



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

[Review of: W.C. Roberts (2017) Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital]

Raekstad, P.

Publication date

2017

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Disputatio

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Raekstad, P. (2017). [Review of: W.C. Roberts (2017) Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital]. *Disputatio*, IX(44), 127-130.

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

R. D. Ingthorsson
Department of Philosophy
LUX, Lund University
Box 192, 221 00 Lund
rognvaldur.ingthorsson@fil.lu.se

Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital, by William Clare Roberts.
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017, 304 pages, ISBN: 978-0691172903.

William Clare Roberts' recent book, *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital*, provides a novel and interesting interpretation of the first volume of Marx's masterpiece. Roberts argues, controversially, that Volume 1 of *Capital* presents a stand-alone piece of political theory. His two over-arching theses are that (1) *Capital* Volume 1 aspired to provide "the definitive analysis of what's wrong with capitalism" and (2) that this is based "on rewriting Dante's *Inferno* as a descent into the modern 'social Hell' of the capitalist mode of production" (p. 1). He does this in part by emphasising the many different strands of socialist theory that Marx was responding to, which include an important and oft-overlooked strain of radical republican thought. It is clear, well-researched, original, and well worth reading for anyone with an interest not only in Marx and Marxist political theory, but in freedom, domination, republicanism, and critiques of capitalist economic institutions as well.

Roberts begins by arguing that Volume 1 of Marx's *Capital* be read and understood as essentially a work of political theory on its own, independently of the other two volumes and Marx's work thereon, and thereafter arguing that Marx modelled the structure of *Capital* Volume 1 on that of Dante's *Inferno*. Roberts' thesis has elicited a well-known debate with David Harvey, who argues that the three volumes of Marx's *Capital* can only be understood as a whole, partly because Marx's full political economy of capitalism only comes to fruition with Volumes 2 and 3. However, I think it's worth making the point that even if, like Harvey, we want to argue *contra* Roberts that Marx is developing a theory of political economy in *Capital*, and that that theory can only properly be understood by reading all three

volumes, Roberts' book still has a much to recommend it for its reading of Marx's account of capitalist domination and unfreedom, and how it connects various parts of Marx's argument to the disagreements he had with the other socialists of his day. In other words, we should avoid the temptation of thinking that *either* Marx was producing a political theory with significant normative import in *Capital* or he was developing a theory of political economy. We can accept both that Marx was developing a theory of political economy, which only comes to full fruition at the end, and that it has important theoretical lessons and implications about how capitalism is dominating and unfree, what sort of system would be required to replace it, and so on. To be clear, this is not a temptation I think Roberts or Harvey (in his critique of Roberts) fall into; it is a one I think some of their readers may risk, and would do well to avoid.

Roberts goes on to argue that in Part I of *Capital* Marx presents an analysis of the market unfreedom inherent in capitalism. On this view, the capitalist marketplace implies subjecting its participants to a form of impersonal domination, insofar as market actors are made dependent on the imposed demands of consumers in the marketplace, without being able to contest or demand justification of them. As I will return to below, this seems to deviate somewhat from the standard neo-Roman or republican concept of freedom, according to which freedom is freedom from domination, and domination in turn is spelled out as being subject to the will or arbitrary power of another (either a person or an institution coherent enough to be construed as having a will). (Note that I here prefer the term 'neo-Roman' to 'republican' conceptions of freedom for essentially the same reason that Quentin Skinner does: because it is possible to advocate monarchy (indeed over a republic) on the basis of such a concept of liberty.) Roberts' following chapters discuss Marx's theory of exploitation in its historical context and his analysis of how capitalism develops the productive forces without enriching labourers, makes labourers increasingly dependent on capital, and even generates the illusion that capitalist domination is really an instance of freedom. Chapter 6 discusses Marx's writings on primitive accumulation, showing how Marx, against many of his contemporaries, is keen to distinguish feudalism from capitalism, show how the development of capitalism renders many of his contemporaries' ideas

about alternative economic institutions—such as a return to small-scale production—impossible, and show how the capitalist state is intrinsically tied up with the need for capital accumulation, seen e.g. through capitalist imperialism and colonialism.

The final chapter ties the different strands of Roberts' argument together to argue that Marx adheres to a neo-Roman concept of freedom, which he uses to critique capitalism. Here Roberts argues against reading Marx as having a positive concept of freedom as self-mastery, self-direction, and so on, in favour of a commitment to freedom as non-domination. However, he argues, this represents a radicalisation of neo-Roman freedom to include not only familiar forms of personal domination—e.g. between the master and slave, monarch and subject, or boss and worker—but also forms of impersonal domination. This raises an interesting question: if freedom is opposed to domination, but domination no longer consists in being subject to the will or arbitrary power of another, do we still have a case of neo-Roman freedom? If you accept an analysis of impersonal domination like Marx's, it seems to me that you have two ways to go. Either you can retain freedom as freedom from being subject to the will or arbitrary power of another, and only oppose freedom to personal forms of domination (and not impersonal forms). Or you can retain freedom as the opposite of domination *tout court*, but end up with a different concept of freedom than the standard neo-Roman one. It would be different from the standard neo-Roman concept of freedom because domination, on this view, no longer consists in being subject to the will or arbitrary power of *an other* of the right sort—either a single person or an organisation unified and coherent enough to be said to have a will. A natural suggestion here is that Marx has a positive concept of freedom, which can, unlike the neo-Roman concept generally discussed, be thwarted by both personal and impersonal forms of domination. Roberts wants to retain freedom as the opposite of domination and accept that there are impersonal forms of domination, but it's left unclear whether, and if so how, a recognisably neo-Roman concept of freedom can do this work.

Marx's Inferno is naturally notable for its argument that Marx structures *Capital* Volume 1 along the lines of Dante's *Inferno* (a claim which is not entirely new, but is undoubtedly well made) and for its

contextual analysis of Marx's argument in light of the other socialist authors of his time he was responding to, including Charles Fourier, Saint-Simon, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and Robert Owen. But this is far from all that the book has to offer. For one, it puts Marx into fruitful dialogue with neo-Roman conceptions of freedom in the context of critically assessing capitalist economic institutions. In so doing, Roberts connects his work to Alex Gourevitch's recent book on the role of neo-Roman conceptions of freedom in the early US labour movement (Alex Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) (p. 7–8). Much traditional writing on neo-Roman conceptions of freedom focus overwhelmingly on early modern, aristocratic, and anti-democratic thinkers. Roberts and Gourevitch both stick out insofar as they (1) extend our knowledge of neo-Roman concepts and ideas into the 19th Century, (2) focus on much more radical thinkers, who, among other things, (3) use these ideas to critically examine the economic structure of capitalist society and (4) think about which alternative economic institutions should replace them. These momentous questions are increasingly being discussed today, and Roberts' book makes an important contribution to both asking and answering them.

Paul Raekstad
Dept. of Pol. Science/Roeterseiland
Postbus 15578
Amsterdam, 1001 NB
Netherlands
paul.raekstad@cantab.net