called the general laws, because Marx mentions two: the general law (pursuit of surplus-value) and the absolute general law (the production of unemployment), all while emphasizing these are tendencies or laws that vary. This episode also provides the clearest explanation of the different compositions of capital, and Ford is also intent on showing how Marx includes *everyone* oppressed and exploited under capitalism as part of the proletarian class, an exposition that clarifies the relationship between anti-colonial and socialist revolutionary projects.

Then we get to the end, the last episode that covers chapters 26-33. Here we get Marx's *critique* of the capitalist ideologue's notion of primitive accumulation and his demonstration that the capitalist mode of production was founded on force: the individual and state-sanctioned thefts of land, the repression (including incarceration, whipping, branding, and execution) of the dispossessed, slavery, and colonialism. Along the way, Marx presents a brief but important summary/overview of the rise of capitalism and the potential rise of socialism, as well as some quick hints about what exactly revolution might entail—and how it relates to the reform proposed in chapter 10. Noting that Marx never relegated this form of accumulation to a bygone era, we go over some examples of how it shows up today and how it continues to be important to capitalism. Finally, Ford proposes that the reason Marx ends with a rather dull examination of a theory of colonialism is because he anticipated capital's transition into imperialism.

Revolutionary critical pedagogy

Revolutionary critical pedagogy operates from an understanding that the basis of education is political and that spaces need to be created where students can imagine a different world outside of capitalism's law of value (i.e., social form of labor), where alternatives to capitalism and capitalist institutions can be discussed and debated, and where dialogue can occur. It's not just about critique, but about imagination and experiencing that we're more than the skills capital demands, more than the commodity of labor-power. It's about realizing that we're not exchangeable. It's a pedagogical project that can happen in different spaces (classrooms, streets, protests) and times (lunch breaks, classes, when the moon's visible). It is theoretical and practical, contingent and necessary. [5]

Reading Capital with Comrades is, in my estimation, a manifestation of this pedagogy. It focuses on analysis, imagination, and the daily struggles of the international working class. There are other podcasts and videos and guides out there, but they're generally academic or lacking a revolutionary perspective. They're about understanding and analyzing. This podcast is about transformation. It's about discovering that within capitalism grows the proletarian class that can abolish capitalism and, with it, class society as a whole. It's organized around a revolutionary perspective, which means it embodies and spreads the *belief in the necessity of revolution*. Go listen to it today and I guarantee you'll not only learn something new, but gain new insights on how to apply that new knowledge to the struggles of the day—the tactics, strategies, goals, programs, alliances, slogans, and more. and more importantly, you'll be motivated to hit the streets. Go over to [Liberation School](#) today!

Notes

[1] Karl Marx, *Capital: A critique of political economy (Volume 1: An analysis of capitalist production)*, trans. S. Moore and E. Aveling (New York: International Publishers, 1867/1967), 25-6.

[2] Brian Becker, "Theory and revolution: Addressing the break in ideological continuity," *Liberation School*, September 28, 2016, <https://liberationschool.org/theory-and-revolution-addressing-the-break-of-ideological-continuity>.

[3] See, for example, Peter McLaren, *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the pedagogy of revolution* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

[4] See also Derek R. Ford, "Making Marxist pedagogy magical: From critique to imagination, or, how bookkeepers set us free," *Critical Education*, 8(9), 1-13.

[5] Marc Pruyn, Curry Malott, and Luis Huerta-Charles, eds. *Tracks to infinity, the long road to justice: The Peter McLaren reader, volume II*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2020.

Peter McLaren is Distinguished Professor in Critical Studies, College of Educational Studies, Chapman University, where he is Co-Director of the Paulo Freire Democratic Project and International Ambassador for Global Ethics and Social Justice. In 2005, a group of scholars and

activists in Northern Mexico established La Fundacion McLaren de Pedagogía Critica to develop a knowledge of McLaren's work throughout Mexico and to promote projects in critical pedagogy and popular education. On September 15, 2006 the Catedra Peter McLaren was inaugurated at the Bolivarian University of Venezuela.

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