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Analysis of Karl Marx's Das Kapital series and its application in today's changing surplus value and exploitation

[Análise da obra O Capital, de Karl Marx, e sua aplicação no contexto atual de transformações na mais-valia e na exploração]

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Abstract: Karl Marx's Capital is a theoretical masterpiece, analyzing the exploitative nature of capitalism through concepts such as surplus value, abstract labor, and the law of diminishing marginal profits. In the context of globalization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, surplus value has shifted from manual labor to intellectual labor and digital data, leading to a change in the form of exploitation. This article analyzes the core concepts of Capital, focusing on the theory of surplus value, and explores how Marx's theory can be applied to understand modern forms of exploitation in the digital economy, automation, and global supply chains. The study emphasizes the scientific nature of Capital in identifying socio-economic contradictions and proposing solutions to minimize exploitation, towards social justice and sustainable development, including in Vietnam.
Keywords: Karl Marx, Das Kapital, surplus value, abstract labor, exploitation, digital economy, globalization, Industrial Revolution 4.0, Vietnam.

Resumo: O Capital , de Karl Marx, é uma obra-prima teórica que analisa a natureza exploratória do capitalismo por meio de conceitos como mais-valia, trabalho abstrato e a lei dos lucros marginais decrescentes. No contexto da globalização e da Quarta Revolução Industrial, a mais-valia deslocou-se do trabalho manual para o trabalho intelectual e os dados digitais, resultando em uma mudança na forma de exploração. Este artigo analisa os conceitos fundamentais de O Capital , com foco na teoria da mais-valia, e explora como a teoria de Marx pode ser aplicada para compreender as formas modernas de exploração na economia digital, na automação e nas cadeias globais de suprimentos. O estudo destaca o caráter científico de O Capital na identificação de contradições socioeconômicas e na proposição de soluções para minimizar a exploração, visando à justiça social e ao desenvolvimento sustentável, inclusive no Vietnã.
Palavras-chave: Karl Marx, O Capital , mais-valia, trabalho abstrato, exploração, economia digital, globalização, Revolução Industrial 4.0, Vietnã.

1. Introduction

Karl Marx's Das Kapital is one of the most far-reaching works in the history of human thought. First published in 1867 in Germany, the work not only laid the foundations for the science of Marxist political economy but also

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shaped a new methodology in social research, dialectical materialism and historical materialism. Das Kapital is not only a work of economic analysis, but also a radical critique of power structures and forms of social consciousness during the booming industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century (Wheen, 2008). The background of the work is associated with the rise of the Industrial Revolution in Europe, when steam technology and the model of mass industrial production fundamentally changed the organization of labor, property relations and class structure. Marx approached this phenomenon not only through sociological observation but also through precise economic analysis, in order to map out the internal mechanism of operation of the capitalist system. By exploring the law of value and the nature of surplus value, he shows that capitalist profit does not arise from equal exchange in the market, but from the unpaid labor of the working class, a form of exploitation concealed under the guise of free exchange of goods (Burawoy and Wright, 2002).

The methodology in Das Kapital demonstrates Marx's unique theoretical capacity: he goes from the abstract to the concrete, from the value of goods to the complex forms of capital. The structure of the work reflects the movement logic of capitalist economic reality itself, from production, circulation to distribution. Engels, a close friend and associate of Marx, perfected and published volumes II (1885) and III (1894) based on the unfinished manuscript, ensuring consistency throughout the theoretical system. The work is therefore not only the crystallization of individual thinking but also the product of a profound tradition of intellectual and social struggle. The core value of Das Kapital lies in Marx's ability to explain the laws of movement of capitalism on a scientific basis, something that classical economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo have not achieved. Marx demonstrated that the contradiction between the sociality of production and the privatization of possession is the source of economic crisis and social inequality. This contradiction, although changing its form through historical periods, is still the driving force that governs the development of global capitalism.

In the context of the 21st century, when globalization and the Industrial Revolution 4.0 profoundly transformed the socio-economic structure, Marx's theory remained topical. Today's form of exploitation of surplus value is no longer limited to material labor at the factory, but has extended to forms of intellectual and non-material labor. Personal data, information and creativity become the new "means of production", while transnational technology corporations act as "digital capital" controlling platforms and knowledge. Surplus value is created not only through labor, but also through the exploitation of consumer behavior, data, and human creative capacity, factors that Marx, if he lives in this era, could see as a higher form of labor alienation. This article aims at three main academic goals. First, it sheds light on the central concepts of Das Kapital, especially the theory of surplus value and the mechanism of capital accumulation. Second, analyze the variability of the nature of surplus value and forms of exploitation in the global digital economy, where capitalist power is strengthened not only by material possession but also by control of data and knowledge. Third, it proposes the possibility of applying the core tenets of Marxist thought towards a more sustainable and equitable model of development, in which people, not profits, become at the center of economic activity.

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2. Research methods

The research is carried out according to the analytical and interpretive method, combining close reading of Marx's concepts and comparison with contemporary socio-economic practice. The goal is not to glorify or deify Marx, but to rediscover the vitality of critical thought, as an effective theoretical tool for understanding and renovating the world in the age of digitalization. The study uses Das Kapital's content-based theoretical analysis method to clarify key concepts such as commodities, surplus value, abstract labor, and the law of declining profit margins. The dialectical materialist method is applied to analyze the internal contradictions of capitalism and the change in the nature of surplus value. Practical analysis is carried out by examining global economic trends such as automation, the digital economy, and supply chains, in order to assess the application of Marx's theory in the modern context. Examples are taken from socio-economic phenomena, such as the activities of technology corporations and the impact of the Industrial Revolution 4.0, to illustrate the change in the mechanism of exploitation.

3. The history of capitalism's movement through the lens of Das Kapital

The history of capitalism's movement is a journey full of contradictions, intertwined between exploitation, injustice, inequality and great strides in the development of productive forces. This is the process by which capitalism both promotes the constant creativity of human beings and creates internal contradictions that lead to social crises. Karl Marx, in Das Kapital, analyzed capitalism as a historical socio-economic form, with the development of productive forces, the transformation of production relations, social relations, class structures, and superstructures (Dai and Wang, 2018). These changes are the result of the constant struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie (the bourgeoisie), in which the proletariat both contributes to the development of Capitalism and resists the exploitation of the bourgeoisie and the capitalist state. At the same time, the bourgeoisie is constantly seeking to arouse resources in society to consolidate and expand Capitalism, creating an economic system that is dynamic but also contains irreconcilable contradictions.

Marx chose England as a typical model for his analysis of Capitalism, because in the nineteenth century, England was the center of the Industrial Revolution, where the characteristics of Capitalism were most clearly expressed (Mazlish, 1990). With its mass-produced factories, steam machinery and marked class divisions, Britain fully reflected the basic elements of a capitalist socio-economic form: from the Advanced Productive Forces to production relations based on hired labour and the exploitation of surplus value. Marx applied the method of dialectical materialism, analyzing capitalism as a natural scientist who studied nature, using abstract thinking to identify the social nature of capital. He saw Britain as an ideal laboratory where the contradictions of Capitalism were clearly exposed, from exploitation in factories to colonial policies that spread capitalist modes of production globally. Thereby, Marx not only analyzed Britain, but also predicted the development of capitalism in other countries, where similar contradictions would emerge as the productive forces and production relations evolved (Brenner, 1982).

According to Marx, capital is not money, factories or enterprises, but an exploitative social relation, which is expressed in the possession of the means of production by the bourgeoisie and the purchase of the labor power of the proletariat, who are deprived of the means of production and forced to sell their labor power in order to survive. Exploitation in Capitalism is based on the creation of surplus value, that is, the share of value created from the unpaid labor of workers. In the general formula of capital, Marx emphasized that the control of the production process and the product belongs to the bourgeoisie, not because of their individual qualities, but because they own the means of production. The bourgeoisie's motivation was to maximize surplus value by reducing labor costs and increasing productivity, often through extending the working day (absolute surplus value) or adopting new technology (relative surplus value). This leads to the alienation of workers, when they lose control of their labor products and are turned into tools for profit (Selucky, 1974).

The development of Capitalism was the result of the bourgeoisie realizing the potential of industrial machinery to combine hired labor to create surplus value. In feudal society, only the bourgeoisie is capable of transforming the means of production into capital, through the organization of large-scale production of goods for sale on the market. Marx analyzed that the products in capitalism differ from earlier socio-economic forms in that they are produced primarily for exchange, not just to meet direct needs. This huge pile of goods reflects the socialization of production, where the collective labor of the proletariat creates value, but the private ownership of the means of production leads to injustice in the distribution of surplus value. Through the process of exchange, the social, legal, cultural and political relations of capitalist society are formed, creating a superstructure to maintain and strengthen production relations.

Marx emphasized that labor in Capitalism is not only a commodity, but also a manifestation of an unequal social relation. Labor is a purposeful activity, in order to create use value to satisfy human needs, as well as an eternal condition for the existence of society. In Capitalism, however, labor is alienated by private ownership of the means of production, leaving workers separated from their products. This alienation takes place in both directions: in the production process, workers do not control the product; In social relations, they are subordinate to the bourgeoisie. Marx argued that private property is the main cause of alienation, as well as a condition for the exploitation of surplus value. However, as the Productive Forces evolved to a high degree, it created the premise for the self-negation of private property, paving the way for a new form of society that was not based on exploitation (Khalil, 1992).

The relationship between labor and capital in Capitalism overshadows the direct human relationships, turning them into relations between goods and money.

The socialization of production, with collective labor and technical progress, slightly reduces simple labour, but at the same time increases the dependence of the proletariat on the bourgeoisie. Marx pointed out that the initial process of capital accumulation is the history of separating the worker from the means of production, turning them into wage workers and turning the means of production into capital. This process not only perpetuates exploitation but also reproduces it on a larger scale, consolidating the power of the bourgeoisie. However, it is the development of the Forces of Production and the internal contradictions of Capitalism that create the premise for change, when the proletariat can struggle to eliminate exploitation and build a more just society.

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4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Core Concepts of Das Kapital

Das Kapital provides a rigorous system of reasoning for analyzing the nature of capitalism, with core concepts such as commodities, abstract labor, surplus value, and the law of declining profit margins (Tsoulfidis, 2024). Commodities are the "economic cells" of capitalist society, with two attributes: use value (specific uses, created by specific labor) and exchange value (by abstract labor, i.e. necessary and crystallized social labor). Abstract labour, Marx's fundamental concept, represents human labor in general, regardless of form, and is the source of social values. Currency is a form of development of exchange value, moving from a common commodity to a means of circulation, creating conditions for economic transactions.

The theory of surplus value is central to Das Kapital, which explains the origin of capital's profits. Marx argued that capital is a social relation that exploits hired labor, not "material" that generates value on its own. Surplus value is created when the daily working time exceeds the time required to reproduce labor, i.e., the minimum cost of living. Labor time is divided into necessary labor (creating value for workers) and surplus labor (creating surplus value for capitalists). The surplus value ratio is calculated using the formula: (m' = (m/v) \times 100%), where (m) is the surplus value, (v) is the value of labor power (Marx, 1990). Marx classified absolute surplus value (lengthening the working day by law or violence) and relative (reducing the labor time required through increasing labor productivity by machines). He criticized the long "labor day" as leading to labor alienation and the accumulation of poverty.

Marx also analyzed the contradiction between the socialization of production (collective labor) and the individualization of ownership (private ownership of the means of production), which led to a crisis of surplus when circulation did not keep up with production, causing a cycle of boom - crisis - recession (Marx, 1992). The law of declining profit margins was proposed by

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Marx to explain the long-term tendency of capitalism, when immutable capital (machines) grows faster than variable capital (labor), reducing profit margins (Marx, 1991). In addition, he analyzed absolute land (from land monopoly) and differential land (from different productivity), criticizing the landlord class as the "parasite" of capital. The conflict between the working class and the bourgeoisie is seen as a historical driving force, leading to the inevitable collapse of capitalism and the birth of socialism (Carrillo, 2023).

4.2. Scientific significance of Das Kapital

Das Kapital has a timeless scientific significance thanks to its dialectical materialism and historical materialism (Wheen, 2008). Unlike classical economics, Marx not only analyzed surface economic phenomena such as prices or profits, but also delved into the social nature of capital, demonstrating that profits, interest rates, and land are all derived from surplus value, the product of unpaid labor. The method from abstract (commodity) to concrete (capitalist system) helped Marx build a rigorous system of reasoning, which transcended the limitations of earlier economists.

The work predicts long-term socio-economic trends, such as capital accumulation that leads to increased inequality, when surplus value is concentrated in the hands of a bourgeois minority. Marx also predicted periodic crises due to the contradiction between production and circulation, when production capacities far exceeded market consumption capacity. The law of declining profit margins explains the decline in profits caused by the immutable increase in capital, forcing capitalists to seek ways to increase exploitation or expand markets. These predictions remain true in the modern context, as income inequality, financial crises, and automation continue to shape the global economy. Das Kapital provides the reasoning tools to understand these contradictions and guide solutions for social justice (Levine, 2008).

4.3. Changes in surplus value and exploitation today

In the context of globalization and the Industrial Revolution 4.0, surplus value and exploitation mechanisms have changed dramatically, but Das Kapital's reasoning can still be applied to analyze these phenomena. In the nineteenth century, surplus value was created from physical labor in factories, where workers worked long hours for low wages. Today, the digital economy has transformed the exploitation mechanism into intellectual and data labor. Tech corporations harness user data , from online behavior to personal preferences to transactional information , to create surplus value without being paid proportionately. When users use social networks, search engines, or e-commerce apps, they inadvertently provide free data, which is converted into profits by corporations through advertising, data analysis, or selling data to third parties. This is a new form of abstract labor where value is created from intellectual and informational activity, not just from material labor. Marx predicted that capital would constantly seek to expand exploitation, and the digital economy is a clear demonstration of this expansion, as technology corporations become the new "capitalists", extracting surplus value from billions of users around the globe (Dai and Wang, 2018).

The Industrial Revolution 4.0, with the development of artificial intelligence and automation, reduced the demand for living labor, leading to relative unemployment and increased inequality. Marx's law of declining profit margins explains this phenomenon: when immutable capital (machines, AI) grows faster than variable capital (labor), profit margins fall, forcing capitalists to increase exploitation or shift production to areas of cheap labor. In traditional industries such as textiles, assembly or automobile manufacturing, workers are replaced by machines and robots, while new jobs that require high skills, such as programming or data analysis, are not enough to absorb the lost workforce. Marx warned of the alienation of labor, when workers are separated from the production process and lose control of the products of their labor (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2022). In the modern context, labor alienation is even more serious when workers not only lose their jobs but are also excluded from automated production processes, leading to social unrest and increased inequality.

In a globalized economy, surplus value is created through complex supply chains, where cheap labor in developing countries is exploited to serve the profits of multinational corporations in developed countries. Workers in outsourcing factories, working for low wages and harsh conditions, create surplus value for corporations through the production of consumer goods, from smartphones to fashionable clothing. The class conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, as Marx analyzed, was global, as corporations exploited the disparity in labor costs between regions. For example, a product designed in a developed country, produced in a developing country with cheap labor, and sold on the global market, creates huge surplus value for capitalists, while workers receive only a fraction of the value they create. Das Kapital provides a theoretical framework for identifying this mechanism of exploitation and guiding solutions to improve working conditions and equitably distribute surplus value.

4.4. Applying Das Kapital Theory to Minimize Exploitation

Das Kapital's reasoning can be applied to address modern forms of exploitation and promote social justice in the global economy. In the digital economy, it is necessary to establish policies to redistribute surplus value from user data. For example, imposing a data tax on tech corporations or establishing collective data ownership can ensure that users benefit from the value they create. These policies reflect Marx's spirit of socializing surplus value to serve the public good, rather than letting private corporations take over the whole. As for automation, Marx's reasoning suggests that it is necessary to invest in labor retraining, shifting from specific labor (manual) to intellectual labor (digital skills,

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programming, data analysis) to minimize alienation and unemployment. High-tech skills training programs, combined with policies such as universal basic income or employment support, can help workers adapt to changing production forces. These solutions not only reduce exploitation, but also help workers regain partial control over the production process, in line with the spirit of Das Kapital.

In global supply chains, Marx's reasoning can be applied to formulate policies that protect workers from the exploitation of multinational corporations. Measures such as raising the minimum wage, improving working conditions, and requiring the transfer of technology from corporations to developing countries can reduce the disparity in surplus value between regions. At the same time, international labor standards, such as those stipulated by the International Labour Organization (ILO), can be used to ensure the rights of workers in the supply chain. These policies reflected Marx's view of resolving class conflicts through the restructuring of production relations, towards a fairer economic system.

Das Kapital's reasoning can also be applied to solve environmental problems related to the exploitation of natural resources. Marx's concept of land, especially absolute land (from land monopoly) and differential land (from different productivity), can be applied to analyze the overexploitation of resources in the capitalist economy (Cen et al., 2021). Policies such as carbon taxes, investments in renewable energy, and sustainable resource management can be designed to socialize surplus value from natural resources, prioritizing community benefits over individual profits. These solutions not only reduce resource exploitation but also contribute to resolving the economic-environmental conflict, in line with Marx's dialectical spirit. The application of Das Kapital theory in the modern context faces many challenges. Globalization and the explosion of social networks have fostered consumer culture and individualism, undermining class consciousness, a core concept of Marx. Workers are increasingly caught up in the consumer lifestyle, from shopping for luxury goods to participating in digital platforms, blurring the perception of the class conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. To overcome this, it is necessary to have strategies for educating creative thought, using social networks and digital platforms to disseminate Marx's theory in a vivid and accessible way. Automation in the Industrial Revolution 4.0 reduces the demand for living labor, leading to unemployment and social instability. Marx's law of declining profit margins explains this trend, but also poses the challenge of reorienting labor and redistributing surplus value. Economic-environmental conflicts are also becoming more and more acute, as capital continues to exploit resources to maximize profits, causing environmental degradation and inequality in access to resources. Marx's reasoning needs to be supplemented by studies of ecological economics to solve these problems.

Despite the challenges, Das Kapital's theory opens up many prospects for analyzing and solving modern socio-economic problems. In the digital economy, Marx's theory can be developed to analyze how surplus value is created from data and intellectual labor. New research can predict "tech bubbles" and suggest how to equitably distribute value, such as through collective data ownership or data taxation. This helps ensure that surplus value from the digital economy is distributed to the community, rather than being appropriated by technology

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corporations.

In the field of green economy, Marx's reasoning can be applied to design socialized models of production that prioritize the interests of the community over individual profits. Policies such as carbon taxes, investment in renewable energy, and sustainable resource management can be built on Marx's concept of geography, helping to resolve the contradiction between the economy and the environment. These models not only reduce resource exploitation but also promote social justice, in line with the spirit of Das Kapital. In the context of global integration, Marx's reasoning can be used to defend the interests of workers against the exploitation of multinational corporations. Policies such as requiring technology transfer, adopting international labor standards, and strengthening collective bargaining can help reduce disparities in surplus value between regions. These prospects affirm that Das Kapital is not only a theoretical work of the nineteenth century, but also a powerful tool for guiding solutions to the socio-economic challenges of the twenty-first century.

5. Conclusion

Karl Marx's Das Kapital is a timeless theoretical work that provides a sharp analytical framework for understanding the exploitative nature of capitalism and the shift in surplus value in the modern economy. From material labor in factories to intellectual labor and digital data, forms of exploitation have become more sophisticated, but Marx's concepts such as surplus value, abstract labor, and class contradictions retain value in identifying and resolving these contradictions. By applying Das Kapital's reasoning, it is possible to develop solutions to reduce exploitation, from redistributing the value of data and retraining workers to protecting labor rights and natural resources. To adapt to the challenges of the digital economy, automation, and climate change, Marx's reasoning needs to be supplemented and innovated, but Das Kapital remains a powerful tool for moving towards a more just, sustainable, and humane society.

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