

THE REVOLUTIONARY
IDEAS OF KARL MARX



ALEX CALLINICOS

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Callinicos is a leading member of the Socialist Workers Party. He is a professor of European Studies at King's College London and is the author of, among other books, *Making History* (1987), *Against Postmodernism* (1989), *An Anti-Capitalist Manifesto* (2003), *Imperialism and Global Political Economy* (2009) and *Bonfire of Illusions* (2010).

PREFACE

My aim in this book has been to fill a gap in the literature on Marx by providing an accessible modern introduction to his life and thought by someone who shares his basic beliefs on history, society and revolution. I am grateful to a number of people for their help and encouragement: to Peter Clark and Tony Cliff, who had the idea in the first place; to Tony Cliff for his searching criticisms of the book's manuscript; and to Peter Goodwin and Peter Marsden, who performed the same task as well as the more difficult one of trying to make the book readable. Although the general political standpoint taken in this book is that of the Socialist Workers Party, the errors it undoubtedly contains are all my own. I would like to dedicate *The Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx* to Joanna Seddon, to whom I owe much, among other things, such knowledge as I have of the Utopian socialists.

KEY TO REFERENCES

Only references to the writings of Marx and Engels have been included. The following abbreviations have been used:

- AD* Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (Moscow, 1969)
- C* Marx, *Capital*: Volume i (Harmondsworth, 1976), Volume ii (Moscow, 1956), Volume iii (Moscow, 1971)
- CW* Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, 50 vols published or in preparation (London, 1975-)
- CWF* Marx, *The Civil War in France* (Peking, 1966)
- G* Marx, *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth, 1973)
- SC* Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow, 1965)
- SW* Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, 3 vols (Moscow, 1973)
- TSV* Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, 3 vols (Moscow, 1963-72)
- V* *Value: Studies by Marx* (London, 1976)

INTRODUCTION (2011)

Marx's great theme was capitalism—how to understand it, the better to overthrow it. The most famous text he and his friend and comrade Friedrich Engels wrote, *The Communist Manifesto*, appeared in 1848. Europe was being swept by revolutions in 1848—a historical moment somewhat similar to the great revolutionary surge across the Arab world in 2011. It is an astonishingly prophetic work. At the time industrial capitalism was firmly established only in Britain (above all in Engels's Manchester), Belgium, and on the northeastern coast of the United States. But Marx understood that this new economic system would conquer the world and subject it to the remorseless logic of competitive accumulation.

However he also understood that it was a system that was deeply and fundamentally flawed. At its heart lay the antagonism between capital and wage labor. As Marx showed systematically in the great cycle of economic studies culminating in his unfinished masterpiece *Capital*, the profits sought by capitalists comes from exploiting the workers they employ. Capitalism is therefore riven with conflict, which is not some kind of accident or mistake but derives from its innermost nature. But the class struggle between capitalists and workers is exacerbated by the system's liability to regular and destructive economic crises. Marx was one of the first to recognize that capitalism goes through a regular cycle of booms and slumps and one of his main preoccupations in his economic writings was to explain why this happens. In *Capital* he shows how the competitive struggles among rival firms lead them to increase investment more quickly than profits, causing a fall in the rate of profit that pushes the economy into crisis. He also spends a lot of time analyzing the role of the credit system—what we would now call financial markets—in making capitalism function, in the short term postponing crises, in the longer term making them worse.

This brief summary should make it perfectly clear why Marx is still worth reading. For the past twenty years we have lived in the era of what is endlessly trumpeted as globalization. This is not simply the greater economic integration of the world but also the global triumph of neoliberal capitalism—in other words, capitalism unrestrained, the rule of the “free” market. In the *Manifesto*, referring to the Opium War through which Britain broke open China's markets, Marx writes: “The cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls.” Today, China is the new workshop of the world, producing a fifth of global manufacturing output, and helping to drive further economic integration. In the late 1990s, the *Wall Street Journal* summed up this triumphalist mood with the slogan “Adventures in Capitalism.” But it has turned out to be a bumpy ride, as a succession of increasingly serious economic crises have borne witness—the East Asian crisis of 1997–98, the collapse of the dot-com boom in 2000–01, and, of course, the financial crash of 2008, which helped to precipitate the most severe global economic slump since the 1930s.

After each of these economic shocks there was a wave of articles in the mainstream media announcing the rediscovery of Marx. But there have been other, arguably more important signs that Marx's enduring importance is recognized, notably the extraordinary success of David Harvey's online lectures on Marx's *Capital*. So it seems like a good time to republish my own introduction to Marx. *The Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx* first appeared a long time ago, in 1983, in a very different political environment, as the introduction to the 1995 edition explains. But, despite the passage of time, I believe the text stands up as an exposition of Marx's thought. I have left the text

unaltered with the exception of minor stylistic changes and updates, and corrections. I would write the book differently now (the omission of any discussion of Marx's analysis of the credit system seen like a particular weakness in the light of recent events), but it has acquired a degree of independence from me, like a child that has matured into adulthood and can stand on its own feet.

One of the main themes of the book is the unity of Marx's life and thought as critical theorist and revolutionary activist. As I said at the start of this introduction, he sought to understand capitalism the better to overthrow it. He believed the experience of the internal contradictions of capitalism would encourage workers to form themselves into a collective political subject and smash the existing system, replacing it eventually with a classless communist society. The collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s, coming as it did after a series of defeats for the Western workers' movement, dealt a serious blow to the left internationally—despite the fact that, as I show at length, Marx's own conception of socialism as the self-emancipation of the working class is the antithesis of the concentration of power at the top that was a defining feature of these regimes. But we have seen since the late 1990s a slow process of recovery of the genuine anticapitalist left, at the same time as the "Third Way"—the attempt to revive social democracy by marrying it to neoliberalism—has come and gone, discredited above all by Tony Blair's role in Britain as a champion of imperialist wars.

The emergence at the Seattle protests of November 1999 of what is variously called the global justice movement or the movement for another globalization represented the revival of contestation of the system itself. In Europe this dovetailed with the mass movements against the war in Iraq, in Latin America with the new left governments that came to office during the 2000s. The accompanying intellectual radicalization has led to a renewal of interest in the idea of communism as an authentic alternative to capitalism. The austerity programs through which governments in Europe and the United States have sought to displace the costs of the global economic and financial crisis on the working people and the poor have provoked waves of militant resistance. And the Arab revolution began by taking out regimes in Tunisia and Egypt that were in the vanguard of neoliberalism in the Middle East and North Africa.

So Marx is getting a more favorable hearing at a time when anticapitalist politics have been reviving. This is as it should be. For Marx, there was always an indissoluble connection between understanding the world and changing it.

INTRODUCTION (1995)

The Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx first appeared in 1983, one hundred years after Marx's death. The political climate was very different then. Ronald Reagan had recently become president of the United States. Margaret Thatcher was still in her first term as British prime minister. The offensive of the free market right over which they presided was only beginning to make itself felt in the working class movement.

In Britain the Labour Party was being torn apart by the divisions created by its disastrous period in office between 1974 and 1979. The breakaway of the Social Democratic Party was pulling the party to the right, and the left-wing movement headed by Tony Benn was disintegrating. The Great Miner Strike of 1984–85 was still in the future. Its defeat would make the triumph of the right inside the Labour Party inevitable.

Internationally the world was still in the grip of what was sometimes called the Second Cold War—the period of renewed tension between the superpower blocs that started in the late 1970s. NATO plans to install a new generation of cruise nuclear missiles in Western Europe—finally implemented in the autumn of 1983—provoked the revival of the peace movement on an enormous scale. After the crushing in December 1981 of the great Polish workers' movement *Solidarność*, the Stalinist regimes in the East seemed as ossified and entrenched in power as ever. In Russia itself Mikhail Gorbachev was still only a rising star in the Politburo.

The world is a very different place today. Fundamentally this is a consequence of what has been called the “double revolution” of 1989/91—the 1989 revolutions which swept aside the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, and the fall of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union which saw the disintegration of the USSR itself in 1991. This enormous transformation ended the partition of Europe between the superpower blocs and, with it, the Cold War between those blocs.

But as important as these geopolitical changes have been the ideological consequences of 1989/91. The collapse of the Communist regimes was widely taken to refute Marx's ideas definitively. The free-market right seized on the fall of Stalinism and proclaimed it the triumph of capitalism. Indeed Francis Fukuyama, at the time an official in the State Department under President George Bush, announced “the end of history.” Liberal capitalism had, Fukuyama claimed, decisively defeated Marxism and with it any serious challenge to its dominance. All that humankind had to look forward to was century upon century of capitalism.

It was natural enough for the right to exploit 1989/91 in this way. More surprisingly, many on the left went at least part of the way with Fukuyama. This reflected the fact that they had (like the right) equated the USSR and the other Stalinist regimes with socialism. The fall of what had been up to then “existing socialism” was therefore interpreted as a defeat for the left worldwide.

The resulting mood of pessimism in which this left many socialists was summed up by the historian Eric Hobsbawm. In his recent book *Age of Extremes* (1994), Hobsbawm grimly views the world dominated by a dynamic, increasingly international capitalism, and various forms of political reaction—religious fundamentalism and the like. As for Marxism, “clearly, if Marx would live on as a major thinker, which could hardly be doubted, none of the versions of Marxism formulated since the 1890s as doctrines of political action and aspiration for socialist movements were likely to do so in their original forms.”

Marxism as a political and intellectual tradition was thus thrown onto the defensive. Academic Marxism, already weakened by its isolation in the universities through the 1980s, entered a further stage in its decline. The 1980s had seen the rise of postmodernism, which proclaimed the death of all large truths and in particular of the “grand narratives,” above all Marxism, that sought to weave together all human history into a single process of development.

With the academic left in disarray, postmodernists proclaimed themselves the real radicals, even though they denounced any attempt to change the world through political action.

Politically, the events of 1989/91 strengthened the hand of those on the left who argue that there is no real alternative to market capitalism. The British Labour Party moved strongly in this direction. For them, socialism amounts to what the former Polish dissident Adam Michnik called “the market with a human face.” Such has been Labour’s message since Tony Blair became its leader in July 1997. Blair’s successful attack on Clause Four of the party’s constitution, with its commitment to achieving common ownership of the means of production, served to underline that “New Labour” intends no significant change in the structure of capitalism in Britain.

The odd thing about this embrace of the market is that it comes at a time when capitalism is doing pretty badly. After a wave of speculative euphoria during the Reagan-Thatcher era in the 1980s, the world economy entered a major recession at the beginning of the 1990s. This was the third great global slump since the early 1970s. By the mid-1990s those economies to go first into recession—the United States and Britain in particular—were experiencing uneven and unstable recoveries, but Japan, the most successful major economy in the postwar era, was stuck in the depths of a slump which, if anything, was getting worse.

It is now clear, moreover, that the free-market right, with its call for a return to unrestrained and unregulated capitalism, offers no solution to this crisis. Britain, which took the right’s policies furthest among major economies, is stuck in a century-long process of relative decline. The chief effect of the New Right in power has been a massive transfer of wealth and income from poor to rich and the more general growth of social and economic inequality. The resulting social polarization sparked off explosions like the 1990 poll tax riots, which brought down Thatcher, and the 1992 Los Angeles rebellion. It is hard to see the new generation of right-wing politicians—epitomized by Newt Gingrich in the United States and Michael Portillo and John Redwood in Britain—producing anything except more of the same.

All of this suggests that the central strand in Marx’s thought—his critique of capitalism as a system profoundly rooted in exploitation and chronically prone to crisis—remains valid today. This raises the question of whether Marxist economic theory can survive when the entire tradition of which it is part has been refuted by great historical events. But has it been refuted?

The answer to this last question is to be found, I believe, in the pages of this book. The reader will discover a Marx who is the very opposite of the icon of a despised and now defunct despotism. This is the real Marx, for whom socialism is the self-emancipation of the working class—not something to be imposed on the mass of people, but something that they can only achieve by and for themselves through their own struggles and organizations.

One must then distinguish the real Marxist tradition—what is sometimes called classical Marxism—from its various distortions. The informing political theme of this tradition is the idea of (as the American socialist Hal Draper put it) “socialism from below,” a socialism that is inherently democratic because it is made by the mass of workers themselves. Classical Marxism was inaugurated, as I describe in chapter 1, by Marx and his great friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels and was continued by later generations of revolutionary socialists, above all by Vladimir Lenin, Leonid Brezhnev, and Mao Zedong.

Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg. Counterposed to it are rival, distorting “Marxisms,” which made variously a doctrine of piecemeal reform (Western social democracy), the state religion of the Stalinist societies (official “Marxism-Leninism”), or a form of scholarly inquiry disengaged from political practice (academic “Western Marxism”).

In particular the distance between the ideas outlined in this book and the reality of “existing socialism” in the Soviet Union and elsewhere should be obvious. This is one of the main issues I address, in conclusion, in chapter 8. Drawing on Tony Cliff’s analysis of Stalinism, I argue that the USSR and its ilk can be understood, in Marxist terms, not as any kind of socialism but as instances of bureaucratic state capitalism, a variant of the same exploitative social system that exists in the West. I conclude, in words written seven years before the revolutions in Eastern Europe:

“Really existing socialism” in the Eastern bloc is thus the negation of socialism as Marx conceived it. It rests, not on the self-emancipation of the working class, but on its exploitation. Anyone who remains true to Marx’s thought must work wholeheartedly for the downfall of these regimes.

From this perspective the fall of Stalinism was an occasion not for mourning but for celebration. It is marked, as I argue in *The Revenge of History* (1991), not the final refutation of Marxism, but a moment to resume unfinished business. Freed from the monstrous encumbrance of Stalinism, the real Marxist tradition could begin to emerge from the political margins to which it had been driven in the 1920s and challenge a capitalism more barbarous and irrational than it was even in Marx’s day.

The Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx may thus serve as a useful way into a body of thought that is still as relevant as when first formulated. I have left the text of this new edition almost wholly unchanged. No doubt (as is always true) I would write the book differently had I to do so today, but as it stands it has a coherence which tinkering about with the text could damage. There are some passages, particularly in chapter 8, where the reader should take into account the different political situation—sketched out at the beginning of this introduction—in which it was written. To help in this task I have revised the suggestions for further reading at the end of the book to cover Marxist writing published since the early 1980s. Understanding Marx, I should emphasize, is not simply an intellectual exercise. His ideas are indispensable to making sense of a world that seems to be getting more irrational and chaotic by the day. But what is the point of gaining a deeper insight into the driving forces of the contemporary world unless it is a means of changing that world?

Capitalist crisis is not just an impersonal economic process. It means mass unemployment in the rich countries, and famine and epidemics in many parts of the Third World. The terrible suffering that represents can produce political reactions that tip humankind further down the slope toward outright barbarism. Already the 1990s have seen in Western Europe the large-scale revival of fascism, in the Balkans a senseless civil war and in many African countries the disintegration of the entire society as it is torn apart by warring bands.

“Socialism or barbarism,” declared the great Polish revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg during the First World War. Barbarism we can see growing everywhere. The future of socialism depends on the ideas outlined in this book becoming, as Marx himself put it, a material force that moves millions of workers against a capitalist system overdue for replacement.

INTRODUCTION (1983)

Karl Marx died one hundred years ago, on March 14, 1883. So much has happened since then—two world wars, Auschwitz, the atomic bomb, the internal combustion engine, television, the microchip. What point is there now in writing a book about the life and thought of this man?

There are three answers to this question. First, Marx was one of a handful of thinkers who have fundamentally changed the way we see the world. In this he ranks with Plato, Aristotle, Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Freud and Einstein. The materialist conception of history—“the simple fact,” as Marx’s lifelong collaborator Friedrich Engels put it at his graveside, “hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.” (*SW* iii 162)—is so powerful that even Marx’s critics and opponents cannot ignore it.

However, and this is the second answer to our question, Marx was “before all else a revolutionist” as Engels said (*SW* iii, 163). Theory was, for Marx, a means to understanding the world around him but only as a step to transforming that world. His life’s work—the materialist conception of history and the enormous economic studies culminating in *Capital*—was dedicated to one single goal: the self-emancipation of the working class.

It is easy to forget the heroism involved in the task Marx set himself. He was a man of enormous energy and obvious brilliance. One contemporary described him in his mid-twenties: “Imagine Rousseau, Voltaire, Holbach, Lessing, Heine and Hegel fused into one person . . . and you have Dr. Marx.” Had he conformed politically and led a conventional academic career, he would have risen to the top of the intellectual establishment of the day. He could have died rich and famous.

Instead, Marx devoted his life to the cause of socialist revolution. He and his family were, as a result, hounded and spied on by the police forces of half of Europe. They lived in miserable poverty with the bailiff always at the door, and survived thanks only to Engels’s self-sacrifice. When Marx died, his passing was ignored in his adopted country, England. The *Times* learned of his death only from the French press. Compare this career with that of one of the pampered pundits of our own day, Bernard Levin for example, constantly assured of their brilliance by the admiring media.

Marx commands our attention because an understanding of his thought is essential for anyone who considers himself or herself a socialist, who wishes, like Marx, to do away with the exploitation, suffering and violence that is built into the capitalist system whose laws of motion he sought to uncover. For the questions that Marx raised are with us still. There are thirty million people without work in the Western industrial world alone. A number of major socialist experiments have taken place in the more developed countries—Chile 1970–73, Portugal 1974–75, France today. All have failed. None took the step Marx considered to be essential, of forcibly breaking the organized power of the capitalist class and setting up in its place a new and radically democratic form of workers’ power. No serious socialist can avoid Marx’s thought, because in it are found all the questions pressing on us now—crises and unemployment, revolution and reform.

Unfortunately, understanding Marx is not always as simple as it should be. This is not mainly because, as legend has it, Marx’s writings are obscure, ponderous and Germanic—he was, on the whole, a clear writer, and his works are hard going usually only when the subject matter they deal with is itself complex. The main difficulty, and the third reason for writing this book, is that Marx’s ideas

have suffered the most enormous distortion.

The harm has been done partly, of course, by Marx's enemies, by the defenders of the existing order, the "hired prizefighters" of capitalism, as he called them. So many lies have been written about Marx. He has been called many things—fanatic, anti-Semite and forerunner of Hitler (although he was a Jew and an internationalist), even a "fundamentally religious" thinker (Marx was a lifelong atheist). His enormous correspondence has been quarried by bourgeois "scholars" in the hope, sometimes fulfilled, of catching him out in the odd vulgarity or racist remark.

These calumnies are, however, comparatively easy to refute. More difficult to deal with are the distortions that Marx's thought has suffered at the hands of his followers. "All I know is that I am not a Marxist," he said toward the end of his life—"God save me from my friends!"

There have been two main sources of this "friendly" misinterpretation of Marx's ideas. The first, and much the more important, arises from the fact that "Marxism-Leninism" has become the official ideology of a number of important and powerful states, most notably the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Marx's socialism, as I shall try to show, was socialism "from below." He foresaw the working class liberating itself through its own activity, and remaking society in its own image. "Really existing socialism" in the Eastern bloc, however, is based on the denial of the self-activity of the workers and the denial of popular democracy. The rise and fall of Solidarność in Poland showed that beyond any doubt. One issue that I shall deal with in the final chapter is whether Marx's ideas can make sense of the states which rule in his name.

The other source of distortion is the fact that Marx has been discovered by the academics. It isn't just that his works have become the subject of hundreds of commentaries and doctoral theses. A new species of Marxism has arisen, based not in the labor movement but in the universities, and whose aim is not to overthrow capitalism but to study Marxism itself.

"Western Marxism" is the polite name for this species, because its members are found mainly in Western Europe and North America. "Academic Marxism" would be a more accurate name. Its practitioners remind one of Narcissus, who in the Greek legend fell in love with his own reflection. Not all the output of these academic Marxists can be dismissed out of hand. Sometimes it is necessary to devote time to clarifying and developing the concepts that we use, but for Western Marxists this activity has become an end in itself. The result is a body of writing incomprehensible to all but a tiny minority of highly qualified intellectuals.

The aim of this book, then, is to rescue Marx from the distortions he has suffered: to present, in as clear and simple a manner as possible, his basic ideas. It should already be obvious that this isn't an easy task. In the first place, socialists of all varieties read Marx in order to find justification for their political views—social democrats, orthodox Communists, Maoists, different sorts of Trotskyists, and so on. It should be made clear from the start that this book is written from a revolutionary socialist standpoint. In other words, I share with Marx the belief that capitalism is an exploitative social system whose contradictions must lead either to socialism or to barbarism, and that the only hope for humanity lies in the working class destroying the capitalist state machine and replacing it with its own rule. This doesn't mean that this book has no criticisms to make of Marx. The man whose favorite motto was "Doubt everything" would have despised the Soviet cult of him as an infallible sage. But the book is, first and foremost, an exposition and defense of Marx's ideas.

Secondly, any account of Marx's ideas is bound to be controversial. His writings are surrounded by such a mass of conflicting interpretations that to explain what they say is to walk through a minefield. Moreover, Marx, being human, was sometimes ambiguous and inconsistent, and changed his mind on matters both large and small. In picking one's way through these difficulties, one has

tread a narrow path. It is easy to slip from “What Marx really meant to say . . . ” to “What Marx should have said, but didn’t . . . ” I hope I have avoided the latter. The only place where I might reasonably be accused of doing this is in chapter 5, on Marx’s theory of history. Here I believe that Marx’s views did change, and develop, between *The German Ideology* and *Capital*, and have based my account on the latter and more mature work.

Thirdly, there is the question of how far Engels’s writings can be taken as a reliable guide to Marx’s thought. Having been treated as the touchstone of orthodoxy by the Second International and in the Eastern bloc, Engels is now regarded by many Marxists in the West as Marx’s evil genius, who distorted the latter’s thought. Both these views of Engels must be rejected. Engels himself would never have claimed to be as great or original a thinker as Marx. “Marx was a genius,” he wrote, “while others were at best talented” (*SW* iii, 361). Nevertheless, Engels made his own independent contribution to Marxism, both as a writer on scientific, philosophical, political and military subjects and as a popularizer of Marx’s ideas. He deserves to be studied in his own right. I shall cite his writings insofar as they complement, clarify or develop Marx’s own views.

This book is a contribution to the struggle against capitalism, and for socialism. To the extent that it succeeds in changing a few people’s beliefs, and persuading them that Marx was right, it must also alter their practice. For one cannot accept Marx’s scientific theory and reject his revolutionary politics: the two go together. That is the fundamental point about Marxism—it is, in Antonio Gramsci’s words, the philosophy of practice.

If this book convinces only one person of the necessity of working to bring about the self-emancipation of the working class, then I shall be content.

CHAPTER 1

THE LIFE OF A REVOLUTIONARY

Karl Marx was born on May 5, 1818 in Trier, an ancient cathedral town in the German Rhineland. Both his parents were Jewish, the descendants of many generations of rabbis; his family name had been Mordechai, then Markus, before Marx. Marx's father, Heinrich, however, had converted to Lutheran Christianity in 1817, in order to evade a decree excluding Jews from public office. The Rhineland, although annexed by the reactionary Prussian monarchy in 1815, remained the most economically and politically advanced part of Germany, heavily influenced by the French Revolution.

Heinrich Marx, a successful legal official, was a moderate liberal with a deep faith in the power of reason. His granddaughter Eleanor called him "a real Frenchman of the eighteenth century who knew his Voltaire and Rousseau by heart." The relationship between father and son was close: Marx carried a picture of Heinrich till his death, when it was buried with him.

The future author of *Capital* was brought up in a comfortable and fairly prosperous middle-class home. Educated at the high school in Trier, he received a liberal education with a strong emphasis on the classics. He does not seem to have been an outstanding pupil, and his surviving school essays give little hint of his future greatness. An important influence on the young Marx was a Prussian civil servant, Baron Ludwig von Westphalen, who introduced him to Homer and Shakespeare, and whose daughter he was to marry.

In 1835 Marx went to Bonn University to study law. A conventional middle-class career in his father's footsteps seemed set out for him. Like his fellow students, he got drunk, ran up debts, fought duels, and even spent a night in jail for brawling. A taste for writing bad romantic poems (only some of which, thankfully, have survived) was made worse when he became secretly engaged to Jenny von Westphalen during the summer vacation of 1836. Jenny was four years his senior, from a higher social bracket, and something of a local belle. When Marx revisited Trier many years later, in 1862, he "was asked daily, left and right, after the former 'prettiest girl in Trier' and the 'queen of the ball.'"

There was opposition to the match from both their parents. Some of the von Westphalens were extreme reactionaries (Jenny's brother became a Prussian cabinet minister in the 1850s), while Heinrich Marx was afraid that his son's "demonic spirit" would lead them to disaster. "Will you ever—and that is not the least painful doubt of my heart—will you ever be capable of truly human domestic happiness?" This parental opposition may help to explain why it was seven years before Karl and Jenny were to be married, on June 19, 1843.

In October 1836 Marx moved to Berlin University. His original intention was to continue his legal studies, but he soon became distracted, as he explained to his horrified father in a famous letter of November 10, 1837. Dissatisfied with his love poetry as "moonshine," Marx settled down to serious study. He was drawn first into the philosophy of law, and then into philosophy proper. Inevitably, he had to come to terms with the work of the most influential philosopher of the day, G. W. F. Hegel. At first repelled by its "grotesque, craggy melody," Marx soon found himself, to his immense annoyance, converted.

This conversion was more than an intellectual process: German philosophy in the 1830s and 1840s

was a highly political business. Germany was then a politically divided and economically and socially backward country, a patchwork of petty principalities each claiming absolute power over its subjects, dominated by the reactionary Holy Alliance of Austria, Prussia and Russia. Yet intellectually the country flourished. The early decades of the nineteenth century were the golden age of German philosophy. It was almost as if this overdevelopment of abstract thought was a compensation for Germany's political impotence and economic backwardness. "In politics the Germans *thought* what other nations did," as Marx later put it (*CW* iii, 181).

The contradictions of German society were reflected in Hegel's thought. At first an enthusiast for the French Revolution, and for Napoleon, Hegel later became a pessimist and reactionary, believing that the absolutist Prussian state was the embodiment of reason. In the 1830s and 1840s he was, to all intents and purposes, the official Prussian philosopher, and his followers received appointments in the state-controlled universities.

This situation did not last. A number of younger philosophers began to interpret Hegel in an increasingly radical way. Hegel identified reason with God, calling it the Absolute. History was, for him, simply the story of the Absolute's gradual journey toward consciousness of itself, a process whose climax was the Protestant Reformation. For the Young Hegelians, or Left Hegelians, as they came to be called, the Absolute was simply humanity. God vanished from the picture. They agreed with Hegel that the state should be the embodiment of reason, but they disagreed that the Prussian monarchy fulfilled this role. They were atheists, rationalists and liberals. As first they hoped that the Prussian crown prince would introduce the democratic reforms they wanted. After he had succeeded to the throne as King Friedrich Wilhelm IV in 1840, and had shown himself as reactionary as his predecessors, the Young Hegelians' opposition to the status quo in Germany became more and more radical.

Into this intellectual and political scene Marx was drawn after his introduction to philosophy. The Hegelian left congregated in the Berlin Doctors' Club. Marx soon became a prominent member of the club and a close friend of Bruno Bauer, one of the foremost Young Hegelians. They were a drunken, loose-living bunch. Heinrich Marx complained that "as if we were men of wealth, my Herr Schlegel disposed in one year of almost 700 thalers contrary to all agreement, contrary to all usage, whereas the richest spend less than 500."

Marx's links with his family were virtually broken off after his father's death in May 1838. He does not seem to have gotten along very well with his mother, although she provided him with quite large sums of money over the years. A satirical poem by the young Engels and Bruno's brother Edgar Bauer describes Marx at this time as "a swarthy chap of Trier, a marked monstrosity/He neither hops nor skips, but moves in leaps and bounds/Raving aloud . . . /He shakes his wicked fist, raves with frantic air/As if ten thousand devils had him by the hair."

Marx seems to have hoped to pursue a career as a professional philosopher. He devoted much time to studying the early Greek thinkers, and in April 1841 received his doctorate for a thesis entitled "The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature." Although obscurely written, and strongly Hegelian, the thesis shows Marx's growing impatience with the highly idealist philosophy of his friend Bruno Bauer, who sought to reduce everything to human consciousness. The growing confrontation between the Prussian state and the Young Hegelians put paid to Marx's hopes of an academic career. Friedrich Wilhelm IV suppressed the main Left Hegelian journal, Arnold Ruge's *Hallische Jahrbücher*, and appointed Hegel's old enemy, Schelling, professor of philosophy in Berlin, with instructions to root out the "dragon seed of Hegelianism." Finally, in March 1842, Bauer was sacked from his teaching post at Bonn University.

Marx, who had returned to Trier in 1841, now threw himself into political journalism. The *Rheinische Zeitung* had been set up by Rhineland industrialists to press for their economic interests. To its bourgeois shareholders' bemusement, however, it soon fell under the control of the Young Hegelians, led by Moses Hess, one of the first German communists. Marx began writing for the paper in April 1842, and in October moved to Cologne to become its editor in chief. He was at this stage a radical liberal democrat, who hoped to see in Germany a republic and universal suffrage such as France had achieved after the revolution of 1789. When another paper accused the *Rheinische Zeitung* of communism he replied that "the *Rheinische Zeitung* . . . does not admit that communist ideas in their present form possess even theoretical reality, and therefore can still less desire their practical realization" (*CW* i, 220).

Nevertheless, the *Rheinische Zeitung* was a turning point. It was then, Marx later reminisced, that "I experienced for the first time the embarrassment of having to take part in discussions on so-called material interests" ("Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*," *Marx-Engels Reader*, 59). Marx, like the other Young Hegelians, followed their master in believing that the state was, or should be, above classes: as the representative of the universal interests shared by every citizen, the function of the state was to reconcile the differences of interest and conflicts between classes.

Studying the debates in the local Rhenish Estates (or parliament) on proposals for tightening up the law against thefts of wood, Marx realized that both the industrial capitalists who financed his newspaper and the feudal landowners who supported Prussian absolutism shared a common interest in the preservation of private property. An investigation of the wretched conditions of the peasants in the Moselle wine country brought home to him the effects of private property. As Engels put it fifty years later, "I heard Marx say again and again that it was precisely through his concern with the wood-theft law and with the situation of the Moselle peasants that he was shunted from pure politics over to economic conditions, and thus came to socialism" (*Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, vol. 1).

It was not only "pure politics" that Marx abandoned while at the *Rheinische Zeitung*. The experience of persecution drove Bauer and the Berlin Doctors' Club to greater and greater extremes of verbal radicalism. Isolated in Berlin, the stronghold of the Prussian bureaucracy, and far from the more economically developed and liberal Rhineland, they continued to see their task as the purely intellectual one of refuting error. The chief target was religion, which the "Free," as they now called themselves, endlessly denounced. Meanwhile, every compromise which the harassed Marx made to keep Prussian censorship from closing down the *Rheinische Zeitung* they denounced as treason. He learned a lifelong lesson—that theory which loses contact with reality becomes impotent.

It was with Bruno Bauer and his other old cronies in Berlin in mind that Marx wrote a little later that

we do not confront the world in a doctrinaire way with a new principle: Here is the truth, kneel down before it! We develop no principles for the world out of the world's own principles. We do not say to the world: Cease your struggles, they are foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle. We merely show the world what it is really fighting for, and consciousness is something that it has to acquire, even if it does not want to (*CW* iii, 144).

Here we have the origins of Marx's later attitude toward the working class. The task of the theorist is not to lay down the law to workers, but rather to make sense of what they are fighting for, to show how they can achieve it.

It remained only for Marx to discover the working class. That he had not done so yet is shown by a manuscript he wrote in mid-1843 while on honeymoon with Jenny at Kreuznach (he had resigned from the *Rheinische Zeitung* shortly before the censors finally suppressed it in March 1843). Called

Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, it was not to be published until 1927.

Here Marx set out to refute Hegel's idea that the state was above classes. He was clearly very much under the influence of the most radical of the Young Hegelians, Ludwig Feuerbach, when he wrote it. Feuerbach, whose *Essence of Christianity* created a sensation when it appeared in 1841, went much further than Bruno Bauer. Feuerbach argued that Hegel's philosophy should be rejected in toto; philosophy's starting point had to be not God or the Idea but human beings and the material conditions in which they live. Obviously, this attracted those such as Marx, Engels and Hess who were beginning to believe that only a social revolution could bring radical political change in Germany. But Marx had not yet seized on the working class as the agent of this revolution. He still looked toward "true democracy"—universal suffrage—as the means of bringing the state under the control, not of the propertied minority, but of the mass of the population.

A year after writing the *Critique*, Marx was an open advocate of working-class revolution, communist. The decisive factor behind this shift was his move to Paris. Prussian censorship had made work in Germany impossible. Marx and Arnold Ruge decided to produce a Young Hegelian journal abroad, the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*. In October 1843 the Marxes arrived in Paris to join Ruge.

Paris was very different from Berlin or Cologne. The cultural capital of nineteenth-century Western civilization, it was also the metropolis of a country undergoing rapid industrialization, under the rule of a corrupt clique of courtiers and bankers gathered around the "bourgeois monarchy" of Louis-Philippe. In Paris a swarm of communist and socialist sects—some of them with many followings—coexisted and quarreled. There were also forty thousand expatriate Germans, most of them artisans, many of them under the influence of a revolutionary secret society, the League of the Just.

Marx's contacts with the French and German communist societies in Paris were his first experience of an organized working-class movement. The impact was enormous. He wrote Feuerbach in August 1844:

You would have to attend one of the meetings of the French workers to appreciate the pure freshness, the nobility which bursts forth from these toil-worn men It is among these "barbarians" of our civilized society that history is preparing the practical element for the emancipation of mankind (*CW* iii, 355).

This new view of the working class was expressed in Marx's two contributions to the only issue of the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* to appear, in March 1844 (its editors quarreling, banned by the Prussian government, ignored by the French, the journal sank without a trace when its publisher withdrew his backing). In "On the Jewish Question" Marx argued, against Bauer, that a pure political revolution, such as that of 1789 in France, would liberate man only as "an individual withdrawn into himself, into the confines of his private interests and private caprices, and separated from the community" (*CW* iii, 164). Only a social revolution which swept away private property and individualism could offer "human emancipation."

In the second essay, which had been intended as the Introduction to Marx's unpublished *Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, he argued that only such a revolution was possible in Germany. The German bourgeoisie—the middle class—was too weak to play the role taken by its French counterpart in 1789, leading the whole people against the monarchy. Only the proletariat—the industrial working class—could play this role:

a class with *radical chains*, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the *complete loss* of man and hence can win itself or

As this last passage makes clear, Marx's approach to politics was still steeped in philosophy. His thought in terms of an alliance between philosophy and the working class—one, indeed, in which philosophy would play the leading role. He called the workers the “*passive element*” of the revolution and wrote that “the *head* of this emancipation is *philosophy*, its *heart* is the *proletariat*” (CW iii, 187). Workers were to play a revolutionary role because they were the most wretched of classes, not—as he later came to believe—the most powerful.

This rather patronizing and elitist attitude soon changed—for two reasons. First, while in Paris Marx undertook his first serious study of the writings of Adam Smith, David Ricardo and the other political economists. As a result, he wrote, between April and August 1844, the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. To be first published in 1932, these writings contain an early version of Marx's materialist theory of history. Most important of all, the revolutionary role of the working class is explained in terms of workers' role in the production of goods, which compels them to struggle against capitalism. “From the relationship of estranged labor to private property it follows that the emancipation of society from private property, etc, from servitude, is expressed in the *political form* of the *emancipation of the workers*” (CW iii, 280).

The second reason for Marx's change of attitude was that the German working class gave dramatic proof that it was more than just a “passive element.” In June 1844 the Silesian weavers rebelled against their masters, and the army had to be called in to restore order. Ruge published an anonymous article in a German émigré paper in Paris in which he dismissed the revolt and attacked the weavers. He was probably speaking for most of the Young Hegelians. The article was attributed to Marx, who wrote a furious reply denouncing Ruge and championing the workers for their courage and the high level of their organization and consciousness. He regarded the working class no longer as the passive but as the “dynamic element” of the German revolution (CW iii, 202). Marx the revolutionary communist had finally emerged.

FRIENDSHIP AND REVOLUTION

At the end of August 1844, Friedrich Engels spent ten days in Paris. During his stay Engels visited Marx, a meeting which resulted in a lifelong partnership.

Engels was then twenty-three, nearly three years Marx's junior, but had already enjoyed a brilliant career as a radical journalist and Young Hegelian. Although Engels had contributed to the *Rheinische Zeitung*, Marx had distrusted him as one of the Berlin “Free” whose toy revolutionism he had come to despise. However, in November 1842 Engels moved to Manchester to work in the family firm of Ermen & Engels, to be confronted with the industrial revolution, working-class poverty and Chartism—the first mass working-class movement in history, then still recovering from the defeat of the general strike of August 1842. This experience, recorded most memorably in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, led Engels, like Marx, to recognize the revolutionary role of the working class. An essay published in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, “Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy,” anticipated Marx's later writings.

Marx and Engels were, then, natural partners. Their first work together was an attack on Bauer and the “Free,” who were reacting to the repression they had suffered at the hands of the Prussian state by adopting an increasingly elitist and anti-democratic attitude. Bauer, who was to become an anti-Semite and supporter of the Tsarist autocracy in Russia, wrote that “it is in the masses and there alone that one should look for the true enemy of the Mind.” The reply by Marx and Engels, *The Holy*

Family, was intended originally to be a short pamphlet. However, and not for the last time, Marx zeal got the better of him. His contribution swelled it into a two-hundred-page book ranging from philosophy to literary criticism, and defending the principle of working-class self-emancipation. Engels protested mildly at the inclusion of his name on the title page, since “I contributed practically nothing to it,” and at its length. “Otherwise the book is splendidly written and enough to make you split your sides.”

Marx was by this time a prominent figure among the exiled revolutionaries who populated Paris in the 1840s. He was on friendly terms with the fathers of anarchism, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin, with whom he would discuss Hegel. The Marxes were also close to the poet Heinrich Heine, whom they persuaded for a while to overcome his fear of the masses and write socialist verses. It was of Marx and Engels that Heine later wrote, “The more or less occult leaders of the German communists are great logicians, the most powerful of which have come from the school of Hegel; and they are, without doubt, Germany’s most capable thinkers and most energetic characters.”

Marx’s prominence may have helped to persuade the French government, under Prussian pressure, to expel him from France. In February 1845 he moved from Paris to Brussels, where he was soon joined by Engels, who gave up his job in the family firm to become a full-time revolutionary. Hence their partnership began in earnest. They visited England together in the summer of 1845, and then settled down to produce one final reply to Bauer and company.

The “Free” had by now become extreme individualists, an attitude summed up by Max Stirner in *The Ego and His Own*, which argued that nothing except the individual self existed. *The German Ideology*, written by Marx and Engels between September 1845 and August 1846, was intended as the demolition of Stirner. Running to more than six hundred pages, mainly by Marx, it is that and a lot more. The first part, on Feuerbach, contains the first systematic account of historical materialism. They were unable to find a publisher for the book. As Marx later put it, “We abandoned the manuscript to the gnawing criticism of the mice all the more willingly as we had achieved our main purpose—self-clarification.”

The German Ideology provided the theoretical foundation for Marx and Engels’s politics. It argued that the possibility of social revolution depended on the material conditions which capitalism itself was creating. The most important of these conditions was the working class. “Communism,” Engels wrote around this time, “is the doctrine of the conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat” (*CI*, vi, 341).

Having thus formulated their theory of revolution, Marx and Engels threw themselves into political activity. They concentrated their attentions on the League of the Just, an international secret society consisting mainly of German artisans living outside their own country. The dominant influence on the League was Wilhelm Weitling, a tailor whose views on socialism were extremely confused, but who believed that the mass of workers could not be won to communism, and that it was up to the revolutionary minority to seize power on behalf of the masses. This elitist attitude he shared with Auguste Blanqui, the great French revolutionary, and the League was banned in France after it took part in Blanqui’s abortive insurrection in 1839. The headquarters of the League shifted to London, where it was split between Weitling’s followers and those who believed that gradual and peaceful education could achieve socialism.

In February 1846 Marx and Engels set up the Communist Correspondence Committee, with the aim of winning control of the League of the Just. At a stormy meeting of the committee, Marx told Weitling that “to call to the workers without any strictly scientific ideas or constructive doctrine . . . was equivalent to vain dishonest play at preaching which assumed on the one side an inspired proph-

and on the other only gaping asses.” He responded to Weitling’s attempt to defend himself by attacking theory and theoreticians with the words, “Ignorance never yet helped anyone!”

Paul Annenkov, a Russian acquaintance of Marx’s who was present at this meeting, has left behind a vivid picture of him in his late twenties:

Marx himself was the type of man who is made up of energy, will and unshakeable conviction. He was most remarkable in his appearance. He had a shock of deep black hair and hairy hands and his coat was buttoned wrong; but he looked like a man with the right and power to demand respect, no matter how he appeared before you and no matter what he did. His movements were clumsy but confident and selfreliant, his ways defied the usual conventions in human relations, but they were dignified and somewhat disdainful; his sharp metallic voice was wonderfully adapted to the radical judgements that he passed on persons and things (McLellan, *Marx*).

Another contemporary writes of Marx at this time:

Marx was a born leader of the people. His speech was brief, convincing and compelling in its logic. He never said a superfluous word; every sentence contained an idea and every idea was an essential link in the chain of his argument. Marx had nothing of the dreamer about him.

This formidable intellect was set to work to refute what Marx and Engels regarded as the erroneous versions of socialism current in the German workers’ movement. One target was the “true socialists,” intellectuals who had discovered the “social problem” after the weavers’ revolt, and who believed that society could be transformed through the moral conversion of the mass of the people. Another target was Proudhon. Marx wrote to him in May 1846 inviting him to become the Paris correspondent of the Brussels Committee. Proudhon replied with a patronizing letter in which he told “my dear philosopher” that he was opposed to revolution, preferring instead “to burn property by slow fire.” In 1847 Marx published *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in which he demolished Proudhon’s *The System of Economic Contradictions*—which had as its subtitle “The Philosophy of Poverty.”

After lengthy maneuvers Marx and Engels succeeded in winning control of the League of the Just. A congress in June 1847 transformed the League from a conspiratorial secret society into an open revolutionary organization, the Communist League. Its slogan was no longer “All men are brothers” (Marx said there were plenty of men whose brother he did not want to be) but “Working men of all countries, unite!” The second congress of the Communist League, meeting in December 1847, instructed Marx and Engels to draw up a manifesto stating its principles. The result was the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, written by Marx in February 1848 and published that same month in London. It opens with the words, “A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism” (*CW* vi, 481). This was the first popular exposition of Marxism, and is by far the most famous of all socialist writings.

By the time the *Manifesto* appeared, Europe was being swept by revolution. In February Louis Philippe of France was overthrown and the Second Republic proclaimed; in March uprisings broke out in Vienna and Berlin. The reactionary Europe of the Holy Alliance had suddenly crumbled. The frightened Belgian government expelled Marx at the beginning of March. After a brief stay in Paris he returned to Germany, to become editor in chief of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, based, like its predecessor, in Cologne. According to Engels, “The editorial constitution was simply the dictatorship of Marx.” Werner Blumenberg writes of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* that “with its 101 numbers it was not only the best newspaper of that revolutionary year; it has remained the best German socialist newspaper.”

The revolutions of 1848 represented the moment at which the struggle between capital and labor took on greater importance than that between the bourgeoisie and the old feudal landowning classes. This was confirmed by the events of June 1848 in Paris, when a workers’ uprising was brutally crushed by the republican government. Here, Marx wrote at the time, “*fraternité*, the brotherhood

antagonistic classes, one of which exploits the other, this *fraternité* [brotherhood] which in February 1848 was proclaimed and inscribed in large letters on the facades of Paris, on every prison and every barracks, this *fraternité* found its true, unadulterated and prosaic expression in *civil war*, civil war in its most terrible aspect, the war of labor against capital” (*CW* vii, 144, 147).

Marx and Engels continued to believe, however, that in backward Germany the bourgeoisie could be pressed into playing a revolutionary role like its English and French forebears. The Communist League, with its few hundred members, found itself swamped in the mass movement which followed the March revolution in Berlin. Rather than, as Engels put it many years later, “preach communism on a little provincial sheet and . . . found a tiny sect instead of a great party of action,” they decided “to take on the role of the forward-pushing, extreme left wing of the bourgeoisie” (*SW* iii, 166). The Communist League was effectively dissolved and the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* provided the focus of Marx’s and Engels’s political activity. Its “political program,” Engels explained, “consisted of two main points: a single, indivisible, democratic German republic and war with Russia” (*SW* iii, 166).

The Russia of Tsar Nicholas I was the most powerful counterrevolutionary state in Europe and his armies were to play a crucial role in restoring order in 1848–49. Marx and Engels hoped that republican Germany could, like the French Jacobins in the 1790s, liberate Europe by waging revolutionary war against the reactionary powers. These hopes were to be dashed. The German bourgeoisie, terrified of the rising workers’ movement, sought an accommodation with the Prussian monarchy. The *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* had to record the triumph of the counterrevolution in country after country—Austria, Bohemia, Hungary, France and Germany itself.

Marx found himself waging an increasingly uphill struggle to keep the paper going. In February 1849 he and other editors of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* were put on trial twice, but were acquitted by sympathetic juries. Finally, in May the Prussian authorities suppressed the paper and expelled the editors. The last issue, of May 19, 1849, was printed entirely in red. The editorial by Marx concluded: “In bidding you farewell the editors of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* thank you for the sympathy you have shown them. Their last word everywhere and always will be: *emancipation of the working class!*” (*CW* ix, 467)

EXILE AND THE “WRETCHEDNESS OF EXISTENCE”

After his expulsion from Germany, Marx made his way first to Paris, and then, in August 1849, to London. At first he expected this exile to be brief, believing that the revolution had suffered only a temporary defeat. He was soon joined by Engels, who had taken part in the unsuccessful defense of the last republican stronghold in Germany, the Palatinate, from Prussian invasion.

The two friends played an active role in reviving the Communist League, whose central committee was based in London, and launched a new journal, the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung: Politisch-Ökonomisch Revue*. In its pages Marx published *The Class Struggles in France*, an analysis of the revolution of 1848–49. In March 1850 he drafted an address by the central committee which declared that “the revolution . . . is near at hand” (*CW* x, 279), and the following month the League concluded an alliance with the followers of Blanqui, the Universal Society of Revolutionary Communists, whose objective was “the downfall of all privileged classes, [and] the submission of these classes to the dictatorship of the proletariat by keeping the revolution in continual progress [*en permanence*] until the achievement of communism” (*CW* x, 614).

This revolutionary optimism began gradually to evaporate in the course of 1850. In June Marx obtained a ticket to the Reading Room of the British Museum. Once installed there, he launched himself into intensive economic studies, drawing especially (as many have done after him) on the

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