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Nearly a quarter of a century ago, I wrote a doctoral dissertation titled The Commodity as the Point of Departure of Capital: A Methodological Inquiry. This was an inquiry into how and why Marx began his Capital with «the commodity», a point of departure which appeared to be problematic and created numerous controversies. My work dealt with various aspects of Marx’s method. Among these were numerous plans that Marx drafted in Grundrisse for writing his economic manuscript, the formation of the concept of commodity in Grundrisse, Marx’s search for a proper beginning point, his distinction between scientific knowledge and common sense, and his method of presentation of the commodity as opposed to his method of inquiry.

After finishing my dissertation, I revised it for publication. But, I «abandoned the manuscript to the gnawing criticism of the mice», to use Marx’s explanation of what became of the criticism of post-Hegelian philosophy that he wrote jointly with Engels.1 I felt that I had achieved my «main purpose – self-clarification», as Marx explained further. I did continue to write a few pieces on Marx’s method afterward.2 But, my youthful exuberance with Marxian economics somewhat faded as the years went by.

There were several reasons for becoming less enchanted with Marxian economics. Among these was the sectarianism that is often associated with the name «Marx». Even though such sectarianism is found among the followers of many famous economists, it is more acute when it comes to Marx and ‘Marxism’. ‘Marxism’ is, of course, somewhat akin to religion. Marx, as is well known, protested against French ‘Marxists’ by stating that he is not a Marxist.3 His motto was also De omnibus dubitandum. Yet, there are many Marxists who have faith in Marx. They religiously and passionately follow

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3 Marx–Engels Selected Correspondence, August 5, 1890, Moscow, Progress Publisher, 1975, 392-394.
every word of the master and never doubt anything that he has written. These Marxists repeatedly quote Marx’s works in support of their own interpretation, as if the scripture was read and interpreted. On the other side, of course, there are the anti-Marxists, those who detest everything that Marx has ever written, even if they have hardly read or understood any of it. They, too, quote a line or two from Marx, usually taken out of context, to prove how false the prophet was. In this religious climate those who believe in De omnibus dubitandum, and who might read Marx seriously but critically, could easily become alienated and fade away.

Another possible reason for disenchantment could be the fact that there has been very little growth in the Marxian economics research agenda since the publication of Capital in 1867. Many of the issues discussed today appear to be the same as those discussed over a century ago. The falling rate of profit, transformation problem, derivation of value, young Marx versus mature Marx, Marx’s debt to Hegel, and various points related to Marx’s method, such as the distinction between ‘essence and appearance’, seem to be themes as dominant in the twenty-first century as they were in the twentieth century, or even in the nineteenth century. There seems to be no new discussions, vistas, discoveries, or growth of knowledge in the field of Marxian economics. To be sure, in the late twentieth century there were some seemingly novel research agendas, such as ‘analytical Marxism’. But, on a closer look these were mostly fluff, intended to give Marx, or perhaps the ‘analytical Marxists’, an aura of bourgeois respectability.

There could, of course, be various other reasons for losing youthful exuberance when it comes to Marxian economics. For example, many young Marxist economists received their knowledge of history of economic thought and economic history through Marx. And Marx had the habit of reading history after his own theory. But, as one gets older, it becomes possible to read the history of economic thought and economic history independent of Marx. This might actually allow one to situate Marx himself in a broader context, both historically and theoretically. For example, looking back at the history of the development of labor theory of value it is easy to see how this theory could be used in the mid-nineteenth century to explain the revolutionary sentiment of the working class in Europe. In particular, given the role of the workers in such situations as the European Revolutions of 1848 or the Paris Commune of 1871, it is not difficult to see the reason for Marx’s attraction to the labor theory of value, a theory which had the potential to explain the revolutionary tendencies of the working class at the time. Furthermore, reflecting on the history of Scientific Revolution, from Copernicus to Newton, it is not hard to notice the obsession of economic thinkers with ‘science’ and ‘scientific method’ of analysis. Economics, since the age of Physiocracy, has been slave to natural sciences and, particularly, to the Newtonian and energetic physics. Marx, one might argue, did not escape this obsession with ‘scientism’.

Whatever the reason for shying away from ‘Marxism’, and becoming less exuberant about Marxian economics, it is hard to stay away from Marx for too long. Marx was indeed one of the main intellectual forces of the nine-
teenth century who cannot be ignored. His name is bound to come up whenever three or four great economists of all time are mentioned. His uncompromising stance toward the ills of the capitalist economy, his biting criticism of bourgeois society, his insights, his discipline and determination to write a comprehensive critique of political economy, his prolific writing, his sharp wit and bitter sarcasm are such that sooner or later one is bound to grab one of his books to look up a passage or a quotation. Thus, after years of not reading much on Marxian economics, I looked forward to reading *Following Marx: Method, Critique and Crisis* by Michael A. Lebowitz. I hoped the book would acquaint me with any recent developments in the field of Marxian economics and excite me about reentry into the field. I did not get what I had hoped for, but I did take a sentimental journey through some of the popular Marxist literature of the second half of the twentieth century.

*Following Marx* is a collection of various essays written in different periods, with different aims. Some of these essays are decades old, so old that Paul Craig Roberts gets a dishonorable mention in one article as a rightwing economist and Patrick Clawson an honorable mention or two as a leftwing economist. The former, of course, is nowadays writing for such outlets as CounterPunch and Antiwar.com, outlets that have been engaged in a struggle against US and Israeli policies of sanctions and wars in the Middle East. The latter, however, is the director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a think tank affiliate of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee that promotes US and Israeli policies in the Middle East. Yet, some of these old articles are quite interesting for different generations of economic thinkers. For the old, as alluded to earlier, it is a nostalgic journey through much of the discussions and debates that went on in the second half of the twentieth century. For the new, these are some lessons in the history of Marxian economics.

As a collection of essays, one should not look for a continuous and well-articulated narrative in *Following Marx*. The author also does not follow one of the most interesting aspects of Marx’s method of analysis, namely, first dealing with the theory and then reading the history of the theory. The five-part, 19-chapter book jumps from one subject matter to another. The author himself suggests that if the reader is interested in continuity of certain subject matters – for example, in Marx’s method of analysis – not reading the chapters sequentially, and skipping some in between, might be helpful.

The lack of continuity makes the review of the book difficult. It might be best to follow the author’s suggestion and read the chapters on methodology – chs 1, 5, 6, 10 and 11 – separately. After all, these appear to be the most important chapters in *Following Marx*, with some unifying concepts.

Chapter 1, the «Fallacy of Everyday Notions», begins with the fallacy of composition. Lebowitz argues that Marx was well aware of this fallacy and criticized «any theory which proceeds from particular cases to establish general principles» (p. 7). Marx, the author writes, held that «the whole is not sum of the individual parts taken separately». Lebowitz sees a close relation between this knowledge and knowing «that the way things appear to the individual actors actually involved … cannot be the basis for understanding of the whole». «There is in short, a big difference between Appearance and
Essence», writes Lebowitz (ibidem). Much of the chapter is devoted to the issue of how things appear to the «actual agents of capitalist production», particularly in competition between capitals, and how the «vulgar economists» translate the «everyday notions» of these agents (p. 10). «The apparent movement of the sun around the earth» is used as the analogy to show how «everyday notions», even though «rooted in the real conditions facing individual capitals», persist (ibidem). The same analogy appears later again and again.

Neoclassical economics is seen here as a perfect example of vulgar economics, since «it starts from the way that things appear to the individual actors» and its assumptions are drawn «from appearances» (pp. 11-12). Lebowitz argues that going beyond the form of appearances of things is essential and quotes Marx as saying: «the essential relation must first be discovered by science» (p. 15).

Chapter 5, «Following Hegel: The Science of Marx», returns to some of the same themes as the first chapter, particularly, the issue of appearance and essence. Marx’s famous passage that «all science would be superfluous if the form of appearance of things coincided with their essence» is quoted and the movement of the Earth around the Sun is mentioned a number of times. «What made Marx so sensitive to the gap between essence and appearance?» asks Lebowitz (p. 72). And he answers by stating that «we cannot ignore the importance of Hegel» and his Science of Logic (ibidem). The answer is backed by an appeal to Lenin and his claim that understanding Marx’s Capital is impossible without understanding the whole of Hegel’s Logic. Marx’s discussion of «scientifically correct method» of political economy at the beginning of Grundrisse – namely, the method of «rising from the abstract to the concrete» – is also mentioned in this chapter. The origin of this aspect of Marx’s method, too, is seen to be Hegel. Moreover, Lebowitz believes that all such aspects of «scientifically correct method» were already present in embryo in the «young Marx’s critique of political economy». Indeed, he argues there is «so much that can be found in the young Marx which helps us to understand Capital» (p. 79). Yet, Lebowitz argues, in 1844 Marx «began from the theories of political economists» rather than «real concrete», and it was not until 1857, when writing notebooks for his Grundrisse, that Marx absorbed himself in «real economic movements» (p. 80). Marx now reread Hegel’s Logic and found it of «great use» in «method of treatment». According to Lebowitz, while Marx «was referring particularly at the time to his examination of the rate of profit, in fact the deepening of the influence of Hegel’s dialectical method is evident throughout the Grundrisse» (ibidem).1 The Hegelian dialectical method leads Marx to begin his journey to understand capitalism with the «commodity», writes Lebowitz. This was an «obvious choice» for the point of departure, since Marx had a «growing recognition that the purchase of labor-power as a commodity is a unique characteristic of capitalism» (p. 81). From this concrete beginning, Marx went on, by way of ab-

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1 Actually, Marx’s letter refers to profit and not rate of profit: «I have overthrown the whole doctrine of profit as it has existed up to now» (Marx-Engels Selected Correspondence, 14 January, 1858, Moscow; Progress Publisher, 1975), 93.
straction, to develop «concrete totality» (ibidem). In this Hegelian dialectical method Marx «discovers money as latent within the commodity» (p. 83). According to Lebowitz, «it is possible indeed to present Marx’s dialectical derivation (in this case from the commodity to money) in a blatantly Hegelian manner – namely, one that does far more than ‘coquette’ with Hegel’s ‘mode of expression’» (ibidem).

Chapter 6, «Explorations in the Logic of Capital», apparently written in the 1970s as lecture notes, is mostly a Hegelian reading of the first few chapters of Capital dealing with the circuits C-M-C and M-C-M’. Statements such as «exchange is the truth of the commodity», it «is Becoming of the commodity as a thing-in-and for-itself», or the «commodity is not a thing at rest; it is motion and its activity is the process of exchange», show the Hegelian flavor of this chapter.

Chapter 10, «Marx’s Methodological Project» continues with the theme of «Essence and Appearance» in the Hegelian sense. «Essence must appear», the author quotes Hegel (p. 196). The issue then becomes how «capital as a whole», or the «Essence», appears. This is where the 3rd volume of Capital enters the picture. Here surplus value, as Essence, appears on the surface as profit, and «inner connections revealed through the concept of value» are «obliterated when considering market prices and prices of production (the “law” or average around which market prices gravitate)» (p. 198). The discussion ends with dividing «Marx’s methodological project as a whole» into four «moments». Moment i, observation of concrete; Moment ii, abstract thought; Moment iii, unity of Essence of Appearance; and Moment iv, «testing-reconciliation of the concept with its object» (pp. 199-203). Throughout this discussion, once again, Lenin is called upon to support the Hegelian reading of Marx.

Chapter 11, «What is Competition», deals with how «inner truth» appears as competition between capitals (p. 206). The reading continues to be Hegelian and, therefore, Marx’s volume iii of Capital – where capital in general is divided and appears as many competing capitals – is viewed as «Moment iii of Marx’s methodological project» (p. 208). Marx’s famous statement that a «scientific analysis of competition is possible if we can grasp the inner nature of capital» is repeated and the analogy of the apparent movement of the Sun around the Earth is recalled a number of times. «Insofar as capital exists in the form of many capitals», writes the author, «science is necessary».

Much of Lebowitz’s discussion concerning Marx’s method of analysis, especially the issue of «essence and appearance», is well known to the students of Marx and commonly discussed in Marxian economics courses. Perhaps less common is a consistent Hegelian reading of Marx’s method of analysis. In the 1st volume of Capital Marx explained that nearly thirty years earlier he had criticized the «mystifying side of Hegelian dialectic». But, when Hegel was treated as a «dead dog», Marx went on to say, I «openly avowed myself the pupil of that mighty thinker, and even, here and there in the chapter on the theory of value, coquetted with the mode of expression peculiar to him».

Many Hegelians, however, don’t take Marx’s ‘no’ for an answer and believe that he did much more than simply coquette with Hegel’s mode of expression. Marx, they assert, basically followed Hegel’s *Logic*. Sometimes the authority of V. I. Lenin is used to support this contention, as if Lenin was a great expert in analyzing Marx’s *Capital*. As I have argued in some of my writings, there is little evidence that Marx did anything more than what he said he did, namely, coquette a bit with the mode of expression peculiar to Hegel in the chapter on the theory of value. Indeed, a careful reading of *Grundrisse*, which was primarily the focus of my earlier research, shows that both in terms of economic concepts and method of analysis Marx started as no more than a Ricardian and finished the work as something very different. Marx’s new theory and method of analysis was due mostly to reworking for himself the puzzle of the capitalist economy and not the appropriation of Hegel’s *Logic*. If the latter was the case, we would have seen in *Grundrisse* the development of a relatively straightforward theory and plan for presenting an economic manuscript. What we see instead is a gradual development of an embryonic theory and numerous, changing, and, at times, incongruent plans for an economic manuscript. For example, Marx’s ultimate decision to start *Capital* with the «commodity», contrary to Lebowitz’s assertion was anything but an «obvious choice». Anyone who has closely followed Marx’s twists and turns in *Grundrisse* to find a proper beginning point, or has followed numerous controversies that have surrounded Marx’s multiple points of departure in *Capital*, can attest to the fact that his ultimate choice was not an obvious and trouble-free one.

Hegel also cannot be the source of Marx’s distinction between the so-called essence and appearance, a distinction that actually could best be expressed as one between scientific knowledge and sense perception of reality. This distinction does not exist, at least blatantly, in Marx’s writings prior to *Grundrisse*, even though Marx knew Hegel’s *Logic*. We can’t find the distinction at the beginning of *Grundrisse* either. It is only after Marx had started to solve for himself the riddle of the capitalist economy in *Grundrisse* that the distinction starts to appear; and it becomes stronger in Marx’s later writings. As I once traced the distinction, starting from the middle of *Grundrisse* to the end of his more mature economic writings, there are, respectively, at least 58 and 43 different expressions that Marx uses to designate, refer to, or describe sense perception and scientific knowledge. It is hard to imagine this multiplicity of expressions if Marx had simply appropriated Hegel’s «Essence and Appearance».

Moreover, the distinction between scientific knowledge and sense perception of the reality is much older than Hegel’s *Logic*; it goes back to the Scientific Revolution and, particularly, the Copernican revolution. Consider, for example, this statement in Galileo’s *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*: I can never «sufficiently admire the acumen of those who have taken hold of this opinion [the heliocentric view] and accepted it as true; they have through sheer force of intellect done such violence to their own senses as to prefer what reason told them over that which sensible experience plainly showed them to the contrary». Some economists, even before Marx, were
familiar with these notions and even tried to emulate the method of analysis employed in physics and astronomy. For example, in his Essays on the History of Astronomy, Adam Smith stated that the “learned give up the evidence of their senses to preserve the coherence of the ideas of their imagination”. Or, he stated that there is a propensity, natural to all men, “to account for all appearances from as few principles as possible”. As such, Smith praised Newton and Newtonian system for laying “down certain principles known or proved in the beginning, from whence we account for several phenomena, connecting all together by the same chain”. This was, indeed, what Smith tried to do in The Wealth of Nations before he adopted the “vulgar” method of analysis. Marx, too, was familiar with such notions and that is why, when discussing scientific knowledge, he often used the analogy of the movement of the Earth around the Sun. Indeed, in developing the distinction between the so-called scientific knowledge of the capitalist society and sense perception of it, Marx perfected the Copernican-Galilean-Newtonian method of analysis in economics.

However, the influence of physics on economics did not end with Marx. Physics became entangled with neoclassical economics in different ways. For example, in developing utility theory, as I have argued in different places, neoclassical economics simply asked: What is the economic interpretation of the path of a trajectory and its time rate of change? Energetic physics, too, exerted considerable influence on the development of neoclassical theories. Given such ties to physics, a methodological analysis of neoclassical economics becomes far more complicated than treating it as merely “vulgar” economics, as Lebowitz does. Indeed, these ties would pose some interesting questions: Why has there been so much fascination in economics with natural sciences, particularly physics, and can there ever be a theory of the capitalist economy that is ‘non-scientific’? Actually, certain parts of Marx’s Capital that are merely reflecting history show us the direction in which such a theory might be developed.

In sum, the most important chapters in Following Marx, those dealing with methodology, seem to treat Marx’s method of investigation and presentation in a simple way, setting aside complex issues. The rest of the book, as stated earlier, is a mix of different papers, written in different times, with little unitifying themes. The topics dealt with include criticisms of neo-Ricardians and “analytical Marxists”, arguments concerning the falling rate of profit and

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4 See, for example, Ph. Mirowski, More Heat than Light, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1989.
Marx’s theory of crisis in general, a biographical discussion of Paul Sweezy and his economic contributions, a critique of an obscure theory called «blind-spot» paradigm, an assessment of Baran-Sweezy’s theory of monopoly capital, another critique of «analytical Marxism», and a critique of Robert Brenner’s analysis of global crisis in the late 1990s.

The last four chapters, including one on «Uno-ism», are the only chapters in which Lebowitz presents a critical analysis of Marx and some Marxists. The critique is based on what Lebowitz considers to be the «silence of Capital» or «one-sided Marxism». He argues that Capital concentrates too much on capital, leaving out the «worker as subject» and «class struggle» (pp. 311 and 356). Marx, as Lebowitz points out, had planned to write a separate book on «wage-labor». The book, according to Marx’s letter to Engels, on April 2, 1858, was to appear in the series: «1. On Capital. 2. Landed Property. 3. Wage Labor. 4. State. 5. International Trade. 6. World Market». Marx explained the order by arguing that the transition from capital to landed property and wage-labor «is not only dialectical but historical».1 This was all in accord with his concept of «scientific method» of presentation. However, Marx never finished his project and never wrote the book on 'wage-labor'. Why this was the case, we may never know. Lebowitz, however, has an answer: «the completion of his [Marx’s] epistemological project interested him less than his revolutionary project» (p. 358). That is, Marx was more a revolutionist than a scientist. But this is odd, given Lebowitz’s earlier and repeated praises for Marx the scientist. I believe that Marx himself bears some responsibility for this oddity, since it is not clear whether the ‘science’ of political economy – which resembles Newtonian physics and astronomy – should be dispassionate, or whether it should take sides in the class struggle between capital and wage-labor. The problem, it seems, goes to the very heart of Marxian economics, which, as I stated earlier, shares with all other modern schools of economic theory an obsession with being ‘scientific’. Hopefully, if I take another journey through Marxian economics, I will see a discussion of this important issue.

1 Marx-Engels Selected Correspondence, Moscow, Progress Publisher, 1975, 97.
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