

BOOK REVIEW

Karl Marx, Critique of the Gotha Program, K.B. Anderson and Karel Ludenhoff trans., introduction by Peter Hudis, PM Press, 2023. ISBN: 978-1629639161, Pages: 1-128.

Reviewed by Garry Potter¹

Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program* is hardly a new work. Rather, this English edition of it is a new *translation*. However, this review is *not* a review of the translation. In order to create a translation, one must be fluent in both languages, as well as possessing significant insight into the subject matter of the work in question. Likewise, these traits are necessary to *assess* a translation. I lack these traits. Thus, for example, I will not offer an opinion as to whether the phrase "exchange involving equal values" as translated from the *Critique* by Tian Yu Cao, is actually as Hudis asserts, a *mistranslation*. The question as to the relative "correctness" of Anderson and Ludenhoff's translation, and of Hudis's interpretation of such, thus will not concern me.

No, the focus of this review is a severely circumscribed one. It focuses upon a single question, which in turn was focused upon within Peter Hudis's introduction. I wish to provide an assessment of his analysis in terms of how accurately it corresponds with the realities of capitalist production and distribution, past and present, and how this affects our aspirations and possibilities for achieving future socialism.

Hudis asserts (correctly I believe): "The past one hundred years is the history of a series of defective conceptions of an alternative to capitalism put into practice . . . Neither the reformist social democratic version of socialism nor its revolutionary variant that was taken over by various forms of Stalinism and Marxist-Leninism succeeded in posing a viable alternative; instead, each morphed into some version of capitalism." Hudis then goes on to say, "we clearly need a new beginning." A great many people would agree with him. Many, of course, would not; there still exists an abundance of both Tankies and Social Democrats.

Regardless, I believe Hudis is completely accurate with regard to the above. First, theory is crucially important and has real world consequences e.g., the tanks that rolled into Hungary and Prague can be traced back to underlying theoretical error within Stalinism. Marx and Hudis put their finger on the core of such. I refer here to the analysis of *value* in capitalism and future socialism/communism.

I put socialism and communism together like this because I agree with Hudis that the terms can be seen as interchangeable and are not, as many Marxists have long believed, labels for different modes of production. I also agree with Hudis (and Marx as well, I think) that there are to be two stages of communism that will occur in a post-capitalist world; but these are NOT two different modes of production. The key point is that we do not go in the post-capitalism world straight into production and distribution using the principle "from each according to their

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abilities, to each according to their needs.” Hopefully, we’ll get there some day but not immediately. Hudis’s analysis here is extremely insightful.

I am aware that most, if not all, readers of this review, will have a reasonable knowledge and understanding of Marx’s theory of value. However, I am going to go over the very basics of it here, for amongst other things, it is Hudis’s contention that such has been long misunderstood. Further, he argues it is crucial to our present politics, that a ‘correct’ understanding become prevalent.

Marx first distinguishes use value and exchange value. The former is simple enough. Use value is a thing’s value to anyone for any reason. If, for example, a gaudy trinket of no practical purpose is purchased to be placed upon a person’s mantle, has no use other than to display the purchaser’s bad taste, one can still say it has use value. Exchange value, is, of course, totally different.

Exchange value is the comparative value of commodities to one another in a capitalist economy. This value is determined by the *socially necessary labour time* of the commodity’s production. This is the heart of Marx’s theory and the focus of Hudis’ analysis as well. In determining value we look at *socially necessary labour time* not at the actual, concrete, labour time, exerted by any given labourer. If we were to look at the empirical labour achievements of actual labourers, it would result in the absurdity of the slower worker producing more valuable commodities than a faster colleague. And this is without even taking technology into account. Each word in the “socially necessary labour time” phrase is important. “Socially necessary”, imparts to the phrase the difference between technologically enhanced labour vs labour by hand and insists we should calculate using the former.

‘Socially necessary labour time’ Hudis emphasizes, is an abstraction. Values of commodities do not change according to the efforts of individual workers. They derive from an average; hence exchange value is an abstraction. The distribution and exchange of concrete individually made products of equal “worth,” in the first stage of post-capitalist economy, is thus not based upon the (abstract) exchange value system found in a capitalist mode of production. As Hudis says, of the lower phase of communism “. . . there are no classes, no commodity exchange, and no dual character labour.” Classes are based upon relations of production; profit and exploitation are both derived from the (exchange) value function.

In communism these relations are superseded by use value and the concrete. This an extremely important point insofar as the misunderstanding of it, was propagated by Stalin for example, as he asserts, “the law of value operates in socialism.” Hudis argues that many principled anti-Stalinists shared his error upon this point. But intellectual points have consequences. The consequence in this case being that rather than being a powerful signal that things are going wrong; the persistence of the exchange value abstraction and commodity production in the Soviet system merely replaced individual capitalist employer’s exploitation through the extraction of surplus value with the same being done by the (totalitarian) state.

The first stage of communism still requires some principle, some mechanism for the distribution of goods and services and recompense for labour. This cannot be exchange value as found in capitalism. Rather we mean here concrete actual labour undertaken by individuals. Not everyone will receive the same recompense. Some will work harder than others, some will spend more time upon their labours than others. The point is that such will be undertaken in freedom, and work itself will not be the enslavement that it is under capitalism, but rather something very different. Hudis does not refer much to the 1844 manuscripts or the concept of alienation. However, it very much fits here. The work undertaken, the concrete labour of individuals, in the first phase of communism, will *not* be *alienated labour* but rather an activity that fulfills people's species being.

The Gotha Program was only 630 words. Marx's *Critique* is longer, but still is very short; this book is less than 100 pages, including Hudis's Introduction. Nonetheless, what we have here is a crucial argument for our time. "We need a new beginning!"