

The Productive Base as the Ground of Society and History. Marx's Base-Superstructure Theory

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"One basis for life and another basis for science is an a-priori lie" -Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, 1845.

Base-Superstructure Theory (BST) is Marx's guiding general theory, but is long misunderstood. Deeply embedded in a monumental corpus of system-challenging analysis, it has become lost in secondary interpretations with partial takes and opposed propagandas militating against coherent comprehension. Within the last 35 years, there has also been a sea-shift of global culture to anti-foundationalist relativism which has uprooted the very idea of a common base or ground, Marx's 'economic base' most vehemently of all.

The Productive Base as the Ground of Society and History

Within a dominant post-1991 cultural assumption that 'Marxism is dead', the *BST* has been essentially abandoned even by Marxists as 'postmodernist' and 'identity politics' tides sweep across the West. Yet Marx's overall historical materialist principle remains intact within the academy - that *the material conditions of historical societies - opposed to God or human concepts - determine human affairs*. This first ontological step of Marx's general theory repudiates the conceptual idealism of philosophy from Plato to Hegel which supposes that disembodied Ideas determine material reality, rather than the other way round. Marx introduces this foundational principle of the *BST* (emphasis added as henceforth):

"Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, religion, or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence".

This is Marx's 'productive base', usually referred to as *Productivkraften* or 'productive forces'. This production beyond Nature's available provisions increasingly "subjugates Nature to its sway" (*Capital*, "On the Labour Process"). Yet Marx's work takes on the *revolutionary* political edge for which he is most famous in the iconic *Manifesto of the Communist Party* in 1848. Here his philosophy of society and history moves to a sweeping 10-Point social program, much of it instituted within the next century - extension of existing *industrial development to state ownership, graduated income tax, free education for all children by public schools, and a national bank*. Marx's theory has been in this way largely proven in practice against the standard assumption to the contrary.

Yet it is not until his 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, that Marx defines his general theory with his base-superstructure model as "the guiding thread of my studies". Since this canonical statement carried through in *Das Kapital* is widely misconceived as a mechanistic determinism in which all elements of society are uniquely

determined by the ruling economic system, it requires close inspection.

“In the social production which men carry on”, Marx begins his paradigm statement, “they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will”.

While this is usually thought to be a statement against humanity’s free will, it is more modestly a statement of unacknowledged fact about the ‘free society’ capitalism is assumed to be. Wage or salary work must be done by the great majority to stay alive “independent of their will”. Their “definite relations” are materially determined by the employer who must achieve the lowest costs with ‘no choice in the matter’. And behind this “wage slavery”, Marx emphasises in *Capital*, lies the further unacknowledged horrific historical fact of the “great expropriation of the people from the soil, from the means of subsistence, and from the means of labour - [by] violent and painful methods”. They must sell their labour into servitude, or they do not survive. This servitude, Marx documents, is enforced by mass hangings, mutilations, floggings, pillories, and deprivation of children.

Yet Marx acerbically rejects any kind of voluntarism as an alternative. The mode of production that produces a society’s means of life must, he argues, be developed to a stage where the direct producers are effectively organised to historically replace the ruling capitalist system of social production. This is why he asserts as the guiding framework of his work:

“production relations must correspond to a definite stage of development of men’s material powers”.

This is ‘the *productive base*’ on which slave-owning, feudal or capitalist social systems are raised in their turn, but which ruling cultures assume as ‘everlasting’. Marx summarizes in this central statement of his general theory that the “the totality of these relations of production constitutes the *economic structure of society*- the *real foundation* [or base] on which the *legal and political superstructure* arises”.

Marx is opposed to the ruling determinism, but organises the facts as they are against ‘ideological illusions’ - the essential method of his base-superstructure theory. While many claim Marx denies the autonomy of individual consciousness, or free choice, or democracy, or all at once, his master verb for superstructure determination by the economic base is *entsprechen*- to correspond to or comply with. This means that the state and legal institutions of a society must *comply with* the ruling ownership structure society’s forces of production, or be selected out as materially unviable. This is why Marx says in his Preface to *Capital*,

“My standpoint can less than other make the individual responsible for relations for whose creature he socially remains, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them” (emphases again added as elsewhere).

Marx insists against most philosophy that *subjectivism* is incapable of understanding the real world or changing it. This is why he ridicules Kant’s ‘moral will’ as an impotent deontology that excludes consequences a-priori; and why he mocks **Max Stirner’s**

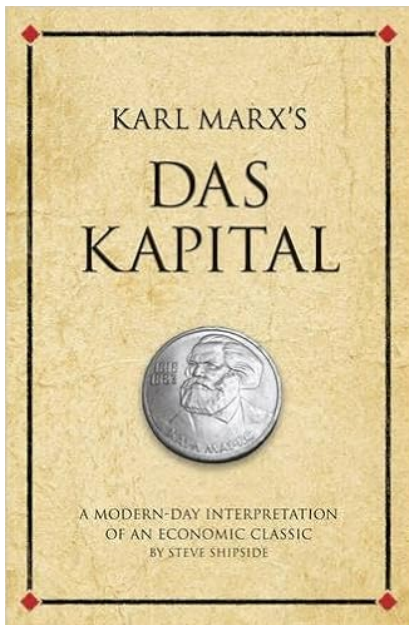
'Omnipotent Ego', neo-Hegelianism, and all commentary which revolves within "consciousness in itself". Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* is the iconic expression of this unprecedentedly *activist ontology and epistemology* and the philosophical ground of his base-superstructure theory:

"The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a merely scholastic question" (Thesis II).

Marx would be hard on most postmodernism, analytic theory, and academia in general today, and this may be why they are all inclined to pooh-pooh Marx. Yet his *BST* is most easily de-mystified when reading attends to its straightforward material model – a building foundation and a superstructure raised upon it. No superstructure can stand without a foundation, and this could be called an 'inexorable law'. But this does not mean the superstructure conforms to the base by ruling out all alternatives within its range of permission. Nor, conversely, does it mean that the base will change in virtue of those alternatives in the mind, even if socialist. Superstructural phenomena must, in Marx's *BST*, *comply with* the underlying mode of production, or face strong selective pressures to extinction. Thus Marx argues that the laws, policies and state in a society correspond to the productive base to survive, and why he disparages those who think a legal proclamation will change social reality *if there are not the material conditions to enable it to occur*. In logical terms, Marx's meaning may be summarized without his militant mood: legal, state and ideological phenomena must be consistent with the society's material reproduction at the established level of society's productive provision of means of existence, or go under.

Social Being Determines Consciousness

Marx continues his *BST* 'guiding thread' to write that "*definite forms of social consciousness correspond to a society's mode of production*". This has led to many competing interpretations, dogmas and denunciations. Yet to test it, one may ask: where is there *not* correspondence in global capitalism between 'ruling forms of social consciousness' and 'the economic structure'? More specifically, do we find that the dominant meanings of "freedom", "responsibility", "productivity", "and "justice" are do *not* comply with the capitalist system? An easy refutation would be any published conception of these anchoring normative concepts which opposes, say, the rightness of private profit, or rejects the assumption that citizens must sell their services to employers as their duty to society.



Marx continues his explanation with perhaps the most controversial sentence of his base-superstructure theory.

“It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness”.

For this, Marx is held to be declaring a materialist reductionism, or the epiphenomenal nature of human thought, or denial of moral choice, or undialectical simplification, or a soulless doctrine. In fact, Marx only repudiates any theory which *excludes material foundations from its understanding*. Thus received philosophers and press commentary, for example, are ridiculed by Marx and more specifically, religio-moral certitudes reflecting ruling-class interests. Yet since all words and languages are social constructions, Marx’s claim is obviously true in a now accepted way. The most studied philosophers of the twentieth century, **Martin Heidegger** and **Ludwig Wittgenstein**, for example, declare language as the “home of Being” and “the limit of thought” respectively, and contemporary etymology usually presupposes language’s social and historical nature. Marx’s claim that “social being determines consciousness” is hardly controversial today except that Marx’s *BST* further argues that the social is y determined by the capitalist economic structure that must and will be overthrown. In Marx’s *BST* terms without his militance, this line of thought is rejected by official society as unacceptable. This is how, as Marx provocatively describes it in many different contexts, a realm of illusory cover stories and concepts blinker out the capitalist system’s oppressive exploitations while purporting the highest moral motives. Consider Marx’s bitingly witty asides in this light:

“The Church of England will more readily pardon an attack on its Thirty-Nine Articles than 1/39th of its income”.

This is the same Marx that in *The Holy Family* talks of religion as the “spirit of spiritless conditions, the heart of a heartless world” - thus resonantly affirming the spirit and the heart that he is said to deny. What he is in fact castigating is the capitalist church and its rich investments, rents and hypocrisies exploiting the populace and grinding the poor. Marx’s *BST* analysis also lays bare the institutionalised veils of doctrine masking the cupidity

of the Conservative Party and its Lords: “The high Tory hymns the beauties of the British Constitution, the Crown and the Law until the day of danger snatches from him the confession that he is interested only in – Ground Rent.”

Marx’s base-superstructure method of laying bare private capital gain underneath moral pomposity and the robes of religion, the constitution, and the law still applies to, say, US politicians’ invocation of ‘God’s blessing’ and ‘our sacred Constitution’ – why Marx may be so abhorred by establishments across the world.

Freedom in Marx’s Base Superstructure Theory

Long the primary reason for repudiating Marx’s base-superstructure theory has been its alleged denial of individual freedom. Yet his work from the beginning is devoted to freedom as of ultimate value, preferring Epicurus to Democritus in his doctoral thesis solely because the theory of Epicurus allowed freedom into an arbitrary “swerve” of atoms against the “far more scientific” Democritus who is a mechanist. Yet there *is* an implicit principle of ‘technological determinism’ as the ultimate regulator of Marx’s base-superstructure theory.

Few understand that this position rules out the success of state seizure for socialist revolution without a developed productive base to sustain it – as history since Marx has significantly confirmed. Marx also predicts social transformation to a “many-sided” working class “ready and able to meet any change of production;” as well as technological replacement of labour to allow “free time” from “the realm of necessity” – opposite positions to a denial of human freedom.

In spite of Marx’s failed prediction of ‘inevitable revolution’ in advanced industrial societies, Marx is rather prescient in anticipating the material possibilities of freedom by technological and worker development, and how they are ‘fettered’ by the capitalist economic structure within which all lower-cost benefits of technological advances like labour-saving machinery go to capitalists as the working day increases. Marx’s evolving productive base is throughout grounded in humanity’s distinguishing feature as a species and the origin of human freedom: “the capacity to raise a project in the head before it is constructed in reality”. (*Capital*, “On the Labour Process”). A socially self-directing mode of production with socialist plan is the meta version of this built-in human freedom.

This distinguishing ground of historical materialism is brought into revealing alliance with Darwin’s classical *Origin of the Species* when Marx connects “nature’s technology” to human society’s “organs of technology” as the ultimate basis of historical development:

“Darwin has interested us in the history of Nature’s Technology i.e., in the formation of the organs of plants and animals, which organs serve as instruments as of production for sustaining life. Does not the history of the productive organs of man, of organs that are the material basis of all social organization, deserve equal attention?” (*Capital*, “The Development of Machinery”).

In his still under-theorized *evolutionary* theory, Marx goes beyond Darwin in arguing that:

- (1) the forces of selection are increasingly social, not natural, and
- (2) organic instruments are evolved by creative cooperative production, not

instinctual repertoires or genes.

Marx's base-superstructure theory is the framework within which historical as opposed to natural evolution develops, and human capacity self-realization not species reproduction numbers is its logic of advance.

Economic Determinism, Darwinian Selection and Social Revolution

Marx's implicit principle of economic determination by extinction of what does not fit the ruling property order is evolutionary biology at the historical level, As Marx says in his Preface to *Capital*,

“the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history”.

In fact, however, history is not a natural process as its laws are made not found in nature, and Marx's own theory implicitly seeks human society's supersession of nature's ultimate law of dominance by physical force.

Yet both evolutionary and historical materialist theories recognise selection and extinction of life forms that adapt or not, survive, flourish or die, in the struggle for continued life. Marx, however, argues for the revolutionary necessity of surpassing the brutality of natural evolution by working-class overthrow of the ruling class system of “hitherto existing society” which always “pumps out surplus labour from the direct producers” to enrich masters, lords or capitalists” (*Capital III*, “Genesis of Capitalist Ground-Rent”). Marx's ultimate goal is liberation from capitalist class rule, in his theory the last to rule society against its common interests with productive development the material base of this revolution. For Marx's *BST*, however, species liberation only becomes historically possible with industrial mass production to organise it. Human survival and extinction, class domination and overthrow are based on *technological* development which eventually outgrows the old form of control and appropriation of society's means of production to bring about a higher stage of society led by the direct producers themselves.

Marx's revolutionary theory is the most controversial element of his explanatory model, and has so many versions that it helps to define its inner logic in dispassionate terms:

1. a social revolution in a society's law, politics and ideology is propelled by
2. ever more open class struggle to
3. achieve a higher stage of development of the productive base of society
4. than the prior ruling-class economic structure can manage
5. without forfeit of society's stage of material production.

In the rare periods of successful social revolution, Marx offers an original causal explanation: Only when productive force development goes beyond the fetters of the established ruling-class relations of production can a social revolution occur. Marx's guiding framework is concisely stated by his 'guiding thread' (with possible application to contemporary society in square brackets:

“At a certain stage of their development, the material forces of production [think of the Internet] come into conflict with the existing relations of production – or – what is but a legal expression for them – with the property relations within which they had been at work before [private -profit copyright, patent and control over published meanings]. From forms of development of productive forces, these relations [of corporate ownership profit] turn into their chains. Then occurs a period of social revolution [the creators of knowledge deciding on commons publication and open access in cumulative transition from the for-profit ‘information economy’ to the ‘knowledge commons’].

At the macro level of interface with evolutionary biology, Marx’s *BST* suggests new technologies as the ‘organic extensions of human society’ outgrowing the ruling ownership ‘anatomy’ to necessitate society’s transformation to a higher and more productive form. A society, he writes in introducing *Capital*, is an “organism always changing” while the “birth-pangs of revolution” presuppose a long process in “the natural laws of its movement” which “can neither clear by bold leaps, nor remove by legal enactments the obstacles involved – – but can shorten the and lessen the birth-pangs”. The underlying common ground of both disjunctive and cumulative-transition understandings of this social transformation is that any uprising social organisation of material forces must be *more efficient and productive* than the one now ruling . This is an understanding that has, ironically, been seized upon by counter-revolutions across the world since wherein external capitalist powers deliberately destroy socialist life bases by armed and financial means – the *converse* of Marx’s revolutionary theory. Marx asserts in his definitive *BST* explanation:

“No social order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have been developed, and new higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions have matured in the womb of the old society.”

Counter-revolutions prevent this evolution of the ruling mode of production ever succeeding.

Self-Maximizing Growth and Marx’s Aporia of Productive Object

Marx’s base-superstructure theory implicitly recognises that the ultimate value base and driver of capitalism is the “fully developed shape [of] *the money form*” in terms of which all decisions of what commodities to produce and how they are produced are made solely to maximize revenue returns to private capital owners in cycles of increasing accumulation: in general formula *Money-Commodity-More Money* or $M-C-M^1$. As Marx also argues, capitalist investors are “personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class relations and class interests”, and so are a-priori indifferent to what life is degraded, exploited and destroyed in multiplying private money profits with no cumulative limit (Marx’s Preface, Chapter I, and Chapter XXV of *Capital*).

While Marx’s *BST* is confirmed by capitalist history, a deep-structural issue emerges. How can Marx or his followers believe that the results of this totalizing system of life oppression, immiserization and life capital rundown must “inevitably” result in a completely opposite outcome of “social revolution”, “dictatorship of the proletariat”, and “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need”? There is no clear definition of any step of this historical vision. Most deeply, there is no answer to the question: *what is the criterion of the life needs that production is ultimately for?*

Marx focuses rather on the socialist logic he sees built into competing large scales of capitalist production – “an ever-expanding scale, the co-operative form of the labour process, the conscious technical application of science, the methodical cultivation of the soil, the transformation of the instruments of labour in instruments of labour only usable in common, the economising of all means of production by their use as means of production of combined socialised labour, the entanglement of all peoples in the net of the world-market, and with all this the international nature of the capitalistic regime” (*Capital*, Chapter XXXII). Marx’s analysis here is breathtaking in scope, but what remains absent is the underlying *life base and laws* of any productive force development and exponential growth. That this development must be *consistent with the universal needs and capacities of humanity, its natural biosphere and fellow creatures* does not enter into Marx’s base-superstructure theory as an issue (nor mainstream theories today). As with the capitalist epoch in general, technological development seems to be a secular Providence that can solve any problem.

In *Capital*, Marx restricts the parameters to be considered to the technology used and collective wage labour as historical agency.

“The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails”, he writes in his first sentence of *Capital* presents itself as “an immense accumulation of commodities”.

The commodities of which all wealth consists in capitalist society are always produced in accordance with the master organising principle of their production and profit, $M-C-M^1$, the capitalist value-system Marx first defines. This ‘immense accumulation of commodities’ are the values of this system in whatever form they take, and are defined in the same first page of *Capital* as material use-values for *wants* – – – whether they spring from the stomach or fancy *makes no difference*”. Marx underlines this criterion of commodities by his approving footnote citing **Nicholas Barbou’s** subjectivist principle:

“want is the appetite of the mind and as natural as hunger to the body”.

It is this commodity base – and all capitalist productive forces are commodities – which constitutes the productive forces to drive the ‘inevitable proletarian revolution’.

Since all these productive and consumer commodities are driven *ex hypothesi* by systemic compulsion to sell anything to moneyed desires for the lowest inputs costs and highest profits over generations, there is a problem of transition to socialism that is not met. The depredatory effects on organic and ecological life systems of these capitalist productive powers and consumables across generations are not recognised or regulated to prevent them in theory or practice. With no defined life standards or criteria to distinguish life-destructive from life-enabling productive forces and products, how can the cumulative looting and polluting of humanity’s and other species’ life support systems by global capitalism be reversed when they are conceived as “development” even by Marx?

Marx envisions in his *Grundrisse* notebooks to *Capital* a future state in which “once the narrow bourgeois form is peeled away”, there can be “the evolution of all human powers as such unmeasured by any previously established yardstick”. But what if the ‘bourgeois form’ cannot be peeled away because it built into the productive forces themselves? The life-base standards definable at every level do not exist. In *Capital* Volume II, Marx is poignantly

unaware of the problem when he says (emphases added):

“Regardless of whether such a product as tobacco is really a consumer necessity from the physiological point of view, it suffices that it is habitually such”.

We see here the relativization of life necessity to habitual wants which can drive productive forces through the human organism and the biosphere with no *life-carrying capacity limits* defined in even Marx’s *BST*.

Re-Setting Base-Superstructure Theory to the Life Ground

Marx’s base-superstructure theory begins with humanity distinguishing itself from other animals by production of the means of life. Yet ‘means of life’ disappears as a category after 1847 in Marx’s corpus, and is replaced on the first page of *Capital* by commodities serving desires not needs. Productive forces since increasingly mass-manufacture commodities which are disabling and addictive in their consumption – even in a communist-party society moving from mass bicycle riding to fossil-fuel motors toxifying the air and environment. Marx conceives commodities as *values* because they embody labour hours. Yet if we take into account the life and life capital effects of industrial commodities from extraction through processing to product through consumer bodies to wastes through the biosphere – all in motion in Marx’s day – a darker picture emerges than ‘productive force development’ and “‘immense wealth of commodities’ to ground socialist revolution. Nowhere does any measure of life capital enter into theory or measure. True productive value measured by *the yardstick of life capacity gained versus lost* is not conceived. As in capitalism before and since, the “precision of natural science” Marx attributes to “the material mode of production” lacks any criteria which we may call *life capital standards* to meet this fatal problem. Life-degrading commodities and machines cannot be selected against even by revolutionary socialism if there is no regulating principle whereby to recognise them. It seems that Marx’s first principle in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* has dropped out of view:

“One basis for life and another basis for science is an a-priori lie”.

The Missing Life Capital Base of Marx’s Base-Superstructure Theory

Re-set of Marx’s base-superstructure theory to principled consistency with life capital standards is the missing foundation, and the *measure* of life capital necessity is undeniable once defined. Any material need or necessity *is that without which life capacities of any kind are reduced or die* – from oceans to songbirds to human brains. While Marx’s *BST* abstracts out this life base of the productive base, it seems implicitly presupposed in both his attacks on the capitalist system and his revolutionary alternative to it. One may test the italicised principle by seeking any denunciation or affirmation of Marx’s analysis which does *not* conform to it. So can Marx’s *BST* be re-set to include this life base and measure? There is only way do so, and that is by comprehension of the following three moments of any coherent value system that

(i) produces more life value

(ii) without loss and

(iii) with cumulative gain.

The sole concept which comprehends these three moments is life capital – what may also be called true capital – whose collective form includes every social asset through time from the sciences and arts to stable hydrological cycles to a public healthcare system to pollution-abating and recycling technologies to regional biodiversity and arable lands to aquifers, rivers, sewers and filter systems. In fidelity to Marx’s method which understands social systems in terms of social relations rather than atomic aggregates, this missing concept may be modified as ‘collective life capital’. In onto-axiological terms, any life capital at all is only coherent if it reproduces and gains consistently with other life capital: as follows from Marx’s principle of “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”.

The Productive Agency of Social Transformation 150 Years after Capital



Marx believed that industrial workers (the [proletariat](#)) would rise up around the world (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

At the heart of Marx’s base-superstructure theory, the concluding pages of *Capital* contend that the industrial working class or proletariat is “disciplined, united, organised by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself” to *revolt against it*. Yet a logical slippage occurs here. For *within* “this very mechanism of capitalist production”, no purpose is allowed but to serve the M-C-M¹ “law of motion of modern society” which, by Marx’s own description, operates solely to lower money costs for capitalists to pump out maximum profit. What has gone unnoticed is a fallacy of equivocation between the production process of workers bound to strict servitude within the industrial workplace *and* workers joining together *outside* this workplace on the basis of their collective life interests. As Marx himself says in *Wage Labour and Capital*,

“life only begins for the labourer where his bought labour ceases”.

Marx further claims in this signature passage that the industrial proletariat is “growing in revolt” and “always increasing in numbers”. Here the error is not logical, but historical. The industrial proletariat since Marx’s *Capital* has been increasingly replaced by automated

systems which in the last half century have multiplied industrial job reduction, separation of work functions into globally scaled assembly-lines, and deprivation of collective worker leverages of strike, union association, local market demand, and job security. Here again Marx's base-superstructure theory of social transformation needs to be re-set to remain applicable. The class most superseding and displacing the industrial proletariat is one of *knowledge workers who emerge everywhere that symbolic practices replace physical inputs in production*. Yet Marx's First Preface to *Capital* where his general theory is most evident as in his previous Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (bear in mind that a Preface is a traditional location for a work's lodestone of meaning to be generically defined) is far-seeing in a way that has not been recognised. Marx implicitly conceptualises the leading edge of the knowledge class and its public- sector economic base as a transformative agency of developed industrial society across life domains:

where there are plenary powers to get at the truth (Marx's emphasis): if it was possible to find for this purpose men as competent, as free from partisanship and respect of persons as are the English Factory inspectors, her medical reporters on public health, her commissioners of inquiry into the exploitation of women and children, into housing and food".

Observe how encompassing these 'plenary powers to get at the truth' are. Observe how even in a capitalist society Marx supports the knowledge-formation capacities of public servants to be competent, free from bias, and respectful of persons. Observe how he exactly endorses their existing capacities to seek the facts across the most basic domains of human life production and reproduction of the working class. Little known in contemporary culture, Marx's base-superstructure theory implicitly calls for life-capital knowledge evolution as the ultimate species advantage led by public authority with 'plenary powers to get at the truth'.

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Source

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. 1975-2004. Collected Works. Lawrence and Wishart Ltd./Progress Publishers: New York/Moscow.

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