



The Art of Sociological Argument

Graham Crow



The Art of Sociological Argument

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GRAHAM CROW

1

Introduction: the importance of sociological argument

According to Gans's 1999 survey, the best-selling monograph written by a living American sociologist since the 1940s was David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*. First published in 1950, it had sold one million copies by 1971 and a further 434,000 by the end of 1995 (Gans 1999: 283). It was, according to Riesman's obituarist, 'a surprise best seller' (Buhle 2002). At the time of its publication Riesman had 'thought it might sell a few thousand copies as reading in social science courses' (2001: li), and even after becoming famous 'he didn't quite believe his reviews' (Sennett 2003: 29). Riesman's rise to prominence as one of the most influential 'public intellectuals' (Kivisto 1998: 109) of post-war America was due in no small part to his book and its message, even if some of the complexity of that message was lost along the way (Bellah *et al.* 1996: 49). Its critique of consumerism caught the public mood, appealing to a broad 'audience of educated, paperback readers, who fretted about the widespread reports of alienation, juvenile delinquency and loss of religious faith' (Buhle 2002). *The Lonely Crowd* succeeded because it 'sympathetically exposed the anxieties of a middle class that was rising with the postwar boom' (Gitlin 2001: xiii). It echoed the concerns of the time that there was 'too much "community", not enough individualism, too much conformity to others' (Wrong 1999: 73). Its wide appeal is also attributable to the remarkable 'range of Riesman's sources, from psychoanalysis to economic history' (Lemert 1999: 321). The role played by the book's title deserves mention too, because it is so immediately engaging. Reference to *The Lonely Crowd* grabs our attention by presenting us with a paradox that requires explanation: how can one be lonely in a crowd? The same may be said of several other titles among the 56 books that Gans reports having sold in excess of 50,000 copies, including his own *The Urban Villagers* (Gans 1962), Sennett's (1970) *The Uses of Disorder* and Rubin's (1983) *Intimate Strangers*. The point also applies to other classic books (Atkinson 1990: 81) and articles (such as Granovetter 1973) and to the contemporary classic *Bowling Alone* (Putnam 2000).

It seems odd to highlight the use of paradox in the process of making sense of social phenomena, but it is one of a number of well-established techniques employed by sociologists as they engage with their audiences and seek to make them think differently. Numerous cases of sociological paradoxes are discussed in this book as examples of its central proposition that attention ought to be given both to what sociologists say and the way that they say it. Another technique of engaging an audience that will be considered alongside paradoxes is that of the use by sociologists of metaphors to help to get their messages across. Many sociologists' metaphors have entered popular culture. Metaphors matter in what Rigney (2001) has called *The Metaphorical Society* because they shape our conception of the social world as (for example) a theatre, a game or a war, all of which metaphors figure prominently in everyday expression. The ease with which we draw on the language of actors and audiences or winners and losers indicates their potential to become what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) call *Metaphors We Live By*, although we need to beware the common pitfall of treating metaphors as literal descriptions of reality (López 2003). Comparable studies of how arguments are developed have been undertaken in neighbouring disciplines, including psychology (Billig 1996), economics (McCloskey 1998) and anthropology (Geertz 1988) and the art of the use in sociology of rhetorical devices such as paradox and metaphor is equally deserving of attention. The rationale of this book is that the study of how sociologists develop their arguments offers valuable lessons to anyone seeking to persuade an audience of the merits of their case.

One of the things that sociologists' frequent use of paradoxical titles tells us is that audiences have to be attracted. Paradoxes are a particularly good way of getting people's attention. It is also possible to use ambiguity in a title in order to intrigue readers as to which of two or more meanings is intended, as, for example, Oakley (1980) does with *Women Confined*. Other authors are deliberately provocative, as Mills (1960) was in choosing the title *The Causes of World War Three*. Such titles are, of course, only the beginning of the process of persuading an audience of the merits of a case, but inattention to this aspect of developing an argument will decrease the chances of having an audience to persuade in the first place. Once attracted, the attention of an audience has to be kept. The level at which an argument is pitched involves a fine judgement, in which a balance has to be struck between intellectual rigour and intelligibility. Weber's view on this point was that one's terminology could be 'simplified as far as possible' but that there were limits to how far academic arguments could be 'popularized' (1978a: 3). Durkheim also cautioned against sociologists seeking 'to enlist a numerous clientèle', arguing that by seeking 'to take on the esoteric character which befits all science' the

discipline 'will gain in dignity and authority what it will perhaps lose in popularity' (1982: 163). On the other hand, not all writers treat the idea of popular sociology as an oxymoron. Mills, for example, regarded sociologists as having a duty to realise their potential to reach a wide audience 'of intelligent people, academic and otherwise'. As he saw it, sociologists have an obligation to employ 'the simplicity of clear statement' and not lapse into the unintelligibility of 'socspeak' (2000: 218, 224, 220). Oakley's exhortation to use plain language 'to say what we think' (2002: 4) to a broad public audience of laywomen as well as laymen develops Mills's theme, and may be taken as an indication of sociology's democratisation in the century since Durkheim and Weber were writing.

There have been many notable figures in the development of the discipline of sociology whose contributions have helped to shape not only the content of sociological thinking but also the ways in which these ideas are expressed. The eight who have been selected for particular attention in this book are Karl Marx (1818–83), Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), Max Weber (1864–1920), Talcott Parsons (1902–79), Charles Wright Mills (1916–62), Erving Goffman (1922–82), Michel Foucault (1926–84) and Ann Oakley (1944–). They have been chosen for a number of reasons from a much larger pool of potential candidates who merit attention because of what is said in their work and how that message is conveyed. The first reason for their selection is that these are all thinkers who have wrestled with the problem of how best to present an argument that is both theoretically and empirically informed. Sociology does have a place for 'pure' theorists and for colleagues whose 'applied' work eschews extensive engagement with theoretical concerns, but it is in the work of authors that engage with both theory and evidence at the same time that some of the hardest problems are to be found, and some of the most useful lessons are to be learned. This theoretically and empirically informed approach characterises what Marx has to say about capitalism, Durkheim about social cohesion, Weber about religion and social change, Parsons about values and norms, Mills about power, Goffman about identity, Foucault about madness and deviance and Oakley about gender. Their arguments warrant especially serious attention because what they have to say about these topics cannot be dismissed simply as armchair speculation nor as hurried descriptive journalism. The rigour and commitment with which they have gone about their work places them among sociology's best representatives.

The second reason behind this book's selection of sociologists is their diversity of opinions and styles. The eight thinkers convey something of the heterogeneity of the discipline and raise the question of what it means to be a sociologist, particularly in the cases of Marx and Foucault as neither of them identified themselves as such and they might have disputed the way that their ideas have been claimed for sociology. The

diversity of the eight thinkers' approaches extends to questions of what comprises appropriate sociological evidence, what constitutes convincing sociological reasoning and what the point of engaging in sociological argument is. Some place more emphasis than others on the idea of sociology as a science, some operate with the language of demonstrations and proofs that to others are highly problematic and some regard sociology as a means not only of understanding but also of changing the world in a way that others regard as illegitimate. Some, like Oakley, seek to draw conclusions from autobiographical material while others, like Goffman, draw a sharp distinction between their sociology and their private lives. The writers concerned have of course been mindful of these differences, and sought to use them to their advantage in the development of their arguments. Oakley's critique of postmodernists' language as 'dense, imprecise, long-winded, grammatically complex, hugely inaccessible and hence intrinsically undemocratic' carries the implication that the better arguments are those conveyed by 'plain speaking' (2002: 190, 3). This is a rerun of the argument that raged fifty years ago between Mills and Parsons over the most appropriate sociological style. The analysis of eight very different sociologists has not been undertaken for the purpose of identifying one best practice relative to which the other seven fall short; rather they are treated as proponents of diverse approaches that may be more or less useful, depending on the task in hand. Rodinson's metaphorical observation that 'no one has a key to fit all locks' (1977: viii) is apposite here.

The third reason for the selection of the eight thinkers whose work is concentrated upon in the pages which follow is that they all espouse the view that the development of an argument is a craft that needs to be worked at if that argument is to achieve its full potential. It is not too much of an exaggeration to suggest that this stands as central to their life's work. Mills's commitment to what he called 'intellectual craftsmanship' (2000: 195) spurred him to spend ten years working on *White Collar*, and this 'decade-long obsession' (Gillam 1981: 1) has parallels in the amount of time taken to prepare Marx's first volume of *Capital* (Rosdolsky 1980: 10), Durkheim's *Suicide* (Lukes 1975: 191), Parsons's *The Social System* (Wearne 1989: 85) and Oakley's *Social Support and Motherhood* (Oakley 1992: viii). Alongside these works that were subject to painstaking revision, these authors have also been able to produce publications in a matter of weeks, amongst which are numbered Marx's collaborative work with Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Taylor 1967: 7), Mills's *The New Men of Power* (Mills and Mills 2000: 107) and Oakley's *Sex, Gender and Society* (1985: 125). These latter were not written completely from scratch, in that they set down ideas that the authors had been mulling over for longer periods, but it is instructive that each of them sold well. They demonstrate that there is

more than one way to achieve the objective of engaging with an audience, provided that the argument is tailored accordingly. The sociological careers of the eight writers focused on in this book also suggest that sociological argument is something that one learns by doing. Reflection on the reception of previous endeavours means that the adage 'practice makes perfect' is appropriate, or at least its modified version 'practice makes better'.

Fourth, the eight thinkers have been chosen because they lived in different places and at different times, and this allows consideration to be given to the question of whether sociology as a discipline has advanced in terms of the capacity of its practitioners to develop successful arguments. The eight are presented chronologically, and the century-long journey from Marx as one of the founding figures of the discipline to Oakley as a representative of contemporary sociology reveals that the subject is not cumulative in any simple sense. The chapters that follow will identify many ways in which the thinkers considered have sought to distance themselves from their predecessors and their agendas. It is evident, for example, that on the matter of the position of women 'Durkheim was writing in a bygone era' (Aron 1970: 43) and that in this respect it has been impossible for feminists to build on his writings. This case illustrates that as times change, so each generation of sociologists must take the discipline in new and unanticipated directions. Other aspects of the work of the founding figures of the discipline have proved more enduring, however, not least in terms of the types of questions that they sought to pose and the types of engagement with their audiences that they endeavoured to achieve. The writers considered here have many points of difference, but they share a common concern to engage interested others with their ideas. This common project reflects their shared belief that ideas matter, and more specifically that sociology has the potential, as Mills put it, 'to make a difference to the quality of human life in our time' (2000: 226). Engagement with sociological ideas requires preparedness on the part of an audience to be open to new ways of thinking, and to respond appropriately by suspending their existing world view for the sake of sociological argument.

None of the eight thinkers whose work is to be examined in the chapters that follow has claimed that sociology offers easy answers or timeless verities to which they have uniquely privileged access. The story of each of them is one of a personal journey of discovery in which they endeavour to move towards more precise formulation of the questions that they want to ask, gather more satisfactory answers to these questions and seek more effective means of communicating those answers. Very often literal journeys have been involved, supporting Mills's contention that it is 'helpful to try to get a *comparative* grip on the materials' (2000: 215, emphasis in original). Marx's exile from Germany forced him to think

comparatively, just as visits to Germany stimulated Durkheim and Parsons to step outside their national contexts (albeit more briefly). Similar comments have been made about Weber's trip to the USA, Mills's visits to Latin America and Foucault's spells spent in various countries. The general point is summed up nicely in Oakley's remark about the capacity of 'travels abroad' to undermine 'parochial vision' (1986a: 7). It is intended that these accounts of personal change and discovery will encourage among readers the confidence to engage actively with the various points that are raised. Few sociological debates are finally settled, and the positions adopted by the eight sociologists on whose work attention is focused are not above criticism. Sociology teaches us to challenge what Bourdieu calls those 'internal censorships' by which we rein ourselves in, believing the voices that tell us '“I'm not a theorist”, “I can't write”' and that adjectives like 'brilliant' (1993: 52–3) apply only to other people.

It is also to be hoped that the contemporary relevance of the historical material contained in this book will be appreciated. Stones provides a good example of how knowledge of the past can be useful in the present in his discussion of how 'the unsuspecting reader' may be persuaded by the well-worn technique of criticising an author previously introduced as 'an authoritative genius with the most marvellous of grasps' (1996: 220). The sleight of hand has a very respectable intellectual pedigree, as will be revealed in the discussion of Marx and others below, but even so it is a rhetorical device to beware. In a similar fashion it can be noted that although Miles's warning about the potential of sociological analysis to 'degenerate into meaningless rhetoric' (2001: 167) is made with contemporary writers in mind, such warnings have been given before. This is not the first generation of sociologists to be critical of the style of argument in which popular buzz-words and impressionistic analyses are substituted for hard thinking. We can also use knowledge of the past to reflect on current practice in other ways. Hochschild implies that her first drafts suffer from serious overuse of punctuation in the same way as Weber's did, the difference being that she is prepared to take on board the friendly reminder that quotation marks 'are a way of placing reservations on our use of a word, and we need to have a good reason for doing that' (2003: ix). It is instructive that one of her publications, *The Second Shift* (Hochschild 1989), is included in Gans's list of best-sellers that Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* topped, despite having only six years before the census date for sales to exceed 100,000. Gans's comment that books would not have made it onto this list had they not been 'written in a language that at least educated general readers can understand' indicates that attention to style can pay off, in this instance quite literally. Gans's further suggestions about the desirability of greater knowledge of past research as an antidote

to 'sociological amnesia' (1999: 285, ch. 14) can thus be complemented by a similar set of suggestions concerning the lessons that there are to be learned from the scholarly work of previous generations about what makes an effective argument. This is the reason why the final chapter of this book concludes with ten observations that are grounded in the analysis of the nature of sociological argument and reasoning that begins in Chapter 2 with Marx.

2

Karl Marx: sociology as radical criticism

Introduction and overview

Karl Marx was born in Germany on 5 May 1818 and died in London on 14 March 1883 aged 64, following several years of failing health. Many aspects of his family life were 'thoroughly bourgeois' (Blumenberg 1972: 126), but his lifetime's work was devoted to developing an unrelenting critique of capitalist society. It is for this critique that he is best remembered. His radical politics meant that he spent most of his life in exile, finding a haven in London where he oscillated between periodic involvement in political activism and long spells of solitary study in the Reading Room of the British Museum. He was an avid note-taker, and the published versions of his notebooks offer insights into the furious pace at which he worked, his zeal for questioning all aspects of conventional wisdom and his preparedness to 'turn everything upside down' (in Nicolaus 1973: 59) in his search for an analysis with which he could be satisfied. He was capable of being self-critical in his pursuit of a style of writing that achieved the exacting standards that he set, but he had the capacity to take his criticism of others much further, and few writers whose works he encountered escaped the uncomfortable experience of his waspishly critical attention. One of his opponents even characterised him as someone who had so much self-belief that he tended to 'divide mankind into two parties: Marx and the rest' (McLellan 1973: 247). He was aware that he had the physical appearance of a prophet (Wheen 2000: 379), and this befitted his role as an uncompromising critic of the social evils that he saw all around him.

Marx lived at a time when the transition to an industrial age was transforming all aspects of social and economic life and raising profound political and philosophical questions. The transition to an industrial order undermined previous certainties and represented to Marx a historically pivotal break with the past. The new economic order was open to criticism because of the alienating character of production governed by market forces, and because workers who produced commodities in the emerging

capitalist mode of production were vulnerable to exploitation. These evils were criticised so vehemently by Marx because they were in his view avoidable, at least once the transition had been achieved and the full potential of mechanised production realised. Marx was impressed by industrial society's potential to meet people's material needs in a way that no previous social order had been able to do, but was at the same time convinced that its organisation as a capitalist mode of production stood in the way of realising that potential. To Marx this was a political as well as an economic issue, since production takes place within particular forms of property relations in which typically those social classes that own the means of production dominate those who do not. Marx was thus led to an interest in the tendency of social classes to come into conflict, and also to a philosophical interest in how such conflicts unfold throughout history.

What Marx brought to the study of political economy, as these subjects were called at the time, was a preparedness to ask radical questions and a concern to follow through the logic of an argument to its conclusion, however contentious this may be. This took him beyond academic analysis into the realm of political interventions, and some of the writings for which he is best known are political tracts, such as *The Communist Manifesto* which he wrote in 1848 with his lifelong friend and collaborator Frederick Engels. This work caught the mood of the year of intense revolutionary activity in which it was published, and Marx continued to seek to make his writings relevant to the political agendas of his day. He was aware, however, that the 'popularization' of his ideas stood in conflict with his mission to be scientific in his analysis, and once remarked that 'Scientific attempts to revolutionize a science can never be truly popular' (in Nicolaus 1973: 57, emphasis in original). He was torn between his aspiration to make the core of his approach 'accessible to the ordinary human intelligence, in two or three printer's sheets' (in Callinicos 1996: 77) and his consciousness of the dangers of oversimplification. It is instructive to note that *Capital*, his *magnum opus*, was a huge and complex work that was years in the making and ultimately left uncompleted. Only the first volume was published during his lifetime, in 1867, and many commentators have noted the commitment that is required of readers if they are to reach the end. It was typical of Marx that he could ask for such commitment, on the grounds that he regarded the topics with which he engaged as the most serious and challenging issues that we face.

The way in which Marx set about presenting his ideas was deliberately controversial. As befits someone whose favourite motto was '*De omnibus dubitandum*' (Blumenberg 1972: 175), that is, 'we ought to question everything' (Worsley 1982: 9), he set out to challenge conventional wisdom and its embodiment in everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge. This stance inevitably earned him notoriety in certain circles, among people who

regarded the communist ideas with which he was associated as a 'spectre' (Marx and Engels 1968: 35). Marx defended himself against his critics by casting doubt on their ideas and by claiming that his own point of view could be demonstrated, scientifically, to be superior. In keeping with the spirit of the times in which he lived, Marx positioned himself as someone whose work was 'scientific', in contrast to the hidebound character of conventional thinking. Marx argued that his approach offered a radically different perspective on the world, one that people who benefited from existing arrangements would be bound to seek to discredit. In the battle of ideas in which he was engaged, Marx had no qualms about reinforcing his scientific case with all manner of argumentational devices that advanced his prospects of defeating his opponents. For example, early on in their writing careers Marx and Engels had encountered the 'trick' of recasting an abstract idea 'into a person' (1974: 67) with whom readers could more readily identify. The effectiveness of this ploy was not lost on Marx, in whose later writings the 'whimsically nasty character' (Lemert 1995: 168) of 'Mr Moneybags' was created in order to pillory capitalism more effectively.

A great deal is required by Marx of his audiences. Marx's assumption of 'a reader who is willing to learn something new and therefore to think for himself' (1976: 90) demands active engagement with ideas and preparedness to suspend disbelief in order that prevailing illusions might be challenged and secrets revealed. Engels took a different view of the needs of prospective readers of *Capital*, and urged Marx 'to make it as easy for them as one possibly can' (in Wheen 2000: 312), but Marx was not suited temperamentally to writing in textbook fashion. Marx's *Capital* is written instead in a style that revolves around, in Wheen's words, 'elaborate metaphors ... confusing digressions ... philosophical orotundities ... [and] literary flourishes' (2000: 303). These devices may have been more or less effective in helping to carry the argument along, but the underlying propositions that Marx sought to advance were necessarily hard to grasp because they involved taking the world with which people were familiar and turning it upside down. Starting an analysis with things that we all know to be 'true' only to doubt how far these truths stand up to scrutiny reveals the revolutionary potential of 'questioning everything'. Existing explanations can be examined for inconsistencies and contradictions, and through a process of dialectical reasoning more rigorous accounts can be derived, but these may well appear strange at first sight. It is not surprising to learn that ahead of the publication of the first volume of *Capital* in 1867 Marx spent 'a nine-year period of experimentation and continual searching for a form of presentation which would be adequate to the material' (Rosdolsky 1980: 10), material on which Marx had already by 1858 spent 'fifteen years of research ... the best period of my life' (in McLellan 1980: 122). Even if we accept Harvey's claim that 'The exploration of contradictions always lies

at the heart of original thought' (1989: 345), it remains a formidable problem to demonstrate that they have been resolved satisfactorily.

Marx's efforts to establish the veracity of his ideas drew heavily on the development of a comparative perspective (Sayer 1979). Marx's writings are full of striking juxtapositions in which the implication is clear, that things do not have to be as they are. His message is that 'what was historically created can always be historically changed' (Eagleton 1999: 17). In 1856, for example, historical comparison led him to note that, 'In our days everything seems pregnant with its contrary. Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labour, we behold starving and overworking it. The new-fangled sources of wealth, by some strange weird spell, are turned into sources of want' (1973b: 299). It was a recurrent theme of Marx that capitalism promised to liberate humanity from the constraints to which it had been subject under previous modes of production, but delivered only distorted versions of freedom. Building on the contrast between capitalism's boundless potential and its less impressive record in practice, Marx was able to pursue the idea that wage-labourers are 'free' in two senses, and that one of these, their freedom from property (i.e. their propertylessness) had far more impact on their lives than did their freedom to change employer. As a result, he concluded, 'the system of wage labour is ... a system of slavery' (1974: 352); the achievement of 'the true realm of freedom' (1981: 959) required in Marx's view the transcendence of capitalism. For Marx, the scientific analysis of the working of the capitalist mode of production pointed to this outcome as more or less inevitable.

The extent to which Marx resorted to the argument of historical inevitability is a matter of ongoing debate. There is much in Marx's writings that gives support to the view that he saw social change as a law-like process. Zeitlin has acknowledged that 'Marx and Engels must bear some responsibility for the widespread and persistent misapprehension of their theory' before going on to argue that it would be mistaken to treat 'their evolutionary metaphors as anything more than rhetoric' (1987: 107). Other commentators such as Cohen (1988: ch. 4) place greater emphasis on the role of inevitability in Marx's analysis, although even here care is taken to distinguish between this position and crude determinism. Ray's observation that Marx saw the resolution of the social crisis of his day coming about 'through a combination of scientific knowledge and social agency' (1999: 65) highlights that Marx was seeking to prompt people to act, rather than simply making his audience more aware of what was going on around them. Marx's critique of capitalism galvanised people to action because it had a moral dimension to it as well as a scientific one. According to Moore, 'For Marx there was no conflict between his position as a moralist and a scientist' (1962: 117), and so it is only to be expected

that his writings are peppered with emotive and value-laden terms as well as more conventionally scientific language.

Marx's method of presentation

Over the course of his life Marx engaged with his audiences using a variety of different formats, including numerous speeches, letters, newspaper articles, pamphlets and books. The most ambitious of these was his study of *Capital*. The full six volumes that Marx planned to write were never completed, perhaps unsurprisingly, given the immensity of the task. In addition, Marx's mode of working did not lend itself to speedy and single-minded completion of projects (Pampel 2000: 16). Even so, the first volume of *Capital* is noteworthy both for its intellectual content and for its style of presentation. In the postface to the second edition of this work, Marx wrote with exasperation at how 'the method employed in *Capital* has been little understood', it being more obvious to him than it was to his reviewers that 'the method of presentation must differ in form from that of enquiry' (1976: 99, 102). A step-by-step chronological account of the process by which he reached his conclusions would not have kept the audience's attention, and instead Marx took advantage of the magical qualities of his subject matter. Woodiwiss has commented that *Capital's* 'first six chapters follow the narrative structure of a conjuring act: first we are reassured that everything is normal but suddenly a rabbit is produced' (2001: 36). Marx's surprise at the apparently supernatural appearance of surplus value in the process of production and exchange is of course feigned, but a necessary part of making his readers think in unaccustomed ways. To achieve this, Marx needed to locate his starting point as the position currently occupied by his audience, and then to proceed from there. It is no accident that 'Marx's writing is famous for its endings' (Berman 1983: 20), because he was mindful of the power of a dramatic denouement.

The common ground that Marx sought to establish with his readers at the start of *Capital* was a shared understanding of that central element of everyday life in capitalist societies, the commodity. Inclusion of a quotation from his earlier work in the opening sentence may have added to the authoritative character of his pronouncement, but this was not required to establish what Marx suggests is incontrovertible: that commodities are useful, and that they have prices. Everyone can agree that commodities need to be useful if people are going to want to acquire them, and everyone can also agree that commodities are acquired through being exchanged for money. In setting out these starting points, Marx did not make any claims to originality, and his text is replete with references to the work of forerunners in which the underpinnings of his argument had

already been established. The years spent by Marx in the Reading Room of the British Museum where he 'read voraciously' and 'filled his notebooks' (McLellan 1973: 282–3) allowed him to draw on the ideas of great figures such as Adam Smith. Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* had pointed out that the value of goods 'has two different meanings. ... The one may be called "value in use"; the other, "value in exchange"' (1974: 131) nearly a century before Marx was writing, and this distinction played a key role in the development by Smith and later by Ricardo of the labour theory of value, according to which the prices of commodities reflect the amount and quality of the labour that making them requires (Meek 1973). Marx thus accepted much of what had already been written, but he then sought to take that analysis a crucial step further. In a letter to Engels in 1851 he expressed the view of the economics literature that he had read that 'Basically, this science has made no further progress since A. Smith and D. Ricardo' (in McLellan 1973: 283). The subsequent two decades only hardened Marx's opinion on this matter, for by 1873 he was characterising the successors to Smith and Ricardo as no more than 'hired prize-fighters' in whose writings disinterested inquiry and 'genuine scientific research' had been replaced by mere 'apologetics' (1976: 97) that dealt only in expressing expedient justifications for the status quo.

Marx referred approvingly to the reviewer of *Capital* who took it to be 'a necessary sequel to the teaching of Smith and Ricardo' (Marx 1976: 99). This supported Marx's designation of his endeavour as 'a critique of political economy', the subtitle that he gave to *Capital*. What has been called the 'paradox of value' (Meek 1973: 73), the situation whereby certain commodities (such as diamonds) are more expensive than others (such as water) despite being less useful, had led Smith and Ricardo to look elsewhere for the explanation of the price of a commodity, since it evidently could not lie in the commodity's usefulness. The conclusion that they reached was that commodities varied in price according to how much work was involved in their production, and it was this labour theory of value that Marx sought to develop. Marx could take it as given that Smith and Ricardo had already established that 'The value contained in a commodity is equal to the labour-time taken in making it' (1981: 133). He then proceeded to demonstrate that some startling consequences followed from this apparently innocuous premise when combined with the equally unremarkable premise that commodities are exchanged through the medium of money for things of equivalent value. For Marx the implications of these ideas had to be followed through, in order to reveal the 'secret' and 'mysterious' properties of commodities that remained hidden to the 'vulgar economists' (1976: 163, 175), his deliberately dismissive term for the blinkered thinkers of his day who were not prepared to venture beyond what seems obvious in the common sense view of the world.

Marx whetted his audience's appetite by indicating that things are not what they seem. As he later put it, scientific enquiry is justified on precisely these grounds: 'all science would be superfluous if the appearance of things directly coincided with their essence' (1981: 956). The observation that 'A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing' is followed by the intriguing claim that analysis reveals it to be, on the contrary, 'a very strange thing'. The commodity form that seems so unremarkable in the modern world would have appeared 'fantastic' to people in other eras, such as the inhabitants of medieval Europe. Only when money has become all-pervasive do 'labour and its products' come to assume the magical qualities of commodities. Only in the modern world have commodities become so familiar that they are routinely treated as 'natural'. When this happens commodities come to be 'endowed with a life of their own', and people lose sight of the historically distinctive circumstances that have led to this peculiar 'fetishism of the commodity'. Commodities come to dominate people's existence once sight is lost of the simple point that they are the products of labour, produced because they are useful and instead their exchange value, (that is, their price) becomes the exclusive measure of their worth. Marx spoke of this fetishism as 'peculiar to the capitalist mode of production', since it is only in this historical period that 'the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite' (1976: 163, 170, 175, 165, 163, 1046, 175). By framing his argument in this way Marx was drawing a parallel with the critique of religious thinking that he had developed earlier in his career, and the term 'fetishism' was chosen deliberately to convey his comparable disdain for the worship of commodities.

Marx could have left his argument there, because already by the end of the first chapter of *Capital* he had developed a critique of the work of political economists, challenging their celebration of the bourgeois world view with his more hostile opinion that commodities have come to dominate people's existence. The alienating effects of commodification, making things (and also workers) into commodities that are judged according to the price for which they are bought and sold on markets, had been a key theme of Marx's early writings, but what he sought to do in *Capital* was to add a second and more deadly line of attack. In the interim the centrepiece of his argument had shifted from alienation to surplus value (Walton and Gamble 1976), and it was this latter concept that was presented as his key discovery. Marx argued that what political economy had left unresolved was how profit could arise in a system in which labour is the source of commodities' value, and markets involve the exchange of equivalents. How, as Engels later condensed Marx's question, 'is this then to be reconciled with the fact that the wage-worker does not receive the whole sum of value created by his labour but has to surrender a part of it to the capitalist?' (in Marx and