

## THE ABOLITIONIST—II

**F**OR THE EARLY Marx, the history of civil society unfolded as a process of accumulation that took off with the privatization of archaic quasi-natural communities and came to a conclusion with the abolition of the state, property and the family.<sup>1</sup> Competition propelled a continuous accumulation of the results of the labour of preceding generations, making possible an ever more extensive 'division of labour'. Marx's first version of historical materialism was a history of the division of labour, but the latter term had a meaning in this period that it would subsequently lose: 'Division of labour and private property are . . . identical expressions.'<sup>2</sup> The evolution of the division of labour was thus the history of private property, and in turn this was the story of the accumulation of capital as the stock of past, saved-up labour. Although Marx conceived of labour and capital in this essentially Smithian sense, the dynamic of their relationship was taken more dialectically. 'Labour', far from being a constant of the species-relation to nature, existed only in this divided form, one that culminated in the opposition of wage labour and capital: 'Labour is *man's coming-to-be for himself* within *alienation*, or as *alienated* man.'<sup>3</sup>

The history of private property was thus the history of alienated labour, of living labour subjecting nature to its purposes but in turn becoming ever more subject to the power of its opposite, past labour, i.e. capital. The history of capital, so conceived, was the history of the formation of new needs, new forces of production and a broadening, eventually worldwide, division of labour. Essentially an elaboration of eighteenth-century Anglo-Scottish accounts of the history of civil society, Marx's version extended the story of Ferguson and Smith up to the current age of the world market, with the European theatre of class struggles at its epicentre.

Within the larger field of bourgeois ideology, a German tendency could be distinguished from the Anglo-French one. The Hegelian school professed the primacy of the ideals of a people, as expounded in the spiritual superstructure of its constitution, religion, art and philosophy over the underside of its merely material existence. Marx argued that in the literary outpourings of idealist Germany, real history was made to appear as a pantomime of the separation, struggle and reconciliation of philosophical categories. For all its moments of real criticism, this allegory of history ultimately obscured the actual order of determination between the ideal and the material. As mentioned earlier, Marx looked back to pre-Hegelian Anglo-Scottish and French social thought in working out his own materialist conception of history, but the critical aspect of his relation to this older intellectual formation is harder to specify, since over this period its premises were often his own points of departure.

In contradistinction to his own, Enlightenment materialism was held to be mechanical. His criticism of it was acute: the atomistic individuality it posited at the foundation of the world formed the alienated vantage point of its own merely contemplative, i.e. powerless relation to this world, perforce conceived as an order of inviolable laws. It should be recalled though that from his dissertation years he was receptive to the more discordant strains of atomism—the idea that the unbridled competition of individuals—what Kant had called ‘asocial sociability’—was the driving force of the history of the coming into being of the modern world of commerce and constitutions. Underlying the tranquil laws of political economy was a pattern of atomistic strife that put its notion of equilibrium into question. Marx then came to conclude that the egoistic individual of eighteenth-century conceptions was not a natural given, but rather the product of the meltdown of traditional modes of authority and subsistence, and would eventually have to give way to a new species of social individuals. Civil society was the substratum of this entire history while modern civil society was only its latest phase—a secular age in which the ever more antithetical elements of the whole order of life represented themselves and contended in a sphere of political agency: the transformation of substance into self-conscious subject, to put it into the Hegelian terms that were effaced by their materialist inversion.

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<sup>1</sup>The first part of this study appeared in NLR 90.

<sup>2</sup>Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* [1845–47], in MECW vol. 5, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup>Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* [1844], in MECW vol. 3, p. 333.

Marx offered a dazzling reformulation of the Scottish stadial sagas of the history of modes of life from savagery to civilization, leading up to the present. It was not just the so-called transition from feudalism to modern commercial civilization that had to be explained: the history of material life going back to the origins of the division of labour had to be made intelligible if the case for modern communism was to be made. The first partitions of primal-horde communities led to the establishment of the male-headed household, the pod from which all other forms of servitude developed. For the early Marx as for utopian socialists, the family was the foundation of the division of labour and the inter-generational accumulation of capital through inheritance, and thus: 'That the supersession of the individual economy is inseparable from the supersession of the family is self-evident.'<sup>4</sup> Underlying the passages from archaic clans to ancient city-states, and from feudalism to modern bourgeois society, was a coercive process of development that was propelling mankind into a frightful era of civil wars.

### *The emergence of 'mobile capital'*

For the early Marx, in accordance with the assumptions of *The Wealth of Nations*, 'capital' meant the inherited stock of instruments, materials and provisions created by past labour. Smith's conception of capital logically entailed an account of its so-called primitive accumulation that Marx essentially reproduced. The evolution of European civil society was the story of the emergence of commercially alienable 'mobile capital' out of the inalienable 'natural capital' of land and communally owned conditions of production. The original accumulation of 'mobile capital' started with the political secession of towns from the jurisdiction of feudal law. Within the town, a class structure emerged based on the guild system in which the opposition of mental to manual labour set the mould for a subsequent division between capital and labour. Ongoing conflict between free towns and the feudal countryside then led to the erosion of serfdom as peasants fled into towns, constituting a proto-proletariat. This expanding population of uprooted refugees and their descendants underpinned the accumulation of monetary fortunes out of the old guild-based system, opening up class divisions between masters and journeymen. With the invention of bills of exchange and other sophisticated credit instruments, this stockpiling of wealth was liberated from older limits of the

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<sup>4</sup> *The German Ideology*, p. 76.

consumption and storage of goods. This in turn led to the development of continuous commercial relations between towns and to long-distance luxury trade with Asia, forming an extensive inter-regional division of labour. The amassed capital formed from long-distance trade subordinated and partly destroyed the guild system, creating the conditions for the development of manufacture.

The promotion of manufacturing sectors by early modern states seeking to amass account surpluses led to mercantilist wars and colonial conquests. The stimulus of the resulting influx of gold and silver deepened and expanded the home market. Demand resulting from either the emergence of new needs or population growth outstripped supply, leading to an industrious revolution, so to speak, that 'forced all individuals to strain their energy to the utmost'.<sup>5</sup> As a pioneer of factory production England prevailed in these mercantilist wars, leading to the formation of a free-trade world market based on an English monopoly. This gave rise to the factory system in England, and the dissolution of older social relations on the continent even in the absence of comparable economic developments.

The rise of modern European civil or bourgeois society, as Marx viewed it, was a story of the subordination of the countryside to urban commercial centres that had expanded from the interstices of feudalism before bursting it asunder. In his later economics, he demonstrated how the emergence of a socio-economic logic, radically discontinuous with the one it broke from, necessarily took off from the countryside as the outcome of struggles that destroyed extra-economic means of surplus appropriation while separating peasant producers from their traditional means of subsistence—setting in motion a 'primitive accumulation' of capital by imposing exchange dependency on landlord and tenant alike. Marx's distinct early and later conceptions of capital contained within them radically different accounts of an original accumulation. Just as he sought not to articulate an alternative system of political economy but rather to draw out the contradictions and final implications of this body of thought, so he acknowledged that this conception of history based on class struggle was simply a further development and thinking through of the account of the rise of the bourgeoisie offered by the most advanced school of liberal historiography. As we shall see, it

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<sup>5</sup> *The German Ideology*, p. 73.

was only in the aftermath of the defeat of the revolutions of 1848 that Marx began to distinguish between the genesis of capitalist social relations out of feudalism in England and the parallel mercantilization of the old order induced by the formation of a tax-office state. Referring to Augustin Thierry, 'le père of the "class struggle" in French historiography', he noted that 'although he does not generalize, he depicts very nicely . . . how from the beginning, or at least since the rise of the towns, the French bourgeoisie has gained undue influence by constituting itself a parliament, bureaucracy, etc., and not, as in England, by commerce and *industrie* alone.'<sup>6</sup> A striking indication of the flaw in Adam Smith's account of the emergence of modern civil society from the commercialization of feudalism was its failure to account for this secular divergence, which could only be explained with another conception of capital and its accumulation.

### *Logico-historical circles*

Robert Brenner explains the logic underlying Marx's account of the transition to modern society in the drafts that made up the so-called *German Ideology* as follows: 'The theory's basic image of transition from feudalism to capitalism encompasses the maturation of the developing bourgeois society, nourished by constantly-growing world trade, within the womb of the old feudal society.' He argues that the problem with Marx's earlier 'Smithian' account was that it posited a dynamic of the spontaneous extension of exchange relations in order to explain the emergence of a form of society driven by this same commercial logic. The trans-historical unfolding of bourgeois society—here equated with the underlying material presuppositions of all hitherto existing societies—was thus used tautologically to explain the emergence of *modern* bourgeois society. Brenner provides a succinct encapsulation of the order of determination underlying this conception of the history of civil society: 'the development of the productive forces > the development of the division of labour > the division of mental and manual labour > nature of class and property relations (distribution of material, instrument, and product of labour)'.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Marx, Letter to Engels, 27 July 1854, in MECW vol. 39, pp. 473–4.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Brenner, 'Bourgeois Revolution and Transition to Capitalism', in A. L. Beier et al, eds, *The First Modern Society: Essays in English History in Honour of Lawrence Stone*, Cambridge 1989, pp. 271–304.

But what was the dynamic behind the cumulative development of the productive forces in the first place? Classical political economy could rely upon a vague conception of a general propensity to compete, cooperate and accumulate that, unless checked by extra-economic impediments or reversed by barbarian inundation, would push back natural barriers to population growth for an indefinite time to come. The early Marx did not fundamentally depart from this older account of a cumulative natural-historical process, except to posit its dramatic acceleration and outward expansion over the modern era, without however explaining the structural break that led to this take-off. Indeterminacy banished in one form returned in another—as questions about the nature and history of capital that would be less amenable to the method of critique that Marx practiced over this period. Later solutions would entail a more radical break with the premises of these earlier histories of civil society, and not just with their mystified Hegelian sublimations.

The problem was that the identification of civil or bourgeois society with a natural-historical dynamic, unfolding across all stages of history, logically made it difficult to specify the qualitatively different modes of material life that were held to determine the forms of political community and consciousness characteristic of any one of these eras. Accordingly, the specificity of each tended to be explained not in terms of distinct sets of social property relations but rather by their characteristic *methods of production*, as the scale of the subjugation and transformation of nature that these afforded could be understood as having evolved cumulatively.

Marx's universal history of civil society was patterned more narrowly after the emergence of modern commercial civilization out of the crisis of European feudalism, although, revealingly, until 1848 he never used the term 'feudal' to designate a historically specific form of economy. The reason was that within an account of the progressive course of civilization, the so-called Middle Ages occupied an inevitably indeterminate position, as a proverbial dark age. And unlike Hegel, Marx also felt no need in this period to incorporate the history of the Orient into his schema, although the embryo of his later interest in tribal society—so-called primitive communism—had already taken shape. Other ages of known history conformed to, or troubled, this occidental saga to varying degrees. The earlier transition from clan society to the ancient city, and the subsumption of the latter into Rome's expanding Mediterranean empire, might

be explained plausibly in terms of the mechanisms of this general history of the division of labour—population growth and commercialization fuelling wars of enslavement, boundless polarization of fortunes and eventually, the thorough deracination of the entire Mediterranean world. The distinction between this ancient epic of dispossession, civil war and Caesarism and a modern one leading to wage-slavery and its train of contemporary consequences was not very sharply drawn at this point.

Marx, it must be noted, was not seeking to provide an all-purpose account of human history that would address such complicating objections and qualifications. The meaning of his draft of historical materialism can only be understood in the polemical context of the inversion of historical idealism. The critique of the latter was composed to demonstrate the necessity of the rise of the workers' movement and the actuality of communism, given the premises of modern political economy and the most advanced Anglo-French histories of civil society. Yet precisely within this political context he was forced to ponder a historical riddle, one that seemed to lend credence to the opposed assumptions of the Hegelian school: the continuity of the Christian religion across vast transformations in the modes or stages of material life, from Roman Palestine to mid-nineteenth-century Europe. Marx had earlier sought to break from Bruno Bauer's interpretation of the present as the twilight of this millennial spiritual bondage, but the problem posed by the persistence of religious communities across distinct historical worlds would not be so easily dispatched. Over the period analysed here, the salient materialist tenet was that religion—along with all other forms of mystified consciousness—simply had no internal logic of development: it was in this sense that Marx would assert that ideology had no history (although he certainly did not seem to think this was true of science or even the arts). He maintained that:

Christianity was preceded by the total collapse of the ancient 'world conditions' of which [it] was the mere expression; that 'completely new world conditions' arose not internally through Christianity but only when the Huns and the Germans fell 'externally' on the corpse of the Roman Empire; that after the Germanic invasion the 'new world conditions' did not adapt themselves to Christianity but that Christianity itself changed with every new phase of these world conditions.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Review of Fr. Daumer, *Die Religion des Neuen Weltalters. Versuch einer Combinatorisch-Aphoristischen Grundlegung*, MECW vol. 10, p. 244

The underlying Young Hegelian premise of Marx's first version of historical materialism was that history was moving towards a final manifestation of its heretofore concealed basis—alternatively, the evolution of the division of labour or the class struggle. 'Man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life.'<sup>9</sup> Marx disdainfully noted that educated Germans were especially inclined to resist this disenchantment of the world with ersatz forms of spirituality: 'The difference between the present upheaval and all earlier ones lies in the very fact that man has at last found out the secret of this process of historical upheaval and hence, instead of once again exalting this practical, "external", process in the rapturous form of a new religion, divests himself of all religion.'<sup>10</sup> In its final phase, bourgeois society would reduce all mystified forms of consciousness to the naked cash nexus, before this chain was itself cast off. The difference between the Marx of the decade 1842–52 and the Marx of *Capital* can be demonstrated in a sombre passage from his later notebooks on political economy, depicting a social order in which this self-demystifying dynamic is entirely absent, and whose forms of revenue come to stand as inert, crystallized class characters, amidst a religion of everyday life:

Thus the participants in capitalist production live in a bewitched world and their own relationships appear to them as properties of things, as properties of the material elements of production. It is however in the last, most derivative forms—forms in which the intermediate stage has not only become invisible but has been turned into its direct opposite—that the various aspects of capital appear as the real agencies and direct representatives of production. Interest-bearing capital is personified in the moneyed capitalist, industrial capital in the industrial capitalist, rent-bearing capital in the landlord as the owner of the land, and lastly, labour in the wage-worker.<sup>11</sup>

### *Towards 1848*

The history of civil society unfolded according to a law of accumulation beginning with the partition of natural communities and culminating in communism—or a more vaguely conceived fall into barbarism. Before considering the further political elaborations of this conception in the approach to the revolution of 1848, and then its breakdown in the

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<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* [1848], in MECW vol. 6, p. 487.

<sup>10</sup> Review of Daumer, p. 244

<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* [1861–66], vol. 3, Moscow, 1971, p. 514.



aftermath of defeat, we should pause to take in the remorseless underlying logic by which this secular process was expected to manifest itself in the sphere of politics.

The separation of state and civil society turned the state into a sphere of the representation of class struggles arising out of the unbridled motions of civil society. But this representative relationship of modern civil society to the state contained the premises of their revolutionary abolition, an inexorable transitional process whose iron laws could be identified only through the critique of political economy. For the separation of state from civil society resulted in the division of the income of society into the forms of rent, profit and wages. This separation set in motion an existential struggle between the classes that subsisted by these forms of revenue. Political economy presupposed an equilibrated world in which supply equalled demand because production created its own demand in the form of the factor revenues paid out to the owners of land, capital and labour. Marx overturned this circular theorization of a synchronic order and elaborated a historical dynamic in which rent, profit and the wage system would come to be abolished in succession. Although capital accumulation generated class polarization on an ever more universal scale, modern class struggles assumed their highest political form in the representative sphere arising from and mediating the separation of state from civil society, because this was where the latter's power to constitute and abolish was concentrated. In his early draft of a critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, he sketched the outline of a sudden, dramatic leap from constitutional monarchy to revolutionary assembly. But even though parliamentary ascendancy over the royal executive was expected to open out onto a vaguely conceived abolition of the state, in this earlier forecast emancipation was conceived as the motion of civil-bourgeois society coming into its own, and not of its self-abolition. The subsequent study and critique of political economy pushed beyond this constitutional limit, towards more concrete conjectures about the passing away of civil society itself as the substratum of history hitherto.

Marx conceived of the communist movement as the self-conscious agency of this process of the dissolution of bourgeois society—itsself only the dissolution phase of a longer-standing European old regime—taking the immediate shape of a rapidly expanding, impoverished proletarian multitude. It is of course widely known that for Marx, the proletariat only completed what its progenitor and nemesis had begun. But the precise

conditions and forms of this movement from political to human emancipation, from bourgeois to proletarian revolution can now be set forth with greater precision.

In the age of representative government, every class strove to identify its form of revenue with the general interests of society. The subjection of society to the laws of the world market set in motion a political dialectic of particular interests and a universal one formed from their ongoing dissolution. The universalization of the division of labour was the coming into being of world history, the setting up of the political stage on which every limited form of class rule would be overthrown in a process ending with the self-abolition of the proletariat amidst the tearing down of the whole representative stage itself. Beginning with constitutional monarchy, whose upper house rested upon legally privileged landed property, the breakthroughs of the liberal bourgeoisie had led to a more complete separation of state from society, relegating land rent to a mere species of interest-bearing capital. The adoption of laissez-faire then opened up an increasing polarization of incomes into profit and wages alone. The bourgeoisie was compelled to maintain itself as a class by preserving the separation of the state from civil society—achieved in its struggle against the incomplete separation that constituted the privilege of landed property—and by suppressing the self-organization of those who lived by wages into a political class-agent, ‘for itself’.

The first objective of the workers’ movement was thus the suppression of the competition amongst atomized workers that kept them dependent on wages. The formation of trade unions was the first step in the process of the abolition of the wage system itself as the foundation of capital, and the separation of the state from civil society, which was the framework within which the bourgeoisie existed as a class. Unions were the nucleus of a form of self-organization by which workers were transformed from a multitude of desperately competing individuals into a class existing in a politically conscious form.

This incipient self-organization set the stage for the entry of the working class into the political sphere. As a politically constituted force it could raise the claim to represent the universal interests of mankind, but unlike other classes it could actually do so by abolishing the opposition of capital and wage-labour and the abject immiseration of surplus humanity at its basis, and therefore itself. This process of self-emancipation

began with the struggle for higher wages and better conditions for the employed, passed over into the political sphere with the demand for the abolition of the distinction between employed and unemployed—‘the right to work’ and the ‘organization of labour’—and, after fearsome class struggles, would culminate in the abolition of labour itself. ‘The right to work is, in the bourgeois sense, an absurdity, a miserable, pious wish’, Marx wrote:

But behind the right to work stands the power over capital; behind the power over capital, the appropriation of the means of production, their subjection to the associated working class, and therefore the abolition of wage labour, of capital, and of their mutual relations.<sup>12</sup>

The proletariat, in this upward spiral of its struggle for emancipation, would have to constitute itself as a form of state that would undo the separation of state and civil society by abolishing the underlying conditions of the capital–wage–labour relation—the necessary excess of labourers over the amount of employment. In doing so a workers’ regime would create the conditions for its own withering away. Over the course of this long revolutionary process, the state would be transformed from an external, coercive order, standing above and battering upon society (absolutist monarchy) into a sphere of the imaginary representation of universal interests (so-called constitutional monarchy and fossilized republics like the US) and from there into the sphere in which the class struggle would be played out to its conclusion. The state form of this penultimate phase of the class struggle—the civil-war republic—would turn out to be either a gateway to human emancipation, or a graveyard of the proletariat upon which a new, inglorious Caesarist order would be built.

### *Affirming the political*

This integrated conception of revolutionary politics, political economy and history was developed in the mould of a critique and inversion of the Hegelian system. But far from being a rigid pre-formed conceptual schema, it provided the framework for a series of discoveries and breakthroughs which accompanied the twists and turns of Marx and Engels’s struggles within the Young Hegelian milieu, against competing currents of socialism, and in their rapidly evolving relations with the

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France, 1848–1850* [1850], in MECW, vol. 10, p. 78.

more mainstream opposition of petty-bourgeois democrats and liberal constitutional monarchists.

The distinction between political and human emancipation put forward in the essay 'On the Jewish Question' had raised the problem of the forms and scenarios of emancipation in the passage from one to the other.<sup>13</sup> The reactivation of liberal opposition to the Prussian government in 1847 led Marx and Engels to abandon the stark opposition of political and social laid out at that juncture and return to the scenario that Marx had begun to develop in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*: the passage of the class struggle through the representative state to its abolition. In other words, they re-established the link between political and social emancipation, which was now mediated by a more sharply articulated strategic field of alliances and antagonisms with the oppositional forces of the democratic petty- and liberal bourgeoisie.

Closer to home, this involved breaking with the anti-political, anti-liberal milieu of 'True Socialism', which tended to look to the Prussian state for paternalistic solutions to the social question. Marx complained that 'a certain section of German socialists has continually blustered against the liberal bourgeoisie, and has done so in a manner which has benefited nobody but the German governments'.<sup>14</sup> In Prussia, the problem that Marx confronted was that those on the left who supported independent workers' organizations were often willing to collaborate with the state, while those calling for an open struggle against the latter had to ally

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<sup>13</sup> As a side-note, the Feuerbach-inspired *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* contain some well-known reflections on the historical significance of socialism and communism within this account of the history of the species. These terms came into wide circulation during Marx's lifetime, like 'liberalism' and 'feudalism', but unlike 'capitalism', which only began to be used in something like the sense it has today in the late nineteenth century. There was never any clear-cut differentiation between the two terms, and the later conception of socialism as a stage of society before communism was actually the opposite of his own improvised distinctions worked out during these months in Paris, in which communism is the negation of existing bourgeois society, while socialism is the new, truly human society itself. Communism was a transition to socialism. 'Socialism is man's *positive self-consciousness*, no longer mediated through the abolition of religion, just as *real life* is man's positive reality, no longer mediated through the abolition of private property, through *communism*.' (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, p. 306.)

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx, 'The Communism of the Rheinischer Beobachter' [1847], in MECW vol. 6, p. 220.

with left-liberals and democrats, who were hostile to any independent organizing of workers against their potentially liberal and democratic employers. Prussia, which Marx had assumed to be especially backward, was beginning to develop the characteristics of an early welfare state, opening up the fraught history of the subsequent integration of the working class. (In this respect, what seemed like a predicament of the Prussian left was a harbinger of more general developments.) Over this period, it was Engels who offered the sharper formulations on the nature of the Prussian state—‘the barbarian form of middle-class rule’—probably because he was always more inclined to recognize it as the leading force in any process of national unification. Reflecting on the defeat of an earlier round of idealistic liberal opposition based on professionals and intellectuals, both Marx and Engels judged that the prospects of a more determined opposition were brighter now, because the material interests of an emerging Prussian big bourgeoisie were coming into play: ‘The German bourgeoisie is not only not in power, it is even the most dangerous enemy of the existing ruling classes.’<sup>15</sup>

### *The German revolution and English free trade*

Marx’s political writings going into and through the revolutions of 1848 and their aftermath presuppose a logic of conflict unfolding within a sphere of the direct political representation of class interests arrayed across a spectrum of contending parties—conservatives, liberals, democrats and communists. This logic of revolution required that these class parties come to power in succession. The problem then was how to begin the succession. ‘The workers know very well’, Marx wrote,

that it is not just politically that the bourgeoisie will have to make broader concessions to them than the absolute monarchy, but that in serving the interests of its trade and industry it will create, willy-nilly, the conditions for the uniting of the working class, and the uniting of the workers is the first requirement for their victory.<sup>16</sup>

A German revolution required a German proletariat that in turn required the development of a German industrial bourgeoisie. The proletariat could only come to power after this liberal bourgeoisie had triumphed

<sup>15</sup> Marx, ‘The Constitutional Question in Germany’ [1847], in MECW vol. 6, p. 76.

<sup>16</sup> Marx, ‘Moralizing Criticism and Critical Morality’ [1847], in MECW vol. 6, p. 332.

over the old regime. But with European industry crushed by English competition, it was everywhere too weak:

The industrial bourgeoisie can rule only where modern industry shapes all property relations to suit itself, and industry can win this power only where it has conquered the world market, for national bounds are inadequate for its development. But French industry, to a great extent, maintains its command even of the national market only through a more or less modified system of prohibitive duties.<sup>17</sup>

The same was true of Germany: 'The lack of capital is the basis of the German status quo.'

The relative backwardness of conditions on the continent led liberal and conservative parties to adopt positions on economic policy that were the obverse of the ones held by their counterparts in England. In Prussia as well as in France in this period, the liberal opposition was protectionist, while the regimes were pro-free trade. It could seem to follow that communists should support the German liberal demand for protection against the laissez-faire old regime, in order to build up German industry, forming a German proletariat; the workers' movement might benefit from tariffs that would accelerate its formation. Engels briefly accepted this deduction, but Marx did not. As he put it in very impassioned Young Hegelian terms in an unpublished diatribe against Friedrich List from 1845:

England's industrial tyranny over the world is the domination of industry over the world. England dominates us because industry dominates us. We can free ourselves from England abroad only if we free ourselves from industry at home. We shall be able to put an end to England's domination in the sphere of competition only if we overcome competition within our borders. England has power over us because we have made industry into a power over us.<sup>18</sup>

The mid-nineteenth-century pattern of economic development within the *Zollverein* was made possible in part by the Prussian state's promotion of an expanding railway network. The budgetary demands on its propertied tax-paying classes accordingly grew, sharpening the conflict

<sup>17</sup> *The Class Struggles in France*, p. 56.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Marx, 'Draft of an Article on Friedrich List's book', in MECW vol. 4, p. 283.

between the crown and the semi-parliamentary liberal opposition. In contrast to Engels, Marx saw railway construction simply as a way for the Prussian government to circumvent parliamentary accountability of the budget, and as a diversion of wealth from private enterprise, ‘crowding out’ the autonomous formation of national capital.<sup>19</sup> Marx was inclined to see the Prussian-led free-trade tariff union as the conduit through which the vast German market was flooded with the output of English factories, conveniently drawing scarce capital into the outlet of public debt, thereby relieving the parlous finances of a government resisting parliamentary control of the budget. No quarter was to be given to the modest developmental and welfare initiatives of the Royal Prussian police state, and against it Marx resolutely supported the opposition of liberal notables selected on the basis of a property franchise to taxation without representation: ‘Capitalists will not and cannot allow their profits to be taxed with impunity. This follows from competition itself.’<sup>20</sup>

Except in a few stray passages from this period, Marx never conceptualized tax as the material basis of the connection between state and civil society, the form of revenue characteristic of this relationship.<sup>21</sup> The upshot of what he did have to say was that taxes on capitalists would be of no benefit to workers:

The level of wages expressed, not in terms of money, but in terms of the means of subsistence necessary to the working man, that is the level of real, not nominal wages, depends on the relationship between demand and supply. An alteration in the mode of taxation may cause a momentary disturbance, but will not change anything in the long run.<sup>22</sup>

Marx’s Ricardian conception of real wages as permanently fixed at near the bare subsistence level ruled out anything but defensive struggles to keep wages from sinking below the subsistence minimum. Even if the powers that be were so inclined, the state could do nothing against this iron law except provide some measure of poor relief. In Marx’s view,

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<sup>19</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Notizen aus dem “Economist” von 1849’, in MEGA, Vierte Abteilung, Band 7, Berlin 1983.

<sup>20</sup> ‘The Communism of the *Rheinischer Beobachter*’, in p. 225.

<sup>21</sup> His article ‘The New English Budget’ from 20 February 1857, does, however, provide a sharp analysis of budgetary provisions as well as an account of the principles of modern income tax. MECW vol. 15, p. 200.

<sup>22</sup> ‘The Communism of the *Rheinischer Beobachter*’, p. 225.

taxation and public debt supported a parasitic old-regime bureaucracy and a pack of financial swindlers.<sup>23</sup> ‘In a country like France’, he wrote,

where the volume of national production stands at a disproportionately lower level than the amount of the national debt, where government bonds form the most important subject of speculation and the Bourse the chief market for the investment of capital that wants to turn itself to account in an unproductive way—in such a country a countless number of people from all bourgeois or semi-bourgeois classes must have an interest in the state debt, in the Bourse gamblings, in finance.<sup>24</sup>

### *The frustration of the permanent revolution*

Marx assumed that the struggle for political power, for legislative supremacy over the executive, was a matter of life and death for the French and German bourgeoisie. Without political power they would be unable to form and protect a truly national home market and would soon be cut down by English competition. But if they succeeded in transforming themselves into the political ruling class this would open another path to the grave, hastening the forced march of the ‘permanent revolution’. The passage from monarchy to republic was expected to open a naked class war heralding the abolition of bourgeois society, wage slavery and all the rest: ‘The first manifestation of a truly active communist party is contained within the bourgeois revolution, at the moment when the constitutional monarchy is eliminated.’<sup>25</sup>

Compared to their ancient predecessors, early modern political philosophers had been relatively indifferent to the problem of the best form of state—whatever secured the underlying natural order of property and

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<sup>23</sup> Marx’s belief that the mid-nineteenth-century liberal nightwatchman state was the optimal political form for bourgeois society arguably prevented him from anticipating the later expansion of the state’s infrastructural and regulatory functions for capital. Although *Capital* Volume 3 includes the outlines of a sophisticated account of the role of a central bank in mediating the relation of the state budget and public debt to the process of capital accumulation, this promising nascent theorization was never taken up by later Marxists, who carried over from his earlier period this civil-war conception of the state. The latter presents some stark truths pertaining to scenarios of the classical kind, but was never even conceived as a more comprehensive theorization of the very difficult problems surrounding the relations of capital to the state and the larger geopolitical system of states.

<sup>24</sup> *The Class Struggles in France*, p. 115.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Moralizing Criticism and Critical Morality’, p. 321.



persons sufficed. Both Hegel and the early Marx wrote in a context in which the problem of the form of state—the antithesis of monarchy and republic—had returned with a vengeance. While Hegel’s conception of constitutional monarchy also sought to relativize this opposition, it advanced the case for royal prerogative as the guardian of the constitution. As we have seen, Marx’s inversion of the Hegelian concept of the state entailed the opposite criteria:

The best form of state is that in which social antagonisms are not blurred, not arbitrarily—that is merely artificially, and therefore only seemingly—kept down. The best form of state is that in which these contradictions reach a stage of open struggle in the course of which they are resolved.<sup>26</sup>

Marx’s method of criticism inverted Hegel’s order of determination and thereby transformed the content of the determinations themselves. The best form of state defined its essence not by specifying the necessarily contradictory conditions of its reproduction, but rather those of its full-blown realization through dynamics that would lead to its abolition. From 1843 onwards, the dialectic of state and civil society passed through a sequence of transformations in the constitutional division of powers, unfolding as a struggle between executive and legislature. The victory of the latter over the former turned it into an open stage of class war. The pure legislative form of state could therefore only be a transitional phase thrown up in the aftermath of the elimination of the executive–legislative dualism of constitutional monarchy. Either it would be the framework for an advance towards the emancipation of the proletariat, or society would be subjected to a new form of executive domination.

Until April 1849, Marx subscribed to a two-stage theory of revolution: a bourgeois-democratic stage—political emancipation—out of which the conditions for a workers’ revolution—human emancipation—would emerge. But even before the *coup d’état* of Louis Bonaparte, the progression of this so-called ‘permanent revolution’ had been thwarted and reversed. In the aftermath of defeat he struggled to identify the reasons why this scenario had failed to materialize. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire* he famously invoked the idiocy and isolation of the French peasantry, but it is noteworthy that not long before he himself had recognized that it was not just the peasantry but the working class in its vast majority

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<sup>26</sup> Karl Marx, ‘The June Revolution’ [1848], in MECW, vol. 7, p. 149.

that had voted for Bonaparte in the presidential elections of December 1848: 'Petty bourgeoisie and proletariat had voted en bloc for Napoleon, in order to vote *against* Cavaignac and, by pooling their votes, to wrest the final decision from the Constituent Assembly.'<sup>27</sup>

In *The Class Struggles in France*, finished shortly before the coup, Marx noted that national electoral results revealed that many peasant districts were veering to the left, a development that he expected would swing the pendulum against the Party of Order and put the revolution back on track. He blamed the peasantry only after Bonaparte's coup. His main, related claim was that modern bourgeois society on the continent nested within a tax-office state. As the revolutionary tide ebbed, Marx came increasingly to dwell on the substance of the state apparatus itself as military-police bureaucracy over and above its class-representative form. The dependence of the propertied classes on a bureaucracy based on the tax exploitation of the peasantry created a structural obstacle to the unfolding of the scenario of permanent revolution. 'In France', he concluded,

the petty bourgeois does what normally the industrial bourgeois would have to do; the worker does what normally would be the task of the petty bourgeois; and the task of the worker, who accomplishes that? No one.<sup>28</sup>

The blockage of the internal conditions of an unfolding permanent revolution was reinforced by the absence of a geopolitical polarization of the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary camps: 'There were no great foreign complications which could fire the energies, hasten the revolutionary process, drive the Provisional Government forward or throw it overboard.'<sup>29</sup> The permanent revolution—the passage from political to human or social emancipation—presupposed this geopolitical configuration, and would be derailed in its absence:

The class war within French society turns into a world war, in which the nations confront one another. Accomplishment begins only at the moment when, through the world war, the proletariat is pushed to the fore of the people that dominates the world market, to the forefront in England.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *The Class Struggles in France*, p. 81.

<sup>28</sup> *The Class Struggles in France*, p. 117.

<sup>29</sup> *The Class Struggles in France*, p. 58.

<sup>30</sup> *The Class Struggles in France*, p. 117.

As we will see, the entire trajectory of Marx's thought in these years, from his critique of Hegel's conception of the order of determination between state and civil society onwards, culminated in a vision of a geopolitical configuration that the European revolution would either smash through or be overwhelmed by.

### *Europe after Napoleon*

Although the *Communist Manifesto* presaged an ongoing dissolution of nationalities within a cosmopolitan world economy, in nearly all of his commentary on the times Marx portrayed the Europe of his era as trapped within a post-Napoleonic settlement bolted into place by the supremacy of England at one pole and of Tsarist Russia at the other. He assumed that the geopolitics of the restoration era were the framework within which modern bourgeois society had not only arisen but would be subject to until its impending end: this geopolitical configuration was an expression of the underlying conditions of bourgeois society, not just its antagonistic dependence on the old regime, but, writ large, its characteristic forms of ruling-class revenue—profit, rent and taxation.

Just as profit on capital was 'a moving synthesis of monopoly and competition', England's monopoly position within the world market was the basis of the laws of political economy presupposing laissez-faire. England was both the prop of the European status quo and an agent of its dissolution. While its world market supremacy was undermining the continental old regime, it was also thwarting the formation of independent national centres of accumulation. Hence the ringing prospectus for the lectures that became the pamphlet 'Wage Labour and Capital': 'The commercial subjugation and exploitation of the bourgeois classes of the various European nations by the despot of the world market—England.'<sup>31</sup>

Russia, for its part, was the bulwark of a European order resting on the rent and tax exploitation of the peasantry. An old regime dependent upon the military support of Russian Tsarism had opened up the continent to the modern equivalent of barbarian hordes. From its entry into the European world in the eighteenth century, the Russian Empire had seemed to embody an alien force whose expansion had no meaning in

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<sup>31</sup> Karl Marx, 'Wage Labour and Capital' [1849], in MECW vol. 9, p. 198.

a history organized around the coming into being of civil society. Hegel had failed even to mention its role in bringing about the supposed historical culmination of the post-Napoleonic status quo in the West. It had arisen on the margin of this history of civil society and had encroached upon it. Without a revolution, the Russian empire would overwhelm this tottering old world.

Thus, the status quo on the continent was suspended in the duality of state and society, of executive vs. legislature, of public debt and landed property vs. industrial capital, of rent vs. profit, manifesting itself geopolitically as the power of Anglo-Russian *Flügelmächte* over Europe as a whole. England was the dominant, Russia the subordinate hegemon of the world system of bourgeois society. European society as a whole, like its individual members, was suspended between an advance of civilization and old-regime barbarism.

From these premises, the revolutionary sequence on the continent unfolded in the following spiral: a liberal victory over the old regime, creating a republican opening leading to civil war, followed by the victory of the extreme left, which in order to consolidate its rule would be forced to launch a war against Tsarist Russia. The fulfilment of this revolutionary sequence would then open the door to a social revolution in England, the centre of the world economy, making possible the passage to communism. In the opposite direction, the counter-revolutionary scenario ran as follows: a civil war ending in the defeat of the extreme left, resulting in a closure of the republican opening and finalized by a neutralization of parliament through an executive *coup d'état*. The regimes that emerged from this counter-revolutionary spiral would keep Europe in a condition of historyless stagnation within a restored Anglo-Russian dominion. In Marx's view, without a revolutionary breakthrough, Europe would decline like Spain. It is in the light of this geopolitical configuration that the pattern of Marx's largely favourable commentary on the First Napoleonic Empire becomes intelligible. West German radicals looked back at the 'liberation' of 1813 that brought them under Prussian rule with cold and hostile eyes.

Napoleonic Europe had succumbed to the powers of England and Russia, just as the internal revolutionary process had stumbled on the barriers imposed by the nascent conditions of bourgeois society. The proletarian revolution was expected to surmount these, and spiral outward in a war

against Tsarism before culminating in an insurgency of England's factory proletariat—fulfilling and surpassing the unrealized goals of the first revolution and its Napoleonic culmination. It was only after the *coup d'état* of Louis Napoleon that this high estimate of his predecessor was emphatically retracted; thereafter 'Bonapartism' became one of the more over-extended pejorative terms in Marx's political vocabulary.<sup>32</sup> Marx had concurred with the Old Napoleon's dictum that in fifty years, Europe would either be republican or Cossack. Those who grew up identifying France with modern civilization lost their historical bearings with the so-called 18 *Brumaire* and the unexpected advent of the Cossack republic. What new conclusions did Marx then come to as the prospect of an immediate resumption of revolutionary struggles began to close down? This is where the significance of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* lies. Its dramatic political and theoretical departure was its relegation of the French Revolution and the whole legacy of Jacobinism to the past. Marx's judgement was categorical:

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition about the past. The former revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to dull themselves to their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead. There the words went beyond the content; here the content goes beyond the words.<sup>33</sup>

*The Eighteenth Brumaire* anticipates the break, but does not articulate the political scenario and forms in which social emancipation would unfold. The departure from Jacobinism was a complex and drawn-out process now that his earlier version of it was qualified by the problem of the relationship of political and social or human emancipation going back to 1843. This expectation—that the separation of state and civil society, and the inversion of the order of determination between them, would give rise to a representative political sphere in which the conflict of classes within civil society would play itself out to a final conclusion—was to be disappointed. Marx articulated this experience of defeat within the framework of his overarching conception of state–civil society relations,

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<sup>32</sup> While it is true that in a letter to Ruge from May 1843 he had referred to the Corsican as an inhuman 'despot', even here he was inclined to underscore the tragic grandeur of the case.

<sup>33</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* [1852], in MECW vol. II, p. 106.

by portraying it as an inversion of this inversion: a bloated state apparatus asserting its autonomy and superiority over a defeated, impotent society. Under its new chief and his colourful entourage, the French state had ceased to be based on any ruling class, although it was supposedly upheld by a mass of impoverished, atomized peasant families. Such a caricature of bureaucratic parasitism—so far removed from any of his previous or subsequent characterizations of a European state—can only be explained in its polemical context. This portrait of a despotism over society was directed at liberals like Tocqueville who had openly denounced socialism as a regime of degrading paternalism, and in the course of repressing it assisted Bonaparte's ascent to the leadership of the Party of Order, only to be later cast aside in the rampage that followed.

### *Beyond Jacobinism*

The derailment of an anticipated permanent revolution in the sphere of the political representation of classes led Marx to reject the conception of a revolution as the mere taking over of state power. This is the reason why his break with it took the form of a radical leap forward, in the idea that the revolutionary struggle would culminate not in the usurpation of the coercive apparatus of the existing state, but in its abolition and its replacement with a new and provisional form of state. The latter was conceived as the collectively organized working class, rooting out and defending itself against its enemies. The old state was to be smashed, but the new one put in its place would wither away with the fulfilment of its transitional tasks. This break with Jacobin statism was reactivated in his later portrait of the Paris Commune, and would become a tenet of a later revolutionary Marxism. But for much of the intervening period it appeared to be eclipsed by a new conception of a workers' movement pushing forward through social reforms and factory legislation, and after decades or more of struggle perhaps achieving the dissolution of existing forms of property. The uneasy relation between these two departures reproduced the older opposition of the political and the social.

But just as the caesura between bourgeois society and capitalism should not be conceived as some absolute discontinuity but rather as a problem to be resolved by historical studies, the non-identity of an early and a late Marx must be approached dialectically. The vision of the proletariat in the early Marx was 'carried over' not just into his later writing, but into a massive historical reality that few of his contemporaries foresaw

in the 1840s, forming the underlying objective basis for a continuity in his outlook. This was of course far more than just the inert survival of anachronistic notions which he had effectively abandoned. His relation to the Paris Commune demonstrates that, with his fundamentally new conception of socio-economic development, he had not jettisoned his revolutionary class politics and was not simply waiting for the dynamic of capitalist accumulation to exhaust itself at some indeterminate point in the future. But a claim from his famous *précis* of historical materialism written in the late 1850s might be taken to suggest that until such limits to accumulation had been reached, comprehensive structural transformations would not be feasible:

No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society.<sup>34</sup>

Eduard Bernstein interpreted this later stress on the objective necessities of the long term in a one-sidedly anti-revolutionary manner, and rested his case on a contrast between *Capital* and the *Manifesto*. There can be no doubt that Marx himself would have rejected this conclusion, but the salient point here is that neither he nor his successors developed an even remotely adequate framework for approaching the problem of revolutionary change in developed capitalist societies. It may be difficult to remedy this situation today. The disappearance of much of what remained of the mass formations of the workers' movement has created a political vacuum in which the very premises of strategic thinking seem insecure. Upheavals surely lie ahead, even in the jaded precincts of the West, but is this older, epic form of systemic transformation even possible? Here we might learn a lesson from Marx as he absorbed the experience of defeat.

### *The post-revolutionary horizon*

*America.* By 1852 the reflux of the revolutionary wave of 1848 was complete, and for the remainder of the decade Europe experienced a mini-ice age of political reaction. In exile in London, Marx and Engels scanned

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<sup>34</sup> Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* [1959], New York 1970, p. 21.

world events for any signs of a change in this dismal landscape. America beckoned as a possible exit from the wreckage of the old world. The recent discovery of gold in California seemed to presage the rise of a new Pacific-centred world economy.

Previously Marx had been sceptical of if not hostile to America, seeing it in the mirror of Tocqueville's literary travelogue as the land of completed democracy, but also of a hypocritical middle-class religiosity. His views on the pre-Civil War US were contradictory: he dismissed it as a backward society with undeveloped class contradictions—like the old Swiss republic, hardly a radical beacon—but also seemed to regard it as the most advanced frontier of bourgeois society. America had another significance for the early Marx: its slave system was the infernal shadow of this bourgeois world of alienated liberty. Only later would Marx come to see a contradiction between free wage-labour and slavery. Now, he assumed that American slavery was an integral part of the world system of bourgeois society that was based on wage slavery: 'Modern nations have been able only to disguise slavery in their own countries, but they have imposed it without disguise upon the New World.'<sup>35</sup> The two forms of slavery had risen together and would fall in the same way. The Marx of this period was a ruthless abolitionist: he conceived of his own times as the age of the abolition of state, private property, family, religion and nationality. Marx and Engels took this universalism to its ultimate conclusion in a rejoinder to Stirner's racialization of the Hegelian historical schema into Negroid, Mongoloid and Caucasoid eras: 'Even naturally evolved differences within the species, such as racial differences . . . can and must be abolished in the course of historical development.'<sup>36</sup>

After the end of the American Civil War, Marx began to think more deeply about the transformation of localized white settler societies into centres of capital accumulation—which may explain why the first volume of *Capital* ends with a discussion of the barriers to proletarianization in New Zealand and, by implication, other white settler societies with open frontiers. Whole continents that had previously been sparsely populated by aboriginal peoples were now overrun by whites who drove them into inhospitable places or wiped them out. Easing Malthusian pressures, Europe's urban and rural poor drained out into these great temperate spaces and for long stretches in some places fended off their reduction to

<sup>35</sup> Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* [1847], in MECW vol. 6, p. 168.

<sup>36</sup> *The German Ideology*, p. 425.



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