

My Response to the Discussants

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Abstract

I am delighted that my book has attracted so much interest, and I am very grateful for the interesting contributions and critiques, from which I have learned a great deal. Unfortunately, due to time and space constraints, I am unable to address all of the points raised.

Keywords

Scientific revolution; Theory of value; Abstract labor; Money as a commodity; Dialectics

Several participants in the discussion note that certain topics and debates are missing from my book. The points that are said to be missing are as varied as the focus of the individual participants. Some of the points mentioned would certainly have improved or expanded my argument. However, it should be borne in mind that in my book I have attempted to address a limited set of questions, namely the scientific character of Marx's theory of value, which stems from a scientific revolution, and the ambivalences already contained in the basic categories of Marx's theory of value, which then lead to very different interpretations, all of which can be based on Marx's text. Not all of the omissions mentioned by the discussants seem to me to be really relevant to my set of questions.

I must also briefly note another point: important parts of this book were written between 1987 and 1990, and two extensive chapters were added for the expanded new edition of 1999. Over the past 25-30 years, I have continued to study Marx's theory intensively. In the last 12 or 13 years, this has mainly been in the context of preparing a multi-volume biography of Marx, which also includes an account of the development of his work. As a result of the learning processes involved, I now see some things somewhat differently than when I wrote *The Science of Value*. Although these learning processes have not led me to revise the basic theses of my book, I would today emphasize many things differently or place them in a slightly different context.

1. Continuity and rupture in the development of Marx's theory

An important change in my view concerns the question of continuity and rupture. In *The Science of Value*, I argued that there is a break between the economic work of the young Marx (found primarily in the "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts" of 1844) and that of the mature Marx (from the 'Grundrisse' to the various *Capital* manuscripts). Unlike Althusser, however, I did not see a break between "ideology" and "science" here—I do not wish to deny the scientific character of Marx's early writings. The essential break that takes place in the "Theses on Feuerbach" and the manuscripts on the "German Ideology" is the break with the idea of a "human essence" from which people are "alienated" in capitalism. This break then formed an important prerequisite for the scientific revolution that the mature Marx accomplished in the economic manuscripts written from 1857 onwards.

My views on the break in the development of Marx's work and the concept of the "theoretical field," which I used to explain the scientific revolution accomplished by Marx, owe much to the reflections formulated by Louis Althusser in the 1960s in *Pour Marx* and *Lire le Capital*. Vittorio Morfino has described the relationship between my reflections and those of Althusser in a very precise manner and made it clear how this opened up certain argumentative possibilities for me and

that I thereby go beyond Althusser with Althusser—a formulation that I have not used myself, but which I am happy to adopt.

Today, I still maintain that there was a break with Marx's early theory of "alienation" from human nature. However, I would no longer speak of "one" great break that allows us to distinguish between two (or, if we include a transitional phase, three) major phases in Marx's development. Marx dealt with different, albeit closely related, areas of knowledge: philosophy, economics, history, politics, and, at times, the natural sciences. In all these areas, breaks occurred at different times and to varying degrees. These many breaks cannot be summarized as one great break, nor as two great breaks. The development of Marx's work is far more complex than such two- or three-phase models suggest.

In his excellent introduction to the Italian translation of my book (reprinted here), Riccardo Bellofiore proposes a third alternative to the choice between continuity and rupture: a "backward reading" that shows how and why certain categories do not disappear but are redefined and drastically changed without being abandoned. However, this approach seems to me to be more of a variation on the continuity thesis. No proponent of this thesis would deny that there were changes in Marx's conceptions, and these changes are then explained in the manner suggested by Bellofiore: Marx adapts his system of categories on the basis of new insights, but the original insights are retained, and therefore there is no break.

The example chosen by Bellofiore—that the critique of alienation was converted into a critique of fetish character and fetishism—clearly illustrates the problems of backward reading. In the 1844 manuscripts, "alienation" refers to a human essence, from which humans are alienated. In *Capital*, the term "alienated" is used only very rarely, and when it is, it simply means that the social relations produced by humans are "alien" to them, that they cannot control these relations. For this use of the word alienation in *Capital*, the reference to human essence is not necessary. The same applies to fetish character and fetishism; these two terms also do not require any reference to a human essence. In this respect, the category of alienation from 1844, together with the 'human essence', has completely disappeared from *Capital*. Although *Capital* does refer to the 'nature' of human beings, this nature describes certain potentials inherent in human beings (reflection, planning, etc.) that can be exploited to varying degrees but from which one cannot become 'alienated'.

2. Classical political economy, vulgar economics, and neoclassical economics

My treatment of classical and neoclassical economic theory has also been criticized. Bellofiore believes that I "assimilate" classical economics into vulgar economics and asks whether I still recognize a separate vulgar economics or whether, for me, all non-Marxian economics is vulgar economics. Passarella argues along similar lines in his contribution.

Marx's distinction between scientific economics, which he understood primarily as the "classical political economy" by Adam Smith and David Ricardo, and "vulgar economics," by which he meant primarily the precursors of marginalism, was understood by many Marxists to mean that scientific bourgeois economics was limited to the representatives of classical political economy (i.e., essentially took place before Marx) and that everything that happened after Marx should be classified as "vulgar economics." For example, Keynesian theory was often discussed by Marxists only as the basis for an economic policy designed to stabilize crisis-ridden capitalism and was therefore regarded more or less as (vulgar economic) apologetics. Whether this theory might also contain new insights that could be of interest to Marxists was not a matter for discussion. In the 20th century, the prevailing Marxist view of the history of economic theory was structurally similar to the prevailing bourgeois view. For both, the decisive watershed was the marginalism of the 1870s. Only the assessment of this watershed was contrary. For established bourgeois economics, marginalism and increasingly mathematical models marked the achievement of a new level of scientific rigor that left classical political economy, which usually included Marx's theory, far

behind. For Marxists, marginalism marked the definitive victory of vulgar economics, while classical economics and Marx represented the “scientific” part of economic thought, with the differences between Marx and classical economics considered relatively minor given the enormous difference between both and what was considered post-Marxian vulgar economics.

I have opposed these views in two respects. *First*, with regard to Marx’s concept of vulgar economics, which actually combines two very different definitions, one based on the object under consideration: vulgar economics deals only with “apparent connections,” while scientific economics refers to the inner “core structure”; the other definition focuses on the intentions of the respective authors: the interest of vulgar economists is the apologetics of capitalist relations, while the interest of the classical economists is the real investigation of capitalist relations. Marx himself then had to conclude that these two criteria did not always converge: he found vulgar elements even among the classical economists and single scientific insights even among the vulgar economists. It seems to me that the distinction between classical and “vulgar economics” makes sense based on subject areas. Furthermore, I do not wish to deny the scientific nature of “vulgar economics” from the outset, even if apologetics may be found more frequently here than in classical economics.

My other point is that, despite considerable differences in their paradigms, classical and neoclassical economics operate within the same theoretical field. Marx’s critique of political economy is explicitly a critique of classical economics, but since this critique is ultimately a critique of the theoretical field, it also implies a critique of post-Marxian neoclassical theory.

I do not dispute that, as Bellofiore points out, there are far more distinctions and ambivalences within both classical and neoclassical economics than I have taken into account in my presentation, nor do I dispute that, as Passarella emphasizes, there is perhaps much more to Sraffa’s approach, which I have used merely as a critique of neoclassical theory. However, my intention was not to provide a history of economic theory, but rather, as briefly outlined above, to criticize the prevailing treatment of this history by both Marxists and bourgeois economists and to clarify the relationship between Marx’s theory and these traditions.

3. Scientific revolution and rational reconstruction of scientific progress

In *The Science of Value*, I attempt to show that Marx’s theory is not simply a continuation or perfection of classical political economy, but that it is based on a “scientific revolution.” The existing objects of science are not simply researched better; rather, the scientific revolution brings forth new objects and new questions. I have attempted to capture what happened in this scientific revolution with the concept of the theoretical field: Marx breaks with the theoretical field (the basic assumptions that are accepted as self-evident) within which both classical and neoclassical economics are situated.

In his contribution, Pozzoni accuses me of circular reasoning: that the theoretical field of classical economics, which is characterized by anthropologism, individualism, ahistoricism, and empiricism, represents a limitation, only becomes apparent from the standpoint of a monetary theory of value. However, this would not provide any criteria as to why a monetary theory of value should be an “objective improvement over pre-existing economic thought.”

First of all, it should be noted that I have never claimed that the limitations of the theoretical field of classical economics only become apparent from the standpoint of a monetary theory of value. Marx developed his critique of this field between 1845 and mid-1857. Monetary value theory was the result of his subsequent research. However, the circularity problem addressed by Pozzoni is relevant regardless of this specific formulation: if the scientific objects before and after the scientific revolution are so fundamentally different, how can we even speak of scientific progress? Within a paradigm, it is relatively easy to speak of scientific progress, since one is basically dealing with the same objects and using the same concepts and methods. If one compares different paradigms, namely paradigms that belong to different theoretical fields, then this comparison is no

longer so easy to make, since the representatives of the different paradigms use different criteria for what constitutes a better explanation or what should be explained in the first place. Once a particular paradigm has become established, the history of science is usually rewritten to make it appear as if the victorious paradigm solved the open problems of the defeated paradigm. However, if one looks at the preceding debates, it becomes clear that it was not that simple: The “solutions” usually came at a “price,” and other simple explanations and assumptions could no longer be upheld. In many cases, it is impossible to say unequivocally whether what is lost is less important than what is gained. This is precisely where politics, culture, interests, struggle become relevant for the development of science: not for individual theories or statements, but for the acceptance or non-acceptance of a paradigm. In other words, whether and to what extent Marx’s critique of political economy prevails in the dispute between scientific approaches depends not only on the validity of its individual results, but also on what we expect from a science of society and its economy in the first place.

4. Abstract labor

In *The Science of Value* I argued that abstract labor is a purely social determination and that when Marx speaks of abstract labor as labor in the physiological sense, he falls back into a naturalism that can be found to a certain extent in classical political economy. In contrast, Luca Micaloni argues for a reintegration of physiology into the concept of abstract labor. In doing so, he seeks to link the concepts of abstract and concrete labor more closely and to make it clear “that abstract labor is ‘distilled,’ so to speak, from concrete labor.” However, the “distillation” he proposes turns “abstract labor” into a pure abstraction of thought: it captures the most general common feature of labor (namely, all labor, not just that represented in commodities).

This is a clear difference from the introduction of abstract labor in the first subsection of the first chapter of *Capital*. There, Marx states that in the exchange relation between commodities (this is not yet the exchange process carried out by the commodity owners), the use value of commodities is abstracted, since in the exchange relation every use value is replaceable by every other use value in the right quantity. This abstraction from use value, Marx continues, implies that the concrete useful character of the labor that produced the exchanged use values is also abstracted. Abstract labor is introduced here not as a mental abstraction, but as a real abstraction contained in the exchange relation. And since we are dealing with a real abstraction within the exchange relation of commodities, it is clear that we are not dealing with labor in general, but with the labor represented in commodities. This fact is emphasized again in the title of the second subsection. The heading is not “The dual character of labor,” but “The dual character of the labor represented in commodities,” and this difference is blurred if abstract labor is understood as labor in the physiological sense.

Another problem with physiological labor becomes clear in Micaloni’s own formulation. He writes: “Physiologically equal labor does not imply the empirical coincidence of different concrete processes, but is precisely their common element.” It is completely unclear where Micaloni suddenly gets “physiologically equal labor” from. The hard physical work of a construction worker and the mental work of an architect are also very different in physiological terms; we cannot speak of “physiologically equal” here.

From a completely different angle, Riccardo Bellofiore criticizes my conception of abstract labor. He argues that with the real subsumption of labor by capital, the “abstraction of labor itself is accomplished.” He goes on to write, “labor is now abstract in production itself, because its ‘properties’ come to it ‘from outside,’ from the external will and knowledge of capital.” The properties of the labor of those workers who built the Egyptian pyramids also came from outside, from the external will and knowledge of the pharaoh and his administrators. Does this make the work of these workers “abstract”? The real subsumption of labor under capital adapts *concrete* labor to the needs of capital, but it does not make this labor “abstract,” at least not in the sense that Marx

gave to this term in the first chapter of *Capital*, where abstract labor was linked to real abstraction in exchange.

5. Where does value exist?

Stefano Breda, who translated my book into Italian in an excellent manner, criticizes me for not distinguishing precisely between semblance (Schein) and appearance (Erscheinung). He himself locates “Schein” on a subjective level: “‘Schein’ is the merely subjective, hence deceptive, appearance of relations,” while “Erscheinung” is located on a more objective level, the “way in which relations themselves, due to their objective characteristics, necessarily manifest themselves to subjects.” It is true that “Schein” is a form of deception, which cannot be said of “Erscheinung”, but the deception contained in Schein itself has an objective basis. If this deception were to be located solely on the subjective side, then Schein could not be distinguished from a mere error. But what is correct about Breda’s criticism is that I did not explicitly address the difference between Schein and Erscheinung in *The Science of Value*. I made up for this in my commentary on *Capital*, *How to read Marx’s Capital* (Monthly Review Press 2021). Already in my commentary on the first sentence of the first chapter of *Capital*, I emphasize the difference between “seeming” and “appearing.”

In the ‘Science of Value,’ I emphasized that products only become commodities in exchange and that value also only exists in exchange, even though it is the result of production *and* exchange.

Breda rightly notes that in capitalism, production is for the market and that the expectation that products will become commodities is not merely an individual expectation but a social one, which exists not only on the part of capitalists but also on the part of wage workers and the banks that finance the production process. These expectations seem to Breda to guarantee that the expected will happen: “Whatever form it takes, credit has to be rewarded; in order that interest on the capital invested in the production process can be paid, this production process cannot be just production of use values, it has to be production of value.” Breda goes on to conclude: “So since products have a socially expected monetary value, the labor expended in producing them is already not only concrete labor, but abstract labor, although not yet actually quantified.”

I do not dispute that capitalists are forced to transform products into commodities in order to pay interest (and wages) and that capitalists, workers, and banks expect this transformation to be successful. But these expectations do not guarantee that this transformation will succeed. It fails to varying degrees every day, and if Marx succeeded in proving the necessity of crises, then he proved that this transformation must repeatedly fail on a massive scale, that the social expectations of capitalists, workers, and banks cited by Breda are repeatedly disappointed on a broad scale. They then learn that there is a big difference between the mere expectation of an event and the event itself, even when these are not just individual but social expectations. I can’t see how blurring the difference between expecting something to happen and it actually happening contributes to the “dialectical unity of subjectivity and objectivity” or the “dialectical unity of production and circulation process,” as Breda claims.

6. Money as a commodity, relative surplus value, and the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall

In his contribution, Riccardo Bellofiore addresses many points that he views critically or at least differently than I do. This reflects not only (as Bellofiore notes) our different political and intellectual backgrounds, but also a somewhat different approach to Marx’s theory. My book aims above all to provide a better understanding of Marx’s theory, an understanding that reveals and discusses ambivalences, contradictions, and also errors in Marx, and discusses the consequences this has for the project of a critique of political economy. My examination of other theories and

possible additions to Marx's theory are also subordinated to this goal. The reason I am so intensively engaged with Marx is, of course, that I believe the critique of political economy offers the most promising approach to analyzing current conditions, but such an analysis is not part of my book, even if there are a few comments on it here and there.

For Riccardo Bellofiore, on the other hand, Marx's theory is a starting point for developing categories for analyzing the development of capitalist relations. He, too, does not refer to Marx's theory uncritically; he also discusses its problems, but the goal of his work is much more far-reaching than mine. Therefore, some of what he finds lacking in my work results from claims that I do not make in *The Science of Value*. In the following, I can only address a few points, concentrating on those that are relevant to my own limited question.

Bellofiore disputes that it is possible to abandon the concept of "money as a commodity" without major problems. However, I have the impression that he does not adequately address my fundamental argument. He seems to have understood me as claiming that Marx clung to the commodity nature of money merely because of historical circumstances. Bellofiore, on the other hand, wants to show that it was conceptual reasons that led Marx to money as a commodity. Bellofiore bases his argument on Marx's explanation of what money must be and quotes Marx's statement: "Money is the absolutely alienable commodity because it is the disembodied shape of all other commodities."

I do not dispute that money is the "disembodied shape of all other commodities," but I do dispute that the carrier of this "disembodied shape" must necessarily be a commodity itself. Nor can I see that Marx ever demonstrated this necessity anywhere; he always took it for granted. In *The Science of Value*, I expressed the assumption that Marx found this assumption so unproblematic because the monetary system of his time was based on a monetary commodity. This assumption may or may not be true, but it has nothing to do with my central argument that the derivation of what money is must be separated from the question of whether a commodity or a non-commodity is the carrier of what Marx calls money.

Bellofiore also criticizes my interpretation of Chapter 10 in the first volume of *Capital* (in the Penguin edition, Chapter 12). In order to justify the enforcement of the production of relative surplus value, Marx introduces the category of "extra surplus value" in this chapter and discusses competition within an industry. I had noted that this was done not for systematic reasons, but rather for pedagogical reasons; systematically, competition belongs in the third volume of *Capital*. Bellofiore counters that while 'static' competition (by which he means competition between different industries) is only to be dealt with in the third volume, 'dynamic' competition within an industry already belongs in the first volume. In Chapter 10, we are examining the immediate production process of "individual" capital (in *The Science of Value*, I make it clear that "individual capital" is not identical with empirically existing individual capital). However, in order to be able to talk about competition, whether between industries or within an industry, we must have reached the categorical level of the unity of the production and circulation process, and Marx only reaches this level of exposition at the end of the second volume of *Capital*.

In discussing my statements on crisis theory, Bellofiore makes a half-hearted attempt to rescue the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, but I have the impression that he blurs the difference between the statement that a "law" exists and the empirical observation that the rate of profit has fallen in a given period. Bellofiore asserts that "the 'tendency' always remains in the background," dominating in certain historical phases and giving way to "countertendencies" in other phases.

When one speaks of a "tendency," one must explain why such a tendency exists in the first place, regardless of whether it exists in the foreground or background. As far as I can see, Bellofiore provides no arguments for such a tendency. Rather, he distinguishes between factors that cause a fall in the rate of profit and those that cause a rise. Empirically, he finds that in certain phases the rate of profit falls and concludes that the factors causing the fall predominate. In other phases, the profit rate rises, and Bellofiore concludes that the factors that cause it to rise predominate. The fact

that he attributes one group of factors to a “tendency” and the other to a counter-tendency is purely arbitrary and says nothing about the existence of tendencies.

On another point, I have to agree with Bellofiore: I do not concern myself with crisis theories that focus on direct class confrontation, such as the “profit squeeze” approach. I should have done so, but then my remarks might have met with even more criticism from Bellofiore.

7. Hegel and dialectics

Giovanni Zanolli has made a quantitatively and qualitatively significant contribution that takes up the positions I formulated in *The Science of Value* on Hegel, the Marx/Hegel relationship, and the question of dialectics. However, Zanolli’s contribution goes far beyond a discussion of my positions. I must admit that I find it most difficult to respond to this contribution, for two reasons.

First, I am not sure whether I have understood all of Zanolli’s arguments correctly; at times, the arguments on which his conclusions are based are not entirely clear to me. Zanolli reconstructs Hegel and Hegel’s relationship to Marx very much in line with Adorno’s thinking. My knowledge of Adorno is not very deep, so perhaps my lack of understanding is due to this deficiency. It may also be that Adorno’s path from Hegel to Marx is perhaps a little too long to be presented in an essay.

The other reason why I find it so difficult to respond here is that my understanding of Hegel’s philosophy, and thus also of the relationship between Marx and Hegel, has changed considerably since the publication of the expanded version of *The Science of Value* in 1999. This is the area where I have moved furthest away from the positions taken in *The Science of Value*. As I made clear in the first volume of my Marx biography (*Karl Marx and the Birth of Modern Society*, vol. 1, Monthly Review Press 2019), I consider not only “German idealism” to be a questionable construct in the history of philosophy, but also the classification of Hegel as an “idealist” to be extremely problematic. I would no longer stand by my statement, quoted by Zanolli, that Hegel takes a more “Platonic” position on universals and Marx an “Aristotelian” one. I agree with Zanolli that Hegel must also be credited with an “Aristotelian” position if one wishes to engage in such analogies at all. Against this background, I also find Marx’s statements on Hegel, as found above all in the afterword to the second edition of the first volume of *Capital*, inappropriate. In *The Science of Value*, I criticized Marx’s reception of classical political economy in detail, but accepted his reception of Hegel’s philosophy largely uncritically. I would no longer do so today.

However, I would like to briefly address one of Zanolli’s criticisms. At the end of his paper, he accuses me of not recognizing any subjects in my presentation of the critique of political economy and, as proof that I even confirm this myself, Zanolli refers to my approving quotation of Althusser’s statement that history is a “process without subject.” Apparently, it makes no difference to Zanolli that this sentence refers to “subject” (singular), while he accuses me of omitting “subjects” (plural). Of course, real people exist as subjects (plural) of history, but a grand historical subject in the singular, such as “humanity” or “the proletariat” or “reason” or “capital,” seems to me to be nothing more than bad metaphysics.