

Capitalism and injustice

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It is hard to do without the concept of exploitation when describing the many forms of injustice created by capitalism. Marx remains very much our contemporary.

Reviewed : Emmanuel Renault *Abolir l'exploitation* (Abolishing Exploitation), Paris, La Découverte, 2023, 324 p., 23 €.

Though the title of Emmanuel Renault's book suggests a plan for ending exploitation, its goal is in fact to analyze the concept and redefine its contours, so as to give it a different meaning than the one associated with the tradition to which it belongs. From the outset, Renault conceives of exploitation in normative terms, asking if "it is better suited than other [concepts] to account for and critique certain experiences of injustice and domination" (p. 5). In this vein, he sets three goals for his book: to rehabilitate the political utility of exploitation; to reconsider exploitation in light of recent theories; and to explain its connection to the logic of injustice and domination. He defends "an intersectional approach" (p. 287) and, for this reason, finds it necessary to question "the monopoly of the theoretical use of the concept of exploitation [to which] Marxism has long aspired [and to show] that the critique of capitalism can be based on other principles than the theory of exploitation" (p. 287).¹

The book is organized into three parts. The first consists of debates surrounding the question of exploitation, emphasizing its significance and criticisms to which it has

¹ He groups the grounds for critiquing capitalism, which he borrows from Erik Olin Wright (who, in *Envisioning Real Utopias* [London New York: Verso, 2010] lists thirteen) into four domains: exploitation, the environment, social reproduction, and democracy.

been subject. Part two concerns the history and usage of the concept, including its genesis and appropriation by Marx and the way feminist perspectives have further enriched it. Part three examines the normative stakes that Renault finds in the concept, particularly as they relate to domination and injustice. He emphasizes the lived experiences of the exploited, resulting in a back-and-forth between empirical and theoretical considerations.

Saving the theory of exploitation...

One particularity of the concept of exploitation is that, when applied to human beings rather than resources, it cannot be positive or even neutral. It is morally inconceivable to defend or celebrate exploitation. Just as refusing to invoke exploitation legitimates exploitative situations, "using the concept of exploitation always amounts to accepting its ultimate abolition" (p. 20). The book also adopts an intersectional approach, which consists in "critiquing exploitation in its multiple, overlapping, and cumulative forms" (p. 303), given that "capitalism's exploitative character has always been classist, sexist, and racist" (p. 305). This means expanding the domain of exploitation beyond that of work, notably by supplementing Marx's social critique of capitalism with feminist, antiracist, and ecological critiques. Not only does patriarchal exploitation ensure the reproduction of the labor force, but capitalist exploitation is also overdetermined by social relations based on sex and race. Renault argues that exploitation rests not on a single factor, but on three criteria: circumstances in which the standard of living of the exploited is inversely proportional to that of the exploiters; the exclusion of the exploited from access to certain productive resources; and the appropriation by exploiters of the labor of the exploited. Renault's goal is to transform and enrich the idea of exploitation by expanding the concept of work through an examination of contemporary developments, such as the emergence of "consumer labor" and "digital work" (p. 63).

Renault is interested in the concept's origins, which he traces to the workers' movement as embodied by the first socialist texts, particularly those of the Saint-

Simonians² and the Neo-Babouvists.³ This leads him to consider what he calls the "classic problem of exploitation" (p. 84), which he attributes to Marx. Over two chapters, he explores the genesis and development of Marx's concept of exploitation, first in *The German Ideology* (1845) and particularly in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). In the latter, Marx makes exploitation part of the dynamics of the workers' movement with a view to setting up a historical diagnosis that structures a theory of history--historical materialism--in which various historical periods are conceived as a series of forms of exploitation.

It is in a chapter devoted to capitalist exploitation that Renault studies its specific forms, notably the fact that exploitation is not visible, and that, in Marx's view, a theory was needed to unveil it--that is, the labor theory of value. Exploitation means the extraction of a surplus work and thus surplus value, the production and accumulation of which is the goal of the capitalist class. In his chapter on feminist approaches, Renault considers integrating domestic relations into the theory of exploitation--that is, to expand the exploitation that occurs in relations of production to the exploitation that takes place in relations of reproduction.

In the book's final section, Renault incorporates exploitation into a normative framework (based on experience, as it relates to injustice and domination). Exploitation is considered as a form of domination, supplementing a structural approach that analyzes capitalism's foundations, notably private ownership of the means of production: "Dispossession of the means of production ... describes only a structural inequality and it is unclear why structural inequalities should be considered forms of domination" (p. 214-215). Domination can take different forms: oppression, in the sense of an obstacle to self-development; servitude, meaning dependence on others; subordination in the sense of a lack of autonomy; and inferiorization, that is, a devaluation of one's competencies. Exploitation can also be understood as an injustice in three respects. It is a distributive injustice, since it entails a lack of equity in the distribution of productive resources and wealth. It is a contributive injustice, as it violates workers' rights to the fruit of their labor. And it is a compensatory injustice, because it compensates work insufficiently.

² It is worth noting that the *Exposition de la doctrine de Saint-Simon* was published in 1829 and 1930 and not a century later, as the book says (p. 87), and that the "dissemination of this theme in the workers' movement" occurred in the 1830s and 40s.

³ This is a reference to revolutionaries who, in the 1830s and 1840s, embraced the communist ideas of Gracchus Babeuf.

... without saving Marx

Though Marx,⁴ of whom Renault is a keen specialist,⁵ is ubiquitous in the book, Renault nonetheless distances himself from the German philosopher, notably when he claims that it is a problem that, "for Marx, the criterion of capitalist exploitation [is] the labor theory of value" (p. 42-43). This is true for four reasons: "1) it makes it difficult to account for price formation ... 2) it also makes it difficult to analyze differences in income ... between simple labor and complex labor ... 3) it is not clear how one should measure the quantity of labor that creates value (... intellectual labor time being difficult to measure) 4) ... it is impossible to deduce monetary values (prices) from non-monetary values (labor quantities)" (p. 43). Each of these claims is problematic. The first and the fourth hark back to the "transformation problem" between values into prices,⁶ which was essentially a theoretical offensive launched by neoclassical economists⁷ to discredit Marx's theory. We agree with Andrew Kliman and Ted McGlone,⁸ who do not see it as a problem, since, by using mathematical tools to resolve social questions, this approach turns theoretical and political issues into purely technical matters.

The second and third reasons are also technical. It is on this basis,⁹ rather than on reflective or philosophical grounds, that Renault seeks to discredit Marxist theory.¹⁰ The difficulties in measuring the difference between the value produced by simple labor and the value produced by complex labor--the latter is a power of the former--and the difference between manual labor and intellectual labor are not adequate reasons to reject the relevance of these differences. Even so, Renault concludes that "it

⁴ Or perhaps Marx's specter...

⁵ See, notably, *Marx et la philosophie*, Presses universitaires de France, 2014; *Marx and Critical Theory*, Brill, 2018.

⁶ Debates on the question of the transformation of value into price, which was first formulated by David Ricardo, examine the relevance of the labor theory of value as a tool for price determination.

⁷ Neoclassical theory is one of Renault's theoretical reference points. He notes that "neoclassical economics has shown that thinking in terms of marginal utility allows one to make [commodities] commensurable" (p. 162).

⁸ Andrew Kliman and Ted McGlone, "The Transformation Non-Problem and the Non-Transformation Problem," *Capital & Class*, 12.2, summer 1988: 56-83.

⁹ "This theory [of value] is debatable [primarily] for two reasons that we will simply mention in passing, lest we lose the reader in excessively technical considerations" (p. 161-162).

¹⁰ Yet he does not deny its heuristic dimension: "the critical force of the concept of exploitation lies in the way that it brings to light the fact that appropriating someone else's labor defines a structural and politically decisive social polarity between exploited classes and classes that benefit from exploitation" (p. 47).

seems legitimate to abandon the idea of basing the analysis of capitalist exploitation on [Marx's theory of value]" (166).

Refusing to renounce a theory of exploitation while renouncing the labor theory of value makes it necessary to come up with alternative criteria: Renault opts for injustice and domination, inspired by analytical Marxists (particularly John Roemer,¹¹ but also Jerry Cohen and Erik O. Wright). By replacing the structural foundations of exploitation theory with normative foundations, Renault's position comes close to Roemer's, for whom "it is not at all clear how analytical Marxists will differ from non-Marxist philosophers like Ronald Dworkin."¹² Furthermore, one implication of abandoning the labor theory of value, for Renault, is that "work is not the only factor of production ... and the owners of other factors of production [notably capital] have the right to demand compensation" (p. 270), and just as capital is as entitled as labor to a share of the wealth, employees do not all belong to the same social class, since "it is because they experience exploitative relationships that the most poorly paid employees work for the best paid employees and owners of capital" (p. 213).

It is perhaps along these lines that we should understand the "broad alliances" that "this concept could make possible" (p. 12). One of the book's conclusions is that its transformed theory of exploitation breaks down the boundary between exploiters and exploited. Because it contributes to production, capital is potentially exploited, while some employees may be exploiters. By scrambling class borders, this position undermines Marx's crucial idea that capitalism is premised on the exploitation of workers by capitalists.

Even so, Renault's book is particularly stimulating for anyone interested in power relations and inequality with a view to emancipatory solutions.

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¹¹ See John Roemer (1982) *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class*, Cambridge University Press. For a critique, see Fabien Tarrit (2020), "Marxisme et théorie néoclassique. La reconstruction incertaine de John Roemer," *Cahiers d'économie politique*, 78.2 : 27-53.

¹² John Roemer (1985) "'Rational Choice' Marxism: Some Issues of Method and Substance," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20.34: 1441.