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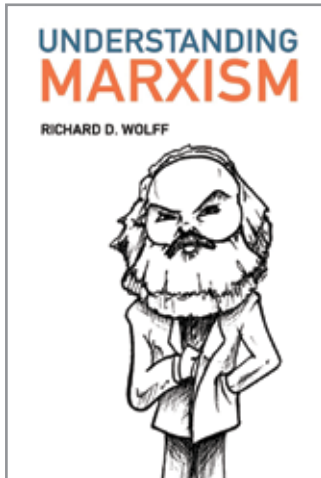
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# The Critical Shadow of Capitalism



*Understanding Marxism* by Richard D. Wolff (Democracy at Work, 2018)

BY ZOE SHERMAN

My early attempts to read Karl Marx, I will admit, did not go so well. I was preparing to begin my first semester as a student of economics at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where (though I wasn't aware of it at the time) Richard Wolff had just retired from his teaching position to turn full time to public education and activism. Since I was going to be attending school with a toddler in tow and was anxious about keeping up with full-time course work, I asked a professor whose class I planned to take for a reading list so I could start over the summer. I tried the selections from Marx, but struggled. There were so many interconnected ideas with their own new-to-me vocabulary, and it seemed that understanding any one of those ideas required already knowing the others. In short, starting to read on page one felt just as disorienting as if I were starting to read on page 103. (The story has a happy ending. In class, with an experienced guide and similarly inexperienced peers, I started to understand what had seemed impenetrable. I even liked it!)

It probably would have helped to have a copy of Wolff's new book, *Understanding Marxism*, had it existed

then. The book hums with a tension between modesty and ambition. The main text is a modestly scaled 77 pages—indeed it only reaches that length with small pages, large print, and generous spacing. Yet it is ambitious in scope, presenting the broad sweep of Marxist thought. Furthermore, Wolff sketches out the circumstances in which Marx developed his analysis of capitalism as a crisis-prone class system and the moments in which interest in Marxism has recurred, including now. "Marxism," he writes in the preface, "always was the

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critical shadow of capitalism." As capitalism's crises feel ever more urgent and unlivable, plenty of people are receptive to, and are even seeking out, critical analyses of capitalism, not just celebrations. Wolff writes, "We offer this essay now because of the power and usefulness today of Marx's criticism of the capitalist economic system."

In plainspoken language, the book walks the reader through the interlocking concepts central to Marx's criticism: class, conflict, contradiction,

and crisis. I say plainspoken because I found it helpful to hear the text in my mind's ear delivered in Wolff's lecturer voice, familiar to me through his radio show and several live lectures I have attended. (You, too, may wish to familiarize yourself with his voice through podcasts and videos available online at [democracyatwork.info](http://democracyatwork.info).) It remains true that each idea's meaning depends on the other ideas in the whole structure of thought, but Wolff's choices about ordering give the first-time reader a way to get a useable first-pass understanding of each concept. And the book is concise enough to reread regularly. Marxist theory (like any sophisticated theory) will come into clearer focus with each re-exposure.

Even better than reading and rereading alone would be reading with friends and complementing *Understanding Marxism* with other works on Marxist theory (Wolff provides a recommended reading list at the end of the book). In addition, or instead, episodes of his weekly "Economic Update" TV and radio show are a treasure trove of examples and elaborations on ideas that are treated concisely in the book. For someone new to Marxism, *Understanding Marxism* could be, at first, a flashlight illuminating a pathway through a dark hallway. For someone gaining familiarity with Marxism (possibly the same reader just described, some time later), this book could be a floor plan of the overall layout of the theory's structure. For someone already familiar with Marxism (perhaps the same someone still later), *Understanding Marxism* could be the highlight reel, recapping their intellectual journey and reminding them of all the insights and illuminations we've gained from Marx, even those that didn't make it into the book. **D&S**

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