



## KARL MARX AND THE TRANSLATIONS OF *CAPITAL* INTO GREEK

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### KARL MARX'S LIFE

Karl Marx was born on May 5<sup>th</sup> 1818 in Trier, of the German Rhineland. The Rhineland, although it had been annexed by the Prussian monarchy in 1815, remained the most advanced part of Germany in economical and political terms, and was deeply influenced by the French Revolution.

In 1835 Marx went to Bonn University to study law and the year after he moved to Berlin. His original intention was to go on with his legal studies, but he was drawn first into the philosophy of law, and then into philosophy. It was a matter of time until he had to confront the work of the most influential philosopher of that era, Hegel.

A number of younger philosophers began to interpret Hegel in an increasingly radical way and quite different from Hegel's original approach. Hegel believed that God is the reason behind everything, calling Him "the Absolute". For the Young Hegelians, "the Absolute" was humanity instead of God. They were atheists, rationalists and liberals.

In 1841 Marx received his doctorate for a thesis entitled *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* and then returned to Trier. He worked in a newspaper called *Rheinische Zeitung* and a year later he moved to Cologne to become its chief editor. In 1843 he and his family moved to Paris after censorship made his work almost impossible in Germany.

Of course, any account of Marx's life or work would be incomplete without mentioning his closest friend, companion and co-worker, Frederick Engels. In the summer of 1844, Engels was spending some days in Paris. During his stay he visited Marx; and the two established a friendship that would last until the latter's death. Engels was 23 years old at the time of their first meeting, but had already built a reputation through his radical journalism and his association with the Young Hegelians. In 1845 Marx gets expelled from France and moves to Brussels, where he was soon joined by Engels.



## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SOURCE TEXT

In 1849, the Marx family moved to London and Marx obtained a ticket to the Reading Room of the British Museum. He started to study economics for the first time, especially drawing on back issues of the *Economist*. He went on writing his great book on economics, an idea he had conceived four years earlier. In 1851 Marx wrote to Engels:

*"I am so far advanced that in five weeks I will be through with the whole economic shit. And that done, I will work over my Economics at home and throw myself into another science at the Museum. I am beginning to be tired of it."*

When Marx died 32 years later, the book on economics was still unfinished.

In 1857 the world economy entered a crisis Marx had predicted would follow the "golden" years of the early 1850s. The crisis encouraged Marx to resume his economic studies. Marx succeeded in producing, between 1857 and 1858, the work now known as the *Grundrisse*, the first draft of *Capital*.

Everything that was published under this title during Marx's lifetime was a completely rewritten version of the first part of *Grundrisse*, on money, which was published in 1859 as *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. During the following years, *Capital* itself took shape. Marx had originally intended the *Contribution* to be only the introduction to his major work on economics, which would be separated into six volumes: Capital (I), Landed Property (II), Wage Labor (III), The State (IV), International Trade (V), and The World Market (VI).

He launched that project in the summer of 1861 and in two years' time he had already filled 23 notebooks covering 1,472 pages, the work known as the "Economic Manuscripts of 1861-63", which has still to be entirely translated into English.

Marx later abandoned the six-volume scheme, and decided instead to call the whole work *Capital*, and divide it into four volumes: on production, circulation, the system as a whole, and theories of surplus value. Marx wrote the manuscripts of volumes I, II and III of *Capital* in 1864 and 1865, and signed a contract with the Hamburg publishers Meissner & Behre. In 1867 Marx announced that he had finished the proofs of the first volume of *Capital* and a thousand copies of the book were printed a few weeks later. Unfortunately, volumes II and III, as well as the intended volume IV (known as "Theories of Surplus-Value") were edited by Engels years after Marx's death.



## A SHORT TRANSLATING HISTORY OF *CAPITAL* IN GREEK

As paradoxical as it may sound, the first who rushed to accent Karl Marx's *Capital* in Greece were not the Marxists of the Left. On the contrary, they were scholars, politicians and editors hostile to the Left. Their intention was to twist or at least devaluate the theoretical thesis of Marx. In order to do so, many "synopses" of *Capital* were written, in which only a few quotations were translated and were interpreted in several ways.

The first attempt to translate *Das Kapital* into Greek was made back in 1927 by P. Pouliopoulos and G. Doumas. Pouliopoulos was the first General Secretary of the Communist Party of Greece (CPG). He was expelled that same year from his own party because he supported Trotsky against Stalin in their dispute. Finally, Pouliopoulos was arrested by the Metaxas regime, and then executed in 1943 by Italian soldiers during the occupation of Greece in the WWII. The attempt of A. & D. Pournaras was also never completed.

The first complete translation of *Das Kapital* into Greek was the one made by lawyer Giannis Skouriotis and published at his own expenses in several issues between 1954 and 1960. Skouriotis used as a source text for his translation a German edition (East Berlin, 1953), which was a reprint of the 1932 edition of the Institute Marx-Engels-Lenin of Moscow. He also took into consideration three more translations, two of them in French, the other one being an English translation which had been reviewed by Engels himself. Skouriotis' translation is considered a very good one, but its linguistic style makes it quite difficult for the contemporary reader to understand.

The complete translation that can be found in the market today is the one by Panagiotis Mavromatis, a delegate of CPG. The first two volumes were published abroad, because the CPG was outlawed until the mid-70s. A complete translation was published after the collapse of the military junta in 1974. In the following decade the translation of *Capital* was printed in four volumes (including "surplus value theories") by Sinhroni Epohi, the publishing company of the CPG. From 1978 until 2009 the first volume sold over 23.000 copies, the second 15.000, the third 12.000 and the fourth 8.000. It was, beyond any doubt, a very important work: a complete translation with less linguistic problems than Skouriotis' one. The linguistic problem in Mavromatis' translation is the use of a kind of *Soviet slang*: phrases and expressions that were actually used almost exclusively between left-wing people often appear in the text of the translation. In most of the cases we have a Russian or German word written with Greek characters or even combined with a Greek ending, instead of being translated. This *Soviet slang* appears in the majority of the texts of the CPG, especially until the 80's and in some cases even until now. Mavromatis' translation, in general, is quite satisfying. The majority of the Marxian ideas is



translated quite well in Greek. Of course, there are a few exceptions. For example, in the part where Marx discusses “The Working Day”, its limitations and the struggle between capitalists and workers:

*“There is here therefore an antinomy, of right against right, both equally bearing the seal of the law of exchange. Between equal rights, force decides”.*

The word that is translated as “force” in the English version is the German word “Gewalt”, which is quite ambiguous. There are two possible translations, and none of them is even close to “force”. The first is “power” and the second is “violence”. It might seem as a tiny difference, but if we take into account the influence that Marx had and still has on politics, it actually is a big deal. Nonetheless, in the translation made by Mavromatis “Gewalt” is translated as “violence”.

Finally, we have to mention that Marx’s method and ideas were introduced for the first time in Greek universities only in 1936. For the first time a thesis with a Marxian method is defended in the University of Athens by Ahileas Grigorogianis under the title *Foreign Capital in Underdeveloped Countries*. Although the thesis was accepted, there is the following note in the first page: “The approval of this thesis under the Law School of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens does not indicate acceptance of the writer’s notion”. The approval of a Marxian thesis was considered to be an “accident” and did not happen again for more than a decade.