

abc

OF SOCIAL AND  
POLITICAL  
KNOWLEDGE

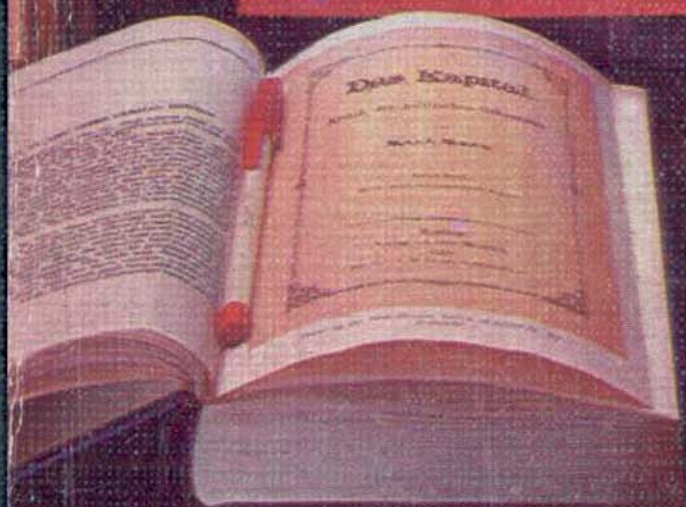
WHAT IS  
**Political  
Economy?**

S. ILYIN, A. MOTYLEV

Commodity - Money - Commodity'

**C-M-C'**

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**ABC** of Social and Political Knowledge

Sergei Ilyin,  
Alexander Motylev

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WHAT IS  
POLITICAL  
ECONOMY?

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АВС СОЦИАЛЬНО-ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИХ ЗНАНИЙ

С. Ильин, А. Мотылев

ЧТО ТАКОЕ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКАЯ ЭКОНОМИЯ?

*На английском языке*

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## Contents

INTRODUCTION . . . . .	7
CHAPTER ONE. THE BASIS OF SOCIAL LIFE	
The Vagaries of History . . . . .	9
A Great Discovery . . . . .	12
Material Production . . . . .	14
Human Labour . . . . .	16
Instruments of Labour and Objects of Labour . . . . .	18
The Means of Production . . . . .	21
CHAPTER TWO. VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE LINKS . . . . .	
The Productive Forces . . . . .	23
The Relations of Production . . . . .	24
Division of Labour . . . . .	25
The Root Cause of Social Revo- lutions . . . . .	29
The Economic Basis and the Su- perstructure . . . . .	31
The Mode of Production and Classes . . . . .	37
CHAPTER THREE. BEFORE CONSUMPTION CAN TAKE PLACE . . . . .	
Production and Consumption . . . . .	42
Distribution of Products . . . . .	43
Exchange of Products . . . . .	47
The Unity of the Reproduction Phases . . . . .	49
	52

<i>CHAPTER FOUR. BY NO QUIRK OF CHANCE</i>	54
The Laws of Nature and the Laws of the Society . . . . .	55
The General and the Specific . .	61
Economic Categories . . . . .	64
Conscious Use of Economic Laws	65
<i>CHAPTER FIVE. WITHOUT MICROSCOPES OR REAGENTS . . . . .</i>	69
The Universal Method of Cogni- tion . . . . .	70
The Abstract and the Concrete . .	72
Analysis and Synthesis . . . . .	79
The Logical and the Historical . .	81
Quantity and Quality . . . . .	83
Social Practice . . . . .	87
<i>CHAPTER SIX. THE GREAT POWER OF IDEAS</i>	91
A Revolution in Political Economy	93
Philosophical Basis . . . . .	94
Ideas on Socialism . . . . .	97
Historicism in the Views on the Society . . . . .	98
The History of Economic Research	100
The Most Terrible Missile That Has Yet Been Hurlled at the Heads of the Bourgeoisie . . . . .	111
The Subject-Matter of Marxist-Le- ninist Political Economy . . . . .	113
The Subject of Political Economy as Seen by Bourgeois Researchers	120
From the Bourgeois Standpoint	128

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From the Positions of the Working Class . . . . .	135
<i>CHAPTER SEVEN. BEFORE CAPITALISM</i>	
CAME ON THE SCENE . . . .	141
Survivals of the Past in Our Day	142
The Infancy of the Human Race	145
Slavery . . . . .	154
The Feudal Lord and the Serf	169
<i>CHAPTER EIGHT. WHERE CAPITAL REIGNS</i>	
SUPREME . . . . .	180
What Is Commodity Production?	182
The Commodity . . . . .	184
Commodity-Value . . . . .	187
The Two-Fold Character of Labour	188
The Contradiction Between Private and Social Labour . . . . .	190
How Does the Law of Value Operate? . . . . .	192
What Is Money? . . . . .	195
The Essence of Capitalist Exploi- tation . . . . .	201
The Ways of the Production of Surplus-Value . . . . .	209
The Two Poles of the Capitalist Society . . . . .	215
Exploiters' Incomes . . . . .	227
The Crisis Economy . . . . .	237
Monopoly Domination . . . . .	244
Foreign Expansion by the Mono- polies . . . . .	252

The Collapse of the Colonial System . . . . .	258
The Eve of the Socialist Revolution	262
<b>CHAPTER NINE. PLANNED-BASED BUILDING OF THE SOCIETY: EVERY- THING FOR THE SAKE OF MAN . . . . .</b>	<b>270</b>
Existing Socialism . . . . .	271
The Period of Transition to the New Type of Society . . . . .	275
The Key to Building a Socialist Economy . . . . .	279
Economic Foundations of the Peoples' Equality . . . . .	283
Disinterested Assistance . . . . .	285
Cooperation of Agriculture . . . . .	290
More than Literacy . . . . .	295
The Mainstay of Socialism . . . . .	298
For the People's Benefit . . . . .	300
Under a Single Plan . . . . .	302
A Just Principle of Distribution	305
Economic Instruments . . . . .	309
The Crucial Task . . . . .	314
Social Product . . . . .	317
A New Type of the World Economy	321
Developed Socialism and Its Per- fection . . . . .	325
The Higher Phase of Communism	330
<b>GLOSSARY . . . . .</b>	<b>333</b>

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## Introduction

Each science has its own subject. As we learn to do sums at school, we begin to comprehend the subject-matter of mathematics. As we watch a bolt of electricity flash between two glittering balls, we enter the fascinating world of physics. Chemistry deals with the structure, properties and transformation of substances, and astronomy, with the motion of celestial bodies. As the natural sciences develop, they merge into a single stream reflecting a panoramic picture of the natural world around us. These are closely tied in with the exact and applied sciences, which help to understand the



principles on which is shaped what is known as “second nature”, that is, everything created by man’s inquisitive mind and skilful hands.

But there is yet another and equally important group of sciences which study diverse aspects of the human society. History, philosophy, law, linguistics, and many other social sciences help to unravel the intricate meshwork of the social conditions in which mankind has lived and developed, and this helps to transform reality for the sake of social progress. Marxist-Leninist political economy has pride of place among these sciences. It studies the social system of production, the economic relations between people in the process of production, and the laws governing the production, distribution and exchange of material values at every stage of mankind’s development.

The task of this book is to give readers a clear idea of this science, whose purpose is to help people in their efforts to create a better social life.

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Chapter  
One

THE BASIS  
OF SOCIAL LIFE

The Vagaries  
of History

Human life has never been simple or easy, and mankind's historical advance has never been a leisurely stroll. Revolutions and changes of social system, peaceful neighbourly relations and sanguinary wars, the arduous toil of the exploited and the idle luxury of the exploiters, sprawling cities and huts in the jungle—such are the contrasts of human history. Is there any connection between its kaleidoscopic events? Is there any thread one could follow in the labyrinth of history in order to find a straight road leading to happiness and social justice? Over the millennia, people kept looking

for such a road. The oppressed rose up against their oppressors, and keen visionaries put forward projects for establishing a social order under which the human personality would flourish and people would live in full harmony with nature on the principles of equality and brotherhood. All those were protests against the social system under which the society was divided into a handful of privileged exploiters and a mass of exploited, who were deprived of the right to happiness and whose sole duty was to toil for the benefit of the rich and idle.

Such crying injustice is against human nature, the nature of man as the architect of the world, the creator of all its material and spiritual values, because everyone born into this world is worthy of a truly human life.

Titanic human labour can work miracles. It can find and utilise unfathomed natural wealth, point the way to other planets, and turn deserts into fertile soil. Through scientific and technical achievements, man has learned to make and operate sophisticated automatic machines, to fabricate materials whose properties surpass those of natural substances, and to harness the powerful energy of water, wind, sun and even atomic nuclei for making electricity, man's loyal ally. Boundless are the potentialities of man's labour, the flights of his imagination and the commands of his purposeful will.

But having learned to master nature and to comprehend its laws, men were as yet unable consciously to regulate their own history. Many natural phenomena keep repeating themselves in accordance with definite laws: seasons change, night follows day just as day follows night, etc., while social life is not marked by such relentless recurrence: it is not so easy to notice the change of historical epochs, for each generation arrives on the historical scene to find a social setup shaped by earlier generations. People acting in the society have a consciousness and a will of their own, and it is not always easy to discern the motives for which they act.

Some believe that historical processes are governed by individuals (wise or foolish, good or evil, rulers or their aides), by the nature and direction of their activity. Ideas rule the world—such is the simple conclusion to be drawn from that view. But it does not give an answer to the questions which inevitably arise in this context: how do the ideas themselves originate? Are there any criteria for assessing how fruitful they are and how relevant to the course of history?

The colonialists conquered entire continents and enslaved their peoples not only because they were led by blood-thirsty military leaders, but also because they had definite aims and were guided by the grasping hand of those who

longed for more wealth. That is why the essence of colonial plunder does not change even when the plunderers claim to perform a "civilising mission" and allege that their sole purpose is to raise the peoples to the heights of modern culture. Under cover of such rhetoric, they gain control of the natural resources of other countries and trample on the cultural values amassed by each nation over the centuries.

To say that ideas rule the world is tantamount to admitting man's impotence in the face of supernatural forces.

## A Great Discovery

If one is to explain the true motives of human behaviour, views and actions, one should go to the roots from which springs the whole stream of social life.

That was done for the first time by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, the great teachers of the working class and all the other working people. Almost one and a half centuries ago, they carried out the greatest ever revolution in man's views of the society and its history by elaborating a doctrine which has come to be known as historical materialism, or the *materialist understanding of history*. Since the time of that great discovery, the world has been a



scene of majestic events, which have influenced the fortunes of all peoples, of mankind as a whole. And each new step in the society's historical development has brought fresh proof of the Marxist doctrine. Far from being outdated, as some of its adversaries strain to prove, it has been gaining strength and vitality as it points out the way to progress, peace and happiness.

Here are the main points of the materialist understanding of history:

- history is a natural objective process and is made by men themselves, without the interference of any supernatural forces;

- men make history not in accordance with their arbitrary desires, but on the basis of the material conditions that take shape in the society at each stage in its development;

- these material conditions (material production) are pivotal to the whole structure of the society and determine its spiritual life, politics, etc. Marx clearly expressed that in his well-known formula: "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness"<sup>1</sup>. Of course, social being and consciousness here do not mean the living

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977, p. 21.

conditions or individual consciousness of a separate person, but the being and consciousness of the society as a whole, of large groups of people constituting classes, various social strata, etc.

Such an approach to history also entailed fundamental changes in the views on the economy, on economic processes and phenomena. So what is material production, which plays the decisive role in the development of the human society?

## Material Production

In order to live, men should have food, clothes, housing, and other material values. But these are not to be found ready-made in nature, and have to be produced by men themselves, by their labour. At the early stages of social development, men were already engaged in producing various products: they hunted wild animals and roasted their meat, caught fish, made primitive tools, built dwellings, etc. Motivated by their requirements, they expanded the sphere of their labour activity and perfected their tools and the production process itself. From hunting they advanced to domestication of animals, and then on to cropping. Later on, they began to engage in the handicrafts: weaving, pottery, metal-working, etc. A subsequent

stage of development saw the emergence of manufactories, based on handicraft techniques and manual work, which eventually developed into large-scale machine production.

In our day, *material production* remains the main source of the products consumed by people. Apart from articles of consumption meant for meeting human requirements in food, clothes, housing, etc., it is also necessary to make the instruments with the help of which these material values are produced. Production can be defined as a process taking place between man and nature in the course of which man transforms natural substances into a product necessary for human life. Without production, the human society can neither exist nor develop. Economic and political conditions may change, and one social system may give way to another in the course of history, but production will always remain the basis of the society's life.

People produce material values jointly, by groups and the society as a whole, so that production, whatever its conditions, is always social, and labour is always the activity of a social individual. The production of material values includes three basic elements: human labour (or work), objects of labour and instruments of labour.

## Human Labour

The long centuries of exploitation and oppression engendered the view that labour is a grave burden. In actual fact, labour—a process of conscious and purposeful human activity with the help of which people change natural objects—is a crucial condition of human life. The attempts by bourgeois researchers to describe the “labour” of beavers, bees, ants or spiders, and to ascribe to them a “division of labour”, “labour contacts”, and other phenomena peculiar to social production are futile. Animals often perform fairly complicated operations, but they do that by instinct, whereas man, before getting down to his work, sets himself a definite goal and aims at attaining certain results. Marx wrote: “...What distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality.”<sup>1</sup>

People gain command of the forces of nature and use its resources in their own interests. They manufacture machines, cultivate land, mine and process ore and coal, extract and refine oil, etc. To meet their requirements in clothes, they grow cotton, spin, weave and make gar-

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1974, p. 174.