

The historical-materialist methodology of *Capital* and the multiple dimensions of the critique of capitalism

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Abstract. As the magnum opus of the Marxist critique of political economy, *Capital* embodies the intrinsic unity of historical dialectics and systematic dialectics. By introducing a “historicist conception” into the critique of political economy and examining “the facts of political economy,” Marx exposed the intrinsic contradictions of capitalism. In doing so, he overcame the shortcomings of the abstract interpretation of speculative historico-philosophical theory, and achieved the dialectical unity of the historically concrete and the concrete in thought. The theory of primitive accumulation reveals the historical essence of capitalism’s origins—namely, the separation of workers from the means of production—thereby demonstrating the methodological strengths of historical materialism in explaining concrete historical processes. The critique of psychopolitics, for its part, discloses the mechanisms through which capital exercises a dual mechanism of domination over workers’ bodies and minds from the perspective of the despotism of capital, highlighting the essentially critical nature of *Capital* as the theory of proletarian emancipation. A holistic understanding of the methodology of *Capital* is essential for deepening Marxist theoretical research and responding to the new developments of contemporary capitalism, and thus holds significant theoretical and practical value.

Keywords: *Capital*, historical dialectics, primitive accumulation, psychopolitics, historical materialism

1. Introducing the problem: theoretical debates on the methodology of *Capital*

As the magnum opus to which Marx devoted his life, *Capital* stands not only as a classic political-economic analysis of the capitalist mode of production but also as a paradigmatic application of the historical-materialist methodology. Yet academic debates surrounding the methodology of *Capital* have produced divergent interpretive frameworks, particularly between those who foreground historical dialectics and those who emphasize systematic dialectics. These differing approaches reflect not only contrasting understandings of the text itself but also fundamentally different conceptions of the essence of Marxist methodology.

The interpretive route grounded in systematic dialectics proceeds from a scientific theoretical system and a rational mode of presentation. It seeks to reinterpret the relationship between the dialectics of *Capital* and Hegel’s *Logic*, underscoring the value of the logic of presentation for the construction of the theoretical architecture of *Capital*. According to this view, the theoretical structure of *Capital* is a special configuration of thought, and the order in which economic categories appear within this totality of thought does not necessarily correspond to the order in which real objects emerge historically. In contrast, the route rooted in historical dialectics holds that a logical system lacking a historical horizon represents only the formal expression of the dialectics within *Capital*. It argues that only a “great historical sense” can bring to light the realistic character and critical essence of Marxist political economy. From this perspective, any interpretation that divorces dialectical logic from historical development risks reducing Marx’s critique to an abstract schema, thereby undermining its transformative intent.

At its core, this theoretical controversy concerns how one ought to understand the relationship between “system” and “history.” In reality, the dialectics embodied in *Capital* constitute neither a purely conceptual movement detached from economic facts nor an empirical account confined to the surface of historical phenomena. Instead, they represent a dialectical unity between the structuration of history and the historicization of structure. To grasp fully the integral features of the methodology of *Capital*, it is essential to examine concrete theoretical issues—such as primitive accumulation and The critique of psychopolitics—and to analyze, on the empirical basis of “the facts of political economy”, both the theoretical horizon and the limits of historical dialectics. Only then can we reveal the multiple dimensions through which *Capital* develops its critique of capitalism.

2. The theoretical horizon of historical dialectics: beginning from "the facts of political economy"

The debate between historical dialectics and systematic dialectics can be traced back to differing interpretations of Hegel's "great historical sense." Engels once remarked that "what distinguishes Hegel's mode of thought from that of all other philosophers is that it has a great historical sense as its foundation" [1]. This dialectics, grounded in a "profound historical sense," enables the development of Hegel's theoretical thought to run "parallel" to the course of world history. On the one hand, this "profound historical sense" refers to the grand narrative system of Hegel's historico-philosophical theory and the linear developmental logic that permeates it. On the other hand, it designates a deeply negative recognition of the inevitable demise of all things.

However, Hegel's "profound historical sense" faces two unavoidable problems. First, by employing abstract logic as the interpretive horizon for history, Hegel fails to investigate adequately the realities of life and to appropriate sensuous material, and therefore cannot account for the "historically determinate" character of the logic of capital. Marx argued that Hegel "merely found the abstract, logical, speculative expression for the movement of history—a history that is still not the real history of human beings as given subjects" [2]. Second, interpreting the historical process through the self-return of Absolute Spirit is fundamentally a historical teleology—one that tends to diminish the agency of historical subjects in the name of historical necessity.

It is precisely in view of the "profound historical sense" of Hegelian dialectics and its shortcomings—especially its "unreality"—that Marx took "the facts of political economy" in capitalist society as the empirical foundation of historical investigation. Drawing extensively on the advances of modern natural science, he reconstructed a new "profound historical sense," thereby delineating the theoretical horizon for interpreting the historical dialectics of *Capital*.

In *Capital*, Marx analyzed "national economic facts" through "the exactness of natural science," thereby effectively overcoming the abstractness of Hegel's "profound historical sense." In Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, he explicitly stated that political-economic critique requires a strict distinction between two domains: "One is the material transformations in the economic conditions of production which can be determined with the exactness of natural science; the other consists of the ideological forms in which people become conscious of this conflict and strive to overcome it" [1]. This division reveals Marx's recognition that "political economy is essentially a historical science" and that only by analyzing with "the exactness of natural science" can one overcome the defects of metaphysical interpretation and grasp historical change through the contradictions of material life [3].

Marx analyzed the laws governing the operation of capitalist society by "starting from the hardest facts" [1]. Making full use of methods drawn from natural science, he "completely appropriated the material," then subjected the collected economic data to quantitative analysis. To measure precisely the labor expended by workers, he quantified the "life-force" that a person can expend within twenty-four hours into the unit of the "the working day," and specified both physical and moral limits to its duration—an application that exemplifies natural-scientific precision. To express more rigorously the degree of exploitation, he defined "the relative surplus value or the relative amount of surplus value," that is, the ratio between surplus labor and necessary labor, as the "the rate of surplus-value." These methods ensured scientific rigor while laying bare the essential nature of capitalist exploitation.

At the same time, Marx penetrated the "concealed structure" of capitalist society and uncovered its internal negative mechanisms of motion, thereby rejecting Hegel's teleological mode of historical explanation. The depth of *Capital's* "historical sense" is most evident in its grasp of the inner laws of capitalist development. The "logic of capital" manifests not only as the process of economic valorization intrinsic to the capitalist mode of production but also as a social relation characterized by inherent self-negation. Beginning with the contradiction between the two factors of the commodity and the twofold character of labor, Marx revealed the entire process of capitalist operation—from labor-power becoming a commodity, to the transformation of money into capital, and ultimately the production of surplus value—and thereby exposed the fundamental antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The "relation between persons concealed within a relation between things" constitutes the "concealed structure" of capitalist society, and its elucidation provides insight into the internal contradictions and limits of the capitalist mode of production.

More importantly, Marx's focus on the "real individuals" who constitute the revolutionary subject of the proletariat—and on the historical conditions under which they develop—embodies a dialectical unity of human agency and historical necessity. Marx replaced the "Absolute Spirit" with "real individuals" as the agents of historical movement, clarifying that the demise of capitalism is neither an abstract process in which the principle of the "negation of the negation" fulfills itself nor an idealist assertion of fatalistic inevitability. Rather, it is grounded in the oppression of the bourgeoisie and the resistance of the proletariat and must be realized through the revolutionary practice of the working class. Historical dialectics thus displays its distinctive theoretical character: it recognizes both the tendency toward pauperization induced by capital accumulation and the historical necessity of proletarian development through struggle; it reveals the objective tendency toward the collapse of capitalism while insisting that such a tendency must be actualized through subjective practice.

3. The theoretical limits of historical dialectics: the rationality and irreplaceability of systematic analysis

Although the historical-dialectical mode of interpretation helps avoid the error of reading political economy through purely abstract speculative logic, it simultaneously carries an inherent risk: it may weaken the specificity of capitalist society and the structural distinctiveness of capital. An interpretation based solely on empirical investigation and positivist analysis cannot fully demonstrate the scientific character of dialectics. Instead, it may lead to a mere accumulation of empirical material or a schematic description of economic phenomena. This makes it necessary to clarify the irreplaceability of the inner structure of capital and the dialectical movement of categories, thereby defining the theoretical limits of historical-dialectical interpretation within *Capital*.

To delineate the interpretive boundaries of *Capital*'s historical dialectics, one must analyze the hierarchical relationship between historical dialectics and systematic dialectics within the methodological framework of political economy. As a method of political economy, systematic dialectics enables us to investigate the logical architecture of *Capital* and to understand the methodological principle that "the abstract determinations lead, in the course of thought, to the reproduction of the concrete." This approach not only reveals the theoretical relationship between systematic structure and historical concreteness but also illuminates Marx's transcendence of classical political economy [4].

First, the depth and scientific rigor of the movement of the logic of capital can only be understood and grasped within a systematic framework; historical concreteness, if taken as the primary mode of analysis, disrupts the integrity and autonomy of capital's logical structure. *Capital* is fundamentally concerned with explaining the deep-seated logic underlying capitalist production. Historical examinations serve merely as auxiliary and illustrative functions relative to the logic of capital's inner structure [5]. Within this narrative centered on capital's logic, Marx treats physical entities—such as gold and silver money—merely as "bearers of particular functions within the circulation of capital." He further abstracts the valorization process of capital into a mathematical expression such as $M-C-M'$, and he treats the capitalist as "the conscious bearer of this movement" [6]. The underlying logic of capital is constantly obscured by external appearances and contingent factors; thus it is "a logic that cannot be directly read off from history but must be grasped theoretically" [5]. To avoid schematic accounts of historical events, it is therefore necessary to articulate the concealed structure of capitalist society within the framework of a theoretical system premised on "pure capitalism."

Second, historical dialectics cannot account for the systemic totality or the logical movement through which simple categories develop into complex ones. The object of study in *Capital* is the totality of "pure capitalism," whose core is the logic of capital. In such a totality, "each part must be supplemented by others in order to be what it is," meaning that no "simple concept" can be fully given or completed at the outset [7]. A simple category "has no meaning outside the structure to which it belongs," and any category abstracted from the theoretical system cannot retain its original complexity or full determinations [7]. For example, the category of "value"—the logical point of departure in *Capital*—does not initially possess a complete or fully concrete meaning. Only as the exposition advances and the systematic structure unfolds does "value" develop from a simple to a more complex category, gradually acquiring richer determinations and more complete significance.

The apparent opposition between systematic dialectics and historical dialectics, however, is fundamentally a false dichotomy created by misreadings of Marx and by interpretive tendencies among later scholars. Marx's concept of history is far more nuanced than such a dichotomy suggests. The historical dialectics of *Capital* is, in essence, a dialectical unity of the structuring of history and the historicization of structure. On the one hand, Marx did not—like positivists—fall into the mere accumulation or schematic narration of historical materials. Through abstract categories such as value-form analysis, the theory of surplus value, and the circuit formulas of capital, he grasped the essential content of history, thereby accomplishing a "historicization of structure." On the other hand, the entire systematic exposition of *Capital* constitutes a comprehensive and conceptual understanding of "historical concreteness." Marx's "totality of thought" is a totality of the historically concrete that is constructed in accordance with the principle of the unity of the logical and the historical; it is, in essence, a "historical mode of cognition."

4. Primitive accumulation and the origins of capitalism: a paradigmatic application of historical materialism

The historical dialectics of *Capital* finds its fullest expression in Marx's theory of primitive accumulation. Building on a strict distinction between capital and capitalism, Marx further differentiates between the "prehistory" and the "actual history" of capitalism. In doing so, he reveals the decisive role of primitive accumulation in enabling the historical transition from capitalism's pre-history to its modern form.

The emergence of capitalism is undoubtedly a qualitative transformation in human history. As Marx writes, "the mere emergence of capital marks a new epoch in the social process of production" [6]. The term "capital" here does not refer to forms of wealth that existed before capitalism; rather, it refers to capital as a mode of production that has achieved social dominance. Prior to the rise of capitalism, capital existed only in subordinate forms—merchant's capital and interest-bearing capital—which

operated within the interstices of natural economies. These two forms, which Marx famously calls “twin brothers,” not only represent “antediluvian forms” of capital but are incapable of effectuating structural transformations in the mode of production. They appropriate surplus labor “on the basis of the old mode of production,” embodying “the mode of exploitation of capital without the capitalist mode of production” [8].

Marx points out clearly that “the formation of monetary wealth before its transformation into capital belongs to the prehistory of bourgeois economy” [4]. Moreover, in Western Europe, the homeland of political economy—“the process of primitive accumulation is to a large extent accomplished,” such that capitalism “has directly conquered the whole of the whole national production,” or where this is not yet fully developed, it nevertheless exerts indirect control over the remnants of earlier modes of production [6]. Without primitive accumulation, the establishment of the capitalist mode of production in Western Europe would have been impossible.

With respect to its substantive nature, Marx uncovers the internal unity of primitive accumulation. The transformation of commodities and money into capital presupposes the separation of labor-power from the means of production. In other words, the defining condition for the establishment of capital relations is the division between the laborer and the ownership of the means of production. “So-called primitive accumulation is nothing other than the historical process of the separation of the producer from the means of production” [6]. This separation constitutes the very essence of primitive accumulation. The chapter on “so-called primitive accumulation” in *Volume I of Capital* depicts precisely this dual process: on one side, producers are separated from their means of subsistence and become wage-laborers—modern proletarians; on the other, the owners of these means of production become capitalists [9].

For Marx, the expropriation of the agricultural producers—namely the peasants—from their land forms the foundation of the entire process of primitive accumulation. This dispossession was accomplished not through idyllic or consensual means but through violent methods, including the spoliation of Church property, the fraudulent alienation of state domains, the theft of the common lands, and the transformation of feudal and clan property into modern private property. These measures simultaneously merged land with capital, laying the groundwork for capitalist large-scale agriculture, and supplied capitalist industry with a mass of a proletariat standing outside the law. Methodologically, a proper understanding of primitive accumulation requires attention both to its inner essence and to the concrete, historically specific forms through which this essence is manifested.

More importantly, Marx emphasizes the historical specificity of primitive accumulation as the concrete pathway by which Western Europe entered capitalism. He explicitly links primitive accumulation to the “origins” of Western European capitalism, describing this portion of *Capital* as “a historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe.” He writes: “The chapter on primitive accumulation merely aims at describing the paths through which the capitalist economic order emerged from the womb of the feudal economic order in Western Europe” [9]. The problem of capitalism’s historical “origin” concerns the concrete pathways through which Western European societies transitioned into capitalism. This is fundamentally different from the question of the historical necessity through which capitalism supersedes feudalism. The former concerns historical phenomena and concrete processes; the latter pertains to historical essence and law-like development. The former is the outward manifestation and realization of the latter.

Marx repeatedly warns against conflating his historical sketch of Western Europe’s transition to capitalism with a universal “historico-philosophical theory.” The flaw of such “historico-philosophical theory” is that it ignores the distinct historical conditions of different societies and generalizes Western Europe’s unique trajectory into a universal law. Marx’s critique of such theory carries important methodological significance: one must not project Western Europe’s historical pattern of primitive accumulation onto other societies, nor should one absolutize its developmental pathway.

Viewed in this light, Max Weber’s theory of the origins of capitalism exhibits clear methodological shortcomings. Weber seeks to explain the uniqueness of capitalism predominantly in spiritual or cultural terms, reducing its ethos to Protestant inner-worldly asceticism and rejecting economic explanations. This approach ignores the determining role of economic base in shaping superstructure and reverses their relationship. Weber entirely overlooks the decisive role of primitive accumulation and obscures the violent processes by which capitalism emerged. In doing so, he ignores the basic fact that the history of primitive accumulation “is written in letters of blood and fire in the annals of mankind” [6]. Ultimately, his analysis remains confined to the surface-level interplay of economic, political, and cultural factors and is unable to penetrate to the essential, law-governed dynamics of the movement of basic social contradictions that drive historical transformation.

5. Spiritual politics and the despotism of capital: the social-critical dimension of *Capital*

If the theory of primitive accumulation reveals the historical essence of the origins of capitalism, then The critique of psychopolitics exposes the dual mechanism of domination—both physical and mental—that capital exerts over workers in the operational process of capitalism. The essence of spiritual politics lies in constructing an interactive configuration of governance in which the politicization of spirit and the spiritualization of politics are both shaped in accordance with the logic of capital. Through his critique of the political economy of the capitalist mode of production, Marx unfolds his reflections on spiritual politics.

The commodification of labor-power and the abuse of the right to use this commodity not only produce the contradictory coexistence of spiritual excitation and volitional dejection; more importantly, they constitute the very preconditions for capitalists to exert corporeal control and spiritual adjudication over wage-laborers. The spiritual world of the capitalist era therefore presents a paradoxical landscape: on the one hand, the capitalist mode of production is revolutionary in nature, and the entire society, in the midst of earth-shaking transformation, displays a developmental pattern characterized by transformation and acceleration, with the capitalist spirit assuming a state of excitation; on the other hand, “the production of surplus value, or the extraction of surplus labor, constitutes the specific content and aim of capitalist production.” The endless exploitation of workers leads to the depletion of their physical strength, the degradation of their bodies, the stunting of their intellects, the debasement of their spirits, and the degradation of their morals [6]. The root of this contradiction lies in the social exchange mechanism by which labor-power becomes a commodity.

The reason capitalist production generates a series of spiritual-political consequences ultimately lies in the collusion between capital and power. As an economic category, capital in fact embodies rich political implications. It is not only “command over social labor” [8] but also “the economic power which dominates everything” [4]. Under the capitalist mode of production, capital and power collude to form an overarching force that exercises comprehensive control over society, constructing an all-encompassing web of power. Through seemingly mild and civilized methods, the despotism of capital completes its domination over the bodies and spiritual discipline of the working class, forging the working population into “servants of capital” through and through.

Spiritual politics reflects the substantive subordination of spirit to capital within the capitalist mode of production. Marx refers to the form “based on absolute surplus value” as “the formal subsumption of labour under capital” [4]; in the production of relative surplus value, this subordination develops into “the real subsumption of labour under capital” [6]. This formal and the real subsumption constitutes the profound expression of the despotism, domination, or dictatorship of capital, and is the fundamental reason for the emergence of spiritual-political problems. It is precisely through the establishment of this relation of labor’s subordination to capital that workers become subject to capital’s control both physically and spiritually.

The spiritual-political techniques of capitalist domination operate primarily through five mechanisms. First, quantification. piece-wages not only provides capitalists with a concrete measure of labor intensity but also a relatively precise scale for “calculating labor productivity and the amount of labor embodied” [6]. Capitalist society as a whole is organized according to the rationalizing principle of calculation, or calculability [10]. Second, homogenization. Machine production causes individual characteristics to be increasingly effaced and the labor process becomes “more and more decomposed into abstract, rationalized partial operations” [10]. Third, institutionalization. The various rules and institutions corresponding to capitalist production are crucial disciplinary mechanisms, through which workers “abandon irregular labor habits” and “technically subordinate themselves to the uniform movement of the instruments of labor” [6]. Fourth, materialization. The materialization of society and the empowerment of material forces render capitalist society one dominated by material dependence. People’s spiritual realms inevitably erode: objects are deified, spirit is objectified, human beings become slaves to things, and spirit becomes enslaved to matter. Fifth, mystification. Capitalism elevates formal rationality and moral ideals—freedom, equality, justice, thrift—attaching to them the stamp of capital and deploying them as ideological instruments of mystification.

As the “gadfly” of its age, *Capital* aims to sting the numbed nerves of the working class, thereby enhancing their capacity for self-knowledge and awakening their self-consciousness. *Capital* is a vivid textbook presenting the living conditions of the working class; it “enables the modern proletariat to become conscious of its own position and needs, and of the conditions of its own emancipation” [9]. Through detailed economic analysis and rigorous logical reasoning, Marx conveys to the working class a simple truth: the working class alone is the master of its own destiny—“the emancipation of the working class must be conquered by the working class itself” [9].

The pursuit of spiritual emancipation by the proletariat requires efforts in several directions. First, the proletariat must grasp the principle that economic base determines superstructure and regard the transformation of economic base as the primary task. The root of spiritual bondage lies in the material interests and relations underlying it, and the abolition of private property is the key for the working class to break free from spiritual politics and attain spiritual freedom. Second, transcending the boundaries of the division of labor and transforming them rationally is the feasible path to spiritual liberation. To correct the distorted development of the spirit, it is necessary to dialectically overturn the old division of labor so that individuals may affirm themselves and develop freely through free and conscious activity. Third, the proletariat must continuously expand the space and extend the temporality of spiritual emancipation in practice. Marx argues in *Capital* that “the reduction of the working day” is the “basic prerequisite” for entering the realm of freedom [11]. The expansion of free time and the rational arrangement of labor time will greatly enrich the spiritual world of human beings.

6. Conclusion: the integrality of the methodology of *Capital* and its contemporary implications

An examination of the theoretical horizon and limitations of the historical dialectic in *Capital*, together with its theories of primitive accumulation and The critique of psychopolitics, allows us to draw several fundamental conclusions.

The dialectic of *Capital* embodies the unity of the structuration of history and the historicization of structure. By introducing a “historicist conception” into the critique of political economy and by interrogating “the facts of political economy”, Marx reveals the internal contradictions of capitalism. In doing so, he overcomes the abstract interpretations characteristic of speculative historico-philosophical theory and achieves a dialectical unity between the historical-concrete and the thought-concrete. If the philosophical method of *Capital* is historical dialectics, then it is necessarily a form of history embedded within the theoretical system of the “totality of thought.” If the philosophical method of *Capital* is systematic dialectics, then it is necessarily a system grounded in historical investigation, aimed at grasping historical tendencies and guiding the praxis of historical subjects.

Methodologically, correctly understanding and grasping the genesis and development of capitalism requires attention both to the interaction and combined effects of various economic, political, and cultural factors at the level of historical phenomena, and to the single determining role of the movement of economic contradictions at the level of historical essence. Neither dimension can be used to displace or negate the other. Engels organically unified the interaction and combined effects of economic, political, and cultural factors at the phenomenal level with the one-fold determining effect of economic contradictions at the essential level. This “the theory of historical resultant forces” holds significant methodological value for understanding the origins of capitalism and for recognizing the new transformations of contemporary capitalism.

Capital critique, corporeal emancipation and spiritual breakthrough are an integrated whole, and the progress of capital critique determines the trajectory of spiritual emancipation. Marx’s theory of spiritual emancipation is the outcome of his critique of spiritual politics and is intrinsically situated within his broader theory of human emancipation. Throughout *Capital*, Marx’s reflections on the politics of spirit consistently aim at liberating both the body and the spirit from relations of constraint, at restoring “human relations” and the “human world” wholly to human beings themselves, and at advancing the transformation from “obedient subjects” to individuals capable of free and all-round development.

A holistic grasp of the methodology of *Capital* bears critical theoretical significance and practical relevance for deepening Marxist theoretical research and responding to the new transformations of contemporary capitalism. In the age of digital capitalism, spiritual politics has acquired an expanded field of operation; the governing techniques of capital have become more sophisticated and more “benign,” while consistently exercising control over individual will under the banner of “acting in your best interest.” In the face of these new phenomena and problems, Marx’s critique of political economy remains a powerful tool for unmasking such stratagems. wage-laborers must maintain composure and clarity amid the torrent of capital and must continue striving for spiritual emancipation and freedom of the mind.

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