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Review Essay: The Once and Future Marx

The Twilight of Capitalism. By Michael Harrington. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976. Pp. 446. \$10.95.

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Michael Harrington begins *The Twilight of Capitalism* with the startling premise that Paul Samuelson, Joan Robinson, Louis Althusser, Erich Fromm, Hannah Arendt, Raymond Aron, and I, in one way or another, have misinterpreted, misunderstood, and even misquoted Marx and that he will present not just a possibly better or more comprehensive reading but, to quote him, the "authentic Marx," the "real Marx" (and presumably, then, the only rational Marx), known hitherto only to a gnostic "underground" (his word again) but whose second coming is at hand, since the resurrection of the old scrolls is now complete.

This is surely an extraordinary claim. How could so many well-known and even distinguished scholars mislead themselves and thus their readers? It turns out on closer examination that Harrington believes the real culprits were Marx and Engels themselves:

- a) In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels committed a "youthful indiscretion" (Harrington's phrase) in seeking a universal key to human history, which "they never formally retracted," though in later writings they sought to relate sociological generalizations only to the stage of development of the society. "Youthful indiscretion" it may have been, but Engels maintained the idea of a universal key even in his speech at the grave of Marx, comparing Marx's findings with those of Darwin.
- b) Marx himself contributed to the misunderstandings by his Forward [sic] to the Critique of Political Economy, "perhaps the best known, and certainly the most unfortunate, statement of what Marxism is [which] even a sophisticated scholar like C. Wright Mills [put] first in his anthology of Marxist writings." The Forward, of course, set forth the famous statement that "the mode of production determines the social, political and spiritual life processes in general." In this form, it is the foundation of a view of society as consisting of a substructure and a superstructure. It is "the very essence of vulgar Marxism; it is also the ideological foundation of Stalinism," writes Harrington (p. 37).

Then "why did Marx do such a disservice to his thought?" This was the period when Marx had been wrestling with the problem of finding the key to the capitalist system; in the preceding two years he had written a thousand pages of notes and commentaries (recently published as the *Grundrisse* [Marx 1973]. "One explanation, then, is that the *Forward*

is the kind of oversimplification even a genius might write when confronted with the problem of summarizing extremely complicated material." In this context, concludes Harrington (faith moves mountains), "The 1859 statement would be subsumed under the famous rule, 'Even Homer nods'" (p. 41). But then why publish the Forward, when he had not published the Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts, The German Ideology, and the Grundrisse, more than 2,000 pages, before?

c) But the real culprit is Friedrich Engels, "the lifelong friend and colleague of Marx, who shared in his intellectual development." He is "the second great figure in the Marxist misunderstanding of Marxism." Marx "was unjust to his ideas in a few passages; Engels did much more consistent harm to his mentor's theory although he sometimes was its shrewdest interpreter. He was the inventor of an omniscient theory of society and nature, called dialectical materialism, which is not to be found, even as a momentary indiscretion, in the writings of Marx" (p. 42).

Engels's presentation of Marx's views—the first comprehensive codification to be published—appeared in *Anti-Dühring* in 1876–78. But now the mystery deepens. Not only did Marx read the entire manuscript; he also contributed to it: the tenth chapter of part 3, entitled "From the Critical History," was written entirely by Marx. And Engels noted specifically, "The mode of outlook expounded in this book was founded and developed in far greater measure by Marx, and only in an insignificant degree by myself."

But if this book was a travesty—and the quixotic fact is that the entire first generation of Marxist writers, Plekhanov, Lenin, Bernstein, and Kautsky, were instructed by it; and the extract taken from it and published as a pamphlet, "Socialism, Utopian and Scientific," was circulated as widely as the *Communist Manifesto* and became the textbook for all Marxist schools—why did Marx allow it?

Anti-Dühring began as a polemic against a rival of Marx, a popular academic figure, Eugen Dühring, so Harrington concludes that "the result, if I am right, was that Marx tolerated a kind of intellectual double standard, allowing his factional partner the rhetorical luxury of imprecisions and sweeping generalities, which he himself would never tolerate in his own scientific work." Besides, "Marx allowed Engels to exaggerate because he felt that was necessary in a factional struggle which involved many uneducated people" (p. 42).

How remarkable! What is one to say of Marx's preface to *Capital*, of the "laws of motion," the "natural laws of capitalist production," of "these laws themselves, of these tendencies working with iron necessity towards inevitable results" (Marx 1906, p. 13)? Or of Marx's characterization of Kant in *The German Ideology* as the "whitewashing spokesman" of the German burghers (Marx [1867, 1885–94] 1965, p. 209), or any dozen other sweeping, imprecise, and "factional" statements in *his* scientific work?

Actually, in his crude attempt to "whitewash" Marx, Harrington is unfair to Marx and to the genuine intellectual questions he wrestled with all his life, which led him often, even if understandably, to vulgar statements as well as to different and more complex formulations. Like all of us to this day, Marx was seeking to resolve a number of inherently irreconcilable dilemmas in the epistemology and sociology of the social sciences. Schematically, the contradictions are

- 1. an activity theory of knowledge versus a copy theory;
- 2. voluntarism, according to which men make their own history, versus structural constraints or mechanistic determinism;
- 3. human nature seen as an essence (wesen) versus human nature seen as recreated by history;
- 4. class role and persona of persons as against diverse individual motivations, and the mechanisms that mediate between the two concepts;
 - 5. the "logic of history" versus moral condemnation of inhumanities;
- 6. scientific inquiry as either theoretical or historical, for it cannot be both simultaneously; thus one has either a logical explanation through a conceptual prism or an empirical explanation seeking to identify actual sequences;
- 7. a general theory of "society" and its determining mode (or even "functional requisites") versus a historicist theory of specific, qualitatively different social formations.

Clearly I do not have the space to elaborate upon these, but in reading Marx (not just Engels) one can find him, at one time or another, espousing (at different times) both sides of nearly all the polar opposites listed above. and one cannot explain that by using the word "dialectical" since that word explains everything. An activity theory of knowledge, which we find in the Theses on Feuerbach, sees man as an active agent in history, but this view risks accusations of idealism, as Lukács found out when he was forced in Moscow to recant the History and Class Consciousness. A copy theory of knowledge, which we find in Anti-Dühring (and later in Lenin's Materialism and Empirio-Criticism), is more positivist and scientistic, but to introduce a theory of change, one has to posit the absurd argument that matter moves dialectically. Given his early Hegelianism, why should Marx have endorsed Anti-Dühring? In the Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts, Marx talks of man as having an essence. But in The German *Ideology*, he defines man by his history. Yet if, as Marx states in *Capital*, in achieving new powers man changes his nature, then human nature in ancient Greece must have been significantly different from human nature under modern capitalism, in which man's powers are so much greater. And if this is so, how is it possible, as Sidney Hook asked long ago in his article on materialism in the original Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, to understand past historical experience in the same way we understand our own, since understanding presupposes some invariant categories? Marx scorned the idea of "timeless truths" (see the vicious discussions of Stirner in The German Ideology); yet if we accept, with Kojeve, Marcuse, and

Lukács, the "logic of history," where is the right to pronounce absolute moral judgments, as on Stalin?

On almost all these issues, Marx was "inconsistent," and it is this inconsistency which allows so many individuals to construct their "own" Marx. Moreover, Marx "finished" only one major scientific work in his lifetime, volume 1 of Capital. The works before 1848 were slashing, vitriolic attacks on Bauer, Stirner (occupying 374 of 632 pages of The German Ideology), Proudhon, Ruge, et al. Of Capital, volume 1 appeared in a German edition in 1867, but Marx was still unhappy with the work; when a French edition appeared in several parts from 1872 to 1875, it bore the note "entirely revised by the author." As late as 1881, two years before his death, Marx told Kautsky that little of the remaining work was ready for publication, because it lacked internal cohesion; the task of sorting and arranging the order of the remaining inchoate manuscripts fell to Engels (for Capital) and Kautsky (for the Theories of Surplus Value).

The point is that on no single theme associated with Marx's name —historical materialism, class, the crises of capitalism—is there a single unambiguous definition of a concept. Marx never used the phrase "historical materialism" (it was coined by Engels; Engels never used the phrase "dialectical materialism," which was invented by Plekhanov); and the famous statement that it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence but their existence that determines their consciousness is vague, mechanistic, and even contradictory. "Class" is defined variously: in relation to property (the proletariat being defined as the propertyless in the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right and in The German Ideology); in terms of political consciousness (the an sich passages in the Poverty of Philosophy); in terms of political interests (in The 18th Brumaire); according to positions in the mode of production (The Communist Manifesto and Capital); and in relation to the source of income, in the incomplete fragment which ends volume 3 of Capital (and which Dahrendorf sought to complete by piecing together other sections in his Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society). There are three different theories of crises of capitalism: an underconsumption theory; a theory of disproportions between the growth of producer-goods and consumer-goods sectors; and a theory of the tendency of the falling rate of profit, as a result of the change in the organic composition of capital. It is no accident that, as Charles Frankel has remarked, it is not Marxism that creates radicalism; each new radical generation creates its own Marx.

Harrington wants to correct the "vulgar Marxists" who see society in terms of a substructure and superstructure and see the politics and culture of a society as always "determined" by the economic elements or even the mode of production itself. Society is an "organic whole," "in which the economic, political and social interact reciprocally upon one another," but this "leaves room for relative autonomies. Art, science and

politics all have their own rhythms," though "production predominates within the organic whole"; and the "idea of a reciprocally interacting causation, which is so central to the Marxist method," is "thus pertinent to computerized sociology as well as to Hegelian philosophy." This is the "first step toward methodology that can help in the understanding of the late twentieth century. In short, the new Karl Marx, announced in the first chapter and contradicted by the familiar Karl Marx in the second, now begins to emerge in his own right." Thus, "When one conceptualizes society as an organic whole in which the economic, the political, the sociological and the cultural so interpenetrate one another they cannot be explained in and of themselves, then there is no room for a completely independent discipline of economics or political science or sociology or aesthetics."

One rubs one's eyes in astonishment. This is like saying that, if one sees "nature whole," there is no possibility of independent disciplines such as physics, chemistry, geology, astronomy, or the like. But the real confusion is compounded because Harrington nowhere defines what he means by "society" or what are its boundaries in space and time. If one talks, as Harrington does, of "capitalist society," are prewar and postwar Japan; the Weimar, Nazi, and Federal Republics of Germany; and the United States all part of an "organic whole"? One can say that a "socio-economic formation" such as capitalism has a coherent conceptual consistency, but if the political and cultural are "relatively autonomous" (as Harrington also says), what is the "organic whole"?

Harrington is confusing a "system" with a "society." Any system has mutually interacting elements, and capitalism as a socioeconomic system (e.g., commodity production) is an aspect of these different societies; but the political systems are largely at variance because they do not derive from the socioeconomic. And the different components such as the technological and the cultural have completely different historical rhythms; so again, what is "organic"?

One can say that the idea of an "organic whole" is a conceptual, not a historical or empirical, construct. But if it is conceptual, does it exhaust the totality of social reality? The ideas of the "mode of production" and of "socio-economic formations" are very powerful constructs. But so are Hegel's "moments" of cultural consciousness or Weber's "modes of domination," and if one uses these different conceptual prisms, there is no exact overlay that makes them coterminous within historical time.

The central dilemma for Marx was that he thought the "mode of production" (a conceptual abstraction) constitutive of society, as Darwin's theory of evolution was constitutive of biological development or Newton's laws of motion constitutive of the universe. Harrington writes that for Marx "economics is, by its very definition, a bourgeois discipline." This is not so. For Marx—and this was the rock of his belief—economics was the material embodiment of philosophy, which is why he could stand

Hegel on his feet. The "realization of philosophy"—the overcoming of the ontological dualities of subject and object, spirit and matter, etc.—was naturalized by Marx into the overcoming of the social dualities—the division of labor into mental and physical, town and country. That is why communism was for Marx the "realization of economics," meaning its abolition, by the overcoming of necessity (i.e., scarcity) and the entry into the "kingdom of freedom." Marx, like Hegel, did believe in a "logic of history" (and the Begriff became the "modes of production"), and this remains the permanent utopianism in Marxism.

Harrington's second effort to provide a "new Marx" is to rehabilitate the "law of value" against its economic despisers such as Paul Samuelson. But if the first effort is highly focused, the second has no focus at all. It is quite evident that Marx's idea of value is independent of price, because he sought a system of constants in which, to use the technical jargon, microeconomics (the individual decisions of buyers and sellers) could be aggregated into a macroeconomic, or system, model. Harrington seems to be completely unaware of that problem. His discussion of the law of value repeats the motif of soapbox oratory that, when a worker works an eight-hour day, some hours are "gratis" or surplus value; his central point is that, since the system is unplanned, there is bound to be a cycle of boom and bust. (How planners would know what the people want, without markets, remains undiscussed.)

Harrington spends much time on the so-called transformation problem—how values become converted into market prices—yet seems totally unaware of the question of aggregation. And the crux of that issue is whether capitalism necessarily has to break down. About the one theory of Marx that does lead to the idea of breakdown—that of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall—Harrington agrees with Samuelson that it is not central to Marx. (Parenthetically, an entire new school of young Marxist economists, English and American, argue that it is central; and one of them, David Yaffe—whose work, according to Andrew Gamble and Paul Walton, is "the most authoritative reading of Marx at present available"—argues that "abandoning the organic composition of capital argument is to reject Marx's whole value analysis, which leaves Marxism reduced to Ricardian economics plus crude facile empiricism" [Gamble and Walton 1976, p. 142].)1

¹ This quotation is a characterization of Yaffe's argument by Gamble and Walton, not directly from Yaffe himself. Earlier two other Marxian economists, Andrew Glyn and Bob Sutcliffe, had written a book (1972) which argued that the decline in British capitalism is due to the falling rate of profit. But they were disputed in part by Gamble and Walton, who, agreeing with their conclusion, claimed that it had been derived from an inadequate premise, namely, a simplified Ricardian model of value. Yet Braun (1976) claims "that a certain confusion reigns between the meaning of the word 'value,' as used by Marx in different parts of Capital, and as used by Ricardo in his Principles." He claims that the definition of the word "value" is "not at all important in the general theory of Marx about the capitalist mode of production" or in a theory of prices of production where "Marx tries incorrectly to derive prices of production from val-

On the other hand, Michio Morishima, one of the most respected economic theorists in the field, shows that Marx did solve the "transformation problem" but dealt inadequately with the aggregation question because his algebra and mathematics were inadequate. Building on Marx, however, Morishima grafts the labor theory of value onto a von Neumann general equilibrium model in order to construct an aggregation or macroeconomic model. This model could then be used as the basis for a new growth theory that can accommodate substitution and choice of alternative techniques, which had been stumbling blocks in Marxist theory (Morishima 1973, esp. introduction and chap. 14).

I cannot mediate the argument. The point I want to make is that Harrington's exposition is a cheat. It pretends to discuss the "law of value" but ignores the entire technical literature on the problem, from its comprehensive exposition in Paul Sweezey's *Theory of Capitalist Development* (reformulating Bortkewicz) down to the profuse literature of the present day.

The same cheat is repeated on a more elaborate scale in part 2 of the book. In a chapter entitled "Introduction to a Secret History." Harrington claims, "It is the argument of Part II of this book that it was and is the structure of capitalist society that turned the historical accidents of the 1970s into calamitous necessities." But nowhere does Harrington employ, in coherent or more than offhand remarks, any of the Marxian tools or any of the specific theories of crises in order to explain the situation of the 1970s; he merely states repeatedly that the unplanned nature of capitalism leads to crises. Most of the chapters are taken up with polemics seeking to show that the United States government has intervened more directly to help corporations than other social groups, that inequality has not been substantially reduced, that the neo-conservatives are wrong in their judgments about the welfare state, and so on. All of these points are debatable, but I do not want to be deflected from the central question, which is, What specifically does this "new Marx" tell us about contemporary society that is genuinely new? The answer is nothing.

In the one effort to deal theoretically with the question of the 1970s, Harrington relies briefly on James O'Connor's Fiscal Crisis of the State, whose argument is not at all congruent with the "law of value." The heart of the "law of value" argument is that competition between capitalists would lead to the elimination of the inefficient, that the increasing substitution of machinery for labor would lead to more intense exploitation to overcome the shrinking base of labor, and that such competition was the

ues"; but it is "important in any model of accumulation, and in this context, Marx uses the concept adequately" (pp. 116–17). If "authentic" Marxists fall out so among themselves, what are we "inauthentic" Marxists to say? Curiously Harrington, who in other respects is so ravenous about recent Marxian literature, ignores this easily available English debate and devotes himself to some recondite German arguments which deal metaphysically with the "law of Value."

motor of destruction. O'Connor's argument, however, is that the capitalist state faces the contradictory problems of accumulation and legitimization, of providing for capital expansion yet meeting social demands. And he is right. But this is true for all societies committed to growth, because —as the present Polish government sees very well—they have to balance the need to increase capital against workers' demands for more food and social services.

Curiously, Harrington misses a neat opportunity to apply Marx's idea of competition as the source of destruction (which is nicely stated in *The Poverty of Philosophy*), as he could have done if he had taken the international economy as his canvas. Thus the strength of the Japanese and German capitalist economies is, in one sense, at the "expense of" the British economy; but this is then not "the twilight of capitalism" but the twilight of *some* capitalist societies—a point which proves Veblen right more than Marx.

If one seeks for some root source of the contemporary economic crisis, it is the fact that in the modern world demand rules the society, as against the traditional societies, where supply ruled. Within the international economy, we have seen in the past 20 years the gathering swell of an international demand which, by its synchronization through interdependence, led to a worldwide inflation. And within societies, the demand for services and entitlements has led to the expansion of the public sector—here the neo-neo-Marxist James O'Connor and the vulgar Marxist Milton Friedman (who believes that economics determines other realms of society) are in agreement—and again to a persistent inflationary pressure.

In a very different sense from what Harrington understands, Marx was right about the present. For what Marx said was that, when the "political revolution" was won, the "social revolution" would follow. The political revolution—the heart of 19th-century struggles—was the effort to gain the political franchise and similar rights. (In most European countries workers did not obtain the right to vote until the period between 1890 and 1910.) What we see now—and what has existed for the past 40 years in the United States and somewhat longer in western Europe—is the effort to extend social claims in all dimensions. This is the fruit of democracy and therefore one of the sources of crises—what Schumpeter called the "fiscal sociology" of capitalism. The one area where few such tensions exist (openly at least) is the Communist world, where the workers are suppressed.

I have said Harrington's book is a cheat. That is a serious charge. Yet it derives from his method. On a theoretical level, it derives from the most serious violation of Marx's own method, which is to treat ideas historically. In constructing his "authentic Marx," Harrington makes a pastiche in which passages from the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts* are joined with passages from *Capital*, etc. This is a lawyer's brief or a theological

mode, but not true to the way a man's ideas develop. He compresses passages in order to make Marx seem more foresighted than he was. For example, on pages 128-29 he quotes from Marx's Grundrisse (without indicating whose translation he is using) a section that shows how Marx anticipated the application of science to production. But if one compares Harrington's literary rendering with Martin Nicolaus's literal translation (Marx 1973, pp. 704-5) one can see how much more clumsy and inexact is Marx's own formulation. What is more, Harrington is quoting Marx in order to argue that I, in my book The Coming of Post-industrial Society, "failed to understand that Marx had anticipated [Bell's] own point on the growing importance of productivity in the domain of capitalist labor": yet after his compressed quotation, Harrington fails to point out that, four pages further on. Marx argues that such productivity is impossible for capitalist labor: ". . . Real wealth is the developed productive power of all individuals. The measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather disposable time. . . . The most developed machinery thus forces the worker to work longer than the savage does, or than he himself with the simplest, crudest tools" (Marx 1973, pp. 708-9; italics in the original).

I must add one more personal point. Harrington writes (p. 162) that Erich Fromm has charged me with a misquotation of Marx. This is so. But it reflects more on Fromm than on myself. Fromm was analyzing an essay of mine, "The Meaning of Alienation," which he had read in an Indian journal named Thought. Why he quoted from that esoteric source rather than the original place of publication, the Journal of Philosophy (November 1959), I do not know. What did not seem to occur to Fromm is that Indian typesetters often think they know the English language better than those whose native language is English; where I had written "persona," it appeared in the Indian journal as "person." That was the basis of the charge. In reviewing Fromm, Richard Bernstein was struck by the fact that in the context the statement made no sense. He wrote me about it, and I thus discovered that Fromm had misquoted me and therefore charged me with misquoting Marx. But Harrington never seems to have been struck by the obvious incongruity and repeats the charge.² Old factional habits never change.

The notion of an "authentic Marx" is inherently absurd. No protean

² Harrington makes some other statements that are of equally grave import. In *The Coming of Post-industrial Society*, I stated that Marx's *Capital* could be looked at as two different schema. One, a logical abstraction, which is in vol. 1, eliminated the *dritte personen* (the complicating elements such as farmers, shopkeepers, lawyers, etc.) to provide a "pure" theory of capitalism. In vol. 3, there was an empirical model that provided some brilliant statements about the actual transformation of capitalist society, in particular the separation of ownership and management, which modified the schema in vol. 1. I said that I found Schema 2 more fruitful than Schema 1. Harrington points out, as Engels did in his prefaces to *Capital*, that most of the materials had been written at the same time and that the task of sorting out the order had fallen to Engels

thinker can ever be given a single, unambiguous reading. We have seen arguments about whether there is one John Stuart Mill or two and whether Keynes belonged to Cambridge, England, or Cambridge, Massachusetts; and I have at hand an article from the British Journal of Sociology entitled "Émile Durkheim: Was He a Nominalist or a Realist?" At one point, Harrington says smugly, "All that serious Marxism demands of you is your lifetime." I have devoted half my life to the study of Marx, and that may be insufficient. But Eugene Kamenka, the Australian political philosopher, has devoted his entire life to the study of Marx. In a recent issue of the Times Literary Supplement, reviewing a book (On Materialism, by Sebastian Timpanaro) that seeks to "rehabilitate" Engels as a "true" Marxist, against his cultured despisers, Kamenka wrote, "The past history, present character and likely future development of Marxism show Marxism to be as complex and as much subject to historical change and tension as Christianity. . . . The only serious way to analyze Marxist or socialist thinking may well be to give up the notion that there is a coherent doctrine called Marxism or socialism, that there is any such thing as the Marxist or socialist idea, or even the Marxist or socialist view of the world" (Kamenka 1976, p. 1442).

Otherwise, one is left with the situation of Harold Laski, who said, bitingly, in replying to a critic, "You can interpret Marx in your way, and I will interpret him in *His*."

⁽which makes Harrington's remark [p. 111] that Marx had written the "fourth and last volume of Das Kapital first and then worked backward to the beginning" quite silly, considering, too, Marx's remark to Kautsky in 1881 that he still felt the work lacked coherence). But the crucial point is that when Engels edited the volumes he made many interpolations, and we do not actually know what he did add. Harrington writes, "Then in the process of editing Volume III, which appeared in 1894, Engels made even more sweeping revisions of Marx's earlier assessments." And he goes on for two pages to indicate that these were the additions which made vol. 3 so much more relevant to the actual institutional changes in capitalism: cartels, the stock market, the corporation as an international instrument, etc. Since these were the elements I had included in my second schema, what then is the meaning of the appendix charging me with misreading Marx, when in his text Harrington makes the exact same point? Or the meaning of the offhand earlier assertion (p. 380), "A carelessness on the same count is also at work in Daniel Bell's confused statement of the Marxist view of social class [to] be taken up in Note 4 of this Appendix"—since note 4 deals with the two schema, what has it to do with social class? And since when is there "the" Marxist view of social class? In this instance, as in many other sweeping accusations against Samuelson, Aron, and others, Harrington is unfortunately imitating the habits of Marx, who rarely played fair with an opponent. If Harrington is interested in the sources of this "repetition compulsion," he should read Leopold Schwarzschild's brilliant book, The Red Prussian, the only book which goes into detail on Marx's vitriolic invective against opponents ("perfidious boor," "toads," "the emigrant scum," and the disgusting anti-Semitic characterizations of Lassalle); as well as two works by Marx that almost no Marxists have ever read, The Knight of the Noble Conscience, a vile attack on his factional opponent August Willich, and The Great Men of Exile, an attack on the Germans who emigrated to America which was not printed because his Hungarian publisher embezzled the publication funds. If a complete oeuvre of Marx is ever to appear, I commend these books to those who seek the "authentic Marx."

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