



ANOTHER MARX

MARCELLO
MUSTO

Early Manuscripts to the International

... But there is no mistake.
The authors of the Circular do not appear to be on
best terms with either their English or their
French, we must refer them to any common
Dictionary. For instance, Boyer's English-French
Dictionary, Paris, Baudry ~~1854~~ 1854, under ouï
"I thought to be so, cela doit être ainsi."
In order to disprove ^{we} the statement that the
resolutions are fully endorsed in France, Germ

Another Marx

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Another Marx

Early Manuscripts to the International

Marcello Musto

Translated by Patrick Camiller

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*To George and Ann,
for their warm hospitality,
unconditional help, boundless support,
and – most of all – infinite patience.*

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Notice

Some of the chapters included in this volume are based, in whole or in part, on articles published in scholarly journals and chapters in books. However, they were initially conceived as components of a larger work.

Chapter 2 is a thoroughly revised and extended version of ‘Marx in Paris: Manuscripts and Notebooks of 1844’, *Science & Society*, vol. 73 (2009), n. 3, pp. 386–402.

Chapter 3 is a revised version of ‘The Formation of Marx’s Critique of Political Economy: From the Studies of 1843 to the *Grundrisse*’, *Socialism and Democracy*, vol. 24 (2010), n. 2, pp. 66–100.

Chapter 4 is a revised and extended version of ‘Marx’s life at the time of the *Grundrisse*. Biographical Notes on 1857–8’, in Marcello Musto (ed.), *Karl Marx’s Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later*, Routledge, 2008, pp. 147–61.

Chapter 6 is an extended version of ‘The Writing of *Capital*: Genesis and Structure of Marx’s Critique of Political Economy’, *Critique*, vol. 46 (2018), no. 1, pp. 11–26.

Finally, chapters 7, 8 and 9 are based on the ‘Introduction’ to the anthology Marcello Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite! The International 150 Years Later*, Bloomsbury, 2014, pp. 1–68.

The permission to partially reappear in this book is gratefully acknowledged.

Marx’s writings have been generally quoted from the 50-volume *Marx Engels Collected Works* (MECW), Moscow/London/New York: Progress Publishers/Lawrence and Wishart/International Publishers, 1975–2005. Sometimes the translations have been modified to conform more closely to the original German. Citations from the *Grundrisse* have been taken from the 1973 Penguin edition translated by Martin Nicolaus, while Marx’s addresses, resolutions and speeches from the period of the International Working Men’s Association have been quoted from Marcello Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite! The International 150*

Years Later, Bloomsbury, 2014. Moreover, in a few cases the reader is referred to single works translated into English but not included in MECW.

Texts that have not yet been translated into English are referenced to the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA²), Berlin: Dietz/Akademie/De Gruyter, 1975–... , of which 65 of the originally planned 114 volumes have so far appeared in print.

As regards the secondary literature, quotations from books and articles not published in English have been translated for the present volume.

All the names of journals and newspapers have been indicated first in the original language, followed by an English translation in square brackets.

Indications of birth and death dates of authors and historical figures have been provided the first time they are mentioned in the book.

I would like to express my most sincere gratitude to Patrick Camiller, who, during the past ten years that we have been working together, has always translated my works with the highest competence, comradely commitment and enormous patience for my many requests. Every author dreams to collaborate with a competent translator; only few, though, have the luck of having one who knows more than they do. Thanks to Patrick, and to his vast knowledge of politics, philosophy and history, I belong to the lucky circle of the latter.

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Introduction

1. The Marx revival

If an author's eternal youth consists in his capacity to keep stimulating new ideas, then it may be said that Karl Marx has without question remained young.

He has even been back in fashion since the outbreak, in 2008, of the latest crisis of capitalism. Contrary to the predictions after the fall of the Berlin wall, when he was consigned to perpetual oblivion, Marx's ideas are once more the object of analysis, development and debate. Many have begun to ask new questions about a thinker who was often falsely identified with 'actually existing socialism' and then curtly brushed aside after 1989.

Prestigious newspapers and journals with a wide audience of readers have described Marx as a highly topical and far-sighted theorist. Almost everywhere, he is now the theme of university courses and international conferences. His writings, reprinted or brought out in new editions, have reappeared on bookshop shelves, and the study of his work, after more than twenty years of neglect, has gathered increasing momentum, sometimes producing important, ground-breaking results.¹ Of particular value for an overall reassessment of Marx's work was the resumed publication in 1998 of the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA²), the historical-critical edition of the complete works of Marx and Engels.

The dissemination of their *oeuvre* is a long and tortuous story. After Marx's death, in 1883, Friedrich Engels [1820–1895] was the first to dedicate himself to the very difficult task – because the material was dispersed, the language obscure and the handwriting illegible – of editing his friend's legacy. His work

¹ For a survey of the main recent additions to the literature, see the section 'Marx's Global Reception Today', in Marcello Musto (ed.), *Marx for Today*. London: Routledge, 2012, pp. 170–234. Cf. also Marcello Musto (ed.), *The Marx Revival*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2019.

concentrated on the reconstruction and selection of original materials, the publication of unpublished or incomplete texts, and the republication or translation of work that had already appeared in print. His priority was the completion of *Capital*, of which Marx had published only Volume I in his lifetime.

Two years after Engels's death, in 1897, the Italian socialist Antonio Labriola [1843–1904] asked: 'Were the writings of Marx and Engels [...] ever read in their entirety by anyone outside of the group of close friends and disciples [...] of the authors themselves?' His conclusions were unequivocal: 'Up to now, it seems to have been a privilege of initiates to read all the writings of the founders of scientific socialism'; the propagation of 'historical materialism' had involved 'endless equivocations, misunderstandings, grotesque alterations, strange disguises and unfounded inventions.'² In fact, as historical research later demonstrated, the belief that Marx and Engels had really been read was itself part of a hagiographic myth;³ many of their texts were rare or difficult to find even in the original language. The proposal of the Italian scholar to publish 'a full critical edition of all the writings of Marx and Engels' was a stark necessity. For Labriola, what was needed were neither anthologies nor a posthumous canon. Rather, 'all the political and scientific activity, all the literary production, even occasional, of the two founders of critical socialism, needs to be placed at the disposal of readers [...] because it speaks directly to anyone who has the desire to read them.'⁴ More than 120 years later, this ambition has still not been realized.

After the death of Engels, the natural executor of the complete works of Marx and Engels was the German Social Democratic Party (SPD): it had possession of their literary bequest, and its leaders, Karl Kautsky [1854–1938] and Eduard Bernstein [1850–1932], had the greatest linguistic and theoretical competence. Nevertheless, political conflicts within the party not only impeded publication of the imposing mass of Marx's unpublished works, but also led to a scattering of the manuscripts that undermined any idea of a systematic edition.⁵ The SPD

² Antonio Labriola, *Socialism and philosophy*. Chicago: C.H. Kerr & Company, 1907, pp. 16–18.

³ Marx's biographers Boris Nikolaevskij and Otto Maenchen-Helfen correctly state, in the foreword to their book, that 'of the thousands of socialists, maybe only one has read an economic work of Marx; of the thousands of anti-Marxists, not even one has read Marx'. Cf. *Karl Marx: Man and Fighter*. Philadelphia/London: J.P. Lippincott Company, 1936, p. v.

⁴ Labriola, *Socialism and philosophy*, pp. 22–3.

⁵ Cf. Maximilien Rubel, *Bibliographie des oeuvres de Karl Marx*. Paris: Rivière, 1956, p. 27.

did not sponsor one, and indeed it treated the literary legacy of Marx and Engels with the utmost negligence.⁶ None of its theoreticians bothered to compile a list of their writings, or even methodically to collect their voluminous correspondence that was such a valuable source of clarification, sometimes even expansion, of their thought.

The first attempt to publish the complete works of Marx and Engels, the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA), was made only in the 1920s, in the Soviet Union, thanks mainly to the tireless initiative of David Ryazanov [1870–1938]. In the early 1930s, however, Stalinist purges struck at the main scholars engaged in the edition, and the advent of Nazism in Germany abruptly curtailed further work.

The project of a 'second' MEGA, designed to reproduce all the writings of the two thinkers together with an extensive critical apparatus, got under way in 1975 in East Germany. Following the fall of the Berlin wall, however, this too was interrupted. A difficult period of reorganization ensued, in which new editorial principles were developed and approved, and the publication of MEGA² recommenced only in 1998. Since then twenty-six volumes have appeared in print – others are in the course of preparation – containing new versions of certain of Marx's works; all the preparatory manuscripts of *Capital*; correspondence from important periods of his life including a number of letters received; and approximately two hundred notebooks. The latter contain excerpts from books that Marx read over the years and the reflections to which they gave rise. They constitute his critical theoretical workshop, indicating the complex itinerary he followed in the development of his thought and the sources on which he drew in working out his own ideas.⁷

These priceless materials – many of which are available only in German and therefore intended for small circles of researchers – show us an author very different from the one that numerous critics or self-styled followers presented for such a long time. Indeed, the new textual acquisitions in MEGA² make it possible to say that, of the classics of political and philosophical thought, Marx

⁶ Cf. David Ryazanov, 'Neueste Mitteilungen über den literarischen Nachlaß von Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels', *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung*, vol. 11 (1925), see esp. pp. 385–6.

⁷ Cf. Marcello Musto, 'The Rediscovery of Karl Marx', *International Review of Social History*, vol. 52 (2007), n. 3, pp. 477–98.

is the author whose profile has changed the most in recent years. The political landscape following the implosion of the Soviet Union has helped to free Marx from the role of figurehead of the state apparatus that was accorded to him there.

Research advances, together with the changed political conditions, therefore suggest that the renewal in the interpretation of Marx's thought is a phenomenon destined to continue.

2. New research paths

Study of the published and as yet unpublished corpus of MEGA² nourished the underlying conviction of the present volume: that many paths remain to be explored, and that, despite frequent claims to the contrary, Marx is not at all an author about whom everything has already been said or written.⁸ In fact, Marxism has often distorted his thought.

Marx's name was often used to justify the ideology of 'socialist' regimes and has often been criticized on the basis of their policies. His quintessentially critical theory found itself reduced to a set of biblical verses susceptible to quasi-religious exegesis. This resulted in the most unlikely paradoxes. The thinker most resolutely opposed to 'writing recipes [. . .] for the cook-shops of the future'⁹ was converted into the progenitor of a new social system. The most painstaking thinker, never satisfied with the results he had produced, became the source of a dyed-in-the-wool doctrinarism. The steadfast champion of the

⁸ The immense literature on Marx includes numerous biographies. Among the most important are: John Spargo, *Karl Marx: His Life and Work*. New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1912; Franz Mehring, *Karl Marx. Geschichte seines Lebens*. Leipzig: Leipziger Buchdruckerei AG, 1918; Otto Rühle, *Karl Marx. Leben und Werk*. Hellerau bei Dresden: Avalun-Verlag, 1928; Karl Vorländer, *Karl Marx*. Leipzig: F. Meiner, 1929; Marx-Engels-Lenin-Institut, *Karl Marx. Chronik seines Lebens in Einzeldaten*. Moscow: Marx-Engels-Verlag, 1934; Boris Nikolaevskij and Otto Maenchen-Helfen, *Karl Marx: Man and Fighter*, op. cit. 1936; Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*. London: Thornton Butterworth, 1939; Maximilien Rubel, *Karl Marx. Essai de biographie intellectuelle*. Paris: Librairie M. Rivière et Cie, 1957; Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus, *Karl Marx. Biographie*. Berlin: Dietz, 1968; David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and His Thought*. London: Macmillan, 1973; Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx: A life*. New York: Norton, 2000. Mary Gabriel, *Love and Capital: Karl and Jenny Marx and the Birth of a Revolution*. New York/Boston/London: Little, Brown and Company, 2011; and most recently Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*, London: Allen Lane, 2016. Despite the many contributions made during decades of scholarship, to date a complete intellectual biography of Marx still has to be written.

⁹ Karl Marx, 'Afterword to the Second German Edition', in MECW, vol. 35, p. 17.

materialist conception of history was wrenched more than any other author from his historical context. Even his insistence that ‘the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves’¹⁰ was locked into an ideology that emphasized the primacy of political vanguards and parties as the forces propelling class consciousness and leading the revolution. The champion of the idea that a shorter working day was the prerequisite for the blossoming of human capacities found himself roped into support for the productivist creed of Stakhanovism. The convinced believer in the abolition of the state was built up into its firmest bulwark. Envisaging like few other thinkers the free development of individuality, he had argued that – whereas bourgeois right masked social disparities beneath a merely legal equality – ‘right would have to be unequal rather than equal.’¹¹ Yet the same Marx was falsely associated with a conception that erased the richness of the collective dimension in a featureless uniformity.

The aim of this book is to help foster discussion of various interpretations of Marx’s work. The results presented to the reader are modest and still incomplete: modest, because Marx’s gigantic critical *oeuvre* spanning many branches of human knowledge makes it a difficult task for any rigorous reader to synthesize it; and incomplete, because this volume concentrates on only three periods of Marx’s life: the early writings, the composition of *Capital*, and the political activity in the International Working Men’s Association. Moreover, within each period, certain texts have been singled out for discussion and others inevitably excluded. The obligation not to exceed the number of pages standard in a monograph made it impossible to deal with various chapters in Marx’s life: for example, his analysis of the revolutionary events of 1848, the long journalistic labours for the *New-York Tribune*; his political and theoretical reflections of the 1870s, and the research in the last years of his life.¹² These will be the object of works to be published in the future. With an awareness of these limits, the results of research completed so far are presented here to the reader,

¹⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘General Rules of the International Working Men’s Association’, in Marcello Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite! The International 150 Years Later*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014, p. 265.

¹¹ Karl Marx, *Critique of Gotha Programme*, in MECW, vol. 24, p. 87.

¹² For this last topic see Marcello Musto, *The Last Marx (1881–1883): An Intellectual Biography*. London: Oxford University Press, 2018.

but they should also be seen as a point of departure for further, more detailed studies.

Among other themes of analysis, Part One seeks to show that a philologically unfounded counterposition between Marx's early writings and his later critique of political economy was shared by 'revisionist' Marxists – eager to prioritize the former – and by orthodox Communists – focused on the 'mature Marx'. In contrast to positions that either play up a distinctive 'young Marx' or try to force a theoretical break in his work, Marx's articles and manuscripts of 1843–44 should be treated as an interesting, but only initial, stage in his critical trajectory.

Part Two aims to enrich in various ways the existing research into Marx's critique of political economy, most of which has considered only certain periods in its development, often jumping straight from the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* to the *Grundrisse* and from there to *Capital*, Volume I. In this book, the study of major recently published manuscripts makes it possible to offer a more exhaustive account of the formation of Marx's thought.

Part Three turns to Marx's political activity in the years between 1864 and 1872. Without denying his indispensable contribution to the life of the International, an attempt is made to show that that organization was much more than a 'creation' of a single individual, as the 'Marxist-Leninist' legend maintained for a long time. Moreover, in directly involving himself in workers' struggles, Marx was stimulated to develop and sometimes revise his ideas, to put old certainties up for discussion and ask himself new questions, and in particular to sharpen his critique of capitalism by drawing the broad outlines of a communist society.

To relegate Marx to the position of an embalmed classic suitable only for academia would be a serious mistake, on a par with his transformation into the doctrinal source of 'actually existing socialism'. For in reality his analyses are more topical today than they have ever been.

Following the spread of market economy to new areas of the planet, capitalism has become a truly worldwide system, invading and shaping all aspects of human existence. It not only determines our lives during work time but is increasingly reconfiguring social relations. Capitalism has overcome its adversaries, broken the mediations of the political sphere, and

remoulded human relations in accordance with its own logic. Yet today more than ever, it produces terrible social injustices and unsustainable environmental destruction.

Of course, the writings that Marx composed a century and a half ago do not contain a precise description of the world today. But despite all the profound transformations that have intervened, Marx still provides a rich array of tools with which to understand both the nature and the development of capitalism.

After the last thirty years of glorification of market society, more and more are arguing once again that the cause of human emancipation should enlist the thought of Marx in its service. His 'spectre' seems likely to haunt the world and to stir humanity for a good while to come.

3. Chronology of Marx's writings

Given the size of Marx's intellectual output, the following chronology can only include his most significant writings; its aim is to highlight the unfinished character of many of Marx's texts and the chequered history of their publication.

In the first column are indicated the years when the respective texts were written, and in the second column their titles. The manuscripts that Marx did not send to press are placed between square brackets, as a way of differentiating them from finished books and articles. The greater weight of the former in comparison with the latter emerges as a result. The third column features the corresponding publication history, particularly in the case of texts that first appeared posthumously, where the year of first publication, the bibliographical reference and, where relevant, the names of their editors are given. Any changes that these made to the originals are also indicated. When a published work or manuscript was not written in German, the original language is specified.

The following abbreviations have been used in the table: MEGA (*Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*, 1927–1935); SOC (*K. Marks i F. Engel's Sochineniya*, 1928–1946); MEW (*Marx-Engels-Werke*, 1956–1968); MECW (*Marx-Engels Collected Works*, 1975–2005); MEGA² (*Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*, 1975– . . .).

Table 1 Chronological table of Karl Marx's writings

Year	Title	Information about editions
1841	<i>[Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature]</i>	1902: in <i>Aus dem literarischen Nachlass von Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels und Ferdinand Lassalle</i> , ed. by Mehring (partial version). 1927: in MEGA I/1.1, ed. by Ryazanov.
1842–43	Articles for the <i>Rheinische Zeitung</i> [Rhenish Newspaper]	Daily published in Cologne.
1843	<i>[Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right]</i>	1927: in MEGA I/1.1, ed. by Ryazanov.
1844	Essays for the <i>Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher</i> [German-French Yearbooks]	Including 'On the Jewish Question' and 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right'. Only one issue, published in Paris. The majority of copies were confiscated by the police.
1844	<i>[Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844]</i>	1932: in <i>Der historische Materialismus</i> , ed. by Landshut and Mayer, and in MEGA I/3, ed. by Adoratskii (the editions differ in content and order of the parts). The text was omitted from the numbered volumes of MEW and published separately.
1845	<i>The Holy Family</i> (with Engels)	Published in Frankfurt-am-Main.
1845	<i>[Theses on Feuerbach]</i>	1888: appendix to republication of <i>Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of German Classical Philosophy</i> by Engels.
1845–46	<i>[The German Ideology]</i> (with Engels)	1903–1904: in <i>Dokumente des Sozialismus</i> , ed. by Bernstein (partial version with editorial revisions). 1932: in <i>Der historische Materialismus</i> , ed. by Landshut and Mayer, and in MEGA I/3, ed. by Adoratskii (the editions differ in content and order of the parts).
1847	<i>Poverty of Philosophy</i>	Printed in Brussels and Paris. Text in French.
1848	<i>Speech on the Question of Free Trade</i>	Published in Brussels. Text in French.
1848	<i>Manifesto of the Communist Party</i> (with Engels)	Printed in London. Began to circulate widely in the 1880s.

- 1848–49 Articles for the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung. Organ der Demokratie* [New Rhenish Newspaper: Organ of Democracy] Daily appearing in Cologne. Includes *Wage Labour and Capital*.
- 1850 Articles for the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung. Politisch-ökonomische Revue* [New Rhenish Newspaper: Political-Economic Review] Monthly printed in Hamburg in small runs. Includes *The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850*.
- 1851–62 Articles for the *New-York Tribune* Many of the articles were written by Engels.
- 1852 *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* Published in New York in the first issue of *Die Revolution*. Most of the copies were not collected from the printers for financial reasons. Only a small number reached Europe. The second edition – revised by Marx – appeared only in 1869.
- 1852 [*Great Men of the Exile*] (with Engels) 1930: in *Arkhiv Marksa i Engel'sa* (Russian edition). The manuscript had previously been hidden by Bernstein.
- 1853 *Revelations concerning the Communist Trial in Cologne* Published as an anonymous pamphlet in Basle (nearly all two thousand copies were confiscated by the police) and in Boston. Republished in 1874 in *Volksstaat* (with Marx identified as the author) and in 1875, in book form.
- 1853–54 *Lord Palmerston* Text in English. Originally published as articles in the *New-York Tribune* and *The People's Paper*, and subsequently in booklet form.
- 1854 *The Knight of the Noble Consciousness* Published in New York in booklet form.
- 1856–57 *Revelations of the Diplomatic History of the 18th Century* Text in English. Though already published by Marx, it was subsequently omitted from his works and published in the 'socialist' countries only in 1986, in MECW.
- 1857 [*Introduction*] 1903: in *Die Neue Zeit*, ed. by Kautsky, with various discrepancies from the original.
- 1857–58 [*Grundrisse: Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*] 1939–1941: edition with small print run. 1953: republication allowing wide circulation.

Year	Title	Information about editions
1859	<i>Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy</i>	Published in Berlin in a thousand copies.
1860	<i>Herr Vogt</i>	Published in London with little resonance.
1861–63	<i>[Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (manuscript of 1861–1863)]</i>	1905–1910: <i>Economic Manuscript of 1861–63</i> , ed. by Kautsky (in revised version). A text conforming to the original appeared only in 1954 (Russian edition) and 1956 (German edition). 1976–1982: manuscript published in full in MEGA ² II/3.1–3.6.
1863–64	<i>[On the Polish Question]</i>	1961: <i>Manuskripte über die polnische Frage</i> , ed. by the IISH.
1863–67	<i>[Economic manuscripts of 1863–1867]</i>	1894: <i>Capital</i> , Volume III. <i>The Process of Capitalist Production as a Whole</i> , ed. by Engels (who also used later manuscripts published in MEGA ² II/14 and MEGA ² II/4.3). 1933: Volume I. <i>Unpublished Chapter VI</i> , in <i>Arkhiv Marksa i Engel'sa</i> . 1988: publication of manuscripts of Volume I and Volume II, in MEGA ² II/4.1. 1992: publication of manuscripts of Volume III, in MEGA ² II/4.2.
1864–72	Addresses, resolutions, circulars, manifestos, programmes, statutes of the International Working Men's Association	Texts mostly in English, including the <i>Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association</i> and <i>The Fictitious Splits in the International</i> (with Engels).
1865	<i>[Wages, Price and Profit]</i>	1898: ed. by Eleanor Marx. Text in English.
1867	<i>Capital</i> , Volume I. <i>The Process of Production of Capital</i>	Published in 1,000 copies in Hamburg. Second edition in 1873 in 3,000 copies. Russian translation in 1872.
1870	<i>[Manuscript of Volume Two of Capital]</i>	1885: <i>Capital</i> , Volume II. <i>The Process of Circulation of Capital</i> , ed. by Engels (who also used the manuscript of 1880–1881 and the shorter ones of 1867–1868 and 1877–1878, published in MEGA ² II/11).
1871	<i>The Civil War in France</i>	Text in English. Numerous editions and translations in a short space of time.

1872–75	<i>Capital</i> , Volume I, <i>The Process of Production of Capital</i> (French edition)	Text reworked for the French edition which appeared in instalments. According to Marx, it had a ‘scientific value independent of the original’.
1874–75	[<i>Notes on Bakunin’s Statehood and Anarchy</i>]	1928: in <i>Letopisi marxizma</i> , with a preface by Ryazanov (Russian edition). Manuscript with excerpts in Russian and comments in German.
1875	[<i>Critique of the Gotha Programme</i>]	1891: in <i>Die Neue Zeit</i> , ed. by Engels, who altered a few passages from the original.
1875	[<i>Relationship between Rate of Surplus-Value and Rate of Profit Developed Mathematically</i>]	2003: in MEGA ² II/14.
1877	‘From <i>Kritische Geschichte</i> ’ (a chapter in <i>Anti-Dühring</i> by Engels)	Published in part in <i>Vorwärts</i> and then in full in the book edition.
1879–80	[<i>Notes on Kovalevskii’s Rural Communal Property</i>]	1977: in <i>Karl Marx über Formen vorkapitalistischer Produktion</i> , ed. by the IISH.
1879–80	[<i>Marginal Notes on Adolph Wagner’s Textbook of Political Economy</i>]	1932: in <i>Das Kapital</i> (partial version). 1933: in SOC XV (Russian edition).
1880–81	[<i>Excerpts from Morgan’s Ancient Society</i>]	1972: in <i>The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx</i> , ed. by the IISH. Manuscript with excerpts in English.
1881–82	[<i>Chronological excerpts 90 BC to approx. 1648</i>]	1938–1939: in <i>Arkhiv Marks’a i Engel’sa</i> (partial version, Russian edition). 1953: in Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin <i>Zur deutschen Geschichte</i> (partial version).

Part One

Intellectual Influences and
Early Writings

Childhood, Youth and University Studies

1. The rabbi *manqué*

Karl Marx was born on 5 May 1818 in Trier, the oldest city in Germany. Founded in 16 BC as the Roman colony of Augusta Treverorum, it was an important army bastion and a residence of many emperors, with a population of 80,000 by the year AD 300, and went on to become the seat of the Gallic prefecture and one of the main administrative centres of the Western Empire. In the Middle Ages, it was for a long time an archbishopric capital and subsequently preserved the splendour of its intense religious past. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe [1749–1832], who visited it in 1792, described it as a ‘characteristic and striking city’: ‘inside the walls it is burdened, nay overwhelmed, with churches, chapels, monasteries, convents, colleges, and other chivalric and monastic buildings; outside it is beset by abbeys, foundations, and Carthusian monasteries.’¹ Yet Trier’s decline from the late-seventeenth century on meant that by the time of Marx’s birth its population was as low as 11,400.²

Trier’s position on the border between Germany and France – belonging to France from 1795 to 1814 – enabled the population to benefit from the economic and political reforms of the Napoleonic Civil Code and a post-Enlightenment cultural climate. The peasantry was liberated from feudal servitude and intellectuals from ecclesiastical constraints, while the bourgeoisie managed to gain approval for the liberal laws necessary for its development. After 1815, being situated in the southern part of the Prussian Rhineland – a

¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Campaign in France in the Year 1792*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1849, pp. 178–9.

² s.n., *Trierische Kronik*, n.p., 1818, p. 85.

region quite different from the more developed north with its metallurgical and cotton industries – Trier remained an essentially agricultural centre; peasant smallholdings were the norm, and it had almost no proletariat at all.³ Nevertheless, the widespread poverty made it one of the first German cities where French utopian socialist theories made an appearance, introduced by Ludwig Gall [1791–1863].

Marx came from an old Jewish family, and to examine its genealogical tree is to lose oneself in a centuries-long list of successive rabbis.⁴ His paternal uncle, Samuel, was rabbi in Trier until 1827, and Samuel's father, Levi Mordechai [1743–1804] (a name later modified to Marx), had occupied the same position until his death, numbering several more rabbis in his lineage. Levi's wife, Eva Lwow [1754–1823], was the daughter of Moses Lwow [1764–1788], himself a rabbi in Trier, like his father Joshue Heschel Lwow [1692–1771] before him – a leading figure in the Jewish community of his time – and like his grandfather Aron Lwow [1660–1712], originally from the Polish city of Lwów. Before emigrating to Poland, the family ancestors had lived in Hesse, and before that, around the mid-fifteenth century, in Italy. In fact, five generations before, anti-Jewish persecution had forced Abraham Ha-Levi Minz [1440–1525] to emigrate from Germany to Padua, where he was rabbi and his son-in-law, Mayer Katzenellenbogen [1482–1565], became rector of the Talmudic university.⁵

There was also a rabbinical ancestry on the maternal side of Marx's family. Although information is scarcer, we know that Karl's mother, Henriette [1788–1863], was the daughter of Isaac Pressburg [1747–1832], rabbi in Nijmegen, and that her line of descent consisted of Hungarian Jews forced by persecution to migrate to the Netherlands, where it took the name of its city of origin: Pressburg (today's Bratislava).⁶ In the course of moving around, the Pressburgs also spent some time in Italy, the home of Jehuda ben Eliezer ha Levy Minz [?–1508], professor at Pavia University. In this family too, as Marx's youngest

³ Detailed information about the city in this period is given in Emil Zenz, *Geschichte der Stadt Trier im 19 Jahrhundert*. Trier: Spee, 1979. For an assessment of its influence on Marx, see Heinz Monz, *Karl Marx. Grundlagen der Entwicklung zu Leben und Werk*. Trier: NCO, 1973.

⁴ See David McLellan, *Marx before Marxism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, p. 42f.

⁵ H. Horowitz, 'Die Familie Lwów', *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, vol. 5 (1928), pp. 487–99. For further details on the Marx family, see Manfred Schöncke (ed.), *Karl und Heinrich Marx und ihre Geschwister*. Bonn: Pahl-Rugenstein Nachfolger, 1993.

⁶ See the letter from Eleanor Marx to Henri Polak, 31 October 1893, in Werner Blumenberg, 'Ein unbekanntes Kapitel aus Marx' Leben: Briefe an die holländischen Verwandten', *International Review of Social History*, vol. I (1956), n. 1, p. 56.

daughter Eleanor [1855–1898] wrote, ‘the male offspring had been rabbis for hundreds of years.’⁷

With this background, and being the only surviving son, Marx might very well have followed the same path. We may say, then, that he was a rabbi *manqué*, whom circumstances pointed toward a different destiny. His father Hirschel [1777–1838] was part of a generation of young Jews – Heinrich Heine⁸ [1797–1856] and Eduard Gans [1797–1839] made the same choice in this period – who shook off the constraints of a community living apart amid the hostility of Christians, closed to the outside world and the changes taking place within it.⁹ At that time, moreover, relinquishment of the Jewish faith was not only a price to be paid for keeping one’s job but also, as Heine pointed out, the intellectual entry ticket to European civilization.¹⁰

After a complicated youth and difficulties with his family, Hirschel Marx managed to secure a good position as legal adviser at the Court of Appeal in Trier. The Prussian annexation of the Rhineland in 1815, however, led to the exclusion of Jews from all public office. Forced to choose between quitting his profession and abandoning the faith of his ancestors, he then had himself baptised and changed his name to Heinrich. Although Trier had a Catholic majority, he decided to join the small, 300-strong Protestant community, which distinguished itself by its greater liberalism. The conversion of his children (including Karl) followed in August 1824, and that of his wife the following year.¹¹ Despite the change of religion and the Enlightenment atmosphere that the household always exuded, the Marx family retained many Jewish habits and types of behaviour, the influence of which should not be minimized in a discussion of Karl’s childhood and adolescence.

Few particulars are known about the first years of Marx’s life. It is likely that he spent them happily in the calm and cultivated ambience of a bourgeois family and was seen by it as a particularly gifted child holding out bright hopes for the future. Educated at home until he was twelve, he got his early bearings from a

⁷ Wilhelm Liebknecht, *Karl Marx zum Gedächtnis*. Nuremberg: Wörlein & Co., 1896, p. 92.

⁸ During his lifetime, Marx got to know Heine well and became close friends with him. See Walter Victor, *Marx und Heine*. Berlin: Bruno Henschel und Sohn, 1951.

⁹ Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx*. London: Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 26.

¹⁰ Auguste Cornu, *Karl Marx et Friedrich Engels*, vol. I. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, p. 57.

¹¹ See David McLellan, *Karl Marx: A Biography*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 4. Cf. Cornu, pp. 49–67.

paternal rationalism that would exert a profound influence on his development. Heinrich Marx, a highly cultured man, subscribed to Enlightenment theories and had a good knowledge of Voltaire [1694–1778], Jean-Jacques Rousseau [1712–1778] and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing [1729–1781].¹² Free of religious prejudices and supportive of liberal tendencies in politics, he brought up his son according to modern pedagogical principles. Marx always preserved a deep affection for his father: he ‘never tired of speaking of him and always carried around a photo of him taken from an old daguerreotype’.¹³

Marx’s mother Henriette, on the other hand, who had moved from Nijmegen after her marriage, was so lacking in education that she was unable even to master the German language. Devoted to the home, Henriette Pressburg was anxious and apprehensive by nature, played no role in her son’s intellectual development and never understood his aspirations. Relations between them remained infrequent for the rest of her life, often involving conflict and, from a certain point on, centring entirely on financial disputes over the family inheritance. Marx’s relations with his three sisters were also sporadic and had no importance in his life. As the third of nine children – five younger brothers succumbed to tuberculosis – he was left alone with them from an early age. The few recollections that have come down to us speak of him as a ‘terrible tyrant’, who would force his sisters ‘to gallop like horses up the Marcusberg in Trier’ and to eat ‘the cakes he had prepared with dirty hands from even dirtier dough’. Yet they allowed him to do this, because he rewarded them with ‘wonderful stories’.¹⁴

2. At school in Trier and *studiosus juris* in Bonn

From 1830 to 1835, Marx attended the Friedrich Wilhelm Gymnasium in Trier. Founded by Jesuits in the sixteenth century and didactically restructured after Prussia’s annexation of the Rhineland, the high school could boast of

¹² See Boris Nikolaevsky and Otto Maenchen-Helfen, *Karl Marx: Man and Fighter*, p. 52. Cf. Cornu, *Karl Marx et Friedrich Engels*, p. 69.

¹³ Eleanor Marx, in Hans Magnus Enzensberger (ed.), *Gespräche mit Marx und Engels*, vol. 1. Frankfurt: Insel Taschenbuch, 1973, p. 268.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

excellent teachers and offered a rationalist liberal education which, together with the one received from his father, stamped Marx's early cast of mind.

The climate then reigning in Prussia, however, was marked by censorship and the suppression of civil liberties; a decree stifling all expressions of dissent was the response to a demonstration for free speech in Hambach in 1832. A special commission for the elimination of politically dangerous groups turned its attentions to Trier, and after an inspection at Marx's school several teachers were accused of having a bad influence on their pupils. Charges were laid against the headmaster Hugo Wyttenbach [1767–1848], a fervent Enlightenment spirit, and he was assigned a deputy by the name of Vitus Loers [1792–1862], a reactionary for whom Marx displayed his aversion by refusing to take personal leave of him, as was customary, at the end of his studies.

The government commission also targeted the casino literary society, a meeting place for progressive citizens in Trier and the heart of its liberal opposition. In 1834, the building was placed under police surveillance following a banquet in honour of local liberal deputies to the Rhineland Diet – Heinrich Marx gave a speech there supporting a moderate constitutional system – and a meeting at which the Marseillaise was sung and the French tricolour unfurled.¹⁵

Such events formed the backdrop to this period of Marx's life. He was among the youngest pupils in his class and the few non-Catholics in the whole school; these two factors together probably did not help him to make close friends, but we are told that his schoolmates respected 'the ease with which he composed satirical verses against his enemies.'¹⁶

Marx's results were good but not particularly brilliant. Throughout his time at the school, his name appears only twice in the end-of-year praise bestowed on deserving pupils: once for knowledge of ancient languages, and once for German composition. He did satisfactorily in his final exams, but again did not really stand out. The diploma certificate tells us that his German composition and grammatical knowledge were considered 'very good'; in Latin and Greek he could translate and explain easier passages with facility and precision, write thoughtfully and with deep insight into the subject matter, and speak with a degree of fluency. He was 'in general fairly proficient' in history and geography

¹⁵ Cornu, *Karl Marx et Friedrich Engels*, pp. 72–3.

¹⁶ Eleanor Marx, in David Rjazanov (ed.), *Karl Marx als Denker*. Frankfurt: Makol, 1971, p. 27.

and able to read even difficult French with some assistance, and he had a 'good' grasp of mathematics and a 'moderate' grasp of physics. Also 'fairly clear and well grounded' was his knowledge of Christian doctrine and morals and 'to some extent the history of the Christian Church.' The exam board therefore passed him, 'cherishing the hope that he will fulfil the favourable expectations which his aptitudes justify'.¹⁷

Marx took his school-leaving exam in 1835, and his results in religion, Latin and German are the first direct clues to his early intellectual formation.¹⁸ His German composition piece, 'Reflections of a Young Man on the Choice of a Profession', is particularly interesting. Although typical of the Enlightenment humanist conceptions prevalent in Germany at the time,¹⁹ the text has caught the attention of various researchers because it sums up what Marx thought about each individual's responsibility in making the difficult choice of a career. In his view, the main guide in this decision should be the good of humanity, and the people whom history considered really great were those who had worked for the universal. And he concludes:

If we have chosen the position in life in which we can most of all work for mankind, no burdens can bow us down, because they are sacrifices for the benefit of all; then we shall experience no petty, limited, selfish joy, but our happiness will belong to millions, our deeds will live on quietly but perpetually at work, and over our ashes will be shed the hot tears of noble people.²⁰

The essay contains another sentence that has aroused debate among interpreters of Marx: 'But we cannot always attain the position to which we believe we are called; our relations in society have to some extent already begun to be established before we are in a position to determine them.'²¹ Some Marxists who regard his thought as having been formed before his long and profound

¹⁷ Karl Marx, 'Certificate of Maturity for Pupil of the Gymnasium in Trier', in MECW, vol. 1, p. 643.

¹⁸ On Marx's school performance, see Carl Grünberg, 'Marx als Abiturient', *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung*, vol. XI (1925), pp. 424–33; Monz Heinz, Manfred Henke, Rüdiger Thomas and Hans Pelger, *Der unbekanntete junge Marx: neue Studien zur Entwicklung des Marxschen Denkens, 1835–1847*. Mainz: Hase und Koehler, 1973, pp. 9–146; and Marco Duichin, *Il primo Marx*. Rome: Cadmo, 1982, pp. 45–67.

¹⁹ See McLellan, *Marx before Marxism*, p. 54.

²⁰ Karl Marx, 'Reflections of a Young Man on the Choice of a Profession', in MECW, vol. 1, p. 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

studies in political economy even see this statement as the first exposition of the materialist conception of history. But the reality is simpler. Just seventeen years old at the time, Marx was arguing that for any human being a choice of career is bound up with the objective circumstances of his or her life.²²

With the Gymnasium behind him, the young man indulged his father's wish that he should follow him into the legal profession, and although he had no special leaning in that direction he enrolled in October 1835 in the faculty of law in Bonn, the closest university city to Trier and the main intellectual centre of the Rhineland.

Bonn, with a population of 40,000, was a little larger than Trier but much more animated, and it held an undoubted attraction for Marx. Many activities were concentrated around the university, which had a staff of sixty for approximately 700 students. The teaching corps, including the prestigious philosopher August W. Schlegel [1767–1845], set its stamp on the whole cultural atmosphere in the city, dominated at the time by a Romanticism associated with the theories of Friedrich W. J. Schelling [1775–1854]. Its students, who enjoyed considerable freedom, were the most energetic section of society and had promoted various political initiatives.

In April 1833, however, there was a profound change in the situation. A group of students attempted to disperse the Federal Diet and to install an independent Rhineland government, and the swift crushing of this revolt was followed by a crackdown on the student organizations. One in particular, the Student Liberal Association, was formally dissolved and its members expelled or arrested. When Marx arrived in Bonn, the repression was still in full swing, as the police, with the help of a network of informers, was attempting to weed out all the suspects. Fear of sanctions impelled large numbers of students to refrain from further political activity and to throw themselves instead into a round of drinking and duelling. The only permitted associations were the student corporations, made up of sons of the nobility, and circles organized by

²² Two authorities who have made this mistake are Franz Mehring – for whom we see here the 'first flash of an idea [...] whose development and completion were to be the immortal service of the man': *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life*, p. 5 – and Auguste Cornu – who, having warned the reader 'not to exaggerate the importance of this sentence', goes on to write that 'in it Marx underlines for the first time the function of social relations in shaping human lives', *Karl Marx et Friedrich Engels*, p. 79.

city of origin. Marx joined the one with some thirty students from Trier, becoming a keen member and, before long, one of its five presidents.²³

Since Marx's letter to his parents from Bonn have been lost, those from his father are invaluable for a reconstruction of his life in this period – indeed, the only direct source we have. Heinrich sent thoughtful advice to his '*studiosus juris*'²⁴ and expressed high hopes for his future: 'I have no doubt as to your good will and diligence, or about your firm intention to do something great.'

Marx threw himself into his studies with great enthusiasm; his will to learn was so great that he registered for a good nine courses during the first winter semester. But after an admonishment from his father – 'Nine lecture courses seem to me rather a lot and I would not like you to do more than your body and mind can bear'²⁵ – he convinced himself to cut these to six, giving up the realm of physics and chemistry. He assiduously followed every lecture not only in jurisprudence, legal institutions and the history of Roman law, but also in Greek and Roman mythology, modern art history and aspects of Homer (the latter given by Schlegel himself). This selection demonstrates the young man's wide range of interests, as well as the great passion he felt for poetry. Around the same time, he began to write some verse compositions²⁶ and became a member of the Poets Club.

We know from his father's letters and money transfers that Marx bought many books, especially large historical works.²⁷ He studied with great intensity and, despite his father's urging – 'in providing really vigorous and healthy nourishment for your mind, do not forget that in this miserable world it is always accompanied by the body, which determines the well-being of the whole machine. [. . .] Therefore, do not study more than your health can bear'²⁸ – Marx's health suffered from the excessive workload after just a few months in Bonn.

His father's letters repeated the warnings: 'I hope at least that the sad experience will bring home to you the need to pay rather more attention to

²³ On Marx's period in Bonn see Cornu, *Karl Marx et Friedrich Engels*, pp. 82–7.

²⁴ Heinrich Marx to Karl Marx, 19 March 1836, in MECW, vol. 1, pp. 652–3.

²⁵ Heinrich Marx to Karl Marx, 18–29 November 1835, in MECW, vol. 1, p. 645.

²⁶ Marx had already composed some short poems in his schooldays. They were transcribed in a fair copy and preserved by his younger sister Sophie. One of these 'To Charlemagne', dated 1833, shows the influence of his headmaster Wytenbach and is among the oldest to have survived. See Karl Marx, 'Gedichte. Aus einem Notizbuch von Sophie Marx', in MEGA², vol. I/1, pp. 760–3.

²⁷ Heinrich Marx to Karl Marx, beginning of 1836 [February or early March], in MECW, vol. 1, p. 649.

²⁸ Heinrich Marx to Karl Marx, 18–29 November 1835, in MECW, vol. 1, p. 647.

your health. [...] Even excessive study is madness in such a case. [...] There is no more lamentable being than a sickly scholar.²⁹ So, during the summer semester, force of circumstance dictated that he took no more than four courses: history of German law, European international law, natural law, and the *Elegies* of Propertius [50/45 BC – 15/? BC], as well as the one given by Schlegel. Apart from accumulated fatigue, another reason for this reduction was the exuberance of student life to which he had indulged in the meantime. He spent a lot of money and ran up debts, so that his father was often compelled to send him additional funds. He also bought a pistol and, when this was discovered by the police, he had to undergo an investigation for possession of a concealed firearm; he was arrested and given one day's detention for 'rowdiness and drunkenness at night';³⁰ and he took part in a duel with another student and received a slight wound above his left eye.

On balance, the year in Bonn did not live up to expectations, and Marx's father decided to transfer him to Berlin University. Before setting off for the Prussian capital, though, he spent the summer holidays in Trier and became engaged to his future lifelong companion: Jenny von Westphalen [1814–1881], much sought after for her beauty and her position in society. Fearing that the von Westphalens would refuse to accept the match – Karl was an ordinary bourgeois, Jewish in origin and, having just turned eighteen, was four years younger than Jenny (something almost unheard of in those days) – they initially kept their intentions secret from the family.

Jenny did indeed belong to a completely different world. She was the daughter of Baron Ludwig von Westphalen [1770–1842], an eminent government official and a typical representative of the cultured, liberal-inclined German upper classes. He was a fascinating, open-minded man, who spoke perfect English, read ancient Latin and Greek, Italian, French and Spanish; he was therefore on excellent terms with the young Marx and appreciated his great intellectual vivacity. His preferred reading, though, were the works of the Romantic school, rather than the French rationalists and classics. So, 'whereas [Karl's] father read Voltaire and Racine to him, the baron would recite

²⁹ Heinrich Marx to Karl Marx, beginning of 1836 [February or early March], in MECW, vol. 1, pp. 649, 651.

³⁰ 'Certificate of Release from Bonn University', in MECW, vol. 1, p. 658.

Homer [?] and Shakespeare [1564–1616], who always remained his favourite authors.³¹ Von Westphalen also paid close attention to the social question and helped to arouse Marx's early interest in Henri de Saint-Simon [1760–1825].³² All in all, he provided him with stimulating influences that neither family nor school had been able to offer, and Marx always remained tied to him by feelings of gratitude and admiration. Not for nothing did he dedicate his doctoral thesis to the baron a few years later.

3. Into the arms of the enemy

With 320,000 inhabitants, Berlin was the second most populous German-speaking city after Vienna. The heart of the Prussian bureaucracy, it was also a lively intellectual centre and the first great metropolis with which Marx became familiar.

Friedrich Wilhelm University, founded in 1810,³³ had 2,100 students at the time. It housed many of the most celebrated academics of the age – Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel [1770–1831] himself had taught there from 1818 until his death in 1831 – and constituted the most serious and fitting place for Marx to continue his studies. Ludwig Feuerbach [1804–1872], who also studied there, had said of it in the 1820s: 'other universities seem real dumps in comparison with this temple of work.'³⁴

In this new context, and with the responsibilities deriving from his betrothal, Marx gave up the high spirits of his second Bonn semester and got down to work with renewed passion and diligence. His attitude to university had changed, however: he concerned himself much less with academic lectures and, during the nine semesters he spent in Berlin, registered for only thirteen courses and spent two semesters without attending any. In winter 1836–37 he took courses on the Justinian compilations of Roman law, on criminal law, and anthropology. The first two courses, which he followed with great zeal, were

³¹ Eleanor Marx, 'Karl Marx', *Die Neue Zeit*, vol. I (1883), n. 10, p. 441.

³² See Maxim Kovalevsky, in Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus (ed.), *Mohr und General. Erinnerungen an Marx und Engels*. Berlin: Dietz, 1964, p. 394. Cf. Cornu, *Karl Marx et Friedrich Engels*, p. 82.

³³ In 1948, it changed its name to the Humboldt University.

³⁴ Ludwig Feuerbach to his father, 6 July 1824, in Karl Grün (ed.), *Ludwig Feuerbach, Sein Briefwechsel und Nachlass*. Leipzig and Heidelberg: C. F. Winter'sche Verlagshandlung, 1874, p. 183.

shared between the greatest jurists of the day: Friedrich von Savigny [1779–1861], founder and chief theorist of the Historical School, proposed a Romantic exaltation of the past and was a supporter of political conservatism; Eduard Gans, a disciple of Hegel and Henri de Saint-Simon, idol of the whole of progressive Berlin, and highly liberal in his politics, contributed to the development of similar tendencies in Marx and to his interest in Hegelianism.

In any event, an account of Marx's academic involvement gives a very one-sided picture of his intellectual endeavours. Apart from courses obligatory for his exams in ecclesiastical law, civil procedure, Prussian civil procedure, penal procedure, and inheritance law,³⁵ he limited himself to four others: logic, geography, the Book of Isaiah, and Euripides. But, locking himself away in his room, he embarked on prodigious independent study that allowed him very quickly to master fields of knowledge well beyond his chosen discipline.

Marx's learning programme can be reconstructed from the letter he wrote to his father in November 1837; the only one surviving from his time at Berlin University and a priceless document for his first year there. Burning with love for his fiancée and still anxious about the fate of their still unofficial union, he devoted himself to poetry in particular. From October to December 1836, he composed three books of verses and sent them to 'my dear, eternally beloved Jenny v. Westphalen':³⁶ the *Book of Love* in two parts and the *Book of Songs*. Their conventional themes of tragic love and their heavy, awkward lyrical form did not suggest a particular gift for poetry.³⁷

³⁵ See Sepp Miller and Bruno Sawadzki, *Karl Marx in Berlin*. Berlin: Das Neue Berlin, 1956, p. 113, and Nicolaevsky and Maenchen-Helfen, *Karl Marx: Man and Fighter*, p. 35f.

³⁶ Karl Marx, *Buch der Liebe*, in MEGA², vol. I/1, p. 479.

³⁷ See Cornu, *Karl Marx et Friedrich Engels*, pp. 89–90. See also Franz Mehring, 'Einleitung', in Franz Mehring (ed.), *Aus dem literarischen Nachlass von Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels und Ferdinand Lassalle*, vol. 1. Stuttgart: Dietz 1902, pp. 25–6, which reports the opinion of Marx's second daughter, Laura: 'I must tell you that my father treated these verses with great irreverence; whenever my parents spoke of them, they laughed heartily at such youthful follies.' In short, as Mehring observed elsewhere, 'the gift of verse was not amongst the talents placed in his cradle by the Muses', *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life*, p. 11. In the letter of November 1837 to his father, just a year after he had composed them, Marx himself judged the verses very harshly: 'All the poems of the first three volumes I sent to Jenny are marked by attacks on our times, diffuse and inchoate expressions of feeling, nothing natural, everything built out of moonshine, complete opposition between what is and what ought to be, rhetorical reflections instead of poetic thoughts, but perhaps also a certain warmth of feeling and striving for poetic fire. The whole extent of a longing that has no bounds finds expression there in many different forms and makes the poetic "composition" into "diffusion"', Karl Marx, 'Letter from Marx to His Father in Trier', in MECW, vol. 1, p. 11; hereafter 'Letter to His Father'. Marx also sent his verses to the *Deutscher Musenalmanach* [Almanach of German Muses], but the journal did not think them worthy of publication.

For Marx, however, ‘poetry could be and had to be only an accompaniment’. He always felt more strongly ‘the urge to wrestle with philosophy’ and had a duty to study jurisprudence. He did in fact begin reading the German jurists Johann G. Heineccius [1681–1741] and Anton F. J. Thibaut [1772–1840], translated the first two books of the Justinian Pandect, and ‘tried to elaborate a philosophy of law covering the whole field of law’.³⁸ Guided by a wish to relate the two to each other, he passed from a study of the empirical side of law to jurisprudence and from there to philosophy in general.³⁹ In this way, he composed ‘a work of almost 300 pages’, which remained incomplete and later went missing; it had two parts – a ‘metaphysics of law’ and a ‘philosophy of law’. Although Marx never finished it, the act of writing enabled him ‘to gain a general view of the material and a liking for it’. He could see ‘the falsity of the whole thing, the basic plan of which borders on that of Kant’, and became convinced that ‘there could be no headway without philosophy’. He therefore ‘drafted a new system of metaphysical principles’ but at the end of this he was ‘once more compelled to recognize that it was wrong, like all my previous efforts’.

Little by little, philosophy took over from the study of law, and the legal career envisaged by his father gave way to the prospect of a life of academic study. At the same time, Marx developed his interests in many other directions. He acquired ‘the habit of making extracts from all the books [he] read [...] and incidentally scribbled down [his] reflections’⁴⁰ – a habit he kept up for the rest of his life, in his tiny, almost illegible handwriting. Marx began his notebooks of excerpts with *Laocoon* (1767) by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Erwin* (1815) by Karl W. F. Solger [1780–1819], the *History of Ancient Art* (1764) by Johann J. Winckelmann [1717–1768] and the *History of the German People* (1825–35) by Heinrich Luden [1778–1847].⁴¹ During the same period, he translated two Latin classics – Tacitus’s [56–120] *Germania* (AD 98) and Ovid’s [43 BC–AD 17/18] *Tristia* (AD 12–17); he began to study English and Italian grammar; read Ernst F. Klein’s [1744–1810] work on Prussian criminal law and annals and, at least cursorily, all the most recent literature.

³⁸ Marx, ‘Letter to His Father’, pp. 11–12.

³⁹ István Mészáros, ‘Marx filosofo’, in Eric Hobsbawm (ed.), *Storia del marxismo*, vol. 1. Turin: Einaudi, 1978, pp. 122–3.

⁴⁰ Marx, ‘Letter to His Father’, pp. 12, 15.

⁴¹ These excerpts have since been lost.

Despite his father's repeated entreaties 'not to overdo [his] studying' and 'not to exhaust' himself,⁴² Marx kept working at a furious pace. He wrote another notebook of poetry, and dedicated it to his father on his sixtieth birthday, adding the first act of *Oulanem*, a fantastic drama in verse, and some chapters of a humoristic romance *Scorpion and Felix*, a poorly executed attempt to heap scorn on Berlin philistines. More interesting are some brief 'Epigrams' in the same notebook, which record his critical attitude to Hegel at the time. Finally, Marx had a major interest in theatre and literary issues, and from 1837 on, though still barely nineteen, he had plans to found a journal of literary criticism.⁴³

In the end, after all this intensive and emotionally exhausting work in the fields of law, philosophy, art, literature, languages, and poetry,⁴⁴ Marx fell ill and took his doctor's advice to seek rest in the country,⁴⁵ at a fishing village called Stralow⁴⁶ an hour's journey from the university.

As well as providing him with a break, this stay also marked an important stage in Marx's intellectual evolution: 'A curtain had fallen, my holy of holies was rent asunder, and new gods had to be installed.' After a deep inner conflict, he bid farewell to Romanticism, distanced himself from Kantian and Fichtean idealism, and 'arrived at the point of seeking the idea in reality itself'. Until then he had read only 'fragments of Hegel's philosophy, the grotesque craggy melody of which did not appeal' to him. In Stralow he 'got to know Hegel from beginning to end, together with most of his disciples'. Nevertheless, his conversion to Hegelianism was by no means immediate. In order to clarify the ideas he was making his own, he drafted a dialogue of '24 sheets'⁴⁷ called

⁴² Heinrich Marx to Karl Marx, 9 November 1836, in MECW, vol. 1, p. 662. The letter continues: 'You have still a long time to live, God willing, to the benefit of yourself and your family and, if my surmise is not mistaken, for the good of mankind'; *ibid.*

⁴³ The traces of this project are contained in a letter from his father: see Heinrich Marx to Karl Marx, 16 September 1837, in MECW, vol. 1, pp. 679–83.

⁴⁴ Cf. Marx, 'Letter to His Father', p. 11: 'I regard life in general as the expression of an intellectual activity which develops in all directions, in science, art and private matters.'

⁴⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 15: 'Busy with these various occupations, during my first term I spent many a sleepless night, fought many a battle, and endured much internal and external excitement. Yet at the end I emerged not much enriched, and moreover I had neglected nature, art and the world, and shut the door on my friends. The above observations seem to have been made by my body. I was advised by a doctor to go to the country.'

⁴⁶ Today's Stralau, a suburb of Berlin.

⁴⁷ By a 'sheet' (*Druckbogen*) Marx meant 16 pages, so that it would have been a dense text of more than 300 manuscript pages.

Cleanthes, or The Starting Point and Necessary Continuation of Philosophy, also now lost, which attempted to unify ‘art and science’. The fruit of studies of history, the sciences and Schelling’s works, it had caused Marx ‘to rack his brains endlessly’. And the outcome disheartened him in the end; ‘this work, my dearest child, reared by moonlight, like a false siren delivers me into the arms of the enemy’ – that is, into the embrace of Hegel’s philosophy.

Upset by the outcome of his reflections, Marx was ‘for some days quite incapable of thinking’.⁴⁸ Subsequently, he laid philosophy aside for a while to immerse himself again in his legal studies: Savigny’s *Property Law* (1805), Anselm R. Feuerbach’s [1829–1880] *Manual of Criminal Law* (1801), Karl von Groham’s [?] *Fundamental Principles of the Science of Criminal Law* (1812), Johann Andreas Cramer’s [1723–1788] *Significance of the Words in the Title of the Pandect* (?), Johann N. von Wenning-Ingenheim’s [1790–1831] *Manual of General Civil Law* (1822), Christian F. Mühlenbruch’s [1785–1843] *Science of the Pandect* (1838), Gratian’s [1075/80–1145/47] *Concordia discordantium canonum* (1140) and Giovan Paolo Lancellotti’s [1522–1590] *Institutes of Canon Law* (1563). He also read Francis Bacon’s [1561–1626] *De augmentis scientiarum* (1623) and Hermann S. Reimaruss’s [1694–1768] book *On the Artistic Instincts of Animals* (1760), and translated part of Aristotle’s [384 BC–322 BC] *Rhetoric* (367 BC–322 BC).⁴⁹

Finally, because of ‘the vain, fruitless intellectual labours’, and ‘nagging annoyance at having had to make an idol of a view that I hated’ (that is, Hegel’s philosophy), Marx suffered a breakdown. When he had recovered, he ‘burned all the poems and outlines of stories, etc.’ that he had written up to then.⁵⁰ His research still had such a long road to travel.

4. A young Hegelian in Berlin

In 1837, having been introduced by Adolf Rutenberg [1808–1869] – his closest friend at the time – to the Doctors’ Club, Marx began to frequent this circle of Left Hegelian writers, lecturers and students in Berlin. It had been launched that same

⁴⁸ Marx, ‘Letter to His Father’, pp. 16–17.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

year, with members including Bruno Bauer [1809–1882], Karl Friedrich Köppen [1808–1863], Heinrich Bernhard Oppenheim [1819–1880] and Ludwig Buhl [1816–1880].⁵¹ It was thanks to them that Marx became ‘ever more firmly bound to the modern world philosophy from which [he] had thought to escape’. Now, too, he continued to study and write intensively, and in November he wrote to his father: ‘I could not rest until I had acquired modernity and the outlook of contemporary science through a few bad productions such as *The Visit*.’⁵² But his father’s reply was severe, expressing great worries about Karl’s working methods and disapproving of what were now his main spheres of interest:

God’s grief!!! Disorderliness, musty excursions into all departments of knowledge, musty brooding under a gloomy oil-lamp; [. . .] And is it here, in this workshop of senseless and inexpedient erudition, that the fruits are to ripen which will refresh you and your beloved, and the harvest to be garnered which will serve to fulfil your sacred obligations!?! [. . .] [This] merely testifies how you squander your talents and spend your nights giving birth to monsters; that you follow in the footsteps of the new immoralists who twist their words until they themselves do not hear them.⁵³

Shortly afterwards, Heinrich Marx’s own already bad health deteriorated further, and he died of tuberculosis in May 1838. The chains tying Karl to the family then loosened considerably, and without his father’s critical gaze – which over time would probably have sharpened into a conflict between them⁵⁴ – he could go his own way at an even brisker pace.⁵⁵

The Doctors’ Club thus became the centre of Marx’s formation and the stimulus for all his activity. After the split between Left and Right Hegelians,

⁵¹ See Miller and Sawadzki, *Karl Marx in Berlin*, pp. 68–75.

⁵² Marx, ‘Letter to His Father’, p. 17.

⁵³ Heinrich Marx to Karl Marx, 9 December 1837, in MECW, vol. 1, pp. 685–91. Cf. Ernst Bloch, *On Karl Marx*. New York: Herder & Herder, 1971.

⁵⁴ See Cornu, *Karl Marx et Friedrich Engels*, p. 126.

⁵⁵ The death of Heinrich Marx also ended the priceless correspondence that has told us something about Karl’s life in his university years. According to Marx’s youngest daughter, Eleanor, these letters ‘show the young Marx maturing, the future adult in the adolescent. One can already see the exceptional capacity and passion for work that characterized Marx throughout his life; no task was too onerous for him, and his writings never bore any trace of relaxation or negligence. [. . .] His aim was to see clearly inside himself, and here too we observe him criticizing himself and his work. [. . .] And already here, as later, we see a reader who does not shut himself up in one discipline but reads, takes in and devours everything: jurisprudence, history, poetry, art. There is nothing that did not bring grist to his mill; and he dedicated himself completely to everything he did’. Eleanor Marx, ‘Marx’ Briefe an seinen Vater’, *Die Neue Zeit*, vol. 16 (1898), n. 1, pp. 4–12.

which occurred precisely during these years, some of the most progressive minds in Prussia gathered at this circle in Berlin – the men who took part in the struggle against conservatism and liberalism on the side of the latter. Although Marx was only twenty when he first visited the club, his dazzling personality meant not only that all its members – on average ten years older – treated him as an equal, but that he exercised great intellectual influence over them and often shaped the agenda for discussion.⁵⁶

From the beginning of 1839, Marx became more and more attached to Bauer, who had repeatedly urged him to finish university more quickly. Marx therefore undertook a deep study of Epicurus and by early 1840 had filled seven notebooks with notes for a dissertation on Greek philosophy that would be entitled *Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*.⁵⁷ This was the only strictly philosophical work that he wrote in his lifetime.⁵⁸ Probably intended to be part of a larger work on ancient philosophy, it was written between the second half of 1840 and March 1841: it consisted of a preface, two sections of five chapters each – the fourth and fifth chapters of the first section have been lost – and an appendix on Plutarch's critique of Epicurus, which has also been lost apart from a few notes.⁵⁹

The large amount of time that Marx spent on the work was due to his extreme meticulousness and the rigorous self-criticism to which he subjected all his thinking.⁶⁰ The wish to participate in the political struggle of the Hegelian Left was also very strong in him, but he realized he would be of more use continuing his research, deepening his knowledge and clarifying his conception of the world. Epicurus was only one of the many authors he studied. In the first half of 1840, he began to read extracts from Aristotle's *De anima* (350 BC) and planned to write a critique of Friedrich Adolf Trendelenburg's [1802–1872] *Logical Investigations* (1840). It was also his intention to publish a book against the theological Georg Hermes [1775–1831] and a polemical

⁵⁶ See Cornu, *Karl Marx et Friedrich Engels*, p. 151.

⁵⁷ It is very likely that these seven notebooks contain only a small part of the preparatory work for the thesis. See Maximilien Rubel, 'Philosophie Epicurienne. Notice', in Maximilien Rubel (ed.), *Karl Marx, Oeuvres III. Philosophie*. Paris: Gallimard, 1982, p. 786. The so called 'Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy' have been published in English in MECW, vol. 1, pp. 403–516.

⁵⁸ See Maximilien Rubel, 'Différence de la philosophie naturelle chez Démocrite et chez Épicure, avec un appendice. Notice', in Karl Marx, *Oeuvres III. Philosophie*, p. 6.

⁵⁹ See Mario Cingoli, *Il primo Marx (1835–1841)*. Milan: Unicopli, 2001; and Roberto Finelli, *Un parricidio mancato. Hegel e il giovane Marx*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2004, pp. 40–74.

⁶⁰ Cornu, *Karl Marx et Friedrich Engels*, p. 225.

pamphlet on *The Idea of Divinity* (1839) by Karl Philipp Fischer [1807–1885].⁶¹ But none of these projects came to fruition.

Evidence of Marx's resolve to spend his energy in rigorous study and discrete articles⁶² is the fact that between January and April 1841 – that is, during and after his writing of the final part of his doctoral thesis – he worked with a hand copier on compiling seven notebooks of extracts from Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's [1646–1716] correspondence and works, David Hume's [1711–1776] *Treatise on Human Nature*, Baruch Spinoza's [1632–1677] *Theologico-Political Treatise* (1670) and Karl Rosenkranz's [1805–1879] *History of Kantian Philosophy* (1840).⁶³ This material concerned modern philosophers and was thus independent of his work on the dissertation; its purpose was to broaden his knowledge, in the hope that he might obtain a position as a university professor. But in April 1841, having presented his thesis to the University of Jena⁶⁴ (more liberal than Berlin) and been awarded a doctorate in philosophy, Marx found that the new political context had shut the door to him. Following the enthronement of Friedrich Wilhelm IV [1795–1861], a strongly Romantic-Christian wave of reaction had spread throughout Prussia, and Hegelian philosophy – which until then had enjoyed support from the state – was banished from academia.

Meanwhile Marx had curtailed his literary ambitions, although early in 1841 he succeeded in having two poems published in the journal *Athenäum* [Atheneum].⁶⁵ So he decided to leave for Bonn and join his friend Bauer, with whom he had been planning to found a journal *Archiv des Atheismus* [Archive of Atheism] that would offer a critical viewpoint, especially in religious matters. During this period, Marx compiled a new group of extracts, above all from *On the Worship of Fetish Gods* (1760) by Charles de Brosses [1709–1777], the *General Critical History of Religion* (1806–1807) by Christoph Meiners [1747–1810] and *On Religion* (1824–1830) by Benjamin Constant [1767–1830].⁶⁶ But

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 194–7.

⁶² See Mario Rossi, *Da Hegel a Marx. III La scuola hegeliana. Il giovane Marx*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 1977, p. 164.

⁶³ These extracts, together with those from Aristotle's *De anima*, may be found in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Exzerpte und Notizen bis 1842*, in MEGA², vol. IV/1, pp. 153–288.

⁶⁴ See Karl Marx to Carl Friedrich Bachmann, 6 April 1841, in MECW, vol. 1, p. 379; and Karl Marx to Oskar Ludwig Bernhard Wolff, 7 April 1841, in MECW, vol. 1, pp. 380–1.

⁶⁵ The poems appeared in the fourth issue of this German periodical. For an English translation, see Karl Marx, 'The Fiddler' and 'Nocturnal Love', in MECW, vol. 1, pp. 22–4.

⁶⁶ The extracts from the Bonn period may be found in MEGA², vol. IV/1, pp. 289–381.

the journal project eventually fell through, and, having grown distant from Bauer over political questions,⁶⁷ he gave up further studies in this sphere.

At the end of years of intensive academic studies in law, history, literature and philosophy, having abandoned his father's recommendation of the legal profession but found it impossible to secure a university post, Marx decided to devote himself to journalism. In May 1842, he wrote his first article for the daily *Rheinische Zeitung* [Rhenish Newspaper] in Cologne, and from October of that year until March 1843 he became its extremely youthful chief editor.

Soon, however, he felt the need to get to grips with political economy – a discipline just beginning to take wing in Prussia – and to become more directly involved in politics. A meeting with Friedrich Engels [1820–1895], who had already completed his studies in political economy in England, was crucial in encouraging his decision in this direction, as was the influence of Moses Hess's [1812–1872] writings⁶⁸ and the year-and-a-bit that he spent in Paris: the site of ceaseless social agitation. In little more than five years, then, the student from a Jewish family in provincial Germany had become a young revolutionary in touch with the most radical groups in the French capital. His trajectory had been rapid and wide-ranging, but it paled beside what lay ahead in the immediate future.

⁶⁷ On the relations between Marx and Bauer, see Zvi Rosen, *Bruno Bauer and Karl Marx*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977, esp. 223–40 on their dispute; and David Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

⁶⁸ See Zvi Rosen, *Moses Hess und Karl Marx*. Hamburg: Christians, 1983.

The Encounter with Political Economy

1. Paris: Capital of the nineteenth century

Paris is a ‘monstrous miracle, an astounding assemblage of movements, machines and ideas, the city of a thousand different romances, the world’s thinking-box.’¹ This is how Honoré de Balzac [1799–1850] described in one of his tales the effect of the metropolis on those who did not know it thoroughly.

During the years before the 1848 revolution, the city was inhabited by artisans and workers in constant political agitation. From its colonies of exiles, revolutionaries, writers and artists, and the general social ferment, it had acquired an intensity found in few other epochs. Women and men with the most varied intellectual gifts were publishing books, journals and newspapers, writing poetry, speaking at meetings, and discussing endlessly in cafés, in the street, and on public benches. Their close proximity meant that they exercised a continual influence on one another.²

Mikhail Bakunin [1814–1876], having decided to cross the Rhine, suddenly found himself ‘amid those new elements which have not yet been born in Germany [...] [in a climate where] political ideas circulate among all strata of society.’³ Lorenz von Stein [1815–1890] wrote that ‘life in the populace itself was beginning to create new associations and to conceive of new revolutions.’⁴ Arnold Ruge [1802–1880] was of the view that ‘in Paris we shall live our victories and our defeats.’⁵ In short, it was the place to be at that particular moment in history.

¹ Honoré de Balzac, *The History of the Thirteen. Ferragus*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, p. 33.

² Cf. Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx*. London: Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 81f.

³ Mikhail Bakunin, *Ein Briefwechsel von 1843*, in MEGA³, vol. I/2, 1982, p. 482.

⁴ Lorenz von Stein, *Der Sozialismus und Communismus des heutigen Frankreichs. Ein Beitrag zur Zeitgeschichte*. Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1848, p. 509.

⁵ Arnold Ruge, *Zwei Jahre in Paris. Studien und erinnerungen*. Leipzig: Zentralantiquariat der DDR, 1975, p. 59.

For Balzac ‘the streets of Paris have human qualities and such a physiognomy as leaves us with impressions against which we can put up no resistance.’⁶ Many of these impressions also struck Karl Marx, who at the age of twenty-five had moved there in October 1843; they profoundly marked his intellectual evolution, which matured decisively during his time in Paris.⁷

Following the journalistic experience on the *Rheinische Zeitung* [Rhenish Newspaper], Marx’s abandonment of the conceptual horizon of the Hegelian rational state, and an associated democratic radicalism, meant that he had arrived in the French capital with a certain theoretical openness.⁸ But this was now shaken by the tangible vision of the proletariat. The uncertainty generated by the problematic atmosphere of the times, which saw the rapid consolidation of a new social-economic reality, was dissipated once he made contact, both theoretically and experientially, with the Parisian working class and its living and working conditions.

The discovery of the proletariat and, through it, of revolution; the new commitment to communism, still unclearly defined and semi-utopian; the critique of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s speculative philosophy and the Hegelian Left; the first outline of the materialist conception of history and the beginnings of his critique of political economy: these were the set of fundamental themes that Marx would develop during this period.

2. Classics of political economy and alienated labour

Political economy was not Marx’s first intellectual passion. It was only just emerging as a discipline in Germany during his youth, and he encountered it only after various other subjects. When he had been working with the

⁶ Balzac, *The History of the Thirteen*. Ferragus, p. 31.

⁷ For an intellectual biography of Marx in Paris see Auguste Cornu, *Karl Marx et Friedrich Engels*, vol. III. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962; Jacques Grandjonc, *Studien zu Marx erstem Paris-Aufenthalt und zur Entstehung der ‘Deutschen Ideologie’*. Trier: Schriften aus dem Karl Marx Haus, 1990, pp. 163–212; and Jean-Louis Lacascade, *Les métamorphoses de jeune Marx*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002, pp. 129–62.

⁸ ‘Not only has a state of general anarchy set in among the reformers, but everyone will have to admit to himself that he has no exact idea what the future ought to be’, Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge, September 1843, in MECW, vol. 3, p. 142.

Rheinische Zeitung, Marx had already grappled with particular economic questions, albeit only from a legal or political viewpoint.⁹ However, the censorship struck at the paper and caused him to end the experience, ‘to withdraw from the public stage to my study.’¹⁰ So he continued his studies of the state and legal relations, in which Hegel was a leading authority, and in 1843 wrote the manuscript that was posthumously published as *A Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*. Having developed the conviction that civil society was the real foundation of the political state, he formulated, for the first time, the importance of the economic factor in social relations.

But it was only in Paris that Marx made a start on a ‘conscientious critical study of political economy’,¹¹ having received a crucial impetus from contradictions in law and politics that could not be solved within their own sphere and from the inability of either to furnish solutions to social problems. Engels’s ‘Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy’ – one of his two articles to appear in the first and only volume of the *Deutsch-französische Jahrbücher* [Franco-German Yearbooks] – also made a decisive impact on Marx at this time. From that point his studies, hitherto mainly philosophical, political and historical, turned to the new discipline that would become the fulcrum of his scientific concerns and mark out a new horizon he would never abandon.¹²

Under the influence of Moses Hess’s *Essence of Money* (1845) and his transposition of the concept of alienation from a speculative to a social-economic plane, Marx first concentrated on a critique of the economic mediation of money as an obstacle to the realization of the human essence. In a polemic against Bruno Bauer’s *On the Jewish Question* (1843), he considered the Jewish question to be a social problem that represented the philosophical and social-historical presupposition of capitalist civilization as a whole:

Selling is the practical aspect of alienation. Just as man, as long as he is in the grip of religion, is able to objectify his essential nature only by turning it into

⁹ See Karl Marx, ‘Proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly. Third Article. Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood’ and ‘Justification of the Correspondent from the Mosel’, in MECW, vol. 1, pp. 224–63 and pp. 332–58.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in MECW, vol. 29, p. 263.

¹¹ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in MECW, vol. 3, p. 231.

¹² Cf. Maximilien Rubel, ‘Introduction’, in Maximilien Rubel (ed.), *Karl Marx, Œuvres. Economie II*. Paris: Gallimard, 1968, pp. liv–lv.

something alien, something fantastic, so under the domination of egoistic need he can be active practically, and produce objects in practice, only by putting his products, and his activity, under the domination of an alien being, and bestowing the significance of an alien entity – money – on them. [...] Since in civil society the real nature of the Jew has been universally realised and secularised, civil society could not convince the Jew of the unreality of his religious nature, which is indeed only the ideal aspect of practical need. [...] Once society has succeeded in abolishing the empirical essence of Judaism-huckstering and its preconditions the Jew will have become impossible, because his consciousness no longer has an object, because the subjective basis of Judaism, practical need, has been humanised, and because the conflict between man's individual-sensuous existence and his species-existence has been abolished.¹³

The Jew was the metaphor and the historical vanguard for the relations it produced, a worldly figure that became synonymous with capitalism *tout court*.¹⁴

Immediately afterwards, Marx began massive reading in a new field of study, and wrote, both in his manuscripts and notebooks of excerpts, many critical comments that he compiled, as usual, from the reading material. The guiding thread of his work was the need to unveil and oppose the greatest mystification of political economy: the idea that its categories were valid at all times and in all places. Marx was deeply affected by this blindness and lack of historical sense on the part of the economists, who thereby tried to conceal and justify the inhumanity of the economic conditions of their time by presenting them as a fact of nature. In a comment on a text by Jean-Baptiste Say [1767–1832], he noted that ‘private property is a fact whose constitution does not concern political economy yet which is its foundation. [...] The whole of political economy is therefore based on a fact devoid of necessity’.¹⁵ Similar observations recur in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* where Marx emphasizes that ‘political economy starts with the fact of private property; it does not explain it to us.’ ‘The economist assumes in the form of a fact, of an event, what he is supposed to deduce’.¹⁶

¹³ Karl Marx, ‘On the Jewish Question’, in MECW, vol. 3, p. 174.

¹⁴ Cf. Walter Tuchscheerer, *Bevor ‘Das Kapital’ entstand*. Berlin: Dietz, 1968, p. 56.

¹⁵ Karl Marx, ‘Exzerpte aus Jean Baptiste Say [1767–1832]: *Traité d’économie politique*’, in MEGA², vol. IV/2, p. 316.

¹⁶ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pp. 270–1.

Political economy, then, takes the regime of private property, the associated mode of production and the corresponding economic categories as immutable for all eternity. The man of bourgeois society appears as if he were natural man. In short, 'when one speaks of private property, one thinks of dealing with something external to man.'¹⁷ Marx's rejection of this ontological switch could not have been clearer.

His deep and wide study of history had given him a first key to read the temporal evolution of social structures, and he had also taken over what he regarded as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's [1809–1865] best insights, including his critique of the idea of private property as a natural right.¹⁸ With these supports, Marx was able to grasp of the provisional character of history. The bourgeois economists presented laws of the capitalist mode of production as eternal laws of human society. Marx, by contrast, made his exclusive and distinctive object of study the specific relations of his time, 'the ruptured world of industry';¹⁹ he underlined its transitoriness as one stage produced by history, and set out to investigate the contradictions that capitalism generates, which are leading to its supersession.

This different way of understanding social relations had important consequences, chief of which were undoubtedly those concerning the concept of alienated labour (*entfremdete Arbeit*).²⁰ Unlike the economists, or Hegel himself, for whom it was a natural and immutable condition of society, Marx set out on the path that would lead him to reject the anthropological dimension of alienation in favour of a conception that rooted it historically in a certain structure of production and social relations: man's estrangement amid the conditions of industrial labour.

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, alienation is presented as the phenomenon through which the labour product confronts labour 'as something alien, as a power independent of the producer'. For Marx,

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 281.

¹⁸ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What is Property?* New York: Humboldt Publishing Company, 1890, p. 44f.

¹⁹ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 292.

²⁰ In Marx's writings, one finds the term *Entfremdung* ('estrangement') as well as *Entäusserung*. These had different meanings in Hegel, but Marx uses them synonymously. See Marcella D'Abbiere, *Alienazione in Hegel. Usi e significati di Entäusserung, Entfremdung, Veräusserung*. Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1970, pp. 25–7.

The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien.²¹

Alongside this general definition, Marx listed four ways in which the worker is alienated in bourgeois society: (1) from the product of his labour, which becomes ‘an alien object that has power over him’; (2) in his working activity, which he perceives as directed against himself, as something that ‘does not belong to him’;²² (3) from ‘man’s species-being’, which is transformed into ‘a being alien to him’; and (4) from other human beings, and in relation to their labour and the object of their labour.²³

For Marx, in contrast to Hegel, alienation was not coterminous with objectification as such, but rather with a particular phenomenon within a precise form of economy: that is, wage labour and the transformation of labour products into objects standing opposed to producers. The political difference between these two positions is enormous. Whereas Hegel presented alienation as an ontological manifestation of labour, Marx conceived it as characteristic of a particular, capitalist, epoch of production, and thought it would be possible to overcome it through ‘the emancipation of society from private property’.²⁴ He would make similar points in the notebooks containing extracts from James Mill’s [1773–1836] *Elements of Political Economy* (1821):

My work would be a free manifestation of life, hence an enjoyment of life. Presupposing private property, my work is an alienation of life, for I work in order to live, in order to obtain for myself the means of life. My work is not my life. Secondly, the specific nature of my individuality, therefore, would be affirmed in my labour, since the latter would be an affirmation of my individual life. Labour therefore would be true, active property. Presupposing private property, my individuality is alienated to such a degree that this activity is instead hateful to me, a torment, and rather the semblance of an

²¹ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in MECW, vol. 3, p. 272.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 274.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 277. For an account of Marx’s four-part typology of alienation see Bertell Ollman, *Alienation*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971, pp. 136–52.

²⁴ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 280.

activity. Hence, too, it is only a forced activity and one imposed on me only through an external fortuitous need, not through an inner, essential one.²⁵

So, even in these fragmentary and sometimes hesitant early writings, Marx always discussed alienation from a historical, not a natural, point of view.²⁶

The notes accompanying Marx's excerpts from James Mill highlight how 'political economy defines the estranged form of social intercourse [*die entfremdete Form des geselligen Verkehrs*] as the essential and original form corresponding to man's nature'. Far from being a constant condition of objectification, of the worker's production, alienated labour is for Marx the expression of the social character of labour within the limits of the present division of labour, which turns man into 'a machine tool [...] and transforms him into a spiritual and physical monster'.²⁷

The peculiarity of the individual, the execution of his necessary need, is affirmed in working activity of a need peculiar to himself. But 'this realization of labour appears as a derealization [*Entwirklichung*] for the worker'.²⁸ Labour could be human affirmation, free creative activity, but, 'presupposing private property, my individuality is alienated to such a degree that this activity is indeed hateful to me, a torment, and rather a semblance of an activity. Hence, too, it is only a forced activity [*erzwungene Thätigkeit*] and one imposed on me only through an external fortuitous need'.²⁹

Marx reached these conclusions by collecting what he considered to be the sound theories of economic science, criticizing their constitutive elements and inverting their results. This involved him in the most intense and unremitting effort.

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx also expounded his idea of communism. But since he had not yet deepened his study of

²⁵ Marx, 'Comments on James Mill, *Éléments d'économie politique*', in MECW, vol. 3, p. 228.

²⁶ When Marx began to write about economics again in the 1850s and in the 1860s, he more than once used the term 'alienation'. The way he used it recalled in many respects the analyses of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, although the studies conducted in between had allowed him to make them considerably more profound. The account of alienation in *Capital* and its preparatory manuscripts is enriched by a greater understanding of economic categories and by more rigorous social analysis. See Marcello Musto, 'Revisiting Marx's Concept of Alienation', in Marcello Musto (ed.), *Marx for Today*, pp. 108–14.

²⁷ Marx, 'Comments on James Mill, *Éléments d'économie politique*', in MECW, vol. 3, p. 217 and p. 220.

²⁸ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 272.

²⁹ Marx, 'Comments on James Mill, *Éléments d'économie politique*', in MECW, vol. 3 p. 228.

economics, and since his experience of politics had not yet matured, his idea of communism remained highly abstract. At some point, he described it as the ‘negation of the negation’, as a moment in the ‘Hegelian dialectic’, or ‘the positive expression of annulled private property’.³⁰ At others, taking inspiration from Ludwig Feuerbach [1804–1872], he wrote:

Communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man – the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species.³¹

Some passages are influenced by Hegel’s teleological philosophical of history: for example, ‘the entire movement of history [is] communism’s actual act of genesis’; communism is ‘the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution’.³²

The Parisian Marx was ravenous for reading material and devoted day and night to it. He was a man filled with enthusiasms and projects, who drew up work plans so huge that he could never have seen them through, and who studied every document relevant to the object of investigation; he was absorbed in the lightning advance of his knowledge and the shifting interests that for a time carried him towards new horizons, further resolutions and still more areas of research. This is proved by the statements of those who were in touch with him during that period. Ruge, for example, wrote in May 1844: ‘He reads a lot, works with uncommon intensity [...] but does not see anything through to the end, always leaves things halfway to plunge headlong into an endless sea of books; he works until it almost makes him ill, not going to bed night after night until three or four.’³³ The situation had not changed in August:

³⁰ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 294.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 297.

³³ Arnold Ruge to Ludwig Feuerbach, 15 May 1844, in Enzensberger (ed.), *Gespräche mit Marx und Engels*, vol. 1. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973, pp. 23–4.

If Marx does not kill himself with his intemperance, pride and quite desperate work, and if communist extravagance does not annul in him any sensitivity to the simplicity and nobility of form, something should be expected to come of his endless reading and even his dialectic without a conscience. [...] He always wants to write about the things he has just finished reading, but then he always starts reading and taking notes again. Sooner or later, however, I think he will succeed in completing a very long and abstruse work, in which he will pour forth all the material he has heaped together.³⁴

Absorbed by such vast interests, Marx planned the draft of a critique of Hegel's philosophy of law, embarked on studies of the French Revolution in order to write a history of the Convention, and mooted a critique of existing socialist and communist doctrines. Then, he threw himself like a madman into political economy, but – taken by the priority of criticizing Bauer and his followers in Germany – he interrupted this work in order to write his first finished book: *The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism: Against Bruno Bauer and Company* (1845). Yet the most prolific young man in the Hegelian Left had still published less than many of the others. There was something incredible about his meticulousness, as he refused 'to write a sentence if he was unable to prove it in ten different ways'.³⁵ Marx's belief that his information was insufficient and his judgements immature prevented him from publishing a large part of the work on which he embarked; it therefore remained in the form of outlines and fragments. His notes are thus extremely precious. They allow us to gauge the scope of his research; they contain some reflections of his own, and should be considered an integral part of his *oeuvre*. This is also true of the Parisian period, when his manuscripts and reading notes testify to the close and indissoluble link between what he wrote and the comments he made on the work of others.³⁶

³⁴ Arnold Ruge to Max Duncker [1811–1886], 29 August 1844, in Enzensberger (ed.), *Gespräche mit Marx und Engels*, vol. 1, p. 31.

³⁵ See Paul Lafargue, in Enzensberger (ed.), *Gespräche mit Marx und Engels*, p. 32.

³⁶ On this complex relationship, see David Ryazanov, 'Einleitung', in MEGA, vol. I/1.2, p. xix, which for the first time pointed out how difficult it is to establish a precise boundary between the simple books of excerpts and the notebooks that should be considered true preparatory work.

3. Manuscripts and notebooks of excerpts: The papers of 1844

Despite the incomplete and fragmentary character of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, nearly all readings of them have either ignored or treated as unimportant the philological problems they present.³⁷

It was further wrongly assumed that Marx wrote these texts only after he had read and compiled excerpts from the works of political economy,³⁸ whereas in reality the process of composition alternated among different groups of manuscripts, and the corresponding excerpts were spaced out through the whole of his Parisian period, from the articles for the *Deutsch-französische Jahrbücher* to *The Holy Family*.

Despite these evident problems of form, despite confusion following the publication of different versions and, above all, the knowledge that much of the second manuscript (the most important but scattered one) was missing from the set, none of the critical interpreters or compilers of new editions undertook a re-examination of the originals. Yet this was especially necessary for the text that weighed so heavily in debates among the various interpretations of Marx.

³⁷ Cf. Jürgen Rojahn, 'Marxismus – Marx – Geschichtswissenschaft. Der Fall der sog. "Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844"', *International Review of Social History*, vol. XXVIII, n. 1, 1983, p. 20. Moreover, they were first published in their entirety only in 1932 – in two separate editions. In the collection put together by the social democrat scholars Landshut and Mayer, entitled *Der historische Materialismus*, they appeared under the title *Nationalökonomie und Philosophie*, in Karl Marx, *Der historische Materialismus. Die Frühschriften* (eds) Siegfried Landshut and Jacob Peter Mayer. Leipzig: Alfred Kröner, 1932, pp. 283–375, while in the *Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe* they were *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*, in MEGA, vol. I/3, pp. 29–172. Not only the name but also the content varies between the two, and there are major differences in the order of the sections. The Landshut-Mayer edition, teeming with errors because of poor deciphering of the original manuscript, failed to include the first group of papers, the so-called First Manuscript, and misattributed directly to Marx a fourth manuscript that was actually a resumé of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Nevertheless, too little consideration has been paid to the fact that the editors of the first MEGA too, in choosing their name for the manuscripts, in placing the preface at the beginning – when in reality it is part of the third manuscript – and in organizing the whole set of papers in the way they did, made one think that Marx's intention had always been to write a critique of political economy and that everything had originally been divided into chapters. Cf. Jürgen Rojahn, 'The Emergence of a Theory: The Importance of Marx's Notebooks Exemplified by Those from 1844', *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 14 (2002), n. 4, p. 33. See also, Margaret Fay, 'The Influence of Adam Smith on Marx's Theory of Alienation', *Science & Society*, vol. 47 (1983), n. 2, pp. 129–51.

³⁸ David McLellan, for example, is guilty of this error in *Marx before Marxism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, pp. 210–11.

Written between May and August, the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* is not a work that develops in a systematic or prearranged manner. All the attributions to it of a settled direction – both those that detect the full completeness of Marx's thought and those that see a definite conception opposed to his scientific maturity³⁹ – are refuted by a careful philological examination. Not homogeneous or even closely interconnected between their parts, the manuscripts are an evident expression of a position in movement. Scrutiny of the nine notebooks that have come down to us, with more than 200 pages of excerpts and comments, shows us Marx's way of assimilating and using the reading material that fuelled them.⁴⁰

The Paris notebooks record the traces of Marx's encounter with political economy and the formative process of his earliest elaborations of economic theory. A comparison of them with his writings of the period, published or unpublished, decisively demonstrates the importance of his reading for the development of his ideas.⁴¹ A list of excerpts from political economists alone would include texts by Jean-Baptiste Say, Adam Smith [1732–1790], David Ricardo [1772–1832], James Mill, John Ramsay McCulloch [1789–1864], Guillaume Prevost [1751–1839], Antoine-Louis-Claude Destutt de Tracy [1754–1836], Eugène Buret [1810–1842], Pierre de Boisguillebert [1646–1714], John Law [1671–1729], and James Lauderdale [1759–1839].⁴² In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and Marx's articles and correspondence of the time, one also finds references to Proudhon, Wilhelm Schulz [1797–1860], Constantin Pecqueur [1801–1887], Charles Loudon [1801–1844], Jean Charles Léonard de Sismondi [1773–1842], Charles Ganihl [1758–1836], Michel Chevalier [1806–1879], Thomas Robert Malthus [1766–1834], Édouard de Pompery [1812–1895] and Jeremy Bentham [1748–1832].

³⁹ Although they in no way exhaust the never-ending debate on Marx's text, the reader is referred to two of the most important works that advance these respective positions. Landshut and Mayer were the first to read it as 'in a sense Marx's central work [...] the nodal point in his entire conceptual development', which 'in nuce already points ahead to *Capital*', Karl Marx, *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*, in MEGA, vol. I/3, pp. 29–172; while the second approach is present in Althusser's famous thesis of an 'epistemological break', Louis Althusser, *For Marx*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969, p. 33f. See also Marcello Musto, 'The myth of the "young Marx" in the interpretations of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*', *Critique*, vol. 43 (2015), n. 2, pp. 233–60.

⁴⁰ They are included in MEGA², vol. IV/2, pp. 279–579, and MEGA², vol. IV/3, pp. 31–110.

⁴¹ According to Rojahn, Marx's 'manuscripts of 1844 literally grew out of his exzerpte from that period, 'The Emergence of a Theory', p. 33.

⁴² During this period Marx still read the British economists in French translation.

Marx made his first excerpts from Say's *Treatise of Political Economy* (1803),⁴³ transcribing whole sections as he acquired his knowledge of the fundamentals of economics. The only note was added later, on the right side of the sheet in question, which was the place he usually kept for this purpose. His subsequent compilation from Adam Smith's *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776)⁴⁴ served a similar goal of familiarizing himself with basic economic concepts. In fact, although these are the most extensive excerpts, they contain virtually no comments. Yet Marx's thought stands out clearly from his montage of passages and, as it often happened elsewhere, from his way of setting alongside one another the divergent theses of several economists. The picture changes, however, in the case of Ricardo's *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817),⁴⁵ where the first observations of his own make their appearance, especially in relation to the concepts of value and price that were still conceived as perfectly identical. This equation of commodity value and price is located in Marx's initial conception, which conferred reality only on the exchange-value produced by competition and consigned natural price to the realm of abstraction. As these studies advanced, his critical notes were no longer sporadic but punctuated his summaries and expanded with his knowledge as he moved from author to author. There were individual sentences, then longer remarks, and finally – apropos of James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy* – a sustained critical comment on the mediation of money as representing the complete domination of things over human beings; here, the relationship between excerpts and Marx's own text is completely reversed, so that it is the former that are spaced out through the latter.⁴⁶

To underline once more the importance of the excerpts, it should be pointed out just how useful these notes were to him both when he made them and subsequently. In 1844, some of them were published in *Vorwärts!* [Forward!],

⁴³ Karl Marx, 'Exzerpte aus Jean Baptiste Say: *Traité d'économie politique*', in MEGA², vol. IV/2, pp. 301–27.

⁴⁴ Karl Marx, 'Exzerpte aus Adam Smith: *Recherches sur la nature et les causes de la richesse des nations*', in MEGA², vol. IV/2, pp. 332–86.

⁴⁵ Karl Marx, 'Exzerpte aus David Ricardo: *Des principes de l'économie politique et de l'impôt*', in MEGA², vol. IV/2, pp. 392–427.

⁴⁶ Karl Marx, 'Exzerpte aus James Mill: *Éléments d'économie politique*', in MEGA², vol. IV/2, pp. 428–70.

the bi-weekly of German émigrés in Paris, as a contribution to the intellectual education of its readers.⁴⁷

To conclude, Marx developed his ideas both in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and in the notebooks of excerpts from his reading. The manuscripts are filled with quotations, the first being almost a straightforward collection, and the notebooks of compilations, though largely centred on the texts he was reading at the time, are accompanied with his comments. The contents of both, the formal division of the sheets into columns, the pagination, and the time of their composition confirm that the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* is not a work that stands by itself but is part of Marx's critical production, which then consisted of excerpts from texts he was studying, critical reflections on that material, and drafts that he put on paper, either in one go or in a more thought-out form. To separate these manuscripts from the rest, to extrapolate them from their context, may therefore lead to errors of interpretation.

Only these notes taken as a whole, together with a historical reconstruction of how they ripened in Marx's mind, really show the itinerary and the complexity of his thought during the highly intense year of work in Paris.⁴⁸

4. From critical philosophy to revolutionary praxis

The setting in which Marx's ideas developed, and the influence they exercised at a theoretical and practical level merit a last brief remark. Those were times of profound economic and social transformation, and especially of a huge increase in the numbers of the proletariat. With his discovery of the proletariat, Marx was able to break up into class terms the Hegelian concept of civil society. He also gained an awareness that the proletariat was a new class, different from 'the poor', since its poverty derived from its conditions of work. The task was to

⁴⁷ Jacques Grandjonc, *Marx et les communistes allemands à Paris 1844*. Paris: Maspero, 1974, pp. 61–2. Above all, given that Marx was in the habit of re-reading his notes at a distance of time, he was able to use these exhaustive materials in the *Grundrisse*, in *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63*, and in *Capital*, Volume I.

⁴⁸ Cf. Rojahn, 'The Emergence of a Theory: The Importance of Marx's Notebooks Exemplified by Those from 1844', p. 45.

demonstrate one of the main contradictions of bourgeois society: ‘The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size.’⁴⁹

The revolt of the Silesian weavers in June 1844 afforded Marx a last opportunity to develop his thinking. In the ‘Critical Marginal Notes on the Article “The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian” (1844)’, published in *Vorwärts!*, he used a critique of Ruge, and of a previous article of his that had seen the revolt as lacking in political spirit, to take his distance from Hegel’s conception that made the state the only representative of the general interest and relegated any movement of civil society to the private sphere of partial interests.⁵⁰ For Marx, on the contrary, ‘a social revolution is found to have the point of view of the whole’,⁵¹ and under the stimulus of the Silesian events, with their considerable and explicitly revolutionary character, he underlined the gross error of those who sought the root of social ills ‘not in the essential nature of the state but in a definite state form, which they wish to replace by a different state form.’⁵²

More generally, Marx considered that those who advocated the reform of society (the objective of socialist doctrines at the time), wage equality and a reorganization of work within the capitalist system were still prisoners of the assumptions they combatted (Proudhon) or, above all, did not understand the true relationship between private property and alienated labour. For, ‘though private property appears to be the reason, the cause of alienated labour [*entäusserten Arbeit*], it is rather its consequence’; ‘private property is the product, the result, the necessary consequence of alienated labour.’⁵³ In opposition to the theories of the socialists, Marx proposed a radical transformation of the economic system – a project for which it is ‘capital which is to be annulled “as such”’.⁵⁴

The working out of his own conception led him into constant comparisons between the ideas around him and the results of his ongoing studies. The speed

⁴⁹ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pp. 271–2.

⁵⁰ Michael Löwy, *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx*. Boston: Brill, 2003, pp. 29–30.

⁵¹ Karl Marx, ‘Critical Marginal Notes on the Article “The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian”’, in MECW, vol. 3, p. 205.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁵³ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 279.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

with which he was maturing made this a necessity. The same fate lay in store for the Hegelian Left. Indeed, his judgements of its main exponents were the most severe, since they also represented self-criticism of his own past. The *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* [General Literary Paper], the monthly edited by Bauer, peremptorily declared from its pages: ‘The critic refrains from involving himself in the sufferings or joys of society [...] he dissects majestically in solitude.’⁵⁵ For Marx, by contrast, ‘criticism is no passion of the head, [...] it is not a lancet, it is a weapon. Its object is its enemy, which it wants not to refute but to exterminate. [...] Criticism appears no longer as an end in itself, but only as a means.’⁵⁶ Against the solipsism of ‘critical criticism’,⁵⁷ which started from an abstract conviction that to recognize estrangement was already to overcome it, Marx had clearly realized that ‘material force must be overthrown by material force’, and that social being could be changed only by means of human practice. To discover and become conscious of man’s alienated condition meant at the same time to work for its actual elimination. Between a philosophy closed in speculative isolation, which produces only sterile battles of concepts, and the criticism of philosophy, which is ‘criticism in hand-to-hand combat’,⁵⁸ there was a difference that could scarcely be greater. It was the gulf separating the quest for free self-consciousness from the quest for free labour.

Marx’s thought underwent a decisive evolution during his year in Paris. He was now certain that the transformation of the world was a practical question, ‘which philosophy could not solve precisely because it conceived this problem as merely a theoretical one.’⁵⁹ He bid farewell forever to philosophy that had not reached this awareness and achieved its necessary conversion into philosophy of praxis. From now on, his own analysis took its starting point not from the category of alienated labour but from the reality of the workers’

⁵⁵ Bruno Bauer (ed.), *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*, vol. 6. Charlottenburg: Verlag von Egbert Bauer, 1844, p. 32.

⁵⁶ Karl Marx, ‘Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law. Introduction’, in MECW, vol. 3, p. 177.

⁵⁷ Marx used the epithet in *The Holy Family* to designate and deride Bruno Bauer and other young Hegelians working with the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*.

⁵⁸ Marx, ‘Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law. Introduction’, p. 178.

⁵⁹ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 302.

wretched existence. His conclusions were not speculative but directed towards revolutionary action.⁶⁰

His conception of politics itself changed profoundly. Without adopting any of the narrow socialist or communist doctrines of the time, indeed while taking his distance from them, he achieved a full awareness that economic relations weave the connecting web of society and that 'religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc. are only particular modes of production, and fall under its general law.'⁶¹ The state has here lost the primary position it had in Hegel's political philosophy; absorbed into society, it is conceived as a sphere determined by, rather than determining, relations among human beings. According to Marx, 'only political superstition still imagines today that civil life must be held together by the state, whereas in reality, on the contrary, the state is held together by civil life.'⁶²

Marx's conceptual framework also changed fundamentally with regard to the revolutionary subject. From an initial reference to 'suffering humanity',⁶³ he moved to a specific identification of the proletariat, considering it first as an abstract concept based on dialectical antitheses – the 'passive element'⁶⁴ of theory – then, after his first social-economic analysis, as the active element in its own liberation, the only class endowed with revolutionary potential in the capitalist social order.

So, a somewhat vague critique of the political mediation of the state and the economic mediation of money, conceived as obstacles to the realization of a Feuerbachian common human essence, gave way to the critique of a historical relation in which material production begins to appear as the basis for any analysis and transformation of the present: 'the whole of human servitude [*menschliche Knechtschaft*] is involved in the relation of the worker to production, and all relations of servitude are but modifications and consequences of this relation.'⁶⁵ What Marx proposed is no longer a generic

⁶⁰ Ernest Mandel, *The Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx*. London: New Left Books, 1971, p. 210.

⁶¹ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 297.

⁶² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family*, in MECW, vol. 4, p. 121.

⁶³ Karl Marx, 'Letters from Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher', in MECW, vol. 3, p. 141.

⁶⁴ Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction', p. 183.

⁶⁵ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 280.

demand for emancipation but a radical transformation of the real process of production.

As he came to these conclusions, Marx was planning various other investigations. He continued with the studies and excerpts of political economy, outlined a critique of Max Stirner [1806–1856], drew up a sketch for a work on the state,⁶⁶ wrote a series of notes on Hegel, and prepared to draft a critique of the German economist Friedrich List [1789–1846] that he went on to complete shortly afterwards.⁶⁷

Some of Marx's visitors attested to his intense work during this period. The radical journalist Heinrich Bürgers [1820–1878] said of him in late 1844: 'Marx had begun profound investigations in the field of political economy and nurtured the project of writing a critical work that would refound economic science.'⁶⁸ Engels, too, who first met Marx in the summer of 1844 and forged a friendship and theoretical-political solidarity with him that would last the rest of their lives, was driven by hopes of an imminent social upheaval to urge Marx in the first letter of their forty-year correspondence to publish as quickly as possible: 'See to it that the material you've collected is soon launched into the world. It's high time, heaven knows!'⁶⁹ Marx's sense of the inadequacy of his knowledge held him back from completing and publishing the manuscripts. But he did write, together with Engels,⁷⁰ *The Holy Family*, a polemical broadside against Bauer and other figures in the Left Hegelian movement from which Marx had distanced himself in 1842, on grounds that it operated in speculative isolation and was geared exclusively to sterile conceptual battles.

In some parts of the text, Marx and Engels also took up the theme of alienation. First of all, they argued that:

The propertied class and the class of the proletariat present the same human self-estrangement. But the former class feels at ease and strengthened in this self-estrangement, it recognises estrangement as its own power and has in it the semblance of a human existence. The latter feels annihilated in

⁶⁶ Karl Marx, 'Draft Plan for a Work on the Modern State', in MECW, vol. 4, p. 666.

⁶⁷ Karl Marx, 'Draft of an Article on Friedrich List's Book *Das Nationale System der Politischen Oekonomie*', in MECW, vol. 4, pp. 265–94.

⁶⁸ Heinrich Bürgers, in Enzensberger (ed.), *Gespräche mit Marx und Engels*, p. 46.

⁶⁹ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, beginning of October 1844, in MECW, vol. 38, p. 6.

⁷⁰ In reality, Engels contributed only ten or so pages to the text.

estrangement; it sees in it its own powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence.⁷¹

Further on, in a clear polemic against the abstractions of Bauer and his philosophical circle, they added: ‘But workers [...] in the Manchester or Lyons workshops [...] know that property, capital, money, wage labour and the like are no ideal figments of the brain but very practical, very objective products of their self-estrangement and that therefore they must be abolished in a practical, objective way.’⁷² Their struggle could not take place on the terrain of ideas, but only on that of real conflict:

But as those practical self-alienations of the mass exist in the real world in an outward way, the mass must fight them in an outward way. It must by no means hold these products of its self-alienation for mere ideal fantasies, mere alienations of self-consciousness, and must not wish to abolish material estrangement by purely inward spiritual action.⁷³

While working on *The Holy Family*, Engels urged his friend in a letter in early 1845 to complete the other work in preparation:

Do try and finish your political economy book, even if there’s much in it that you yourself are still dissatisfied with, it doesn’t really matter; minds are ripe and we must strike while the iron is hot. [...] now it is high time. So try and finish before April, do as I do, set a date by which you will definitely have finished, and make sure it gets into print quickly.⁷⁴

But these entreaties were of little avail. Marx still felt the need to continue his studies before trying to give a finished form to the drafts he had written. In any event, he was sustained by the conviction that he would soon be able to publish, and on 1 February 1845 – after he had been ordered to leave France because of his collaboration with the German-language workers’ bi-weekly *Vorwärts!* – he signed a contract with the Darmstadt publisher Carl Friedrich Julius Leske [1784–1886] for a two-volume work to be entitled ‘Critique of Politics and Political Economy’.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, in MECW, vol. 4, p. 36.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁷⁴ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 20 January 1845, in MECW, vol. 38, pp. 17–18.

⁷⁵ The contract is published in MECW, vol. 4, p. 675.

The *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and the notebooks of excerpts and notes marked the beginning of Marx's critical study of this new discipline. They were filled with theoretical elements derived from predecessors and contemporaries. None of the outlines or works from this period can be classified under a single discipline: there are no texts that are purely philosophical, essentially economic or solely political. Marx had the capacity to combine experiences of Parisian proletarians with studies of the French Revolution, readings of Smith with the insights of Proudhon, the Silesian weavers' revolt with a critique of Hegel's conception of the state, and Buret's analyses of poverty with communism. His ideas, and particularly the economic observations that began to develop, were not the fruit of a sudden fulmination but the result of intense study.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ The Marxist-Leninist hagiography that held sway for so long used to attribute an impossible immediacy and an instrumental final goal to Marx's thought, thereby presenting a distorted and highly impoverished account of his path to knowledge. The aim should instead be to reconstruct the genesis, the intellectual debts and the theoretical achievements of Marx's labours, and to highlight the complexity and richness of his work.

Part Two

The Critique of Political Economy

Waiting for the Economic Crisis

1. Continuing the study of economics

In February 1845, Marx moved to Brussels, where he was allowed residence on condition that he ‘did not publish anything on current politics’,¹ and where he remained until March 1848 with his wife Jenny von Westphalen and their first daughter Jenny [1844–1883] who was born in Paris a few months before. During these three years, and particularly in 1845, Marx pressed on fruitfully with his studies of political economy.

In March 1845, he worked on a critique – which he never managed to complete – of the German economist Friedrich List’s book on the ‘national system of political economy’.² Between February and July, moreover, he filled six notebooks with extracts, the so-called *Brussels Notebooks*, which mainly concern the basic concepts of political economy, with special attention to Jean Charles Léonard de Sismondi’s *Studies on Political Economy* (1837), Henri Storch’s [1766–1835] *Course of Political Economy* (1823) and Pellegrino Rossi’s [1787–1848] *Course of Political Economy* (1843). At the same time, Marx delved into questions associated with machinery and large-scale industry, copying out a number of pages from *Economy of Machinery and Manufacturers* (1833) by Charles Babbage [1791–1871].³ He was also planning with Engels to

¹ Karl Marx, ‘Marx’s Undertaking Not to Publish Anything in Belgium on Current Politics’, in MECW, vol. 4, p. 677. On the period in Brussels, see Bert Andreas, *Marx’ Verhaftung und Ausweisung Brüssel Februar/März 1848*. Trier: Schriften aus dem Karl-Marx-Haus, 1978; and Edward de Maesschalck, *Marx in Brussel (1845–1848)*. Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2005.

² Karl Marx, ‘Draft of an Article on Friedrich List’s Book *Das Nationale System der Politischen Oekonomie*’, in MECW, vol. 4, pp. 265–93.

³ All these extracts may be found in Karl Marx, *Exzerpte und Notizen. Sommer 1844 bis Anfang 1847*, MEGA², vol. IV/3; see Paresh Chattopadhyay, ‘Marx’s Notebooks of 1844–1847’, in *Marx’s Associated Mode of Production: A Critique of Marxism*. New York: Palgrave, 2016, pp. 31–58.

organize the German translation of a ‘library of the best foreign socialist writers’⁴ but, being short of time and unable to secure funding from a publisher, the two had to abandon the project and concentrated instead on their own work.

Marx spent July and August in Manchester examining the vast English-language economic literature – an essential task for the book he had in mind. He compiled another nine books of extracts, the *Manchester Notebooks*, and again the ones that featured most were manuals of political economy and books on economic history, such as *Lectures on the Elements of Political Economy* (1831) by Thomas Cooper [1759–1839], *History of Prices and of the State of Circulation* (1838) by Thomas Tooke [1774–1858], *The Literature of Political Economy* (1845) by John Ramsay McCulloch and *Essays on Some Unsettled Problems of Political Economy* (1844) by John Stuart Mill [1806–1873].⁵ Marx also took great interest in social questions and gathered extracts from some of the main volumes of English-language socialist literature, particularly *Labour’s Wrongs and Labour’s Remedy* (1839) by John Francis Bray [1809–1897] and *Essay on the Formation of Human Character and Book of the New Moral World* (1840–44) by Robert Owen [1771–1858].⁶ Similar arguments were put forward in Friedrich Engels’s first work, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, which was actually published in June 1845.

In the Belgian capital, in addition to his economic studies, Marx worked on another project that he considered necessary, given the political circumstances. In November 1845, he conceived the idea of writing, along with Engels, Joseph Weydemeyer [1818–1866] and Moses Hess, a ‘critique of modern German philosophy as expounded by its representatives Ludwig Feuerbach,

⁴ See Karl Marx, ‘Plan of the “Library of the Best Foreign Socialist Writers”’, in MECW, vol. 4, p. 667. The authors planned for inclusion in this series were: Étienne-Gabriel Morelly, [1717–1778] Gabriel Bonnot de Mably [1709–1789], François-Noël Babeuf [1760–1797], Filippo Buonarroti [1761–1837], Charles Fourier [1772–1837], Victor Considérant [1802–1893], Etienne Cabet [1788–1856], Jacques-René Hébert [1757–1794], Pierre Leroux [1797–1871], Théophile Leclerc [1771–1793], Robert Owen [1771–1858], Jeremy Bentham [1748–1832], William Godwin [1756–1836], Claude-Adrien Helvétius [1715–1771], Saint-Simon [1760–1825], Théodore Dézamy [1808–1850], Jules Gay [1809–1883] and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.

⁵ These extracts are contained in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Exzerpte und Notizen. Juli bis August 1845*, in MEGA², vol. IV/4, which also includes the first *Manchester Notebooks*. It was during this period that Marx began to read directly in English.

⁶ These extracts, forming part of the *Manchester Notebooks* VI–IX, have been published recently in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Exzerpte und Notizen. August 1845 bis Dezember 1850*, in MEGA², vol. IV/5.

Bruno Bauer, and Max Stirner, and of *German socialism* as expounded by its various prophets.⁷ The resulting text, posthumously published under the title *The German Ideology*, had a dual aim: to combat the latest forms of neo-Hegelianism in Germany (Stirner's *The Ego and His Own* had come out in October 1844), and then, as Marx wrote to the publisher Carl Wilhelm Julius Leske, 'to prepare the public for the viewpoint adopted in my *Economy*, which is diametrically opposed to German scholarship past and present'.⁸ This text, on which he worked right up to June 1846, was never completed, but it helped him to elaborate more clearly than before, though still not in a definitive form, what Engels defined for the wider public forty years later as 'the materialist conception of history'.⁹

To track the progress of the 'Economy' in 1846, it is again necessary to look at Marx's letters to Leske. In August, he informed the publisher that 'the all but completed manuscript of the first volume' had been available 'for so long', but that he would not 'have it published without revising it yet again, both as regards matter and style. It goes without saying that a writer who works continuously cannot, at the end of 6 months, publish word for word what he wrote 6 months earlier.' Nevertheless, he undertook to wrap up the book in the near future: 'The revised version of the first volume will be ready for publication at the end of November. The second volume, of a more historical nature, will be able to follow soon after it'.¹⁰ But these reports did not correspond to the real state of his labours, since none of his manuscripts could have been defined as 'all but completed'; when the publisher had still not received even one by the beginning of 1847, he decided to revoke the contract.

These constant delays should not be attributed to any lack of zeal on Marx's part. He never gave up political activity during those years, and in the spring of 1846, he promoted the work of the 'Communist Correspondence Committee', whose mission was to organize a link-up among the various labour leagues in Europe. Yet, theoretical work always remained his priority, as may be seen from

⁷ Karl Marx, 'Declaration against Karl Grün', in MECW, vol. 6, p. 73.

⁸ Karl Marx to Carl Wilhelm Julius Leske, 1 August 1846, in MECW, vol. 38, p. 50.

⁹ Friedrich Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, in MECW, vol. 26, p. 519. In fact, Engels already used this expression in 1859, in his review of Marx's book *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, but the article had no resonance and the term began to circulate only after the publication of *Ludwig Feuerbach*.

¹⁰ Karl Marx to Carl Wilhelm Julius Leske, 1 August 1846, in MECW, vol. 38, p. 51.

the testimony of those who regularly visited him. The German poet Georg Weerth [1822–1856], for instance, wrote in November 1846:

Marx is regarded in a sense as the head of the communist party. Many self-styled communists and socialists would be astonished, however, if they knew just how much this man actually does. Marx works day and night to clear the minds of the workers of America, France, Germany, etc. of the peculiar systems that obscure them. [...] He works like a madman on his history of political economy. For many years this man has not slept more than four hours a night.¹¹

Marx's own study notes and published writings are further proof of his diligence. Between autumn 1846 and September 1847 he filled three large books of extracts, mainly relating to economic history, from the *Historical Account of the Trade, Industry and Agriculture of the Main Contemporary Trading Nations* (1830) by Gustav von Gülich [1791–1847], one of the leading German economists of the day.¹² In December 1846, having read Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's *System of Economic Contradictions or Philosophy of Poetry* (1846) and found it 'very poor',¹³ Marx decided to write a critique. He did this directly in French, so that his opponent – who did not read German – would be able to understand it. The text was completed in April 1847 and published in July as *Poverty of Philosophy: Reply to Mr Proudhon's Philosophy of Poverty*. It was Marx's first published writing on political economy, which set out his ideas on the theory of value, the proper methodological approach to an understanding of social reality, and the historically transient character of modes of production.

The failure to complete the planned book – a critique of political economy – was not therefore due to lack of application on Marx's part, but rather to the difficulty of the task he had taken on. The subject matter for critical examination was so vast that it would take many more years to address it with his characteristic seriousness and critical conscience. In the late 1840s, even

¹¹ Georg Weerth, in Hans Magnus Enzensberger (ed.), *Gespräche mit Marx und Engels*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973, pp. 68–9.

¹² These extracts constitute the volume Karl Marx, *Exzerpte und Notizen. September 1846 bis Dezember 1847*, MEGA², vol. IV/6.

¹³ Marx to Pavel Vasilyevich Annenkov, 28 December 1846, in MECW, vol. 38, p. 95. On Proudhon's thought, see the two volumes by Pierre Ansart, *Proudhon*. Paris: PGF – Livre de poche, 1984, and *La sociologie de Proudhon*. Paris: PUF, 1967; and Georges Gurvitch, *Proudhon, Sa vie, son oeuvre*. Paris: PUF, 1965.

though he was not aware of it, Marx was still only at the beginning of his exertions.

2. In the solitude of exile

As the social ferment intensified in the second half of 1847, Marx's political involvement became more time-consuming.¹⁴ In June, the Communist League, an association of German workers and artisans with international branches, was founded in London; in August Marx and Engels established a German Workers' Association in Brussels; and in November Marx became vice-president of the Brussels Democratic Association, which incorporated a revolutionary wing as well as a more moderate democratic component. At the end of the year, the Communist League gave Marx and Engels the job of writing a political programme, and shortly afterwards, in February 1848, this was sent to press as the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Its opening words – 'A spectre is haunting Europe, the spectre of communism' – were destined to become famous throughout the world. So too was one of its essential theses: 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles'.¹⁵

The publication of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* could not have been more timely.¹⁶ Immediately afterwards, a revolutionary movement of unprecedented scope and intensity plunged the political and social order of continental Europe into crisis. The governments in place took all possible counter-measures to put an end to the insurrections, and, in March 1848, Marx was expelled from Belgium to France, where a republic had just been proclaimed. He now naturally set aside his studies of political economy and took up journalistic activity in support of the revolution, helping to chart a recommended political course. In April, he moved to the Rhineland, economically the most developed and politically the most liberal region in Germany, and in June he began editing the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* [New

¹⁴ See Herwig Förder, *Marx und Engels am Vorabend der Revolution*. Berlin: Akademie, 1960.

¹⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in MECW, vol. 6, pp. 481–2.

¹⁶ It was only from the 1870s, however, that this text had a mass circulation. See Bert Andréas, *Le Manifeste Communiste de Marx et Engels*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 1963.

Rhenish Newspaper] that had meanwhile been founded in Cologne. From the newspaper columns he carried out an intense activity of agitation, supporting the causes of the insurgents and urging the proletariat to promote 'the social and republican revolution'.¹⁷

Although his own articles were mostly chronicles of political events, in April 1849, he published a series of editorials on the critique of political economy, since he thought that the time had come 'to deal more closely with the relations themselves on which the existence of the bourgeoisie and its class rule, as well as the slavery of the workers, are founded'.¹⁸ Five articles based on lectures he had given in December 1847 to the German Workers' Association in Brussels appeared under the title *Wage Labour and Capital*, in which Marx presented to the public, more extensively than in the past and in a language as intelligible as possible to workers, his conception of how wage labour was exploited by capital.

The revolutionary movement that rose up throughout Europe in 1848 was however defeated within a short space of time. Among the reasons for the authoritarian conservative victory were: the recovery of the economy; the weakness of the working class, which in some countries scarcely had an organized structure; and the withdrawal of the middle classes support for reforms, as they drew closer to the aristocracy in order to prevent a lurch towards excessive radicalism. All this allowed reactionary political forces to regain a firm grip on the reins of government.

After a period of intense political activity, in May 1848 Marx received an expulsion order from Prussia too and set off again for France. But when the revolution was defeated in Paris, the authorities ordered him to move to Morbihan, then a desolate, malaria-infested region of Brittany. Faced with this 'veiled attempt on my life', he decided to leave France for London, where he thought that there was 'a positive prospect of being able to start a German newspaper'.¹⁹ He would remain in England, an exile and stateless person, for the rest of his life, but European reaction could not have confined him in a better place to write his critique of political economy. At that time, London was

¹⁷ Karl Marx, 'The Bourgeoisie and the Counter-Revolution', in MECW, vol. 8, p. 178.

¹⁸ Karl Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital*, in MECW, vol. 9, p. 198.

¹⁹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 23 August 1849, in MECW, vol. 38, p. 213.

the world's leading economic and financial centre, the 'demiurge of the bourgeois cosmos',²⁰ and therefore the most favourable location from which to observe the latest economic developments and to resume his studies of capitalist society.

Marx reached England in summer 1849 at the age of thirty-one. His life in the capital city was far from tranquil. The Marx family, numbering six with the birth of Laura [1845–1911] in 1845, Edgar [1847–1855] in 1847, and Guido [1849–1850] soon after their arrival in 1849, plus their loyal maid Helene Demuth [1820–1890], who was an integral part of the family, had to live for a long time in great poverty in Soho, one of London's poorest and most run-down districts. In addition to family problems, Marx was involved in a relief committee for German émigrés, which he sponsored through the Communist League, and whose mission was to assist the numerous political refugees in London.

Despite the adverse conditions, Marx managed to achieve his aim of starting a new publishing venture. In March 1850, he ran the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung. Politisch-ökonomische Revue* [New Rhenish Newspaper: Review of Political Economy], a monthly that he planned as the locus for 'comprehensive and scientific investigation of the economic conditions which form the foundation of the whole political movement'. He believed that 'a time of apparent calm such as the present must be employed precisely for the purpose of elucidating the period of revolution just experienced, the character of the conflicting parties, and the social conditions which determine the existence and the struggle of these parties.'²¹

Marx was convinced, wrongly, that the situation would prove to be a brief interlude between the revolution concluded shortly before and another one lying just ahead. In December 1849, he wrote to his friend Weydemeyer: 'I have little doubt that by the time three, or maybe two, monthly issues [of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*] have appeared, a world conflagration will intervene and the opportunity of temporarily finishing with political economy will be gone.' A 'mighty industrial, agricultural and commercial crisis' was surely

²⁰ Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850*, in MECW, vol. 10, p. 134.

²¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Announcement of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung. Politisch-ökonomische Revue*', in MECW, vol. 10, p. 5.

imminent,²² and he took it for granted that a new revolutionary movement would emerge – though only after the outbreak of the crisis, since industrial and commercial prosperity weakened the resolve of the proletarian masses. Subsequently, in *The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850*, which appeared as a series of articles in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, he asserted that ‘a real revolution [...] is only possible in periods when [...] the modern forces of production and the bourgeois forms of production come in collision with each other. [...] A new revolution is possible only in consequence of a new crisis. It is, however, just as certain as this crisis.’²³ Marx did not change his view even as economic prosperity began to spread, and in the first (January-February) issue of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, he wrote that the upturn would not last long because the markets of the East Indies were ‘already almost saturated’ and those of North and South America and Australia would soon be, too. Hence:

with the first news of this glut ‘panic’ will break out simultaneously in speculation and production simultaneously – perhaps as soon as towards the end of spring, in July or August at the latest. This crisis, however, since it is bound to coincide with great collisions on the Continent, will bring forth results quite different from those of all previous crises. Whereas every crisis hitherto has been the signal for a new advance, a new victory of the industrial bourgeoisie over landed property and the finance bourgeoisie, this crisis will mark the beginning of the modern English revolution.²⁴

In the next issue, too, dated March-April 1850, Marx argued that the positive economic conjuncture represented no more than a temporary improvement, while overproduction and the excesses of speculation in the state railways sector were bringing on a crisis whose effects would be:

more significant than those of any crisis hitherto. It coincides with the agricultural crisis [...]. This double crisis in England is being hastened and extended, and made more inflammable by the simultaneously impending convulsions on the Continent; and the continental revolutions will assume an incomparably more pronounced socialist character through the recoil of the English crisis on the world market.²⁵

²² Karl Marx to Joseph Weydemeyer, 19 December 1849, in MECW, vol. 38, p. 220.

²³ Marx, *The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850*, p. 135.

²⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘Review: January–February 1850’, in MECW, vol. 10, pp. 264–5.

²⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘Review: March–April 1850’, in MECW, vol. 10, p. 340.

Marx's scenario, then, was very optimistic for the cause of the workers' movement and took in both the European and the North American markets. In his view, 'following the entry of America into the recession brought about by overproduction, we may expect the crisis to develop rather more rapidly in the coming month than hitherto'. His conclusion was therefore enthusiastic: 'The coincidence of trade crisis and revolution [...] is becoming more and more certain. That the destiny be fulfilled!'²⁶

During the summer, Marx deepened his economic analysis begun before 1848, and in the May-October 1850 issue of the review – the last before lack of funds and Prussian police harassment forced its closure – he reached the important conclusion that 'the commercial crisis contributed infinitely more to the revolutions of 1848 than the revolution to the commercial crisis.'²⁷ From now on, economic crisis acquired fundamental importance in his thought. Moreover, in analysing the processes of rampant speculation and overproduction, he ventured to predict that, 'if the new cycle of industrial development which began in 1848 follows the same course as that of 1843–47, the crisis would break out in 1852'. The future crisis, he stressed, would also erupt in the countryside, and 'for the first time the industrial and commercial crisis [would] coincide with a crisis in agriculture.'²⁸

Marx's forecasts over this period of more than a year proved to be mistaken. Yet, even at moments when he was most convinced that a revolutionary wave was imminent, his ideas were very different from those of other European political leaders exiled in London. Although he was wrong about how the economic situation would shape up, he considered it indispensable to study the current state of economic and political relations for the purposes of political activity. By contrast, most of the democratic and communist leaders of the time, whom he characterized as 'alchemists of the revolution', thought that the only prerequisite for a victorious revolution was 'adequate preparation of their conspiracy.'²⁹ One example of this was the manifesto 'To the Nations', issued by the 'European Democratic Central Committee', which Giuseppe

²⁶ Ibid., p. 341.

²⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Review: May–October 1850', in MECW, vol. 10, p. 497.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 503.

²⁹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Reviews from the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung Revue* No. 4', in MECW, vol. 10, p. 318.

Mazzini [1805–1872], Alexandre Ledru-Rollin [1807–1874] and Arnold Ruge had founded in London in 1850. According to Marx, this group were implying ‘that the revolution failed because of the ambition and jealousy of the individual leaders and the mutually hostile views of the various popular educators’. Also ‘stupefying’ was the way in which these leaders conceived of ‘social organization’: ‘a mass gathering in the streets, a riot, a hand-clasp, and it’s all over. In their view indeed revolution consists merely in the overthrow of the existing government; once this aim has been achieved, “the victory” has been won.’³⁰

Unlike those who expected another revolution to appear out of the blue, by the autumn of 1850 Marx was convinced that one could not ripen without a new world economic crisis.³¹ From then on, he distanced himself from false hopes in an imminent revolution³² and lived ‘in complete retirement.’³³ As Wilhelm Pieper [1826–1869], a member of the Communist League, put it in January 1851: ‘Marx leads a very retired life, his only friends being Mill and Loyd, and whenever one goes to see him one is welcomed with economic categories in lieu of greetings.’³⁴ In the following years, Marx did indeed see very few friends in London, and he kept in close touch only with Engels, who had meanwhile settled in Manchester. In February 1851, Marx wrote to Engels: ‘I am greatly pleased by the public, authentic isolation in which we two, you and I, now find ourselves. It is wholly in accord with our attitude and our principles.’³⁵ Engels, for his part, replied: ‘This is the position we can and must

³⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘Review: May–October 1850’, pp. 529–30.

³¹ See Engels’s introduction to the 1895 edition of Marx’s *The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850*: ‘Whereas in the first three articles, which appeared in the January, February and March issues of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, there was still the expectation of an early fresh upsurge of revolutionary vigour, the historical review written by Marx and myself for the last issue, a double one (May to October), breaks with these illusions once and for all, in MECW, vol. 27, pp. 507–8. Even more revealing are the minutes of the meeting of the Central Authority of the Communist League on 15 September 1850, which record Marx as saying: ‘The revolution is seen [by the German communists August Willich and Karl Schapper] not as the product of realities of the situation but as the result of an effort of will. Whereas we say to the workers: You have 15, 20, 50 years of civil war to go through in order to alter the situation and to train yourselves for the exercise of power, it is said: We must take power at once, or else we may as well take to our beds’, in MECW, vol. 10, p. 626.

³² ‘The vulgar democrats expected sparks to fly again any day; we declared as early as autumn 1850 that at least the first chapter of the revolutionary period was closed and that nothing was to be expected until the outbreak of a new world economic crisis. For which reason we were excommunicated, as traitors to the revolution, by the very people who later, almost without exception, made their peace with Bismarck’, Engels, ‘Introduction to Karl Marx’s *The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850*’, p. 510.

³³ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 11 February 1851, in MECW, vol. 38, p. 286.

³⁴ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels [postscript by Wilhelm Pieper], 27 January 1851, in MECW, vol. 38, pp. 269–70.

³⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 11 February 1851, in MECW, vol. 38, p. 286.

adopt on the next occasion: [...] merciless criticism of everyone.’ The ‘main thing’ was ‘to find some way of getting our things published; either in a quarterly in which we make a frontal attack and consolidate our position so far as persons are concerned, or in fat books.’ In short, he concluded with a certain optimism, ‘what price all the tittle-tattle the entire émigré crowd can muster against you, when you answer it with your political economy?’³⁶ The challenge thus became one of predicting the outbreak of crisis. For Marx, who now had an additional political motive, the time had come again to devote himself entirely to the study of political economy.

3. Research notes of 1850–1853

During the three years when Marx had interrupted his study of political economy, there were a succession of economic events – from the crisis of 1847 to the discovery of gold in California and Australia – which he thought so important that he had to undertake further research, as well as to look back over his old notes and try to give them a finished form.³⁷ His further reading was synthesized in twenty-six books of extracts, twenty-four of which – also containing texts from other disciplines – he compiled between September 1850 and August 1853 and numbered among the so-called *London Notebooks*. This study material is extremely interesting, as it documents a period of significant development in Marx’s critique, when he not only summarized knowledge that he had already gained but, by studying dozens of new (especially English-language) books in depth at the British Museum library, he was also acquiring other important ideas for the work that he was intending to write.³⁸

The *London Notebooks* may be divided into three groups.³⁹ In the first seven notebooks (I–VII), written between September 1850 and March 1851, some of

³⁶ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 13 February 1851, in MECW, vol. 38, pp. 290–1.

³⁷ See Walter Tuchscheerer, *Bevor ‘Das Kapital’ entstand*. Berlin: Dietz, 1968, p. 318.

³⁸ For a full assessment of the *London Notebooks* see the special issue vol. 1979, n. 7, of the *Arbeitsblätter zur Marx-Engelsforschung*: Wolfgang Jahn and Dietrich Noske, *Fragen der Entwicklung der Forschungsmethode von Karl Marx in den Londoner Exzerptheften von 1850–1853*.

³⁹ Interesting information about this set of Marx’s excerpts may be found in the introductions and critical apparatus to the volumes of MEGA² covering this period. See esp. ‘Einleitung’, in Karl Marx, *Exzerpte und Notizen. März bis Juni 1851*, in MEGA², vol. IV/8, pp. 13–42.

the numerous works that Marx read and excerpted were: *A History of Prices* (1838) by Tooke, *A View of the Money System of England* (1828) by James Taylor [1788–1863], *History of Money* (1819) by Germain Garnier [1754–1821], the *Complete Works on Banks and the Essence of Coin* (1802) by Georg Büsch [1728–1800], *An Enquiry into the Nature and Effects of the Paper Credit of Great Britain* (1802) by Henry Thornton [1760–1815], and *The Wealth of Nations* (1828) by Adam Smith.⁴⁰ Marx concentrated, in particular, on the history and theories of economic crises, paying close attention to the money-form and credit in his attempt to understand their origins. Unlike other socialists of the time such as Proudhon – who were convinced that economic crises could be avoided through a reform of the money and credit system – Marx came to the conclusion that, since the credit system was one of the underlying conditions, crises could at most be aggravated or mitigated by the correct or incorrect use of monetary circulation; the true causes of crises were to be sought, rather, in the contradictions of production.⁴¹

At the end of this first group of extracts, Marx summed up his own knowledge in two notebooks that he did not number as part of the main series and were entitled *Bullion: The Perfect Monetary System*.⁴² In this manuscript, which he wrote in the spring of 1851, Marx copied out from the main works of political economy – sometimes accompanying them with comments of his own – what he regarded as the most important passages on the theory of money. Divided into ninety-one sections – one for each book under consideration – *Bullion: The Perfect Monetary System* was not merely a collection of quotations but may be thought of as Marx's first autonomous formulation of the theory of money and circulation,⁴³ to be used in the writing of the book that he had been planning for many years.

⁴⁰ Except for the material from Adam Smith, which is in the volume Karl Marx, *Exzerpte und Notizen. März bis Juni 1851*, in MEGA², vol. IV/8, all the excerpts in question may be found in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Exzerpte und Notizen. September 1849 bis Februar 1851*, in MEGA², vol. IV/7. Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (Notebook VII) and Ricardo's *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (Notebooks IV, VII and VIII), which Marx had read in French during his stay in Paris in 1844, were now studied in the original English.

⁴¹ See Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 3 February 1851, in MECW, vol. 38, p. 275.

⁴² Karl Marx, *Bullion. Das vollendete Geldsystem*, in MEGA², vol. IV/8, pp. 3–85. The second of these unnumbered notebooks also contains other extracts, most notably from John Fullarton's [1780–1849] *On the Regulation of Currencies* (1844).

⁴³ Another brief exposition of Marx's theories on money, credit and crisis is contained in Notebook VII, in the fragmentary 'Reflections', in MECW, vol. 10, pp. 584–92.

In this same period, although Marx had to face terrible personal moments – especially around the death of his son Guido in 1850 – and although his economic circumstances were so serious that he was forced to put out to nurse his last daughter Franziska [1851–1852], born in March 1851, he not only managed to pursue his own work but remained hopeful that it would soon be concluded. On 2 April 1851, he wrote to Engels:

I am so far advanced that I will have finished with all this economic crap in five weeks' time. With that finished I shall complete the Economy at home and apply myself to another branch of learning at the [British] Museum. This is starting to bore me. Basically this science has made no progress since A. Smith and D. Ricardo, however much has been done in the way of individual research, often extremely discerning. [...] Fairly soon I shall be bringing out two volumes of sixty sheets.⁴⁴

Engels received the news with great joy: 'I'm glad that you've at long last finished with political economy. The thing has really been dragging on far too long, and so long as you have in front of you an unread book which you believe to be important, you won't be able to settle down to writing.'⁴⁵ But Marx's letter reflected his optimism about the work's completion more than it did the real state of things. Apart from all the books of excerpts, and with the exception of *Bullion: The Perfect Monetary System*, itself by no means a printer-ready draft, Marx had not yet produced a single manuscript. No doubt he had conducted his research with great intensity, but he had still not fully mastered the economic materials, and, for all his resolve and his conviction that he would eventually succeed, his scrupulousness prevented him from going beyond compendia or critical comments and finally writing his own book. Moreover, there was no publisher in the wings urging him to be more concise in his studies. The 'Economy' was a long way from being ready 'fairly soon.'⁴⁶

So, Marx again turned to studying the classics of political economy, and between April and November 1851, he wrote what may be seen as the second group (Notebooks VIII–XVI) of the *London Notebooks*. Notebook VIII was

⁴⁴ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 2 April 1851, in MECW, vol. 38, p. 325.

⁴⁵ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 3 April 1851, in MECW, vol. 38, p. 330.

⁴⁶ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 2 April 1851, in MECW, vol. 38, p. 250.

devoted almost entirely to extracts from James Steuart's [1712–1780] *Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy* (1770), which he had begun to study in 1847, and from David Ricardo's *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1835). The excerpts from Ricardo, in fact, compiled while he was writing *Bullion: The Perfect Monetary System*, constitute the most important part of the *London Notebooks*, as numerous critical comments and personal reflections accompany them.⁴⁷ Until the end of the 1840s, Marx had essentially accepted Ricardo's theories, whereas from now on, through a new and deeper study of ground rent and value, he moved beyond them in certain respects.⁴⁸ In this way, Marx revised some of his earlier views on these fundamental questions and thus expanded the radius of his knowledge and went on to examine still more authors. Notebooks IX and X, from May to July 1851, centred on economists who had dealt with the contradictions in Ricardo's theory, and who, on certain points, had improved on his conceptions. Thus, a large number of extracts from all these books came from: *A History of the Past and Present State of the Labouring Population* (1846) by John Debell Tuckett [1758–?], *Popular Political Economy* (1827) by Thomas Hodgskin [1787–1869], *On Political Economy* (1832) by Thomas Chalmers [1780–1847], *An Essay on the Distribution of Wealth* (1831) by Richard Jones [1790–1855], and *Principles of Political Economy* (1837–38) by Henry Charles Carey [1793–1879].⁴⁹

Despite the expanded scope of his research and the accumulation of theoretical questions to be resolved, Marx remained optimistic about the completion of his writing project. In late June 1851, he wrote to the devoted Weydemeyer:

I am usually at the British Museum from 9 in the morning until 7 in the evening. The material I am working on is so damnably involved that, no matter how I exert myself, I shall not finish for another 6–8 weeks. There are,

⁴⁷ See Karl Marx, 'Exzerpte aus David Ricardo: On the principles of political economy', in MEGA², vol. IV/8, pp. 326–31, 350–72, 381–95, 402–4, 409–26. Proof of the importance of these pages is the fact that the extracts, together with others by the same author contained in Notebooks IV and VII, were published in 1941, in the second volume of the first edition of the *Grundrisse*.

⁴⁸ In this crucial phase of new theoretical acquisitions, Marx's relationship with Engels was of the greatest importance. For example, some of his letters to Engels summarize his critical views on Ricardo's theory of ground rent, see Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 7 January 1851, in MECW, vol. 38, pp. 258–63, and on monetary circulation, see Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 3 February 1851, in MECW, vol. 38, pp. 273–8.

⁴⁹ In the same period, Marx also turned his attention to industry and machinery: see Hans-Peter Müller, *Karl Marx über Maschinerie, Kapital und industrielle Revolution*. Opladen: Westdeutscher, 1992. See also Jean Fallot, *Marx et le machinisme*. Paris: Cujas, 1966.

moreover, constant interruptions of a practical kind, inevitable in the wretched circumstances in which we are vegetating here. But, for all that, the thing is rapidly approaching completion.⁵⁰

Evidently Marx thought that he could write his book within two months, drawing on the vast quantity of extracts and critical notes he had already gathered. Once again, however, not only did he fail to reach the hoped-for 'conclusion', he did not even manage to begin the manuscript 'fair copy' that was to be sent to the printers. This time, the main reason for the missed deadline was his dire economic straits. Lacking a steady income, and worn out by his own physical condition, he wrote to Engels at the end of July 1851: 'It is impossible to go on living like this. [...] I should have finished at the library long ago. But there have been too many interruptions and disturbances and at home everything's always in a state of siege. For nights on end, I am set on edge and infuriated by floods of tears. So I cannot of course do very much.'⁵¹ To improve his financial position, Marx decided to resume journalistic activity and looked around for a newspaper. In August 1851, he became a correspondent for the *New-York Tribune*, the paper with the largest circulation in the United States of America, and he wrote hundreds of pages for it during a stint that lasted until February 1862.⁵² He dealt with the main political and diplomatic events of the age, as well as one economic and financial issue after another, so that within a few years he became a journalist of note.

Marx's critical study of political economy nevertheless continued through the summer of 1851. In August, Marx read Proudhon's *General Idea of the Revolution in the Nineteenth Century* (1851) and entertained the project (which

⁵⁰ Karl Marx to Joseph Weydemeyer, 27 June 1851, in MECW, vol. 38, p. 377.

⁵¹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 31 July 1851, in MECW, vol. 38, p. 398.

⁵² At the time, the *New-York Tribune* appeared in three different editions (*New-York Daily Tribune*, *New-York Semi-Weekly Tribune* and *New-York Weekly Tribune*), each of which carried many articles by Marx. To be precise, the *New-York Daily Tribune* published 487 articles, more than half of which were reprinted in the *New-York Semi-Weekly Tribune* and more than a quarter in the *New-York Weekly Tribune* – and to these should be added a few others that he sent to the paper but which were rejected by the editor, Charles Dana. Of the articles published in the *New-York Daily Tribune*, more than two hundred appeared as unsigned editorials. It should finally be mentioned that, to allow Marx more time for his studies of political economy, roughly a half of these articles were actually written by Engels. The submissions to the *New-York Tribune* always aroused great interest, as we can see, for example, from an editorial statement in the issue of 7 April 1853: 'Mr Marx has very decided opinions of his own, [...] but those who do not read his letters neglect one of the most instructive sources of information on the great questions of current European politics', quoted in Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 26 April 1853, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 315.

he later set aside) of writing a critique of it together with Engels.⁵³ In addition, he continued to compile extracts from his reading: Notebook XI is on texts dealing with the condition of the working class; and Notebooks XII and XIII cover his researches in agrarian chemistry. Understanding the importance of this latter discipline for the study of ground rent, he took copious notes from *Organic Chemistry in Its Application to Agriculture and Physiology* (1842) by Justus Liebig [1803–1873] and *Elements of Agricultural Chemistry and Geology* (1849) by James F.W. Johnston [1796–1855]. In Notebook XIV, Marx turned once more to the debate on Thomas Robert Malthus's theory of population, especially *The Principles of Population* (1836) by his opponent Archibald Alison [1757–1839]; to pre-capitalist modes of production, as the extracts from Adolphe Dureau de la Malle's [1777–1857] *Political Economy of Romans* (1840), and William H. Prescott's [1796–1859] *History of the Conquest of Mexico* and *History of the Conquest of Peru* (1850) demonstrate; and to colonialismo, particularly through Herman Merivale's [1806–1874] *Lectures on Colonization and Colonies* (1841–42).⁵⁴ Finally, between September and November 1851, he extended his field of research to technology, devoting considerable space in Notebook XV to Johann H. M. Poppe's [1776–1854] history of technology and in Notebook XVI to miscellaneous questions of political economy.⁵⁵ As a letter to Engels from mid-October 1851 shows, Marx was then 'in the throes of working out the Economy', 'delving mainly into technology, the history thereof, and agronomy', so that he might 'form at least some sort of an opinion of the stuff'.⁵⁶

At the end of 1851, the Löwenthal publishing house in Frankfurt expressed an interest in Marx's ever more extensive work. From the correspondence with

⁵³ See Friedrich Engels, 'Critical Review of Proudhon's Book *Idée générale de la Révolution au XIX^e siècle*', in MECW, vol. 1, pp. 545–70.

⁵⁴ The extracts from these books are contained in Karl Marx, *Exzerpte und Notizen. Juli bis September 1851*, in MEGA², vol. IV/9. For a critique of Marx's view see Hosea Jaffe, *Marx e il colonialismo*. Milan: Jaca Book, 1977; and Hosea Jaffe, *Davanti al colonialismo: Engels, Marx e il marxismo*. Milan: Jaca Book, 2007.

⁵⁵ These notebooks have not yet been published in MEGA², but Notebook XV featured in Hans Peter-Müller's collection: Karl Marx, *Die technologisch-historischen Exzerpte*. Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1982.

⁵⁶ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 13 October 1851, in MECW, vol. 38, p. 476. See also Amy E. Wendling, *Karl Marx on Technology and Alienation*. New York/Houndmills: Palgrave, 2009.

Engels and Ferdinand Lassalle [1825–1864],⁵⁷ it may be inferred that Marx was then working on a project in three volumes: the first would set forth his own conception, while the second would offer a critique of other socialisms, and the third a history of political economy. At first, however, the publisher was interested only in the third volume, while retaining the option to print the others if the project proved successful. Engels tried to persuade Marx to accept the change of plan and to sign an agreement: it was necessary ‘to strike while the iron is hot’ and ‘absolutely essential to break the spell created by your prolonged absence from the German book market and, later, by funk on the part of the book dealers’⁵⁸ – but the publisher’s interest evaporated, and nothing ever came of it all. After two months, Marx turned again to the devoted Weydemeyer in the United States of America and asked him whether it might be possible ‘to find a publisher there for [his] Economy’.⁵⁹

Despite these obstacles on the publishing front, Marx did not lose his optimism concerning the imminence of an economic crisis. At the end of 1851, he wrote to the famous poet Ferdinand Freiligrath [1810–1876], an old friend of his: ‘The crisis, held in check by all kinds of factors [. . .], must blow up at the latest next autumn. After the last events I am more convinced than ever that there will not be a serious revolution without a commercial crisis.’⁶⁰

Meanwhile, Marx got on with other work. From December 1851 to March 1852, he wrote *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852),⁶¹ but because of the state censorship of his writings in Prussia, he had to have it published in New York, in Weydemeyer’s tiny-circulation journal *Die Revolution* [The Revolution]. In this connection, he remarked in late 1852 to an acquaintance, Gustav Zerffi [1820–1892]: ‘no book dealer in Germany now dares to publish anything of mine.’⁶² Between May and June 1852, he then wrote with Engels the

⁵⁷ See esp. Ferdinand Lassalle to Karl Marx, 12 May 1851, in MEGA², vol. III/4, pp. 377–8; Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 24 November 1851, in MECW, vol. 38, pp. 490–2; and Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 27 November 1851, in MECW, vol. 38, pp. 493–5.

⁵⁸ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 27 November 1851, in MECW, vol. 38, p. 494.

⁵⁹ Karl Marx to Joseph Weydemeyer, 30 January 1852, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 26. On Weydemeyer’s politics, see Karl Obermann, *Joseph Weydemeyer, Pioneer of American Socialism*. New York: International Publishers, 1947.

⁶⁰ Karl Marx to Ferdinand Freiligrath, 27 December 1851, in MECW, vol. 38, p. 520.

⁶¹ For a recent evaluation of this work, see Hauke Brunkhorst, ‘Kommentar’, in Karl Marx, *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2007, pp. 133–322.

⁶² Karl Marx to Gustav Zerffi, 28 December 1852, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 270.

polemical *Great Men of the Exile* (1852), a gallery of caricatured portraits of leading figures in the German political emigration in London (Johann Gottfried Kinkel [1815–1882], Ruge, Karl Heinzen [1809–1880] and Gustav von Struve [1805–1870]). However, the vain search for a publisher made his efforts pointless: the manuscript was in fact given to the Hungarian János Bangya [1817–1868] to take to Germany, but he turned out to be a police agent who, instead of delivering it to the publisher, handed it over to the authorities. The text therefore remained unpublished during the lifetime of its two authors.

From April 1852 to August 1853, Marx resumed the compilation of extracts and wrote the third and last group (XVII–XXIV) of the *London Notebooks*. These mainly concern the various stages in the development of human society, much of his research having been on historical disputes about the Middle Ages and the history of literature, culture and customs. He took a particular interest in India,⁶³ about which he was simultaneously writing articles for the *New-York Tribune*.

As this wide range of research demonstrates, Marx was by no means ‘taking a rest’. The barriers to his projects again had to do with the poverty with which he had to wrestle during those years. Despite constant support from Engels, who in 1851, began to send him five pounds sterling a month, and the income from the *New-York Tribune*, which paid two pounds sterling per article, Marx lived in truly desperate conditions. Not only did he have to face the loss of his daughter, Franziska, in April 1852, his daily life was becoming one long battle. In September 1852, he wrote to Engels:

For the past 8–10 days I have been feeding the family solely on bread and potatoes, but whether I shall be able to get hold of any today is doubtful. [...] The best and most desirable thing that could happen would be for the landlady to throw me out. Then at least I would be quit of the sum of £22 [...]. On top of that, debts are still outstanding to the baker, the milkman, the tea chap, the greengrocer, the butcher. How am I to get out of this infernal mess? Finally [...] but this was] essential if we were not to kick the bucket, I have, over the last 8–10 days, touched some German types for a few shillings and pence.⁶⁴

⁶³ See IISH, Marx-Engels Papers, B 63, B 64, B 65.

⁶⁴ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 8 September 1852, in MECW, vol. 39, pp. 181–2.

All this took a heavy toll on Marx's work and time: '[I] often have to waste an entire day for a shilling. I assure you that, when I consider my wife's sufferings and my own powerlessness, I feel like consigning everything to the devil'.⁶⁵ Sometimes the situation became quite unbearable, as when he wrote to Engels in October 1852: 'Yesterday I pawned a coat dating back to my Liverpool days in order to buy writing paper'.⁶⁶

Yet, the storms in the financial market continued to keep Marx's morale high, and he wrote about them in letters to all his closest friends. With great self-irony, he declared to Lassalle in February 1852: 'The financial crisis has finally reached a level comparable only to the commercial crisis now making itself felt in New York and London. Unlike the gentlemen of commerce, I cannot, alas, even have recourse to bankruptcy'.⁶⁷ In April, he told Weydemeyer that, owing to extraordinary circumstances such as the discovery of new gold deposits in California and Australia and English commercial penetration of India, 'it may well be that the crisis will be postponed until 1853. But then its eruption will be appalling. And until that time there can be no thought of revolutionary convulsions'.⁶⁸ And in August, immediately after the speculative collapses in the United States of America, he triumphantly wrote to Engels: 'Is that not approaching crisis? The revolution may come sooner than we would like'.⁶⁹

Marx did not keep such assessments only for his correspondence but also wrote of them in the *New-York Tribune*. In an article of November 1852 on 'Pauperism and Free Trade', he predicted: 'The crisis [...] will take a far more dangerous character than in 1847, when it was more commercial and monetary than industrial, since the more surplus capital concentrates itself in industrial production, [...] the more extensive, the more lasting, the more direct will the crisis fall upon the working masses'.⁷⁰ In short, it might be necessary to wait a little longer, but he was convinced that sooner or later the hour of revolution would sound.

⁶⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 25 October 1852, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 216.

⁶⁶ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 27 October 1852, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 221.

⁶⁷ Karl Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle, 23 February 1852, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 46.

⁶⁸ Karl Marx to Joseph Weydemeyer, 30 April 1852, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 96.

⁶⁹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 19 August 1852, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 163.

⁷⁰ Karl Marx, 'Pauperism and Free Trade – The Approaching Commercial Crisis', in MECW, vol. 11, p. 361.

4. The trial of the communists and personal hardships

In October 1852, the Prussian government initiated a trial of members of the Communist League who had been arrested the previous year. The charge was that they had participated in an international organization of conspirators led by Marx against the Prussian monarchy. From October to December, in order to demonstrate that the accusations were baseless, he got down 'to work for the party against the government's machinations'⁷¹ and composed *Revelations Concerning the Communist Trial in Cologne*. Published anonymously in Switzerland in January 1853, this short work did not have the desired effect, since a large part of the print run was confiscated by the Prussian police and it circulated only in the United States of America among a small readership, where it first appeared in instalments in the *Neu-England-Zeitung* in Boston, and then as an independent booklet. Marx was understandably disheartened by this publishing failure after so many others: 'It's enough to put one off writing altogether. This constant toil *pour le roi de Prusse!*'⁷²

Contrary to the claims orchestrated by Prussian government ministers, Marx was politically very isolated during this period. The dissolution of the Communist League – having effectively taken place in 1851, then becoming official at the end of 1852 – greatly reduced the number of his political contacts. What the various police forces and political opponents defined as the 'Marx party'⁷³ had very few committed supporters. In England, apart from Engels, the only men who could have been considered 'Marxian'⁷⁴ were Pieper, Wilhelm Wolff [1809–1864], Wilhelm Liebknecht [1826–1900], Peter Imandt [1823–1897], Ferdinand Wolff [1796–1866] and Ernst Dronke [1822–1891]. And in other countries, where most of the political exiles had taken refuge, Marx had close relations only with Weydemeyer and Adolf Cluss [1825–1905] in the

⁷¹ Karl Marx to Adolf Cluss, 7 December 1852, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 259. On the trial in Cologne, see Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus, *Der Bund der Kommunisten. Dokumente und Materialien. Band 1, 1836–1849*. Berlin: Dietz, 1970; *Band 2, 1849–1851*. Berlin: Dietz, 1982; *Band 3, 1851–1852*. Berlin: Dietz, 1984.

⁷² Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 10 March 1853, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 288.

⁷³ This expression was used for the first time in 1846, with regard to the differences between Marx and the German communist Wilhelm Weitling. It was subsequently employed also in the trial proceedings at Cologne. See Maximilien Rubel, *Marx, critique du marxisme*. Paris: Payot, 1974, p. 26, n. 2.

⁷⁴ This term appeared for the first time in 1854. See Georges Haupt, *Aspects of International Socialism, 1871–1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 2.

United States of America, Richard Reinhardt [1829–1898] in Paris, and Lassalle in Prussia. He was well aware that, although these contacts allowed a network to be kept going in quite difficult times, this ‘doesn’t add up to a party’.⁷⁵ Besides, even this narrow circle had difficulty understanding some of Marx’s political and theoretical positions, and indeed his allies often brought him more disadvantages than benefits. On such occasions, he could let off steam with no one besides Engels: ‘Of the many disagreeable experiences during my years here, the greatest have consistently been provided by so-called party friends [. . .]. I propose at the next opportunity to declare publicly that I have nothing whatever to do with any party.’⁷⁶ Unlike other leaders of the political emigration, Marx had always refused to join the existing international committees, which spent their time fantasizing about the imminent revolution; and the only member of other organizations with whom he maintained relations was Ernest Charles Jones [1819–1869], the main representative of the left wing of the Chartist movement.

The recruitment of new active supporters, and especially the involvement of workers in his ideas, was therefore an important and complicated matter, and the work Marx had under way was meant to serve that purpose too. Recruitment was a necessity both theoretically and politically. In March 1853, Engels wrote to him: ‘You ought to finish your *Economy*; later on, as soon as we have a newspaper, we could bring it out in weekly numbers, and what the *populus* could not understand, the *discipuli* would expound as best as possible, but not however without effect. This would provide all our by then restored associations with a basis for debate.’⁷⁷ Marx had previously written to Engels that he hoped to spend a few days with him ‘in April’ and to ‘chat undisturbed about present conditions, which in [his] view must soon lead to an earthquake.’⁷⁸ But Marx did not manage to concentrate on his writing because of the poverty that tormented him. In 1853, Soho was the epicentre of another cholera epidemic, and the circumstances of the Marx family became more and more desperate. In August, he wrote to Engels that ‘sundry creditors’ were ‘laying siege to the house’, and that ‘three-quarters of [his] time were taken up chasing after

⁷⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 10 March 1853, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 290.

⁷⁶ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 8 October 1853, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 386.

⁷⁷ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 11 March 1853, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 293.

⁷⁸ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 10 March 1853, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 289.

pennies.⁷⁹ In order to survive, he and his wife Jenny were forced to have frequent recourse to the pawn shop, pledging the few clothes or objects of value left in a house that lacked 'the wherewithal even for basic necessities.'⁸⁰ The income from journalistic articles became more and more indispensable, although they took up precious time. At the end of the year, he complained to his friend Cluss:

I had always hoped that [...] I might somehow contrive to withdraw into solitude for a few months and work at my Economy. It seems that this isn't to be. I find perpetual hackwork for the newspapers tiresome. It is time-consuming, distracting and, in the end, amounts to very little. However independent one may think oneself, one is tied to the newspaper and its readers, especially when, like myself, one is paid in cash. Purely learned work is something totally different.⁸¹

When Marx had no choice but to heed the necessities of life, his thinking thus remained firmly anchored in the 'Economy'.

5. Articles on the crisis for the *New-York Tribune*

In this period, too, economic crisis was a constant theme in Marx's articles for the *New-York Tribune*. In 'Revolution in China and Europe', from June 1853, where he connected the anti-feudal Chinese revolution that began in 1851 to the general economic situation, Marx again expressed his conviction that there would soon come 'a moment when the extension of the markets is unable to keep pace with the extension of British manufactures, and this disproportion must bring about a new crisis with the same certainty as it has done in the past.'⁸² In his view, in the aftermath of revolution, an unforeseen contraction of the great Chinese market would 'throw the spark into the overloaded mine of the present industrial system and cause the explosion of the long-prepared general crisis, which, spreading abroad, will be closely followed by political

⁷⁹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 18 August 1853, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 356.

⁸⁰ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 8 July 1853, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 352.

⁸¹ Karl Marx to Adolf Cluss, 15 September 1853, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 367.

⁸² Karl Marx, 'Revolution in China and Europe', in MECW, vol. 12, pp. 95–6.

revolutions on the Continent.⁸³ Of course, Marx did not look upon the revolutionary process in a determinist manner, but he was sure that crisis was an indispensable prerequisite for its fulfilment:

Since the commencement of the eighteenth century there has been no serious revolution in Europe, which had not been preceded by a commercial and financial crisis. This applies no less to the revolution of 1789 than to that of 1848. [...] Neither wars nor revolutions are likely to put Europe by the ears, unless in consequence of a general commercial and industrial crisis, the signal of which has, as usual, to be given by England, the representative of European industry in the market of the world.⁸⁴

The point was underlined in late September 1853, in the article ‘Political Movements – Scarcity of Bread in Europe’: ‘neither the declamation of the demagogues, nor the twaddle of the diplomats will drive matters to a crisis, but [...] there are approaching economical disasters and social convulsions which must be the sure forerunners of European revolution. Since 1849 commercial and industrial prosperity has stretched the lounge on which the counter-revolution has slept in safety.’⁸⁵

Traces of the optimism with which Marx awaited events may be found in the correspondence with Engels. In one letter, for example, also from September 1853, he wrote: ‘Things go wonderfully. All h[ell] will be let loose in France when the financial bubble bursts.’⁸⁶ But still the crisis did not come, and he concentrated his energies on other journalistic activity so as not to forego the only source of income.

Between October and December 1853, Marx penned a series of articles entitled *Lord Palmerston*, in which he criticized the foreign policy of Henry John Temple [1784–1865], 3rd Viscount Palmerston, the long-time foreign secretary and future prime minister of Britain. These appeared both in the *New-York Tribune* and in *The People’s Paper* published by the English Chartists. Between August and November 1854, following the Spanish civilian and military uprising in June, he wrote another series, *The Revolution in Spain*, in

⁸³ Ibid., p. 98.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 99.

⁸⁵ Karl Marx, ‘Political Movements – Scarcity of Bread in Europe’, in MECW, vol. 12, p. 308.

⁸⁶ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 28 September 1853, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 372.

which he summarized and analysed the main events of the previous decade in Spain. He took these labours very seriously, as we can gauge from the nine large books of extracts that he compiled between September 1853 and January 1855, the first four of which, centred on diplomatic history, provided a basis for *Lord Palmerston*, while the other five, on Spanish political, social and cultural history, included research for the *Revolution in Spain* articles.⁸⁷

Finally, at some point between late 1854 and early 1855, Marx resumed his studies of political economy. After the three-year break, however, he decided to re-read his old manuscripts before pressing on. In mid-February 1855 he wrote to Engels: 'For the past 4–5 days I have been prevented from writing [...] by a severe inflammation of the eyes [...]. My eye trouble was brought on by reading through my own notebooks on economics, the intention being, not so much to elaborate the thing, as at any rate to master the material and get it ready to work on.'⁸⁸

This review gave rise to twenty pages of fresh notes, to which Marx gave the title *Quotations. Essence of money, essence of credit, crises*; they were further extracts from extracts he had already made in recent years. Returning to books by writers such as Tooke, Mill and Steuart, and to articles from *The Economist*, he further summarized the theories of the major political economists on money, credit and crisis, which he had begun to study in 1850.⁸⁹

At the same time, Marx produced more articles on the recession for the *New-York Tribune*. In January 1855, in 'The Commercial Crisis in Britain', he wrote with satisfaction: 'The English commercial crisis, whose premonitory symptoms were long ago chronicled in our columns, is a fact now loudly proclaimed by the highest authorities in this matter.'⁹⁰ And, two months later, in 'The Crisis in England':

A few months more and the crisis will be at a height which it has not reached in England since 1846, perhaps not since 1842. When its effects begin to be fully felt among the working classes, then will that political movement begin

⁸⁷ These notebooks of extracts have recently been published in Karl Marx, *Exzerpte und Notizen. September 1853 bis Januar 1855*, in MEGA², vol. IV/12.

⁸⁸ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 13 February 1855, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 522.

⁸⁹ See Fred E. Schrader, *Restoration und Revolution*. Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1980, p. 99.

⁹⁰ Karl Marx, 'The Commercial Crisis in Britain', in MECW, vol. 13, p. 585. See Sergio Bologna, 'Moneta e crisi: Marx corrispondente della "New York Daily Tribune," 1856–57', in Sergio Bologna, Paolo Carpiagnano and Antonio Negri, *Crisi e organizzazione operaia*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 1974, pp. 9–72.

again, which has been dormant for six years. [...] Then will the two real contending parties in that country stand face to face – the middle class and the working classes, the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat.⁹¹

Yet, just as Marx seemed on the point of restarting work on the ‘Economy’, personal difficulties once more caused a change of plan. In April 1855, he was profoundly shaken by the death of his eight-year-old son Edgar, confiding to Engels: ‘I’ve already had my share of bad luck but only now do I know what real unhappiness is. [...] Amid all the fearful torments I have recently had to endure, the thought of you and your friendship has always sustained me, as has the hope that there is something sensible for us to do together in the world.’⁹²

Marx’s health and economic circumstances remained disastrous throughout 1855, and his family increased again in size with Eleanor’s birth in January. He often complained to Engels of problems with his eyes and teeth and a terrible cough, and he felt that ‘the physical staleness also stultifie[d his] brain.’⁹³ A further complication was a law suit that Freund,⁹⁴ the family doctor, had brought against him for non-payment of bills. To get away from this, Marx had to spend some time from mid-September to early December living with Engels in Manchester, and to remain hidden at home for a couple of weeks after his return. A solution came only thanks to a ‘very happy event’:⁹⁵ an inheritance of £100 following the death of Jenny’s ninety-year-old uncle.

Thus, Marx was able to start work again on political economy only in June 1856, writing some articles for *The People’s Paper* on *Crédit Mobilier*, the main French commercial bank, which he considered ‘one of the most curious economical phenomena of our epoch.’⁹⁶ In Autumn 1856, the family’s circumstances improved for a while allowing them to leave their Soho lodgings for a better flat in the northern suburbs of London, at 9 Grafton Terrace, Kentish Town, where the rent was more affordable. The house, where they stayed until 1864, was built in a recently developed area bereft of beaten paths and connections to the centre, and enveloped in darkness at night. But they

⁹¹ Karl Marx, ‘The Crisis in England’, in MECW, vol. 14, p. 61.

⁹² Karl Marx to Engels, 12 April 1855, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 533.

⁹³ Karl Marx to Engels, 3 March 1855, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 525.

⁹⁴ Karl Marx is here playing on the German word *Freund* = friend.

⁹⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 8 March 1855, in MECW, vol. 39, p. 526.

⁹⁶ Karl Marx, ‘The French *Crédit Mobilier*’, in MECW, vol. 15, p. 10.

finally lived in a real house, the minimal requirement for the family to retain ‘at least a *semblance* of respectability’.⁹⁷

On 3 October 1856, Marx wrote again on the crisis for the *New-York Tribune*. He argued in ‘The Monetary Crisis in Europe’ that ‘a movement in the European money markets analogous to the panic of 1847’ was under way.⁹⁸ And in ‘The European Crisis’, which appeared in November, at a time when all the columnists were confidently predicting that the worst was over, he maintained:

The indications brought from Europe [. . .] certainly seem to postpone to a future day the final collapse of speculation and stock-jobbing, which men on both sides of the sea instinctively anticipate as with a fearful looking forward to some inevitable doom. That collapse is none the less sure from this postponement; indeed, the chronic character assumed by the existing financial crisis only forebodes for it a more violent and destructive end. The longer the crisis lasts the worse the ultimate reckoning.⁹⁹

The events also gave Marx the opportunity to attack his political opponents. In ‘The Monetary Crisis in Europe’, he wrote:

If we place side by side the effects of this short monetary panic and the effect of Mazzinian and other proclamations, the whole history since 1849 of the delusions of the official revolutionists is at once deprived of its mysteries. They know nothing of the economical life of peoples, they know nothing of the real conditions of historical movement, and when the new revolution shall break out they will have a better right than Pilate to wash their hands and protest that they are innocent of the blood shed.¹⁰⁰

In the first half of 1857, however, absolute calm prevailed on the international markets. Until March, Marx worked on the *Revelations of the Diplomatic*

⁹⁷ Jenny Marx, in Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus (ed.), *Mohr und General. Erinnerungen an Marx und Engels*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1964, p. 223. According to Marx’s wife, this change had become absolutely necessary: ‘as everyone was becoming a philistine, we could not keep living like *bohémiens*’, *ibid.*, p. 223. On Marx’s time in the English capital see Asa Briggs and John Callow, *Marx in London*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2008.

⁹⁸ Karl Marx, ‘The Monetary Crisis in Europe’, in MECW, vol. 15, p. 113.

⁹⁹ Karl Marx, ‘The European Crisis’, in MECW, vol. 15, p. 136.

¹⁰⁰ Karl Marx, ‘The Monetary Crisis in Europe’, in MECW, vol. 15, p. 115.

History of the Eighteenth Century (1856), a group of articles published in *The Free Press*, a paper run by the anti-Palmerston Conservative David Urquhart [1805–1842]. These pieces were meant to be only the first part of a work on the history of diplomacy, which Marx had planned at the beginning of 1856, during the Crimean war, but which he would never complete. In this case too, he made a profound study of the materials, and between January 1856 and March 1857, he compiled seven books of extracts on international politics in the eighteenth century.¹⁰¹

Finally, in July, Marx wrote some brief but interesting critical remarks on *Economic Harmonies* (1850) by Frédéric Bastiat [1801–1850] and *Principles of Political Economy* (1837–38) by Carey, which he had already studied and excerpted in 1851. In these notes, posthumously published under the title *Bastiat and Carey*, he pointed up the naivety of the two economists – the first a champion of free trade, the second of protectionism – who, in their writings, had strained to demonstrate ‘the harmony of the relations of production’¹⁰² and thus of bourgeois society as a whole. These researches were the prelude to what would be one of the most productive and intellectually stimulating periods of Marx’s critique of political economy: the composition of the *Grundrisse*.

¹⁰¹ IISH, Marx-Engels Papers, B 77, B 78, B 80, B 82, B 83, B 86, B 90.

¹⁰² Karl Marx, ‘Bastiat and Carey’, in *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Draft)*. London: Penguin Books, 1993, p. 886. Like the extracts from Ricardo, the *Bastiat and Carey* fragment was included in volume two of the first edition of the *Grundrisse*, published in 1941.

At the Time of the *Grundrisse*

1. The financial crisis of 1857 and the date with the revolution

In the course of 1856, Marx completely neglected the study of political economy but the coming of an international financial crisis suddenly changed this situation. In a climate of deep uncertainty, which turned into wide-spread panic contributing to bankruptcies everywhere, Marx felt that the right time for action had come again and foreseeing the future development of the recession, he wrote to Friedrich Engels: 'I don't suppose we'll be able to spend much longer here merely watching.'¹ Engels, already infused with great optimism, predicted a scenario for the future in this way: 'This time there'll be an unprecedented day of wrath; the whole of Europe's industry in ruins, [...] all markets over-stocked, all the upper classes in the soup, complete bankruptcy of the bourgeoisie, war and disorder to the nth degree. I, too, believe that it will all come to pass in 1857.'²

By the end of a decade that had seen the reflux of the revolutionary movement, and in the course of which Marx and Engels were prevented from actively participating in the European political arena, the two started to exchange messages with renewed confidence in future prospects. The long-awaited date with the revolution now seemed much closer, and for Marx this pointed to one priority above all: resuming his 'Economics' and finishing it as soon as possible.

¹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 26 September 1856, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 70.

² Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 26 September 1856, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 72.

In 1857, Marx was convinced that the financial crisis developing at international level had created the conditions for a new revolutionary period throughout Europe. He had been waiting for this moment ever since the popular insurrections of 1848, and now that it finally seemed to have come, he did not want events to catch him unprepared. He therefore decided to resume his economic studies and to give them a finished form.

This time, unlike in past crises, the economic storm began not in Europe but in the United States of America. During the first few months of 1857, the New York banks stepped up their volume of loans, despite the decline in deposits. The resulting growth in speculative activity worsened the general economic conditions, and, after the New York branch of the Ohio Life Insurance and Trust Company became insolvent, the prevailing panic led to numerous bankruptcies. Loss of confidence in the banking system then produced a contraction of credit, a drying up of deposits and the suspension of money payments.

Sensing the extraordinary nature of these events, Marx immediately got back to work. On 23 August 1857 – the very day before the Ohio Life collapse that sowed panic in public opinion – he began to write the ‘Introduction’ to his ‘Economy’; the explosive onset of crisis had given him an additional motive that had been absent in previous years. After the defeat of 1848, Marx had faced a whole decade of political setbacks and deep personal isolation. But, with the outbreak of the crisis, he glimpsed the possibility of taking part in a new round of social revolts and considered that his most urgent task was to analyse the economic phenomena that would be so important for the beginning of a revolution. This meant writing and publishing, as quickly as possible, the work he had been planning for so long.

From New York, the crisis rapidly spread to the rest of the United States of America and, within a few weeks, to all the centres of the world market in Europe, South America and the East, becoming the first international financial crisis in history. News of these developments generated great euphoria in Marx and fuelled a huge explosion of intellectual productivity. The period between summer 1857 and spring 1858 was one of the most prolific in his life: he managed to write more in a few months than in the preceding years. In December 1857, he wrote to Engels: ‘I am working like mad all night and every

night collating my economic studies, so that I might at least get the outlines [*Grundrisse*] clear before the deluge.³

He also took the opportunity to point out that his predictions that a crisis was inevitable had not been so ill-founded, since ‘Saturday’s *Economist* maintains that, during the final months of 1853, throughout 1854, the autumn of 1855 and the sudden changes of 1856, Europe has never had more than a hair-breadth escape from the impending crisis.’⁴

Marx’s work was now remarkable and wide-ranging. From August 1857 to May 1858, he filled the eight notebooks known as the *Grundrisse*,⁵ while as *New-York Tribune* correspondent, he wrote dozens of articles on, among other things, the development of the crisis in Europe. Driven by the need to improve his economic circumstances, he also agreed to compose a number of entries for *The New American Cyclopædia*. Lastly, from October 1857 to February 1858, he compiled three books of extracts, called the *Crisis Notebooks*.⁶ Thanks to these, it is possible to change the conventional image of a Marx studying Hegel’s *Science of Logic* (1812–16) to find inspiration for the manuscripts of 1857–58.⁷ For at that time he was much more preoccupied with events linked to the long-predicted major crisis. Unlike the extracts he had made before, these were not compendia from the works of economists but consisted of a large quantity of notes, gleaned from various daily newspapers, about major developments in the crisis, stock market trends, trade exchange fluctuations and important bankruptcies in Europe, the United States of America and other parts of the world. A letter he wrote to Engels in December indicates how intense his activity was:

I am working enormously, as a rule until 4 o’clock in the morning. I am engaged on a twofold task: 1. Elaborating the outlines of political economy.

³ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 8 December 1857, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 257. The title later given to these manuscripts was inspired by this letter.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ It should be stressed that the first part of Notebook I, which contains Marx’s critical analysis of *Of the Reform of Banks* by Alfred Darimon [1819–1902], was written in the months of January and February 1857, not (as the editors of the *Grundrisse* thought) in October. See Inna Ossobowa, ‘Über einige Probleme der ökonomischen Studien von Marx im Jahre 1857 vom Standpunkt des Historikers’, *Beiträge zur Marx-Engels-Forschung*, 1990, n. 29, pp. 147–61.

⁶ See the recently published volume MEGA², IV/14.

⁷ See Michael Krätke, ‘Marx’s “Books of Crisis” of 1857–8’, in Marcello Musto (ed.), *Karl Marx’s Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later*. London/New York: Routledge, 2008, pp. 169–75.

(For the benefit of the public it is absolutely essential to go into the matter to the bottom, as it is for my own, individually, to get rid of this nightmare.)
 2. The present crisis. Apart from the articles for the [*New-York Tribune*], all I do is keep records of it, which, however, takes up a considerable amount of time. I think that, somewhere about the spring, we ought to do a pamphlet together about the affair as a reminder to the German public that we are still there as always, and always the same.⁸

Marx gave up the latter idea, however, in order to concentrate all his energies on the *Grundrisse*.

2. History and the social individual

Where to begin? How to embark on the critique of political economy, that ambitious and demanding project which he had begun and interrupted several times before? These were the first questions that Marx asked himself as he got down to work again. Two circumstances played a crucial role in determining the answer: he held the view that, despite the validity of certain theories, economic science still lacked a cognitive procedure with which to grasp and elucidate reality correctly;⁹ and he felt a need to establish the arguments and the order of exposition before he embarked on the task of composition. These considerations led him to go more deeply into problems of method and to formulate the guiding principles for his research. The upshot was one of the most extensively debated manuscripts in the whole of his *oeuvre*: the so-called 'Introduction' to the *Grundrisse*. In these pages, in a close encounter with the ideas of some of the greatest economists and philosophers, Marx there reaffirms profound convictions and arrives at significant theoretical acquisitions.

Marx's intention was certainly not to write a sophisticated methodological treatise but to clarify for himself, before his readers, what orientation he should

⁸ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 18 December 1857, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 224. A few days later, Marx communicated his plans to Lassalle: 'The present commercial crisis has impelled me to set to work seriously on my outlines of political economy, and also to prepare something on the present crisis', Karl Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle, 21 December 1857, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 226.

⁹ In a letter to Ferdinand Lassalle on 12 November 1858, Marx wrote that 'economics as a science in the German sense of the word has yet to be tackled', in MECW, vol. 40, p. 355.

follow on the long and eventful critical journey that lay ahead. This was also necessary for the task of revising the huge mass of economic studies that he had accumulated since the mid-1840s. Thus, along with observations on the employment and articulation of theoretical categories, these pages contain a number of formulations essential to his thought that he found indispensable to summarize anew – especially those linked to his conception of history – as well as a quite unsystematic list of questions for which the solutions remained problematic.

This mix of requirements and purposes, the short period of composition – scarcely a week – and, above all, the provisional character of these notes make them extremely complex and controversial. Nevertheless, since it contains the most extensive and detailed pronouncement that Marx ever made on epistemological questions, the ‘Introduction’ is an important reference for the understanding of his thought¹⁰ and a key to the interpretation of the *Grundrisse* as a whole.

In keeping with his style, Marx alternated in the ‘Introduction’ between exposition of his own ideas and criticism of his theoretical opponents. The text is divided into four sections:

1. Production in general
2. General relation between production, distribution, exchange, and consumption
3. The method of political economy
4. Means (forces) of production and relations of production, and relations of circulation, etc.¹¹

The first section opens with a declaration of intent, immediately specifying the field of study and pointing to the historical criterion: ‘[t]he object before us, to begin with, material production. Individuals producing in society – hence

¹⁰ The voluminous critical literature on the ‘Introduction’ is one token of its importance. Since its first publication in 1903, all the main critical interpretations, intellectual biographies, and introductions to Marx’s thought have taken account of it, and it has been the object of numerous articles and commentaries. Among the latter, see in particular Terrell Carver, *Karl Marx: Texts on Method*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1975, pp. 88–158; and Marcello Musto, ‘History, production and method in the “1857 Introduction”’, in Musto (ed.), *Karl Marx’s Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later*, pp. 3–32.

¹¹ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1993, p. 69.

socially determined individual production – is, of course, the point of departure.’ Marx’s polemical target was ‘the eighteenth-century Robinsonades’,¹² the myth of Robinson Crusoe¹³ as the paradigm of *homo oeconomicus*, or the projection of phenomena typical of the bourgeois era onto every other society that has existed since the earliest times. Such conceptions represented the social character of production as a constant in any labour process, not as a peculiarity of capitalist relations. In the same way, civil society [*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*] – whose emergence in the eighteenth century had created the conditions through which ‘the individual appears detached from the natural bonds etc. which in earlier historical periods make him the accessory of a definite and limited human conglomerate’ – was portrayed as having always existed.¹⁴

In reality, the isolated individual simply did not exist before the capitalist epoch. As Marx put it in another passage in the *Grundrisse*: ‘He originally appears as a species-being, tribal being, herd animal.’¹⁵ This collective dimension is the condition for the appropriation of the earth, ‘the great workshop, the arsenal which furnishes both means and material of labour, as well as the seat, the *base* of the community [*Basis des Gemeinwesens*].’¹⁶ In the presence of these primal relations, the activity of human beings is directly linked to the earth; there is a ‘natural unity of labour with its material presuppositions’, and the individual lives in symbiosis with others like himself.¹⁷ Similarly, in all later economic forms based on agriculture where the aim is to create use-values and not yet exchange-values,¹⁸ the relationship of the individual to ‘the objective conditions of his labour is mediated through his presence as member of the commune’; he is always only one link in the chain.¹⁹ In this connection, Marx writes in the ‘Introduction’:

The more deeply we go back into history, the more does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent [*unselbstständig*],

¹² Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 83.

¹³ See Ian Watt, ‘Robinson Crusoe as a Myth’, *Essays in Criticism*, vol. I (1951), n. 2, p. 112.

¹⁴ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 83.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 496.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 472.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 471.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 471–513. Marx dealt with these themes in detail in the section of the *Grundrisse* devoted to ‘Forms which Precede Capitalist Production.’

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 486.

as belonging to a greater whole: in a still quite natural way in the family and in the family expanded into the clan [*Stamm*]; then later in the various forms of communal society arising out of the antitheses and fusions of the clans.²⁰

Similar considerations appear in *Capital*, Volume I. Here, in speaking of ‘the European Middle Ages, shrouded in darkness,’ Marx argues that ‘instead of the independent man, we find everyone dependent, serfs and lords, vassals and suzerains, laymen and clergy. Personal dependence here characterizes the social relations of production just as much as it does the other spheres of life organized on the basis of that production.’²¹ And, when he examined the genesis of product exchange, he recalled that it began with contacts among different families, tribes, or communities, ‘for, in the beginning of civilization, it is not private individuals but families, tribes, etc., that meet on an independent footing.’²² Thus, whether the horizon was the primal bond of consanguinity or the medieval nexus of lordship and vassalage, individuals lived amid ‘limited relations of production [*bornirter Produktionsverhältnisse*],’ joined to one another by reciprocal ties.²³

The classical economists had inverted this reality, on the basis of what Marx regarded as fantasies with an inspiration in natural law. In particular, Adam

²⁰ Ibid., p. 84. This conception of an Aristotelian matrix – the family preceding the birth of the village – recurs in *Capital*, Volume I, but Marx was said later to have moved away from it. Friedrich Engels pointed out in a note to the third German edition of 1883: ‘[s]ubsequent very searching study of the primitive conditions of man led the author [i.e. Marx] to the conclusion that it was not the family that originally developed into the tribe, but that, on the contrary, the tribe was the primitive and spontaneously developed form of human association, on the basis of blood relationship, that out of the first incipient loosening of the tribal bonds, the many and various forms of the family were afterwards developed; Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume III, in MECW, vol. 37, p. 356. Engels was referring to the studies of ancient history made by himself at the time and by Marx during the final years of his life (for an extensive discussion of Marx’s anthropological notebooks see Musto, *The Last Marx (1881–1883): An Intellectual Biography*, ch. 1).

²¹ Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, p. 88.

²² Ibid., p. 357. Ten years earlier, in the ‘Introduction,’ Marx had already argued: ‘it is simply wrong to place exchange at the centre of communal society as the original, constituent element. It originally appears, rather, in the connection of the different communities with one another, not in the relations between the members of a single community,’ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 103.

²³ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 162. This mutual dependence should not be confused with that which establishes itself among individuals in the capitalist mode of production: the former is the product of nature, the latter of history. In capitalism, individual independence is combined with a social dependence expressed in the division of labour, see Marx, *Original Text of the Second and the Beginning of the Third Chapter of A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in MECW, vol. 29, p. 465. At this stage of production, the social character of activity presents itself not as a simple relationship of individuals to one another ‘but as their subordination to relations which subsist independently of them and which arise out of collisions between mutually indifferent individuals. The general exchange of activities and products, which has become a vital condition for each individual – their mutual interconnection – here appears as something alien to them, autonomous, as a thing,’ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 157.

Smith had described a primal condition where individuals not only existed but were capable of producing outside society. A division of labour within tribes of hunters and shepherds had supposedly achieved the specialization of trades: one person's greater dexterity in fashioning bows and arrows, for example, or in building wooden huts, had made him a kind of armourer or carpenter, and the assurance of being able to exchange the unconsumed part of one's labour product for the surplus of others 'encourage[d] every man to apply himself to a particular occupation.'²⁴ David Ricardo was guilty of a similar anachronism when he conceived of the relationship between hunters and fishermen in the early stages of society as an exchange between owners of commodities on the basis of the labour-time objectified in them.²⁵

In this way, Smith and Ricardo depicted a highly developed product of the society in which they lived – the isolated bourgeois individual – as if he were a spontaneous manifestation of nature. What emerged from the pages of their works was a mythological, timeless individual, one 'posited by nature,' whose social relations were always the same and whose economic behaviour had a historyless anthropological character.²⁶ According to Marx, the interpreters of each new historical epoch have regularly deluded themselves that the most distinctive features of their own age have been present since time immemorial.²⁷

Marx argued instead that '[p]roduction by an isolated individual outside society [...] is as much of an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living together and talking to each other.'²⁸ And, against those who portrayed the isolated individual of the eighteenth century as the archetype of human nature, 'not as a historical result but as history's point of departure,' he maintained that such an individual emerged only with the most highly developed social relations.²⁹ Marx did not entirely disagree that man was

²⁴ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, vol. 1. London: Methuen, 1961, p. 19.

²⁵ See David Ricardo, *The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1973, p. 15. Cf. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in MECW, vol. 29, p. 300.

²⁶ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 83.

²⁷ The economist who, in Marx's view, had avoided this naive assumption was James Steuart. Marx commented on numerous passages from Steuart's main work – *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy* – in a notebook that he filled with extracts from it in the spring of 1851, see Karl Marx, 'Exzerpte aus James Steuart: *An inquiry into the principles of political economy*', in MEGA², vol. IV/8.

²⁸ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 84. Elsewhere in the *Grundrisse* Marx stated that 'an isolated individual could no more have property in land and soil than he could speak', *ibid.*, p. 485; and that 'language as the product of an individual is an impossibility. But the same holds for property', *ibid.*, p. 490.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

a ζῶον πολιτικόν [*zoon politikon*], a social animal, but he insisted that he was ‘an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society’.³⁰ Thus, since civil society had arisen only with the modern world, the free wage labourer of the capitalist epoch had appeared only after a long historical process. He was, in fact, ‘the product on one side of the dissolution of the feudal forms of society, on the other side of the new forces of production developed since the sixteenth century’.³¹ If Marx felt the need to repeat a point he considered all too evident, it was only because works by Henry Charles Carey, Frédéric Bastiat and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon had brought it up for discussion in the previous twenty years.³²

After sketching the genesis of the capitalist individual and demonstrating that modern production conforms only to ‘a definitive stage of social development – production by social individuals’, Marx points to a second theoretical requirement: namely, to expose the mystification practised by economists with regard to the concept of ‘production in general’ [*Production im Allgemeinen*]. This is an abstraction, a category that does not exist at any concrete stage of reality.

If abstraction was not combined with the kind of determinations characteristic of any historical reality, then production changed from being a specific, differentiated phenomenon into a perpetually self-identical process, which concealed the ‘essential diversity’ [*wesentliche Verschiedenheit*] of the various forms in which it manifested itself. This was the error committed by

³⁰ Ibid., p. 84.

³¹ Ibid., p. 83.

³² In his editorial commentary on the ‘Introduction’, Terrell Carver points out – see Carver, pp. 93–5 – that Marx’s remarks concerning Bastiat’s use of *Robinson Crusoe* do not correspond to what the author actually says. For, according to Bastiat, ‘Daniel Defoe would have deprived his novel of every trace of verisimilitude if [...] he had not made necessary social concessions by allowing his hero to save from the shipwreck a few indispensable objects, such as provisions, gunpowder, a rifle, an axe, a knife, rope, boards, iron, etc. – decisive evidence that society is man’s necessary milieu, since even a novelist cannot make him live outside it. And note that Robinson Crusoe took with him into solitude another social treasure worth a thousand times more [...] I mean his ideas, his memories, his experience, and especially his language’, Frédéric Bastiat, *Economic Harmonies*. Princeton: D. van Nostrand Co. Inc., 1964, p. 64. Nevertheless, Bastiat displays a lack of historical sense in other parts of his work, where the actions of the individual seem dictated by rational economic calculation and are presented in accordance with the splits peculiar to capitalist society: ‘An individual in isolation, provided he could survive for any length of time, would be at once capitalist, entrepreneur, workman, producer and consumer’, *ibid.*, p. 174. And so Crusoe once again becomes the economists’ prosaic stereotype: ‘Our Robinson Crusoe will not, therefore, set about making the tool unless he can foresee, when the work is done, a definite saving of his labour in relation to his satisfaction, or an increase in satisfactions for the same amount of labour’, *ibid.*, p. 175. Most probably these were the assertions that attracted Marx’s attention.

economists who claimed to show ‘the eternity and harmoniousness of the existing social relations.’³³ In contrast to their procedure, Marx maintained that it was the specific features of each social-economic formation which made it possible to distinguish it from others, gave the impetus for its development and enabled scholars to understand the real historical.³⁴

Although the definition of the general elements of production is ‘segmented many times over and split into different determinations’, some of which ‘belong to all epochs, others to only a few’, there are certainly, among its universal components, human labour and material provided by nature.³⁵ For, without a producing subject and a worked-upon object, there could be no production at all. But the economists introduced a third general prerequisite of production: ‘a stock, previously accumulated, of the products of former labour’, that is, capital.³⁶ The critique of this last element was essential for Marx, in order to reveal what he considered to be a fundamental limitation of the economists. It also seemed evident to him that no production was possible without an instrument of labour, if only the human hand, or without accumulated past labour, if only in the form of primitive man’s repetitive exercises. However, while agreeing that capital was past labour and an instrument of production, he did not, like Smith, Ricardo and John Stuart Mill, conclude that it had always existed.

If the error is made of ‘conceiving capital in its physical attribute only as instrument of production, while entirely ignoring the economic form which makes the instrument of production into capital,’³⁷ one falls into the ‘crude inability to grasp the real distinctions’ and a belief that ‘there exists only one single economic relation which takes on different names.’³⁸

³³ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 85.

³⁴ Karl Korsch, *Karl Marx*. London: Chapman & Hall, 1938, p. 78f.

³⁵ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 85.

³⁶ John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, vol. I. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965, p. 55. The more elaborate exposition of this idea is to be found in John Stuart Mill, *ibid.*, p. 55f.

³⁷ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 591.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 249. In fact, Marx had already criticized the economists’ lack of historical sense in *The Poverty of Philosophy*: ‘Economists have a singular method of procedure. There are only two kinds of institutions for them, artificial and natural. The institutions of feudalism are artificial institutions, those of the bourgeoisie are natural institutions. In this they resemble the theologians, who likewise establish two kinds of religion. Every religion which is not theirs is an invention of men, while their own is an emanation from God. When the economists say that present-day relations – the relations of bourgeois production – are natural, they imply that these are the relations in which wealth is created and productive forces developed in conformity with the laws of nature. These relations therefore are themselves natural laws independent of the influence of time. They are eternal laws which must always govern society. Thus there has been history, but there is no longer any’, in MECW, vol. 6, p. 174.

For this to be plausible, economists depicted the historical circumstances prior to the birth of the capitalist mode of production as ‘results of its presence’ with its very own features.³⁹ As Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse*:

The bourgeois economists who regard capital as an eternal and natural (not historical) form of production then attempt [...] to legitimize it again by formulating the conditions of its becoming as the conditions of its contemporary realization; i.e. presenting the moments in which the capitalist still appropriates as not-capitalist – because he is still becoming – as the very conditions in which he appropriates as capitalist.⁴⁰

From a historical point of view, the profound difference between Marx and the classical economists is that, in his view, ‘capital did not begin the world from the beginning, but rather encountered production and products already present, before it subjugated them beneath its process.’⁴¹ For ‘the new productive forces and relations of production do not develop out of nothing, nor drop from the sky, nor from the womb of the self-positing Idea; but from within and in antithesis to the existing development of production and the inherited, traditional relations of property.’⁴² Similarly, the circumstance whereby producing subjects are separated from the means of production – which allows the capitalist to find propertyless workers capable of performing abstract labour (the necessary requirement for the exchange between capital and living labour) – is the result of a process that the economists cover with silence, which ‘forms the history of the origins of capital and wage labour.’⁴³

A number of passages in the *Grundrisse* criticize the way in which economists portray historical as natural realities. It is self-evident to Marx, for example, that money is a product of history: ‘to be money is not a natural attribute of gold and silver’, but only a determination they first acquire at a precise moment of social development.⁴⁴ The same is true of credit. According to Marx, lending and borrowing was a phenomenon common to many civilizations, as was usury, but they ‘no more constitute credit than working constitutes industrial labour or free wage labour. And credit as an essential,

³⁹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 460.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 675.

⁴² Ibid., p. 278.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 489.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 239.

developed relation of production appears historically only in circulation based on capital.⁴⁵ Prices and exchange also existed in ancient society, ‘but the increasing determination of the former by costs of production, as well as the increasing dominance of the latter over all relations of production, only develop fully [...] in bourgeois society, the society of free competition’; or ‘what Adam Smith, in the true eighteenth-century manner, puts in the prehistoric period, the period preceding history, is rather a product of history’.⁴⁶ Furthermore, just as he criticized the economists for their lack of historical sense, Marx mocked Proudhon and all the socialists who thought that labour productive of exchange value could exist without developing into wage labour, that exchange value could exist without turning into capital, or that there could be capital without capitalists.⁴⁷

Marx’s chief aim is therefore to assert the historical specificity of the capitalist mode of production: to demonstrate, as he would again affirm in *Capital*, Volume III, that it ‘is not an absolute mode of production’ but ‘merely historical, transitory’.⁴⁸

This viewpoint implies a different way of seeing many questions, including the labour process and its various characteristics. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx wrote that ‘the bourgeois economists are so much cooped up within the notions belonging to a specific historic stage of social development that the necessity of the objectification of the powers of social labour appears to them as inseparable from the necessity of their alienation’.⁴⁹ Marx repeatedly took issue with this presentation of the specific forms of the capitalist mode of production as if they were constants of the production process as such. To portray wage labour not as a distinctive relation of a particular historical form of production but as a universal reality of man’s economic existence was to imply that exploitation and alienation had always existed and would always continue to exist.

Evasion of the specificity of capitalist production therefore had both epistemological and political consequences. On the one hand, it impeded

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 535.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 156.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 248.

⁴⁸ Marx, *Capital*, Volume III, p. 240.

⁴⁹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 832.

understanding of the concrete historical levels of production; on the other hand, in defining present conditions as unchanged and unchangeable, it presented capitalist production as production in general and bourgeois social relations as natural human relations. Accordingly, Marx's critique of the theories of economists had a twofold value. As well as underlining that a historical characterization was indispensable for an understanding of reality, it had the precise political aim of countering the dogma of the immutability of the capitalist mode of production. A demonstration of the historicity of the capitalist order would also be proof of its transitory character and of the possibility of its elimination.

3. Poverty in London

In order to have the energy demanded by his Herculean project, Marx would have needed some tranquillity, but his personal situation was still extremely precarious and did not allow him any respite. Having employed all the resources at his disposal in the relocation to a new home, he was short of money again to pay the first month's rent. So he reported to Engels, who lived and worked in Manchester at the time, all the troubles of his situation: '[I am] without prospects and with soaring family liabilities. I have no idea about what to do and in fact my situation is more desperate than it was five years ago. I thought that I had already tasted the quintessence of this shit, but no.'⁵⁰ This statement deeply shocked Engels, who had been so sure that after the move his friend would finally be more settled, that in January 1857 he spent the money received from his father for Christmas to buy a horse and pursue his great passion: fox hunting. However, during this period and for his whole life, Engels never denied all of his support to Marx and his family, and, worried about this difficult juncture, he sent Marx £5 a month and urged him to count on him always in difficult times.

Engels's role was certainly not limited to financial support. In the deep isolation Marx experienced during those years, but through the large correspondence exchanged between the two, Engels was the only point of

⁵⁰ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 20 January 1857, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 93.

reference with whom he could engage in intellectual debate: ‘more than anything I need your opinion.’⁵¹ Engels was the only friend to confide in at difficult times of despondency: ‘write soon because your letters are essential now to help me pluck up. The situation is dire.’⁵² Engels was also the companion with whom Marx shared the sarcasm solicited by events: ‘I envy people who can turn summersaults. It must be a great way of ridding the head of bourgeois anger and ordure.’⁵³

In fact, uncertainty soon became more pressing. Marx’s only income, aside from the help granted by Engels, consisted of payments received from the *New-York Tribune*, the most widely circulated English language newspaper at the time. The agreement on his contributions, for which he received £2 per article, changed with the economic crisis that also had had repercussions on the American daily. Aside from the American traveller and writer Bayard Taylor [1825–1878], Marx was the only European correspondent not to be fired, but his participation was scaled down from two articles weekly to one, and – ‘although in times of prosperity they never gave me an extra penny’⁵⁴ – his payments were halved. Marx humorously recounted the event: ‘There is a certain irony of fate in my being personally embroiled in these damned crises.’⁵⁵ However, to be able to witness the financial breakdown was an unparalleled entertainment: ‘Nice, too, that the capitalists, who so vociferously opposed the “right to work”, are now everywhere demanding “public support” from their governments and [...] hence advocating the “right to profit” at public expense.’⁵⁶ Despite his state of anxiety, he announced to Engels that ‘though my own financial distress may be dire indeed, never, since 1849, have I felt so cosy as during this outbreak.’⁵⁷

The beginning of a new editorial project slightly eased the desperation. The editor of the *New-York Tribune*, Charles Dana [1819–1897], invited Marx to join the editorial committee for *The New American Cyclopædia*. Lack of money drove him to accept the offer, but he entrusted most of the work to Engels in

⁵¹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 2 April 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 303.

⁵² Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 18 March 1857, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 106.

⁵³ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 23 January 1857, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 99.

⁵⁴ Karl Marx to Joseph Weydemeyer, 1 February 1859, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 374.

⁵⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 31 October 1857, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 198.

⁵⁶ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 8 December 1857, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 214.

⁵⁷ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 13 November 1857, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 199.

order to dedicate more time to his research. In their division of labour between July 1857 and November 1860, Engels edited military entries – i.e. the majority of the ones commissioned – while Marx compiled several biographical sketches. Although the payment of \$2 per page was very low, it was still an addition to his disastrous finances. For this reason, Engels urged him to get as many entries from Dana as possible: ‘We can easily supply that amount of “unalloyed” erudition, so long as unalloyed Californian gold is substituted for it.’⁵⁸ Marx followed the same principle in writing his articles: ‘to be as little concise as possible, so long as it is not insipid.’⁵⁹

Despite efforts, his financial situation did not improve at all. It actually became so unsustainable that, chased by creditors he compared to ‘hungry wolves’⁶⁰ and in the absence of coal for heating during the cold winter of that year, in January 1858, he wrote to Engels: ‘if these conditions persist, I would sooner be miles under the ground than go on vegetating this way. Always being a nuisance to others while, on top of that, being constantly tormented by personal trifles becomes unbearable in the long run.’⁶¹ In such circumstances he also had bitter words for the emotional sphere: ‘privately, I think, I lead the most agitated life imaginable. [...] For people of wide aspiration nothing is more stupid than to get married, thus letting oneself in for the the small miseries of domestic and private life.’⁶²

Poverty was not the only spectre haunting Marx. As with a major part of his troubled existence, he was also affected at the time by several diseases. In March 1857, the excessive labour done at night gave him an eye infection; in April, he was hit by toothache; in May, he suffered continuous liver complaints for which he was ‘submerged in drugs’. Greatly enfeebled, he was incapacitated and unable to work for three weeks. He then reported to Engels: ‘in order that my time should not be entirely wasted I have, in the absence of better things, been mastering the Danish language’; however, ‘if the doctor’s

⁵⁸ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 22 April 1857, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 122.

⁵⁹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 22 February 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 272. Although they included some interesting remarks, the articles for the encyclopaedia were defined by Engels as ‘purely commercial work [...] that can safely remain buried’. Friedrich Engels to Hermann Schlüter, 29 January 1891, in MECW, vol. 49, p. 113.

⁶⁰ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 8 December 1857, p. 214.

⁶¹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 28 January 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 255.

⁶² Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 22 February 1858, p. 273.

promises are anything to go by, I have prospects of becoming a human being again by next week. Meanwhile I'm still as yellow as a quince and vastly more irritated.⁶³

Shortly afterwards, a much graver occurrence befell the Marx family. In early July, Jenny gave birth to their last child, but the baby, born too weak, died immediately after. Bereaved once more, Marx confessed to Engels: 'in itself, this is not a tragedy. But [...] the circumstances that caused it to happen were such to bring back heartrending memories (probably the death of Edgar, the last child he lost). It is impossible to discuss this issue in a letter.'⁶⁴ Engels was highly affected by this statement and replied: 'things must be really hard for you to write like this. You can accept the death of the little one stoically, but your wife will hardly be able to.'⁶⁵

The situation was further complicated by the fact that Engels fell ill and was seriously hit by a glandular fever, so he could not work for the whole summer. At that point, Marx was in real difficulties. Without his friend's entries for the encyclopaedia, he needed to buy time, so he pretended to have sent a pile of manuscripts to New York, and that they had been lost in the post. Nonetheless, the pressure did not decrease. When the events surrounding the Indian Sepoy rebellion became more striking, the *New-York Tribune* expected an analysis from its expert,⁶⁶ without knowing that the articles concerning military matters were in fact the work of Engels. Marx, forced by the circumstances to be temporarily in charge of the 'military department,'⁶⁷ ventured to claim that the English needed to make a retreat by the beginning of the rainy season. He informed Engels of his choice in these words: 'it is possible that I'll look really bad but in any case with a little dialectics I will be able to get out of it. I have, of course, so formulated my words as to be right either way.'⁶⁸ However, Marx did not underestimate this conflict and reflecting on its possible effects, he said: 'in

⁶³ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 22 May 1857, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 132.

⁶⁴ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 8 July 1857, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 143.

⁶⁵ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 11 July 1857, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 143.

⁶⁶ Marx had already dealt at length with India in 1853. See Irfan Habib, 'Marx's Perception of India', and Prabhat Patnaik, 'Appreciation: the Other Marx', in Iqbal Husain (ed.), *Karl Marx, on India*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2006, pp. xix–liv and lv–lxviii. See also Aijaz Ahmad, 'Marx on India: a Clarification', in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London: Verso, 1992, pp. 221–42.

⁶⁷ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 14 January 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 249 (this letter is mistakenly dated 16 January 1858).

⁶⁸ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 15 August 1857, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 152.

view of the drain of men and bullion which she will cost the English, India is now our best ally'.⁶⁹

Poverty, health problems and all kind of privations – the *Grundrisse* was written in this tragic context. It was not the product of research by a well-to-do thinker protected by bourgeois tranquillity; on the contrary, it was the labour of an author who experienced hardship and found the energy to carry on only sustained by the belief that, given the advancing economic crisis, his work had become necessary for his times.

4. In search of a method

Marx, then, started from the need to address a fundamental methodological issue: how to reproduce reality in thought? How to construct an abstract model capable of comprehending and representing society? Such questions are also posed in the 'Introduction' to the *Grundrisse*. The pages that Marx devoted to 'the relationship between scientific presentation and the real movement'⁷⁰ do not represent his final thoughts on method: they theorize the problem inadequately and do little more than sketch out a number of points. Nevertheless, these reflections have made the 'Introduction' an indispensable theoretical text, as well as a fascinating one from a literary point of view, for all serious interpreters and readers of Marx.

Like other great thinkers before him, Marx first asked himself where to begin – that is, in his case, what political economy should take as its analytic starting-point. One possibility was that it should begin 'with the real and the concrete, with the real precondition', 'the foundation and subject of the entire social act of production': the population.⁷¹ But Marx considered that this path, taken by the founders of political economy, William Petty [1623–1687] and Pierre de Boisguillebert, was inadequate and erroneous. To begin with, such an indeterminate entity as the population would involve an overly generic image of the whole; it would be incapable of demonstrating the division

⁶⁹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 14 January 1858, p. 249.

⁷⁰ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 86.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

into classes (bourgeoisie, landowners and proletariat), since these could be differentiated only through knowledge of their respective foundations: capital, land ownership and wage labour. With an empirical approach of that kind, concrete elements like the state would dissolve into abstract determinations such as division of labour, money or value.

No sooner had the eighteenth-century economists finished defining their abstract categories than 'there began the economic systems, which ascended from simple relations, such as labour, division of labour, need, exchange value, to the level of the state, exchange between nations and the world market'. This procedure, employed by Smith and Ricardo in economics as well as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in philosophy, may be summed up in the thesis that 'the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought'; it was this that Marx described as the 'scientifically correct method' [*wissenschaftlich richtige Methode*]. With the right categories, it was possible 'to retrace the journey until one finally arrives at population again, only this time not as the chaotic conception of the whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations'.⁷²

Yet, contrary to what certain commentators on the 'Introduction' have argued,⁷³ Marx's definition of the 'scientifically correct method' does not at all mean that it was the one he subsequently employed himself.⁷⁴ First of all, he did not share the conviction of the economists that their logical reconstruction of the concrete at the level of ideas was a faithful reproduction of reality.⁷⁵ The procedure synthetically presented in the 'Introduction' did, it is true, borrow various elements from Hegel's method, but it also displayed radical differences. Like Hegel before him, Marx was convinced that 'the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete is only the way in which thought appropriates the

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 100–1.

⁷³ The interpretations of Evald Ilyenkov, Louis Althusser, Antonio Negri and Galvano Della Volpe, for example, fall into the error of equating this with Marx's method. See Ilyenkov, *Dialectics of the Abstract & the Concrete in Marx's Capital*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1982, p. 100; Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*. London: Verso, 1979, pp. 87–8; Antonio Negri, *Marx beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*. New York: Autonomedia, 1991, p. 47; Galvano Della Volpe, *Rousseau e Marx*. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1979, p. 191. For a critique of Della Volpe, see Cesare Luporini, 'Il circolo concreto-astratto-concreto', in Franco Cassano (ed.), *Marxismo e filosofia in Italia (1958–1971)*. Bari: De Donato, 1973, pp. 226–39.

⁷⁴ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 101.

⁷⁵ Mario Dal Pra, *La dialettica in Marx*. Bari: Laterza, 1965, p. 461.

concrete', that the recomposition of reality in thought should start from the simplest and most general determinations. For both, moreover, the concrete was 'the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse'; it appeared in thought as 'a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure', although for Marx, it was always necessary to keep in mind that the concrete was 'the point of departure for observation [*Anschauung*] and conception'.

Beyond this common base, however, there was the difference that 'Hegel fell into the illusion of conceiving the real as the product of thought', whereas for Marx 'this is by no means the process by which the concrete itself comes into being'. In Hegelian idealism, Marx argues, 'the movement of the categories appears as the real act of production [...] whose product is the world'; 'conceptual thinking is the real human being' and 'the conceptual world as such is thus the only reality', not only representing the real world in ideas but also operating as its constitutive process. Marx emphasized several times, in opposition to Hegel, that 'the concrete totality, [as] a totality of thoughts, [like the] concrete in thought, [is] in fact a product of thinking and comprehending', but that it is 'not in any way a product of the concept which thinks and generates itself'. For 'the real subject retains its autonomous existence outside the head just as before. [...] Hence, in the theoretical method, too, the subject, society, must always be kept in mind as the presupposition.'⁷⁶

In the 'Introduction', Marx turned to another crucial issue. In what order should he set out the categories in the work he was about to write? To the question as to whether the complex should furnish the instruments with which to understand the simple, or the other way round, he decisively opted for the first possibility.

Bourgeois society is the most complex historic organization of production.

The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby also allow insights into the structure and the relations of production

⁷⁶ Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 101–2. In reality, however, Marx's interpretation does not do justice to Hegel's philosophy. A number of passages in the latter's work show that, unlike the transcendental idealism of Johann Gottlieb Fichte [1762–1814] and the objective idealism of Friedrich Schelling, his thought did not confuse the movement of knowledge with the order of nature, the subject with the object. See Judith Jánoska, Martin Bondeli, Konrad Kindle and Marc Hofer, *Das 'Methodenkapitel' von Karl Marx*. Basel: Schwabe & Co., 1994, pp. 115–19; and Musto, 'Introduction', in Musto (ed.), *Karl Marx's Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later*, pp. 17–18.

of all the vanquished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up, whose partly still unconquered remnants are carried along with it.⁷⁷

It is the present, then, which offers the indications for a reconstruction of the past. ‘Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape [...] and] the intimations of higher development among the subordinate animal species [...] can be understood only after the higher development is already known.’⁷⁸ This well-known statement should not, however, be read in evolutionist terms. Indeed, Marx explicitly criticized the conception of ‘so-called historical evolution’, based on the banality that ‘the latest form regards the previous ones as steps leading up to itself’.⁷⁹ Unlike the theorists of evolutionism, who posited a naively progressive trajectory from the simplest to the most complex organisms, Marx chose to use an opposite, much more complex logical method and elaborated a conception of history marked by the succession of modes of production (ancient, Asiatic, feudal, capitalist), which was meant to explain the positions and functions that the categories assumed within those various modes.⁸⁰ It was bourgeois society, therefore, which provided the clues for an understanding of the economies of previous historical epochs – although, given the profound differences between societies, the clues should be treated with moderation. Marx emphatically repeated that this could not be done ‘in the manner of those economists who smudge over all historical differences and see bourgeois relations in all forms of society’.⁸¹

Marx rejected the approach of chronological succession for the scientific categories, which he had used in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in favour of a logical method with historical-empirical checks. Since the present helped one to understand the past, or the structure of man the structure of the ape, it was necessary to begin the analysis from the most mature stage, capitalist society, and more particularly from the element that predominated there over all others: capital. ‘Capital is the all-dominating economic power

⁷⁷ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 105.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁸⁰ Stuart Hall, ‘Marx’s notes on method: A “reading” of the “1857 Introduction”’, *Cultural Studies*, vol. 17 (2003), n. 2, p. 133. Hall rightly notes that the theory developed by Marx represented a break with historicism, though not a break with historicity.

⁸¹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 105.

of bourgeois society. It must form the starting-point as well as the finishing-point.⁸²

In essence, setting out the categories in a precise logical order and the working of real history do not coincide with each other – and moreover, as Marx wrote in the manuscripts for *Capital*, Volume III, ‘all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided’.⁸³

Marx, then, arrived at his own synthesis by diverging from the empiricism of the early economists, which yielded a dissolution of concrete elements into abstract definitions; from the method of the classical economists, which reduced thought about reality to reality itself; from philosophical idealism – including, in Marx’s view, Hegel’s philosophy – which he accused of giving thought the capacity to produce the concrete; from gnoseological conceptions that rigidly counterposed forms of thought and objective reality; from historicism and its dissolution of the logical into the historical; and, finally, from his own conviction in *The Poverty of Philosophy* that he was essentially following ‘the march of history’.⁸⁴ His aversion to establishing a one-to-one correspondence between the concrete and thought led him to separate the two by recognizing the specificity of the latter and assigning to the former an existence independent of thought, so that the order of exposition of the categories differed from that which manifested itself in the relations of the real historical process.⁸⁵ To avoid limiting the cognitive process to a mere repetition of the stages of what had happened in history, it was necessary to use a process of abstraction, and therefore categories that allowed for the interpretation of society in all its complexity. On the other hand, to be really useful for this purpose, abstraction had to be constantly compared with various historical realities, in such a way that the general logical determinations could be distinguished from the concrete historical relations. Marx’s conception of history thereby gained in efficacy and incisiveness: once a symmetry of logical order and actual historical order had been rejected, the historical became decisive for the understanding of reality, while the logical made it

⁸² Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 107.

⁸³ Marx, *Capital*, Volume III, p. 804.

⁸⁴ Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, p. 172.

⁸⁵ Althusser and Balibar, *Reading Capital*, pp. 47–8, 87.

possible to conceive history as something other than a flat chronology of events.⁸⁶

The method developed by Marx had provided him with tools not only to understand the differences among all the modes in which production had manifested itself in history, but also to discern in the present the tendencies prefiguring a new mode of production and therefore confounding all those who had proclaimed the inalterability of capitalism. His own research, including in epistemology, never had an exclusively theoretical motive; it was always driven by the need to interpret the world in order to engage better in the political struggle.

The last important reflections elaborated by Marx – starting from a few considerations on the relationship between Greek art and modern society – focused on the ‘uneven relationship [*ungleiche Verhältniß*] between material production and artistic development.’⁸⁷ Far from affirming the kind of rigid parallelism between production and forms of consciousness that many ostensible Marxists later postulated, Marx stressed that there was no direct relationship between social-economic development and artistic production.

Reworking certain ideas in *The Historical View of the Literature of the South of Europe* (1813) by Leonard Simonde de Sismondi, which he had read and excerpted in a notebook of 1852, he now wrote: ‘In the case of the arts, it is well known that certain periods of their flowering are out of all proportion to the general development of society, hence also to the material foundation [*materiellen Grundlage*], the skeletal structure [...] of its organization.’ He also pointed out that certain art forms – the epic, for instance – ‘are possible only at

⁸⁶ The complexity of the method synthesized by Marx is apparent in the fact that it was misrepresented not only by many students of his work but also by Friedrich Engels. Not apparently having read the theses in the 1857 ‘Introduction’, Engels wrote in 1859, in a review of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, that once Marx had elaborated his method he could have undertaken the critique of political economy ‘in two ways – historically or logically’. But, as ‘history often moves in leaps and bounds and in zigzags, and as this would have [had] to be followed throughout, [...] the logical method of approach was the only adequate one’. Engels wrongly concluded, however, that this was ‘indeed nothing but the historical method, only stripped of the historical form and of interfering contingencies. The point where this history begins must also be the starting-point of the train of thought, and its further progress will be simply the reflection, in abstract and theoretically consistent form, of the course of history’, Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in MECW, vol. 29, p. 475. In short, Engels held that there was a parallelism between history and logic, which Marx had decisively rejected in the ‘Introduction’. Having been attributed to Marx by Engels, that position later became still more barren and schematic in the Marxist-Leninist interpretation.

⁸⁷ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 109.

an undeveloped stage of artistic development. If this is the case with the relation between different kinds of art within the realm of the arts, it is already less puzzling that it is the case in the relation of the entire realm to the general development of society.⁸⁸ Greek art presupposed Greek mythology, that is, an ‘unconsciously artistic’ representation of social forms. But, in an advanced society such as that of the modern age, in which people conceive of nature rationally, not as an external power standing over and against them, mythology loses its *raison d’être* and the epic can no longer be repeated: ‘Is Achilles possible with powder and lead? Or the *Iliad* with the printing press [...]? Do not the song and the saga and the muse necessarily come to an end with the printer’s bar, hence do not the necessary conditions of epic poetry vanish?’⁸⁹

Marx had an anti-dogmatic approach as to how the forms of material production are related to intellectual creations and behaviour. His awareness of their ‘uneven development’ involved rejection of any schematic procedure that posited a uniform relationship among the various spheres of the social totality.⁹⁰ Even the well-known thesis in the ‘Preface’ to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, published two years after Marx wrote the ‘Introduction’ – ‘the mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life’⁹¹ – should not be interpreted in a determinist sense;⁹² it should be clearly distinguished from the narrow and predictable reading of ‘Marxism-Leninism’, in which the superstructural

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 110.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 111. Friedrich Theodor Vischer [1807–1887], in his *Aesthetics, or the Science of the Beautiful* (1846–1857), discussed the power of capitalism to dissolve myths. Marx drew inspiration from this work and summarized parts of it in his notebooks, scarcely three months before he wrote the ‘Introduction’. But the approaches of the two authors could not have been more different: Vischer treated capitalism as an unalterable reality and deplored in romantic style the aesthetic impoverishment of culture that it brought about; whereas Marx, though constantly fighting for the overcoming of capitalism, emphasized that both materially and ideologically it represented a more advanced reality than previous modes of production, cf. Georg Lukács, ‘Karl Marx und Friedrich Theodor Vischer’, in *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Ästhetik*. Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1956, pp. 267–8.

⁹⁰ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 109.

⁹¹ Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in MECW, vol. 29, p. 263.

⁹² Evidence of this is the fact that, when Marx quoted this statement in a note to the 1872–5 French edition of *Capital*, he preferred to use the verb *dominer* for the German *bedingen* (more usually translated as ‘*déterminer*’ or ‘*conditionner*’): ‘Le mode de production de la vie matérielle *domine* [dominates] en général le développement de la vie sociale, politique et intellectuelle’, see Karl Marx, ‘Le Capital’, MEGA² II/7, p. 62. His aim in doing this was precisely to avoid the risk of positing a mechanical relationship between the two aspects, cf. Maximilien Rubel, *Karl Marx. Essai de biographie intellectuelle*. Paris: Rivière, 1971, p. 298.

phenomena of society are merely a reflection of the material existence of human beings.⁹³

Apart from the methodological considerations in the 'Introduction', Marx divided the *Grundrisse* into two parts: the 'Chapter on Money', which deals with money and value, and the 'Chapter on Capital', which centres on the process of production and circulation of capital and addresses such key themes as the concept of surplus-value and the economic formations which preceded the capitalist mode of production. His immense effort did not, however, allow him to complete the work. In late February 1858 he wrote to Lassalle:

I have in fact been at work on the final stages for some months. But the thing is proceeding very slowly because no sooner does one set about finally disposing of subjects to which one has devoted years of study than they start revealing new aspects and demand to be thought out further. [...] The work I am presently concerned with is a Critique of Economic Categories or, if you like, a critical exposé of the system of the bourgeois economy. It is at once an exposé and, by the same token, a critique of the system. I have very little idea how many sheets the whole thing will amount to. [...] Now that I am at last ready to set to work after 15 years of study, I have an uncomfortable feeling that turbulent movements from without will probably interfere after all.⁹⁴

5. Writing the *Grundrisse*

Attention to the main economic and political events of the time was a constant in Marx's life. In the autumn of 1857, Engels was still evaluating events with optimism: 'The American crash is superb and will last for a long time. [...] Commerce will again be going downhill for the next three or four years. Now we have a chance.'⁹⁵ Thus, he was encouraging Marx: 'In 1848 we were saying:

⁹³ The worst and most widely disseminated interpretation of this kind is Joseph Stalin's in *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*: 'the material world represents objective reality [...] and] the spiritual life of society is a reflection of this objective reality'; and 'whatever is the being of a society, whatever are the conditions of material life of a society, such are the ideas, theories, political views and political institutions of that society', Joseph Stalin, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1941, p. 15.

⁹⁴ Karl Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle, 22 February 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, pp. 270–1.

⁹⁵ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 29 October 1857, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 195.

now our moment is coming, and in a certain sense it was, but this time it is coming completely and it is a case of life or death.⁹⁶ On the other hand, without harbouring any doubts about the imminence of the revolution, they both hoped that it would not erupt before the whole of Europe had been invested by the crisis, and so the auspices for the ‘year of strife’ were postponed to 1858.⁹⁷

As reported in a letter from Jenny von Westphalen to Conrad Schramm [1822–1858], a family friend, the general crisis had its positive effects on Marx: ‘You can imagine how high up the Moor is. He has recovered all his wonted facility and capacity for work, as well as the liveliness and buoyancy of spirit.’⁹⁸ In fact, Marx began a period of intense intellectual activity, dividing his labours between the articles for the *New-York Tribune*, the work for *The New American Cyclopædia*, the unfinished project to write a pamphlet on the current crisis and, obviously, the *Grundrisse*. However, despite his renewed energies, all these undertakings proved excessive and Engels’s aid became once more indispensable. By the beginning of 1858, following his full recovery from the disease he had suffered, Marx asked him to return to work on the encyclopaedia entries:

Sometimes it seems to me that if you could manage to do a few sections every couple of days, it could perhaps act as a check on your drunkenness that, from what I know of Manchester and at the present excited times, seems to me inevitable and far from good for you. [. . .] Because I really need to finish off my other works, that are taking up all my time, even if the house should come falling on my head!⁹⁹

Engels accepted Marx’s energetic exhortation and reassured him that, after the holidays, he ‘experienced the need of a quieter and more active life.’¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, Marx’s greatest problem was still lack of time, and he repeatedly complained to his friend that ‘whenever I’m at the [British] Museum, there are so many things I need to look up that it’s closing time (now 4 o’clock) before I have so much as looked round. Then there’s the journey there. So much time

⁹⁶ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 15 November 1857, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 200.

⁹⁷ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 31 December 1857, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 236.

⁹⁸ Jenny Marx to Conrad Schramm, 8 December 1857, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 566.

⁹⁹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 5 January 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 238.

¹⁰⁰ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 6 January 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 239.

lost.¹⁰¹ Moreover, in addition to practical difficulties, there were theoretical ones: 'I have been [...] so damnably held up by errors in calculation that, in despair, I have applied myself to a revision of algebra. Arithmetic has always been my enemy, but by making a detour via algebra, I shall quickly get back into the way of things.'¹⁰² Finally, his scrupulousness contributed to slowing the writing of the *Grundrisse*, as he demanded of himself that he keep on searching for new confirmations to test the validity of his theses. In February, he explained the state of his research to Ferdinand Lassalle thus:

Now I want to tell you how my Economics is getting on. The work is written. I have in fact had the final text in hand for some months. But the thing is proceeding very slowly, because no sooner does one set about finally disposing of subjects that have been the main object of years of study, than they start revealing new aspects and demand to be thought out further.

In the same letter, Marx regretted once again the condition to which he was doomed. Being forced to spend a large part of the day on newspaper articles, he wrote: 'I am not master of my time but rather its slave. Only the nights are left for my own work, which in turn is often disrupted by bilious attacks or recurrences of liver trouble.'¹⁰³

In fact, illness had violently befallen him again. In January 1858, he communicated to Engels that he had been in cure for three weeks: 'I had exaggerated working at night – only keeping myself going with lemonades and a large quantity of tobacco.'¹⁰⁴ In March, he was 'very sickly again' with his liver: 'the prolonged work by night and, by day, the numerous petty discomforts resulting from the economical conditions of my domesticity have recently been cause of frequent relapses.'¹⁰⁵ In April, he claimed again: 'I've felt so ill with my bilious complaint this week, that I am incapable of thinking, reading, writing or, indeed, doing anything save the articles for the [*New-York*] *Tribune*. These, of course, cannot be allowed to lapse since I must draw on the curs as soon as possible to avoid bankruptcy.'¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 1 February 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 258.

¹⁰² Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 11 January 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 244.

¹⁰³ Karl Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle, 22 February 1858, p. 268.

¹⁰⁴ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 14 January 1858, p. 247.

¹⁰⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 29 March 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 295.

¹⁰⁶ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 2 April 1858, p. 296.

At this stage of his life, Marx had completely given up politically organized affiliations and private relations: in letters to his few remaining friend, he disclosed that ‘I live like a hermit,’¹⁰⁷ and ‘I seldom see my few acquaintances nor, on the whole, is this any great loss.’¹⁰⁸ Aside from Engels’s continuous encouragement, the recession and its expansion world-wide also fed his hopes and goaded him into carrying on working: ‘take[n] all in all, the crisis has been burrowing away like a good old mole.’¹⁰⁹ The correspondence with Engels documents the enthusiasm sparked in him by the progression of events. In January, having read the news from Paris in the *Manchester Guardian*, he exclaimed: ‘everything seems to be going better than expected,’¹¹⁰ and at the end of March, commenting on recent developments, he added: ‘in France the bedlam continues most satisfactorily. It is unlikely that conditions will be peaceful beyond the summer.’¹¹¹ While a few months earlier, he had pessimistically stated that:

After what has happened over the last ten years, any thinking being’s contempt for the masses as for individuals must have increased to such a degree that ‘*odi profanum vulgus et arceo*’¹¹² has almost become an imposed maxim. Nonetheless, all these are themselves philistine states of mind, that will be swept away by the first storm.¹¹³

In May, he claimed with some satisfaction that ‘on the whole the present moment of time is a pleasing one. History is apparently about to take again a new start, and the signs of dissolution everywhere are delightful for every mind not bent upon the conservation of things as they are.’¹¹⁴

Similarly, Engels reported to Marx with great fervour that on the day of the execution of Felice Orsini [1819–1858], the Italian democrat who had tried to assassinate Napoleon III [1808–1873], a major working class protest took place in Paris: ‘at a time of great turmoil it is good to see such a roll-call take

¹⁰⁷ Karl Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle, 21 December 1857, p. 255.

¹⁰⁸ Karl Marx to Conrad Schramm, 8 December 1857, p. 217.

¹⁰⁹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 22 February 1858, p. 274.

¹¹⁰ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 23 January 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 252.

¹¹¹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 29 March 1858, p. 296.

¹¹² Translation: ‘I hate and shun the vulgar crowd’: David Mulroy, *Horace’s Odes and Epodes*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 127.

¹¹³ Karl Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle, 22 February 1858, p. 268.

¹¹⁴ Karl Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle, 31 May 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 323.

place and hear 100,000 men reply “present!”¹¹⁵ In view of possible revolutionary developments, he also studied the sizeable number of French troops and warned Marx that to win it would have been necessary to form secret societies in the army, or, as in 1848, for the bourgeoisie to stand against Bonaparte. Finally, he predicted that the secession of Hungary and Italy and the Slavic insurrections would have violently hit Austria, the old reactionary bastion, and that, in addition to this, a generalized counter attack would have spread the crisis to every large city and industrial district. In other words, he was certain that ‘after all, it’s going to be a hard struggle.’¹¹⁶ Led by his optimism, Engels resumed his horse riding, this time with a further aim; as he wrote to Marx: ‘Yesterday, I took my horse over a bank and hedge five feet and several inches high: the highest I have ever jumped [. . .] when we go back to Germany we will certainly have a thing or two to show the Prussian cavalry. Those gentlemen will find it difficult to keep up with me.’¹¹⁷ The reply was of smug satisfaction: ‘I congratulate you upon your equestrian performances. But don’t take too many breakneck jumps, as there will be soon more important occasion for risking one’s neck. I don’t believe that cavalry is the speciality in which you will be of the greatest service to Germany.’¹¹⁸

On the contrary, Marx’s life met with further complications. In March, Lassalle informed him that the editor Franz Duncker [1813–1879] from Berlin had agreed to publish his work in instalments, but the good news paradoxically turned into another destabilising factor. A new cause of concern added to the others – anxiety – as recounted in the umpteenth medical bulletin addressed to Engels, this time written by Jenny von Westphalen: ‘His bile and liver are again in a state of rebellion. [. . .] The worsening of his condition is largely attributable to mental unrest and agitation which now, after the conclusion of the contract with the publishers are greater than ever and increasing daily, since he finds it utterly impossible to bring the work to a close.’¹¹⁹ For the whole of April, Marx was hit by the most virulent bile pain he had ever suffered and could not work at all. He concentrated exclusively on

¹¹⁵ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 17 March 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, pp. 289–90.

¹¹⁶ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 17 March 1858, p. 289.

¹¹⁷ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 11 February 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 265.

¹¹⁸ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 14 February 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 266.

¹¹⁹ Jenny Marx to Friedrich Engels, 9 April 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 569.

the few articles for the *New-York Tribune*; these were indispensable for his survival, and he had to dictate them to his wife, who was fulfilling ‘the function of secretary’.¹²⁰ As soon as he was able to hold a pen again, he informed Engels that his silence was only due to his ‘inability to write’. This was manifest ‘not only in the literary, but in the literal sense of the word’. He also claimed that ‘the persistent urge to get down to work coupled with the inability to do so contributed to aggravate the disease’. His condition was still very bad:

I am not capable of working. If I write for a couple of hours, I have to lie down in pain for a couple of days. I expect, damn it, that this state of affairs will come to an end next week. It couldn’t have come at a worst time. Obviously during the winter I overdid my nocturnal labours. *Hinc illae lacrimae*.¹²¹

Marx tried to fight his illness, but, after taking large amounts of medicines without drawing any benefit from them, he resigned himself to follow the doctor’s advice to change scene for a week and ‘refrain from all intellectual labour for a while’.¹²² So he decided to visit Engels, to whom he announced: ‘I’ve let my duty go hang’.¹²³ Naturally, during his twenty days in Manchester, he carried on working: he wrote the ‘Chapter on Capital’ and the last pages of the *Grundrisse*.

6. Struggling against bourgeois society

Once back in London, Marx should have edited the text in order to send it to the publishers, but, although he was already late, he still delayed its draft. His critical nature won over his practical needs again. As he informed Engels:

During my absence a book by Maclaren covering the entire history of currency came out in London, which, to judge by the excerpts in *The Economist*, is first-rate. The book isn’t in the library yet [...]. Obviously I must read it before writing mine. So I sent my wife to the publisher in the

¹²⁰ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 23 April 1857, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 125.

¹²¹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 29 April 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 309. Translation: ‘Hence, those tears’. Terence, *Andria*, Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 2002, p. 99.

¹²² Karl Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle, 31 May 1858, p. 321.

¹²³ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 1 May 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 312.

City, but to our dismay we discovered that it costs 9/6d, more than the whole of our fighting funds. Hence I would be most grateful if you could send me a mail order for that amount. There probably won't be anything that's new to me in the book, but after all the fuss *The Economist* has made about it, and the excerpts I myself have read, my theoretical conscience won't allow me to proceed without having looked at it.¹²⁴

This vignette is very telling. The 'dangerousness' of the reviews in *The Economist* for family peace; sending his wife Jenny to the City on a mission to deal with theoretical doubts; the fact that his savings was not enough even to buy a book; the usual pleas to his friend in Manchester that required immediate attention: what can better describe the life of Marx in those years and particularly what his 'theoretical conscience' was capable of?

In addition to his complex temperament, ill health and poverty – his usual 'enemies' – contributed to delay the completion of his work even further. His physical condition worsened again, as reported to Engels: 'the disease from which I was suffering before leaving Manchester again became chronic, persisting throughout the summer, so that any kind of writing costs me a tremendous effort'.¹²⁵ Moreover, those months were marked by unbearable economic concerns that forced him constantly to live with the 'spectre of an inevitable final catastrophe'.¹²⁶ Seized by desperation again, in July, Marx sent a letter to Engels that really testifies to the extreme situation he was living in:

It behoves us to put our heads together to see if some way cannot be found out of the present situation, for it has become absolutely untenable. It has already resulted in my being completely disabled from doing any work, partly because I have to waste most of my best time running round in fruitless attempts to raise money, and partly because the strength of my abstraction – due rather, perhaps, to my being physically run down – is no longer a match for domestic miseries. My wife is a nervous wreck because of this misery. [...] Thus the whole business turns on the fact that what little comes in is never earmarked for the coming month, nor is it ever more than just sufficient to reduce debts [...] so that this misery is only postponed by four weeks which have to be got through in one way or another. [...] not

¹²⁴ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 31 May 1858, p. 317.

¹²⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 21 September 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 341.

¹²⁶ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 15 July 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 328.

even the auction of my household goods would suffice to satisfy the creditors in the vicinity and ensure an unhampered removal to some hidey-hole. The show of respectability which has so far been kept up has been the only means of avoiding a collapse. I for my part wouldn't care a damn about living in Whitechapel [the neighbourhood in London where most of the working class lived at the time], provided I could again at last secure an hour's peace in which to attend to my work. But in view of my wife's condition just now such a metamorphosis might entail dangerous consequences, and it could hardly be suitable for growing girls. [...] I would not with my worst enemy to have to wade through the quagmire in which I've been trapped for the past eight weeks, fuming the while over the innumerable vexations that are ruining my intellect and destroying my capacity for work.¹²⁷

Yet, despite his extremely destitute state, Marx did not let the precariousness of his situation triumph over him and, concerning his intention to complete his work, he commented to his friend Joseph Weydemeyer: 'I must pursue my goal at all costs and not allow bourgeois society to turn me into a money-making machine.'¹²⁸

Meanwhile, the economic crisis waned, and soon enough the market resumed its normal functioning.¹²⁹ In fact, in August, a disheartened Marx turned to Engels: 'over the past few weeks the world has grown damned optimistic again';¹³⁰ and Engels, reflecting on the way the overproduction of commodities had been absorbed, asserted: 'never before has such heavy flooding drained away so rapidly'.¹³¹ The certainty that the revolution was around the corner, which inspired them throughout the autumn of 1856 and encouraged Marx to write the *Grundrisse*, was now giving way to the most bitter disillusionment: 'there is no war. Everything is bourgeois.'¹³² While Engels raged against the 'increasing embourgeoisement of the English proletariat', a phenomenon that, in his opinion, was to lead the most exploitative country in

¹²⁷ Ibid. pp. 328–31.

¹²⁸ Karl Marx to Joseph Weydemeyer, 1 February 1859, p. 374.

¹²⁹ On the main events of the 1857 crisis, see James Sloan Gibbons, *The Banks of New-York, Their Dealers, Their Clearing-House, and the Panic of 1857*. New York: Appleton & Co., 1859, esp. pp. 343–99; D. Morier Evans, *The History of the Commercial Crisis, 1857–58*. New York: Burt Franklin, 1860; Charles W. Calomiris and Larry Schweikart, 'The Panic of 1857: Origins, Transmission, and Containment', *Journal of Economic History*, vol. 51 (1991), n. 4, pp. 807–34.

¹³⁰ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 13 August 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 338

¹³¹ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 7 October 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 343.

¹³² Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 11 December 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 360.

the world to have a 'bourgeois proletariat alongside the bourgeoisie',¹³³ Marx held onto every even slightly significant event, until the end: 'despite the optimistic turn taken by world trade [...], it is some consolation at least that the revolution has begun in Russia, for I regard the convocation of "notables" to Petersburg as such a beginning'. His hopes were also set on Germany: 'in Prussia things are worse than they were in 1847', as well as on the Czech bourgeoisie's struggle for national independence: 'exceptional movements are on foot amongst the Slavs, especially in Bohemia, which, though counter-revolutionary, yet provide ferment for the movement'. Finally, as if betrayed, he scathingly asserted: 'It will do the French no harm to see that, even without them, the world moved.'¹³⁴

However, Marx had to resign himself to the evidence: the crisis had not provoked the social and political effects that he and Engels had forecast with so much certainty. Nonetheless, he was still firmly convinced that it was only a matter of time before the revolution in Europe erupted and that the issue, if any, was what world scenarios the economic change would have provoked. Thus, he wrote to Engels, giving a sort of political evaluation of the most recent events and a reflection on future prospects:

We can't deny that bourgeois society has for the second time experienced its sixteenth century, a sixteenth century which, I hope, will sound its death knell just as the first flattered it in its lifetime. The real task of bourgeois society is the creation of the world market, or at least of its general framework, and of the production based on the market. Since the world is round, it seems to me that the colonisation of California and Australia and the opening up of China and Japan would seem to have completed this process. The difficult question for us is this: on the continent the revolution is imminent and will immediately assume a socialist character. Will it not necessarily be crushed in this little corner of the earth, since the movement of bourgeois society is still in the ascendant over a far greater area?¹³⁵

These thoughts include two of the most significant of Marx's predictions: a right one that led him to intuit, better than any of his contemporaries, the

¹³³ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 7 October 1858, p. 343.

¹³⁴ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 8 October 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 345.

¹³⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 8 October 1858, p. 347.

world scale of the development of capitalism; and a wrong one, linked to the belief in the inevitability of the proletarian revolution in Europe.

The letters to Engels contain Marx's sharp criticism of all those who were his political adversaries in the progressive camp. Many were targeted alongside one of his favourites, Proudhon, the main figure of the dominant form of socialism in France, whom Marx regarded as the 'false brother' communism needed to rid itself of.¹³⁶ Marx often entertained a relationship of rivalry with Lassalle, for instance, and when he received Lassalle's latest book *Heraclitus, the Dark Philosopher* (1858), he termed it as a 'very silly concoction'.¹³⁷ In September 1858, Giuseppe Mazzini published his new manifesto in the journal *Pensiero ed Azione* [Thought and Action], but Marx, who had no doubts about him, asserted: 'still the same old jackass'.¹³⁸ Instead of analysing the reasons for the defeat of 1848–49, Mazzini 'busies himself with advertising nostrums for the cure of [...] the political palsy' of the revolutionary migration.¹³⁹ He railed against Julius Fröbel [1805–1893], a member of the Frankfurt council in 1848–49 and typical representative of the German democrats, who had fled abroad and later distanced himself from political life: 'once they have found their bread and cheese, all these scoundrels require is some blasé pretext to bid farewell to the struggle'.¹⁴⁰ Finally, as ironic as ever, he derided the 'revolutionary activity' of Karl Blind [1826–1907], one of the leaders of the German émigrés in London:

He gets a couple of acquaintances in Hamburg to send letters (written by himself) to English newspapers in which mention is made of the stir created by his anonymous pamphlets. Then his friends report on German newspapers what a fuss was made by the English ones. That, you see, is what being a man of action means.¹⁴¹

Marx's political engagement was of a different nature. While never desisting from fighting against bourgeois society, he also kept his awareness of his main role in this struggle, which was that of developing a critique of the capitalist

¹³⁶ Karl Marx to Joseph Weydemeyer, 1 February 1859, p. 374.

¹³⁷ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 1 February 1858, p. 258.

¹³⁸ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 8 October 1858, p. 346.

¹³⁹ Karl Marx, 'Mazzini's new manifesto', in MECW, vol. 16, p. 37.

¹⁴⁰ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 24 November 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 356.

¹⁴¹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 2 November 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, p. 351.

mode of production through a rigorous study of political economy and ongoing analysis of economic events. For this reason, during the ‘lows’ of the class struggle, he decided to use his powers in the best possible way by keeping at a distance from the useless conspiracies and personal intrigues to which political competition was reduced at the time: ‘since the Cologne trial [the one against the communists of 1853], I have withdrawn completely into my study. My time was too precious to be wasted in fruitless endeavour and petty squabbles.’¹⁴² As a matter of fact, despite the flood of troubles, Marx continued to work, and – after he had carefully worked up the ‘Chapter on Money’ between August and October 1858 into the manuscript *Original Text of the Second and the Beginning of the Third Chapter of A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* – in 1859 he published his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, a short book with no public resonance for which the *Grundrisse* had been the initial testing ground.

Marx ended the year 1858 similarly to previous ones, as his wife Jenny recounts: ‘1858 was neither a good nor a bad year for us; it was one where days went by, one completely like the next. Eating and drinking, writing articles, reading newspapers and going for walks: this was our whole life.’¹⁴³ Day after day, month after month, year after year, Marx kept working on his *oeuvre*. He was guided in the burdensome labour of drafting the *Grundrisse* by his great determination and strength of personality, and also by the unshakeable certainty that his existence belonged to the movement for the emancipation of millions of women and men.

¹⁴² Karl Marx to Joseph Weydemeyer, 1 February 1859, p. 374.

¹⁴³ Jenny Marx, in Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus (ed.), *Mohr und General. Erinnerungen an Marx und Engels*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1964, p. 224.

The Polemic against Carl Vogt

1. *Herr Vogt*

In 1860, Marx was forced again to interrupt his work of political economy. The reason for this new suspension was a violent conflict with Carl Vogt [1817–1895]. Representative of the left in the National Assembly of Frankfurt during 1848–1849, Vogt was, at the time, professor of natural sciences in Geneva, where he lived in exile. In the spring of 1859, he published the pamphlet *Studies on the Present Situation in Europe*, which articulated a Bonapartist foreign-policy outlook.¹ In June of the same year, an anonymous flyer appeared which denounced the intrigues of Vogt in favour of Napoleon III, especially his attempts to bribe some journalists to furnish philo-Bonapartist versions of contemporary political events. The accusation – which was later shown to be the work of Karl Blind, a German journalist and writer who had emigrated to London – was taken up by the weekly *Das Volk* [The People], which counted Marx and Engels among its contributors, and by the Augsburg daily *Allgemeine Zeitung* [General Newspaper]. This induced Vogt to file a lawsuit against the German daily, which could not rebut the charge due to the anonymity in which Blind wished to remain. Although the libel suit failed, Vogt was the moral victor in the whole affair. Thus, in publishing his account of the events – *My Case Against the Allgemeine Zeitung* (1859) – he accused Marx of betraying the workers:

¹ In 1870, among the documents in the French archives published by the republican government after the end of the Second Empire, proof was found that Vogt was on the payroll of Napoleon III. The latter, in fact, remitted 40,000 francs from his secret fund to Vogt in August 1859. See *Papiers et correspondance de la famille impériale. Édition collationnées sur le texte de Vimprimerie nationale*, vol. II. Paris: Garnier Frères, 1871, p. 161.

He laughs at the fools who blindly repeat his proletarian catechism after him [. . .]. The only men he respects are aristocrats, those who are pure aristocrats, and are conscious of being so. To oust them from power he requires a force, which he can find only in the proletariat. This is why his system is tailored to fit that force.²

Vogt also wrote that Marx had inspired a plot against him, and he charged Marx of being the leader of the ‘Brimstone Gang’,³ a band that lived by blackmailing those who had participated in the revolutionary uprisings of 1848, threatening to reveal the names of those who had not paid them to be silent:

I say quite bluntly: everyone who engages in political machinations with Marx and his associates will sooner or later fall into the hands of the police. For these machinations are no sooner under way than they are made known and betrayed to the secret police and hatched out by them as soon as the time appears to be ripe. [. . .] The instigators, Marx & Co., are of course sitting in London out of reach.⁴

Vogt described the ‘Brimstone Gang’ as a group of ‘people who, after being scattered throughout Switzerland, France and England, gradually congregated in London, and there they revered Mr Marx as their visible leader.’⁵ According to Vogt, ‘their slogan [was] “Social Republic, Workers’ Dictatorship” [and] their business [was] establishing contacts and hatching plots.’⁶ The Genevan professor warned against:

the machinations of a small group of depraved men whose aims and efforts are all directed toward seducing the worker away from his job, implicating him in conspiracies and communist intrigues, and finally, after living from the sweat of his brow, driving him cold-bloodedly to his destruction. Now once again this small group is using every possible method to ensnare the workers’ associations in its toils. Whatever they may say, you may rest assured that their true aim [was] to exploit the worker for their own selfish ends and finally to abandon him to his fate.⁷

² Karl Marx, *Herr Vogt*, in MECW, vol. 17, p. 89.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁶ Carl Vogt, *Mein Prozess gegen die Allgemeine Zeitung: Stenographischer Bericht, Dokumente, und Erläuterungen*. Genf: Selbst-Verlag des Verfassers 1859, as quoted in Marx, *Herr Vogt*, p. 29.

⁷ Marx, *Herr Vogt*, p. 69.

In fact, Marx had not heard of this 'Brimstone Gang' before the appearance of Vogt's book. One of the most faithful and accurate statements about the real face of this group was written by the German revolutionary of 1848 Johann Phillipp Becker [1809–1886]:

This company, essentially a company of idlers, was referred to jestingly and mockingly as the Brimstone Gang. It was a club which consisted, as it were, of a motley crowd brought together by chance; it had neither president nor programme, neither statute nor dogma. There is no question of its having been a secret society, or of its having had any political or other goal to pursue systematically; they merely wanted to show off and that with openness and frankness that knew no bounds. Nor did they have any connection with Marx, who for his part could certainly have known nothing of their existence and whose socio-political views moreover diverged widely from theirs. [...] Who would have thought that after ten years' slumber the long-forgotten Brimstone Gang would be set alight once more by Professor Vogt in order to ward off imagined aggressors by spreading a foul stench which was then transmitted by obliging journalists with great enthusiasm.⁸

Besides having an echo in France as well as England, the London *Daily Telegraph* reported Vogt's accusations. Marx took his revenge later, when he had the chance to write what he thought about this British newspaper:

By means of an ingenious system of concealed plumbing, all the lavatories of London empty their physical refuse into the Thames. In the same way, every day the capital of the world spews out all its social refuse through a system of goose quills, and it pours out into a great central paper *cloaca* – the *Daily Telegraph*. Liebig⁹ rightly criticizes the senseless wastefulness, which robs the Thames of its purity and the English soil of its manure. [...] At the entrance, which leads to the sewer, the following words are written in sombre colours: '*Hic quisquam faxit oletum!*',¹⁰ or as Byron translated it so poetically, 'Wanderer, stop and – piss!'¹¹

Vogt's published account was quite successful in Germany and created a sensation in liberal newspapers: 'The jubilation of the bourgeois press is, of

⁸ Ibid., p. 61.

⁹ Justus von Liebig [1803–1873] was an important German chemist.

¹⁰ Translation: 'Here it is permitted to make bad odours!'

¹¹ Marx, *Herr Vogt*, p. 243.

course, unbounded.¹² Berlin's *National-Zeitung* [National Newspaper] published a summary in two long editorials in January 1860, and Marx consequently sued the newspaper for libel. However, the Royal Prussian High Tribunal rejected the complaint, declaring that the articles did not exceed the limits of allowed criticism and did not constitute an offence. Marx's sarcastic comment on the judgement was: 'like the Turk who cut off the Greek's head without intending to hurt him'.¹³

Not allowed to defend himself in open court, Marx decided that the dishonourable infamies directed against him and his 'party comrades' by Vogt required a 'literary refutation now that the road to a public rebuttal in the courts ha[d] been definitively barred'.¹⁴

Vogt's text skilfully mixed real events with others wholly invented, so as to plant doubts regarding the real history of emigration among those who were not acquainted with all the facts. In order to protect his reputation, Marx therefore felt obliged to organize his own defence, and so in late February 1860 he began to gather material for a book against Vogt. He adopted two paths. Above all, he wrote dozens of letters to militants with whom he had had political relationships during and since 1848, with the aim of obtaining from them all possible documents regarding Vogt.¹⁵ At the end of this work, Marx wrote of Vogt's skunk-like 'shameless impertinence' in accusing him and his

¹² Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 31 January 1860, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 13.

¹³ Marx, *Herr Vogt*, p. 272.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26. Moreover, the analysis of this 'concoction' gave Marx 'the opportunity to dissect an individual who stands for a whole trend', *ibid.*

¹⁵ On the importance of these letters as a means of political communication between the revolutionary militants of 1848–1849, and to comprehend the conflict between Marx and Vogt from a general perspective – that is, not only from Marx's own point of view, which is the main purpose of the present essay – see Christian Jansen, 'Politischer Streit mit harten Bandagen. Zur brieflichen Kommunikation unter den emigrierten Achtundvierzigern – unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Controverse zwischen Marx und Vogt', in Jürgen Herres and Manfred Neuhäus (eds), *Politische Netzwerke durch Briefkommunikation*. Berlin: Akademie, 2002, which examines the political motivations behind Vogt's support for Bonaparte. The chapter also includes an appendix, consisting of letters written by Vogt as well as others addressed to him. Also interesting, since they are free of the conventional and often doctrinal interpretation by Marxists, are the writings of Jacques Grandjón, and Hans Pelger, 'Gegen die 'Agentur Fazy/Vogt. Karl Marx' Herr Vogt', in *Marx-Engels-Forschungsberichte*, no. 6, 1990; Georg Lommels, 'Die Wahrheit über Genf: Quellen und textgeschichtliche Anmerkungen', in *Marx-Engels-Forschungsberichte*, vol. 1990, n. 6, pp. 37–68; and Lommels, 'Les implications de l'affaire Marx-Vogt', in Jean-Claude Pont, Daniele Bui, Françoise Dubosson and Jan Lacki (eds), *Carl Vogt (1817–1895). Science, philosophie et politique*. Chêne-Bourg: Georg, 1998, pp. 67–92.

friends, who had always sacrificed their 'private interests to defend those of the working class', of living 'from the sweat of the workers' brow':

In America there is a small animal called a skunk, which has only one method of defending itself at moments of extreme danger: its offensive smell. When attacked it releases a substance from certain parts of its body, which, if it touches your clothes, will ensure that they have to be burnt and, if it touches your skin, will banish you for a period from all human society. The smell is so horribly offensive that when hunters see that their dogs have accidentally started a skunk they will hurriedly take to their heels in greater panic than if they had found that a wolf or a tiger was pursuing them. For powder and lead is an adequate defence against wolves and tigers, but no antidote has been found to the a posteriori of a skunk.¹⁶

Beyond the many polemical passages, in order better to illustrate the politics of the principal European states and to reveal the reactionary role played by Bonaparte, Marx carried out vast studies on the political and diplomatic history of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁷ The latter is doubtless the most interesting part of the work and – along with the section reconstructing the history of the Communist League¹⁸ – the only part that still has value for the contemporary reader, beside the pleasure of (re)discovering Marx's rhetorical art.

At any rate, as was always the case with Marx, his studies greatly increased the size of the book, which grew 'without [his] noticing it'.¹⁹ Moreover, the time needed to complete the work kept increasing. In fact, although Engels urged him – 'Do try and be a bit superficial for once, so that you get it done in time'²⁰ – and wrote to Jenny Marx: 'We're forever producing truly splendid things, but take care to see that they never appear on time, and so they are all flops. [...] An immediate riposte to Vogt three sheets long would, after all, have been of far greater value than anything that has since been done. Insist for all you're

¹⁶ Marx, *Herr Vogt*, pp. 68–9.

¹⁷ This research resulted in the six notebooks containing passages from books, journals and newspapers of widely varying orientations. This material – still unpublished – is useful to see the way in which Marx used the results of his studies in his own writing. See in particular IISH, Marx-Engels Papers, B 93, B 94, B 95, B 96.

¹⁸ See Marx, *Herr Vogt*, pp. 78–99.

¹⁹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 6 December 1860, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 225.

²⁰ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 29 June 1860, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 170.

worth on something being done – and done immediately – about a publisher, and on the pamphlet 9 being finished at long last.²¹ – Marx decided to finish it only in September.

Marx had wanted to entitle the book ‘Dâ-Dâ-Vogt’²² to evoke the similarity of views between Vogt and the Bonapartist Arab journalist Dâ Dâ Roschaid, a contemporary. The latter, in translating Bonapartist pamphlets into Arabic on order of the Algerian authorities, had defined emperor Napoleon III as ‘the sun of beneficence, the glory of the firmament’²³ and to Marx nothing appeared more appropriate for Vogt than the epithet of ‘German Dâ-Dâ’.²⁴ However, Engels convinced him to opt for the more comprehensible *Herr Vogt*.

Further problems involved the book’s place of publication. Engels strongly urged publishing the book in Germany: ‘You must at all costs avoid having your pamphlet 6 printed in London. [...] The experience is one we have been through hundreds of times with émigré literature. Always the same ineffectuality, always money and labour gone down the drain – not to mention the irritation.’²⁵ Nevertheless, since no German publisher became available, Marx had the book published in London by Petsch, and, what is more, this was only made possible by a collection made to pay its expense. Engels commented that ‘printing in Germany [would have been] preferable and could undoubtedly have been arranged[;] a German publisher [being] in a much stronger position to break the conspiracy of silence’.²⁶

The rebuttal of Vogt’s accusations occupied Marx for an entire year, obliging him to completely neglect his economic studies, which according to his contract with the Berlin publishing house of Duncker were to continue with the sequel to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). Before the undertaking started, Engels understood its ‘dangerousness’. In January 1860, he had tried to convince Marx to concentrate exclusively on his work, which – in his opinion – would have been the only real instrument to defeat the opponents of the time and advance anti-capitalist theory:

²¹ Friedrich Engels to Jenny Marx, 15 August 1860, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 179.

²² Cf. Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 25 September 1860, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 197.

²³ Cf. Marx, *Herr Vogt*, pp. 182–3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 15 September 1860, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 191.

²⁶ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 5 October 1860, in MECW, vol. 41, pp. 204–5.

I believe that if, despite Vogt and Co., we are to keep our end up so far as the public is concerned, we shall do it through our scientific work. [...] In Germany itself direct political and polemic action, as our party understands it, is a sheer impossibility. So, what remains? Either we hold tongues or we make efforts that are known only to the immigration and the American Germans but not to anyone in Germany, or else we go on as we have begun, you in your first instalment [*A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*] and I in *Po and Rhine*. [...] The early appearance of your 2nd instalment is obviously of paramount importance in this connection and I hope that you won't let the Vogt affair stop you from getting on with it. Do try for once to be a little less conscientious with regard to your own stuff; it is, in any case, far too good for the wretched public. The *main* thing is that it should be written and published; the shortcomings that catch your eye certainly won't be apparent to the jackasses; and, when time becomes turbulent, what will it avail you to have broken the whole thing before you have even finished the section on capital in general? I am very well aware of all the other interruptions that crop up, but I also know that the delay is due mainly to your own scruples. Come to that, it's surely better that the thing should appear, rather than that doubts like these should prevent its appearing at all.²⁷

Despite these strong recommendations, the frenzy that drove Marx during this affair also infected those closest to him. His wife Jenny found *Herr Vogt* a source of 'endless pleasure and delight'; Lassalle greeted the text as 'a magisterial thing in every way';²⁸ Wilhelm Wolff said 'it is a masterpiece from beginning to end';²⁹ and even Engels declared the work to be 'the best polemic work you have ever written'.³⁰

Many acquaintances of Marx, as the letters included in *Herr Vogt* show, had tried to dissuade him from undertaking this work. The Russian journalist Nikolai Ivanovich Sazonov [1815–1862] asked Marx to

ignore all this wretched pettiness; all serious men, all scrupulous men are on your side, but they expect something other than sterile polemics from you;

²⁷ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 31 January 1860, pp. 13–14.

²⁸ Ferdinand Lassalle to Karl Marx, 19 January 1861, in MEGA², vol. III/11, p. 321.

²⁹ Wilhelm Wolff to Karl Marx, 27 December 1860, in MEGA², vol. III/11, p. 283.

³⁰ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 19 December 1860, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 231.

they would like to study the continuation of your admirable work as soon as possible. [...] Keep in good health and as in the past for the enlightenment of the world without concerning yourself with petty stupidities and petty acts of cowardly malice.³¹

Bartholomäus Szemere [1812–1869], former minister of the interior and head of the revolutionary Hungarian government of 1849, asked him: ‘Is it really worth your while to bother your head with all this tittle-tattle?’³² Finally, the teacher and political activist Peter Imandt tried to dissuade him by arguing: ‘I would not like to be condemned to write about it and I shall be most astonished if you can bring yourself to immerse your hand in such a brew.’³³

Marx’s principal biographers unanimously consider this work to have been a notable waste of time and energy.³⁴ One of its most striking features is Marx’s frequent use of literary references in his argument: for example, Pedro Calderón de la Barca [1600–1681], William Shakespeare [1564–1616], Dante Alighieri [1265–1321], Alexander Pope [1688–1744], Cicero [106 BC–43

³¹ Marx, *Herr Vogt*, p. 42.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³⁴ Recalling how various acquaintances of Marx had tried to dissuade him from undertaking this work, Franz Mehring [1846–1919] affirmed how ‘one would have hoped that he would have listened to these voices, [since] it blocked [...] his great life’s work [...] due to the costly waste of energy and time without any real gain’, Franz Mehring, *Karl Marx: The Story of His Life*, p. 296. Of the same mind, Karl Vorländer [1860–1928] wrote: ‘it is reasonable to doubt if, in this miserable affair which lasted a year, it was worth the effort to waste so much spiritual labor and so much money to write a small work of 191 pages crafted with so much wit, with sayings and quotations from all of world literature’, Karl Vorländer, *Karl Marx*, p. 189. Boris Nikolaevskii [1887–1966] and Otto Maenchen-Helfen [1894–1969] also reproached him: ‘Marx had employed more than a year to defend himself, by way of a libel suit, against the attempt to put an end to his political life [...] only toward the end of 1861 was he able to resume his work on economics’, Boris Nikolaevskii and Otto Maenchen-Helfen, *Karl Marx: Man and Fighter*, pp. 249–50. For David McLellan the polemic against Vogt ‘was a clear example of [Marx’s] ability to spend a great deal of energy on topics of very little importance and to waste his talent on invective’, David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and His Thought*, p. 311. Francis Wheen asks: ‘to respond to the slander published in the Swiss press by an obscure politician like Carl Vogt, was it really necessary to write a 200-page book?’ And he noted that ‘the economic notebooks lay closed on his writing desk while their owner distracted himself with a spectacular but unnecessary quarrel’, Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx: A Life*, pp. 152 and 238. In defence of Marx it must be said that Vogt was not an unknown figure, but among the major exponents of the Frankfurt National Assembly of 1848–1849. On a contrary note, Carver has challenged the ‘standard view’ of *Herr Vogt* that has ‘downgrad[ed] Marx’s contemporary political success as against the longer-term interest’ for theory, cf. Terrell Carver, ‘Marx and the Politics of Sarcasm’, in Marcello Musto (ed.), *Marx for Today*, pp. 127–8. Nevertheless, *Herr Vogt* was a fiasco and Marx could have defended himself more quickly.

BC], Matteo Maria Boiardo [1441–1494], Johann Fischart [1545–1591], Laurence Sterne [1713–1768] and various sources from Middle-High German literature. Otherwise who appear include: Virgil [70 BC–19 BC], figures from the Bible, Johann C. F. Schiller [1759–1805], George G. Byron [1788–1824], Victor Hugo [1802–1885], and, of course, his beloved Miguel de Cervantes [1547–1616], Voltaire, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Heinrich Heine and Honoré de Balzac.³⁵ However, these citations – and the precious time employed to insert them into the text – did not simply respond to Marx's wish to demonstrate the superiority of his culture as against that of Vogt, nor to an attempt to make the pamphlet more enjoyable to the readers through satire.

They reflect two essential characteristics of Marx's personality. The first is the great importance he attributed throughout his life to style and structure in his works, even in the minor or merely polemical ones, such as *Herr Vogt*. The mediocrity of the great bulk of the writings with which he clashed in so many battles, their inferior form, their uncertain and ungrammatical construction, their illogical formulations and the presence of many errors always aroused his indignation.³⁶ Thus, alongside the conflict over content, he inveighed against the intrinsic vulgarity and lack of quality in his adversaries' works and wanted to show them not only the correctness of what he wrote but also the best way of doing it.

The second typical characteristic, evidenced throughout the imposing preparatory work for *Herr Vogt*, is the aggressivity and unrestrained virulence, which he directed at his primary adversaries. Whether they were philosophers, economists or political militants, and whether they were called Bruno Bauer, Max Stirner, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Vogt, Lassalle or Mikhail Bakunin, Marx wanted in essence to destroy them, to demonstrate in every way possible the groundlessness of their concepts, to compel them to surrender by making it impossible for them to object to his assertions. Thus, under this impulse, he

³⁵ In this connection, see the reflections of Siegbert S. Praver, *Karl Marx and World Literature*. London: Verso, 2011, p. 264: 'In *Herr Vogt* Marx is incapable of treating any political or social phenomenon without referring to a work of world literature'; and his indication that this text can be studied as 'an anthology of the various methods adopted by Marx to incorporate literary allusions and quotations into his polemics', *ibid.*, p. 266. Also see Ludovico Silva, *Lo stile letterario di Marx*. Milan: Bompiani, 1973.

³⁶ On this point, see once again the brilliant observations of Praver, *Karl Marx and World Literature*, p. 261.

was tempted to bury his antagonists under mountains of critical arguments, and when he was seized by this fury to the point of making him lose sight even of his project of critique of political economy, then he no longer contented himself 'only' with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, David Ricardo or with citing historical events, but made use of Aeschylus [525 BC–456 BC], Dante Alighieri, William Shakespeare, and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

Herr Vogt was a kind of fateful coincidence of these two components of his character. A short circuit caused by one of the most glaring examples of the literary slovenliness so loathed by Marx, and by his will to destroy the enemy who, through lies, had threatened his credibility and attempted to sully his political history.

With this book, Marx hoped to create a sensation and did everything to get the German press to speak of it. However, the newspapers and Vogt himself paid absolutely no attention: 'the dogs [...] want to kill the thing with silence'.³⁷ Also, 'the appearance of a much abridged French version, which is now in press'³⁸ was blocked when the volume was the target of censorship and included in the list of prohibited books. During the lifetimes of Marx and Engels, no other edition of *Herr Vogt* appeared, and only short selected passages were reprinted.

2. Fighting misery and disease

Contributing to the delay of Marx's work and terribly complicating his personal situation were his two eternal sworn enemies: poverty and illness. This period, in fact, was one in which Marx's economic situation became truly desperate. Besieged by the claims of his many creditors and with the constant shadow of injunctions by the broker and the judicial official, on his door, he complained to Engels: 'how I shall continue to make shift here I can't imagine, for the rates, school, house, grocer, butcher and God knows what else are denying me any further respite'.³⁹ At the end of 1861, the situation became even more desperate,

³⁷ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 22 January 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 249.

³⁸ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 16 May 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 290.

³⁹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 29 January 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 252.

and to survive, aside from being able to count on the constant help of his friend – to whom he showed immense gratitude ‘for the outstanding proofs of friendship’⁴⁰ – Marx was obliged to pawn ‘everything that was not actually nailed down.’⁴¹ To his friend, as always, he wrote: ‘If I were quit of this wretched situation and did not see my family oppressed by miserable adversities, how overjoyed I would be at the fiasco of the Decembrist financial system, so long and so frequently prognosticated by me in the [*New-York*] *Tribune*.’⁴² And when, at the end of December, he sent him his New Year’s greetings, he said, ‘If it’s anything like the old one, I, for my part, would sooner consign it to the devil.’⁴³

The disheartening financial problems were promptly accompanied by health problems, to which the former contributed. The deep depression which affected Marx’s wife Jenny for many weeks, made her more vulnerable to contracting smallpox with which she was taken ill at the end of 1860, with serious risk to her life. Throughout the whole illness and convalescence of his companion, Marx was constantly at her bedside and only resumed his own activities when Jenny was out of danger. During this period, as he wrote Engels, work was completely out of the question: ‘the only occupation that helps me maintain the necessary quietness of mind is mathematics’⁴⁴ – one of the great intellectual passions of his life. Moreover, a few days later, he added that a circumstance that had ‘greatly helped [was] a severe toothache’. After extracting a tooth, the dentist had by mistake left a chip in his mouth, which gave him a face that was ‘swollen and painful along with a half-closed throat’. And how did this help him? Well, this is how, Marx in fact said stoically: ‘This physical pressure contributes much to the disablement of thought and hence to one’s powers of abstraction for, as Hegel says, pure thought or pure being or nothingness is one and the same thing.’⁴⁵ Despite these problems, these weeks afforded him the opportunity to read many books, among them Charles Darwin’s [1809–1882] *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*

⁴⁰ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 27 February 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 266.

⁴¹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 30 October 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 324.

⁴² Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 18 November 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 328.

⁴³ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 27 December 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 338.

⁴⁴ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 23 November 1860, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 216.

⁴⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 28 November 1860, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 220.

(1859), printed just one year previously. The comment in the letter Marx sent to Engels was destined to provoke discussion among armies of scholars and socialist militants: 'Although developed in the crude English fashion, this is the book which, in the field of natural history, provides the basis for our views.'⁴⁶

Following this period, at the beginning of 1861, Marx's condition worsened because of an inflammation of the liver that had affected him in the previous summer: 'I am as tormented as Job, though not as god-fearing.'⁴⁷ In particular, being bent over caused him great pain and he was forbidden to write. Thus, to overcome the 'highly disgusting condition, which incapacitate[d him to] work',⁴⁸ he took refuge again in literature: 'for recreation in the evenings I have been reading Appian's Civil Wars of Rome in the original Greek. A most valuable book. [...] Spartacus emerges as the most capital fellow in the whole history of antiquity. A great general (not a Garibaldi), of noble character, a real representative of the proletariat of ancient times.'⁴⁹

3. In the meantime 'Economics' waits

Having recuperated from his illness by the end of February 1861, Marx repaired to Zalt-Bommel in Holland to seek a solution to his own financial difficulties. There, he received help from his uncle Lion Philips [1794–1866], businessman and brother of the father of the future founder of the lamp factory, the ancestor of one of the world's most important producers of electrical equipment, who agreed to advance him 160 pounds sterling from his future maternal inheritance. From here Marx clandestinely went to Germany, where for four weeks he was Lassalle's guest in Berlin. Lassalle had repeatedly urged collaboration between the two on the founding of a 'party' organ, and

⁴⁶ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 19 December 1860, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 232. The debate on Marx and Darwin has for a long time been vitiated by the myth that Marx wanted to dedicate *Capital* to the English naturalist. In order to reconstruct correctly this affair, see Lewis S. Feuer, 'Is the "Darwin-Marx Correspondence" Authentic?', *Annals of Science*, vol. 32 (1975), n. 1, pp. 1–12; Margaret A. Fay, 'Did Marx Offer to Dedicate Capital to Darwin? A Reassessment of the Evidence', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 39 (1978), pp. 133–46; and Ralph Colp Jr., 'The Myth of the Darwin-Marx Letter', *History of Political Economy*, vol. 14 (1982), n. 4, pp. 461–82.

⁴⁷ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 18 January 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 247.

⁴⁸ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 22 January 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 250.

⁴⁹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 27 February 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 265.

now, with the amnesty decree of January 1861, the conditions were present for Marx to regain his Prussian citizenship – annulled after his expulsion in 1849 – and to move to Berlin. However, Marx’s sceptical view of Lassalle prevented the project from ever being seriously considered.⁵⁰ Back home from his journey, he described to Engels the German intellectual and militant in these terms:

Lassalle, dazzled by the esteem earned him in certain learned circles by his Heraclitus 19 and, in another circle, consisting of spongers, by his good wine and food, doesn’t know, of course, that he is of ill repute with the public at large. And then his intractability; his obsession with the ‘speculative concept’ (the fellow actually dreams of a new Hegelian philosophy raised to the second power, which he intends to write), his inoculation with early French liberalism, his arrogant pen, importunity, tactlessness, etc. If subjected to rigid discipline, Lassalle might be of service as one of the editors. Otherwise, we would simply make fools of ourselves.⁵¹

Engels’s judgement was no less sharp: ‘the man is incorrigible.’⁵² In any case, Marx’s request for citizenship was quickly rejected, and since he never had himself naturalized in England, he remained stateless for the rest of his life.

Marx’s correspondence supplies entertaining accounts of this German sojourn, which helps us to understand his character. His hosts, Lassalle and his companion Countess Sophie von Hatzfeldt [1805–1881], did their utmost to organize for him a series of activities, which only his letters show how deeply he detested. From a brief account of the first days spent in the city, we see him up against high society. On Tuesday evening, he was among the audience at a ‘Berlin comedy, full of Prussian self-glorification [...] altogether a disgusting affair’. On Wednesday, he was obliged to be present at three hours of ballet at the opera – ‘a really mortally boring thing’ – and, what is more, ‘horribile dictu’,⁵³ ‘in a box close to that of “handsome Wilhelm”’;⁵⁴ the King in person. On

⁵⁰ For more information on Marx’s stay in Berlin, see Rolf Dlubek, ‘Auf der Suche nach neuen politischen Wirkungsmöglichkeiten: Marx 1861 in Berlin’, *Marx-Engels Jahrbuch*, vol. 2004, pp. 142–75.

⁵¹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 7 May 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 281.

⁵² Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 6 February 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 257.

⁵³ Karl Marx to Antoinette Philips, 24 March 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, pp. 270–1.

⁵⁴ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 10 May 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 288.

Thursday, Lassalle gave a luncheon in his honour, at which some ‘celebrities’ were present. Anything but cheered by the occasion, Marx gave this description of his neighbour at table, the literary editor Ludmilla Assing [1821–1880]: ‘she is the most ugly creature I ever saw in my life, a nastily Jewish physiognomy, a sharply protruding thin nose, eternally smiling and grinning, always speaking poetical prose, constantly trying to say something extraordinary, playing at false enthusiasm, and spitting at her audience during the trances of her ecstasis.’⁵⁵ He wrote to Carl Siebel [1836–1868], Rhenish poet and distant relative of Engels: ‘I am bored stiff here. I am treated as a kind of lion and am forced to see a great many professional “wits”, both male and female. It’s awful.’⁵⁶ Later, he could not deny to Lassalle that for him cosmopolitan London exerted ‘an extraordinary fascination’,⁵⁷ although he admitted that he lived ‘a hermit’s life in this gigantic place.’⁵⁸ And so, having passed through Elberfeld, Bremen, Cologne, his own Trier, and then again through Holland, he arrived home at the end of April.

Awaiting him was his ‘Economics’. In June 1859, Marx had published the first instalment of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and was intending to follow it with a second as soon as possible. Notwithstanding his customary optimism – in September 1860 he wrote to Lassalle: ‘I think that second part may very likely come out before Easter’⁵⁹ – events ensured that two years would pass before he was able to return to his studies. He was profoundly frustrated and complained to Engels in July: ‘I’m not progressing as fast as I should like, owing to much domestic trouble’,⁶⁰ and again in December: ‘My writing is progressing, but slowly. Circumstances being what they were, there was, indeed, little possibility of bringing such theoretical matters to a rapid close. However, the thing is assuming a much more popular form, and the method is much less in evidence than in first part.’⁶¹

⁵⁵ Karl Marx to Antoinette Philips, 24 March 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 271.

⁵⁶ Karl Marx to Carl Siebel, 2 April 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 273.

⁵⁷ Karl Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle, 7 May 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 281.

⁵⁸ Karl Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle, 8 May 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 284.

⁵⁹ Karl Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle, 15 September 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 193.

⁶⁰ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 20 July 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 315.

⁶¹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 9 December 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 333.

4. Journalism and international politics

In the last phase of 1861, Marx resumed his collaboration with the *New-York Tribune* and wrote for the Viennese liberal daily *Die Presse* [The Press], a paper that was one of the most popular in the German language, with 30,000 subscribers and the largest circulation in Austria. Most of his correspondence in this period centred around the Civil War in the United States. In this war, according to Marx, ‘the struggle played out between the highest form of popular self-government ever realized up to now and the most abject form of human slavery known to history’.⁶² This interpretation makes clear, more than anything else can, the abyss that separated him from Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807–1882) who had refused the offer from the U. S. Union government to take up a command post in the army, because he felt that the war was only a power conflict and did not have to do with the emancipation of the slaves. Regarding this viewpoint and the attempted initiative at reconciliation between the two sides, Marx commented to Engels: ‘Garibaldi, the jackass, has made a fool of himself by a solidarity letter to the Yankees’.⁶³

In his articles, moreover, Marx analysed the economic impact of the American conflict on England, specifically examining the development of commerce, the financial situation, as well as the opinions running through English society. As regards this point, an interesting reference is also contained in a letter to Lassalle: ‘The whole of the official press in England is, of course, in favour of the slaveholders. They are the selfsame fellows who have wearied the world with their antislave trade philanthropy. But cotton, cotton!’⁶⁴

As always in the letters to Lassalle, Marx developed various reflections regarding one of the political themes on which he lavished his greatest attention in those days: the violent opposition to Russia and its allies Henry Palmerston [1784–1865] and Louis Bonaparte [1778–1846]. In particular, Marx made an effort to clarify to Lassalle the legitimacy of the convergence in this battle between their ‘party’ and that of David Urquhart, a Tory politician with

⁶² Karl Marx, ‘*The London Times on the Orleans Princes in America*’, in MECW, vol. 19, p. 30. On Marx’s conception of slavery see Wilhelm Backhaus, *Marx, Engels und die Sklaverei*. Dusseldorf: Schwann, 1974.

⁶³ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 10 June 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 293.

⁶⁴ Karl Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle, 29 May 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 291.

romantic views. Concerning the latter, who had the audacity to republish, for anti-Russian and anti-Whig purposes, Marx's articles against Palmerston, which had been published by the official organ of the English Chartists, he wrote:

He is [...] subjectively reactionary [...] this in no way precludes the movement in foreign policy, of which he is the head, from being objectively revolutionary. [...] It is to me a matter of complete indifference, just as in a war against Russia, say, it would be a matter of indifference to you whether, in firing on the Russians, the motives of your neighbour in the firing-line were black, red and gold or revolutionary.⁶⁵

Marx continued: 'It goes without saying that, in foreign policy, there's little to be gained by using such catchwords as "reactionary" and "revolutionary".'⁶⁶

The first known photograph of Marx dates back to 1861.⁶⁷ The image shows him standing with hands leaning on a chair in front of him. His thick hair is already white, while his dense beard is jet black. His resolute look does not betray the bitterness of the defeats he suffered and the many difficulties that gripped him, but rather the steadfastness that characterized him throughout his life. And yet, unease and melancholy touched even him who wrote in the same period the photograph was taken: 'To help overcome the intense annoyance I feel about my in every respect unsettled situation, I am reading Thucydides [460 BC–400 BC]. At least, these Ancients remain ever new.'⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Karl Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle, 1 or 2 June 1860, in MECW, vol. 41, pp. 152–3. Among the numerous studies dedicated to Marx's political conception of Russia see David Ryazanov, 'Karl Marx über den Ursprung der Vorherrschaft Russland in Europa', in *Die Neue Zeit*, 1909, n. 5, pp. 1–64; and Bernd Rabehl, 'Die Kontroverse innerhalb des russischen Marxismus über die asiatischen und westlich-kapitalistischen Ursprünge der Gesellschaft, des Kapitalismus und des zaristischen Staates in Russland', in Ulf Wolter (ed.), *Karl Marx. Die Geschichte der Geheimdiplomatie des 18. Jahrhunderts. Über den asiatischen Ursprung der russischen Despotie*. Berlin: Olle & Wolter, 1977, pp. 112–78. See also Bruno Bongiovanni, *Le repliche della storia*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1989, in particular pp. 171–89.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁶⁷ This is datable to the month of April; see MEGA², vol. III/11, 465.

⁶⁸ Karl Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle, 29 May 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 292.



Karl Marx in London, April 1861. Photo by Culture Club/Getty Images.



Karl Marx and his daughter Jenny in Margate, March 1866. Photo by Universal History Archive/UIG via Getty Images.



Karl Marx and his daughter Jenny in London, 1869. World History Archive/Alamy Stock Photo. Marx's daughter Jenny wore a cross commemorating the Polish insurrection of 1864.

Capital: The Unfinished Critique

1. Critical analysis of theories of surplus-value

In August 1861, Marx again devoted himself to the critique of political economy, working with such intensity that by June 1863 he had filled twenty-three sizeable notebooks on the transformation of money into capital; on commercial capital; and above all on the various theories with which economists had tried to explain surplus value.¹ His aim was to complete *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, which had been meant as the first instalment of his planned work. The book published in 1859 contained a brief first chapter, 'The Commodity', differentiating between use value and exchange value, and a longer second chapter, 'Money, or Simple Circulation', dealing with theories of money as unit of measure. In the preface, Marx stated: 'I examine the system of bourgeois economy in the following order: capital, landed property, wage labour; the state, foreign trade, world market'²

Two years later, Marx's plans had not changed: he was still intending to write six books, each devoted to one of the themes he had listed in 1859.³

¹ These notebooks total 1,472 quarto pages. See Friedrich Engels, 'Preface to the First German Edition', in Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume II, in MECW, vol. 36, p. 6.

² Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in MECW, vol. 29, p. 261.

³ Previously, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx had set forth a similar, though less precise, arrangement of the material, Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 108, at four separate points: pp. 108, 227–8, 264 and 275. He also anticipated the six-part schema planned for *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in two letters from the first half of 1858: one to Ferdinand Lassalle on 22 February 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, pp. 268–71; and one to Friedrich Engels on 2 April 1858, in MECW, vol. 40, pp. 296–304. Between February and March 1859, he also drafted a long preparatory index for his work, which in the English edition of *Grundrisse* became the 'Analytical Contents List', pp. 69–80. On the original plan and its variations, see the by now dated, but still fundamental work by Roman Rosdolsky, *The Making of Marx's Capital*. London: Pluto, 1977, pp. 1–62. More limited, however, is Maximilien Rubel, *Marx Critique du marxisme*. Paris: Payot, pp. 379 and 389, which claims that Marx did not change the original plan he devised in 1857.

However, from summer 1861 to March 1862, he worked on a new chapter, 'Capital in General', which he intended to become the third chapter in his publication plan. In the preparatory manuscript contained in the first five of the twenty-three notebooks he compiled by the end of 1863, he focused on the process of production of capital and, more particularly, on: (1) the transformation of money into capital; (2) absolute surplus value; and (3) relative surplus value.⁴ Some of these themes, already addressed in the *Grundrisse*, were now set forth with greater analytic richness and precision.

A momentary alleviation of the huge economic problems that had beset him for years allowed Marx to spend more time on his studies and to make significant theoretical advances. In late October 1861 he wrote to Engels that 'circumstances ha[d] finally cleared to the extent that [he had] at least got firm ground under [his] feet again'. His work for the *New-York Tribune* assured him of 'two pounds a week'.⁵ He had also concluded an agreement with *Die Presse* [The Press]. Over the past year, he had 'pawed everything that was not actually nailed down', and their plight had made his wife seriously depressed. But now the 'twofold engagement' promised to 'put an end to the harried existence led by [his] family' and to allow him to 'complete his book'.

Nevertheless, by December, he told Engels that he had been forced to leave IOUs with the butcher and grocer, and that his debt to assorted creditors amounted to one hundred pounds.⁶ Because of these worries, his research was proceeding slowly: 'Circumstances being what they were, there was, indeed, little possibility of bringing [the] theoretical matters to a rapid close.' But he gave notice to Engels that 'the thing is assuming a much more popular form, and method is much less in evidence than in Part I'.⁷

Against this dramatic background, Marx tried to borrow money from his mother, as well as from other relatives and the poet Carl Siebel. In a letter to Engels later in December, he explained that these were attempts to avoid constantly 'pestering' him. At any event, they were all unproductive. Nor was

⁴ These notebooks were ignored for more than a hundred years, before a Russian translation was finally published in 1973, in a supplementary Volume 47 of the Marx-Engels *Sochineniya*. An original German edition appeared only in 1976 in MEGA², vol. II/3.1.

⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 30 October 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 323.

⁶ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 9 December 1861, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 332.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

the agreement with *Die Presse* working out, as they were only printing (and paying for) half the articles he submitted to them.

Things took a further turn for the worse when the *New-York Tribune*, faced with financial constraints associated with the American Civil War, had to cut down on the number of its foreign correspondents. Marx's last article for the paper appeared on 10 March 1862. From then on, he had to do without what had been his main source of income since the summer of 1851. That same month, the landlord of his house threatened to take action to recover rent arrears, in which case – as he put it to Engels – he would be 'sued by all and sundry'.⁸ And he added shortly after: 'I'm not getting on very well with my book, since work is often checked, i.e. suspended, for weeks on end by domestic disturbances.'⁹

During this period, Marx launched into a new area of research: *Theories of Surplus Value* (1862–63).¹⁰ This was planned to be the fifth¹¹ and final part of the long third chapter on 'Capital in General'. Over ten notebooks, Marx minutely dissected how the major economists had dealt with the question of surplus value; his basic idea was that 'all economists share the error of examining surplus-value not as such, in its pure form, but in the particular forms of profit and rent'.¹²

In Notebook VI, Marx started from a critique of the physiocrats. First of all, he recognized them as the 'true fathers of modern political economy',¹³ since it was they who 'laid the foundation for the analysis of capitalist production'¹⁴ and sought the origin of surplus value not in 'the sphere of circulation' – in the productivity of money, as the mercantilists thought – but in 'the sphere of production'. They understood the 'fundamental principle that only that labour is productive which creates a surplus value'.¹⁵ On the other hand, being wrongly

⁸ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 3 March 1862, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 344.

⁹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 15 March 1862, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 352.

¹⁰ Between 1905 and 1910, Kautsky published the manuscripts in question in a form that deviated somewhat from the originals.

¹¹ It was to have followed: (1) the transformation of money into capital; (2) absolute surplus value; (3) relative surplus value; and (4) a section – one he never actually wrote – on how these three should be considered in combination.

¹² Karl Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63*, vol. I, in MECW, vol. 30, p. 348.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

convinced that ‘agricultural labour’ was ‘the only productive labour’,¹⁶ they conceived of ‘rent’ as ‘the only form of surplus value’.¹⁷ They limited their analysis to the idea that the productivity of the land enabled man to produce ‘no more than sufficed to keep him alive’.¹⁸ According to this theory, then, surplus value appeared as ‘a gift of nature’.¹⁹

In the second half of Notebook VI, and in most of Notebooks VII, VIII and IX, Marx concentrated on Adam Smith. He did not share the false idea of the physiocrats that ‘only one definite kind of concrete labour – agricultural labour – creates surplus value’.²⁰ Indeed, in Marx’s eyes one of Smith’s greatest merits was to have understood that, in the distinctive labour process of bourgeois society, the capitalist ‘appropriates for nothing, appropriates without paying for it, a part of the living labour’;²¹ or again, that ‘more labour is exchanged for less labour (from the labourer’s standpoint), less labour is exchanged for more labour (from the capitalist’s standpoint)’.²² Smith’s limitation, however, was his failure to differentiate ‘surplus-value as such’ from ‘the specific forms it assumes in profit and rent’.²³ He calculated surplus value not in relation to the part of capital from which it arises, but as ‘an overplus over the total value of the capital advanced’;²⁴ including the part that the capitalist expends to purchase raw materials.

Marx put many of these thoughts in writing during a three-week stay with Engels in Manchester in April 1862. On his return, he reported to Lassalle:

As for my book, it won’t be finished for another two months. During the past year, to keep myself from starving, I have had to do the most despicable hackwork and have often gone for months without being able to add a line to the ‘thing’. And there is also that quirk I have of finding fault with anything I have written and not looked at for a month, so that I have to revise it completely.²⁵

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 355.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 357.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 393.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 389.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

²⁵ Karl Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle, 28 April 1862, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 356.

Marx doggedly resumed work and until early June extended his research to other economists such as Germain Garnier and Charles Ganilh [1758–1836]. Then he went more deeply into the question of productive and unproductive labour, again focusing particularly on Smith who, despite a lack of clarity in some respects, had drawn the distinction between the two concepts. From the capitalist's viewpoint, productive labour:

is wage labour which, exchanged against the [...] part of the capital that is spent on wages, reproduces not only this part of the capital (or the value of its own labour capacity), but in addition produces surplus value for the capitalist. It is only thereby that commodity or money is transformed into capital, is produced as capital. Only that wage labour is productive which produces capital.²⁶

Unproductive labour, on the other hand, is 'labour which is not exchanged with capital, but directly with revenue, that is, with wages or profit'.²⁷ According to Smith, the activity of sovereigns – and of the legal and military officers surrounding them – produced no value and in this respect was comparable to the duties of domestic servants. This, Marx pointed out, was the language of a 'still revolutionary bourgeoisie', which had not yet 'subjected to itself the whole of society, the state, etc.':

illustrious and time-honoured occupations – sovereign, judge, officer, priest, etc. – with all the old ideological castes to which they give rise, their men of letters, their teachers and priests, are from an economic standpoint put on the same level as the swarm of their own lackeys and jesters maintained by the bourgeoisie and by idle wealth – the landed nobility and idle capitalists.²⁸

In Notebook X, Marx turned to a rigorous analysis of François Quesnay's [1694–1774] *Tableau économique* (1758).²⁹ He praised it to the skies, describing it as 'an extremely brilliant conception, incontestably the most brilliant for which political economy had up to then been responsible'.³⁰

²⁶ Karl Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63*, vol. I, in MECW, vol. 31, p. 8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

²⁹ Cf. Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 18 June 1862, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 381.

³⁰ Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63*, vol. I, in MECW, vol. 31, p. 240.

Meanwhile, Marx's economic circumstances continued to be desperate. In mid-June, he wrote to Engels: 'Every day my wife says she wishes she and the children were safely in their graves, and I really cannot blame her, for the humiliations, torments and alarms that one has to go through in such a situation are indeed indescribable'. Already in April, the family had had to re-pawn all the possessions it had only recently reclaimed from the loan office. The situation was so extreme that Jenny made up her mind to sell some books from her husband's personal library – although she could not find anyone who wanted to buy them.

Nevertheless, Marx managed to 'work hard' and in mid-June expressed a note of satisfaction to Engels: 'strange to say, my grey matter is functioning better in the midst of the surrounding poverty than it has done for years'.³¹ Continuing his research, he compiled Notebooks XI, XII and XIII in the course of the summer; they focused on the theory of rent, which he had decided to include as 'an extra chapter'³² in the text he was preparing for publication. Marx critically examined the ideas of Johann Rodbertus [1805–1875], then moved on to an extensive analysis of the doctrines of David Ricardo. Denying the existence of absolute rent, Ricardo had allowed a place only for differential rent related to the fertility and location of the land. In this theory, absolute rent was an excess: it could not have been anything more, because that would have contradicted his 'concept of value being equal to a certain quantity of labour time';³³ he would have had to admit that the agricultural product was constantly sold above its cost price, which he calculated as the sum of the capital advanced and the average profit.³⁴ Marx's conception of absolute rent, by contrast, stipulated that 'under certain historical circumstances [...] landed property does indeed put up the prices of raw materials'.³⁵

In the same letter to Engels, Marx wrote that it was 'a real miracle' that he 'had been able to get on with [his] theoretical writing to such an extent'.³⁶ His landlord had again threatened to send in the bailiffs, while tradesmen to whom

³¹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 18 June 1862, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 380.

³² Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 2 August 1862, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 394.

³³ Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861-63*, vol. I, in MECW, vol. 31, p. 359.

³⁴ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 2 August 1862, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 396.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 398.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 394.

he was in debt spoke of withholding provisions and taking legal action against him. Once more he had to turn to Engels for help, confiding that had it not been for his wife and children he would ‘far rather move into a model lodging house than be constantly squeezing [his] purse.’³⁷

In September, Marx wrote to Engels that he might get a job ‘in a railroad office’ in the New Year.³⁸ In December, he repeated to Ludwig Kugelmann [1828–1902] that things had become so desperate that he had ‘decided to become a “practical man”’; nothing came of the idea, however. Marx reported with his typical sarcasm: ‘Luckily – or perhaps I should say unluckily? – I did not get the post because of my bad handwriting.’³⁹ Meanwhile, in early November, he had confided to Ferdinand Lassalle that he had been forced to suspend work ‘for some six weeks’ but that it was ‘going ahead [...] with interruptions.’ ‘However,’ he added, ‘it will assuredly be brought to a conclusion by and by.’⁴⁰

During this span of time, Marx filled another two notebooks, XIV and XV, with extensive critical analysis of various economic theorists. He noted that Thomas Robert Malthus, for whom surplus value stemmed ‘from the fact that the seller sells the commodity above its value,’ represented a return to the past in economic theory, since he derived profit from the exchange of commodities.⁴¹ Marx accused James Mill of misunderstanding the categories of surplus value and profit; highlighted the confusion produced by Samuel Bailey [1791–1870] in failing to distinguish between the immanent measure of value and the value of the commodity; and argued that John Stuart Mill did not realize that ‘the rate of surplus value and the rate of profit’ were two different quantities,⁴² the latter being determined not only by the level of wages but also by other causes not directly attributable to it.

Marx also paid special attention to various economists opposed to Ricardian theory, such as the socialist Thomas Hodgskin. Finally, he dealt with the anonymous text *Revenue and Its Sources* (?) – in his view, a perfect example of ‘vulgar economics,’ which translated into ‘doctrinaire’ but ‘apologetic’

³⁷ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 7 August 1862, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 399.

³⁸ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 10 September 1862, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 417.

³⁹ Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 28 December 1862, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 436.

⁴⁰ Karl Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle, 7 November 1862, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 426.

⁴¹ Karl Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63*, vol. II, in MECW, vol. 32, p. 215.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 373.

language the 'standpoint of the ruling section, i.e. the capitalists.'⁴³ With the study of this book, Marx concluded his analysis of the theories of surplus value put forward by the leading economists of the past and began to examine commercial capital, or the capital that did not create but distributed surplus value.⁴⁴ Its polemic against 'interest-bearing capital' might 'parade as socialism', but Marx had no time for such 'reforming zeal' that did not 'touch upon real capitalist production' but 'merely attacked one of its consequences'. For Marx, on the contrary:

The complete objectification, inversion and derangement of capital as interest-bearing capital – in which, however, the inner nature of capitalist production, [its] derangement, merely appears in its most palpable form – is capital which yields 'compound interest'. It appears as a Moloch demanding the whole world as a sacrifice belonging to it of right, whose legitimate demands, arising from its very nature, are however never met and are always frustrated by a mysterious fate.⁴⁵

Marx continued in the same vein:

Thus it is interest, not profit, which appears to be the creation of value arising from capital as such [. . . and] consequently it is regarded as the specific revenue created by capital. This is also the form in which it is conceived by the vulgar economists. [. . .] All intermediate links are obliterated, and the fetishistic face of capital, as also the concept of the capital-fetish, is complete. This form arises necessarily, because the juridical aspect of property is separated from its economic aspect and one part of the profit under the name of interest accrues to capital in itself which is completely separated from the production process, or to the owner of this capital. To the vulgar economist who desires to represent capital as an independent source of value, a source which creates value, this form is of course a godsend, a form in which the source of profit is no longer recognisable and the result of the capitalist process – separated from the process itself – acquires an independent existence. In M-C-M' an intermediate link is still retained. In M-M' we have the incomprehensible form of capital, the most extreme inversion and materialisation of production relations.⁴⁶

⁴³ Ibid., p. 450.

⁴⁴ These are the final notebooks that form part of *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63*, vol. III.

⁴⁵ Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, vol. III, in MECW, vol. 32, p. 453.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 458.

Following the studies of commercial capital, Marx moved on to what may be thought of as a third phase of the economic manuscripts of 1861–1863. This began in December 1862, with the section on ‘capital and profit’ in Notebook XVI that Marx indicated as the ‘third chapter.’⁴⁷ Here Marx drew an outline of the distinction between surplus value and profit. In Notebook XVII, also compiled in December, he returned to the question of commercial capital (following the reflections in Notebook XV⁴⁸) and to the reflux of money in capitalist reproduction. At the end of the year, Marx gave a progress report to Kugelmann, informing him that ‘the second part’, or the ‘continuation of the first instalment’, a manuscript equivalent to ‘about 30 sheets of print’ was ‘now at last finished’. Four years after the first schema, in the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx now reviewed the structure of his projected work. He told Kugelmann that he had decided on a new title, using *Capital* for the first time, and that the name he had operated with in 1859 would be ‘merely the subtitle.’⁴⁹ Otherwise he was continuing to work in accordance with the original plan. What he intended to write would be ‘the third chapter of the first part, namely Capital in General.’⁵⁰ The volume in the last stages of preparation would contain ‘what Englishmen call “the principles of political economy”’. Together with what he had already written in the 1859 instalment, it would comprise the ‘quintessence’ of his economic theory. On the basis of the elements he was preparing to make public, he told Kugelmann, a further ‘sequel (with the exception, perhaps, of the relationship between the various forms of state and the various economic structures of society) could easily be pursued by others.’

Marx thought he would be able to produce a ‘fair copy’⁵¹ of the manuscript in the New Year, after which he planned to take it to Germany in person. Then

⁴⁷ Karl Marx, *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie (Manuskript 1861–1863)*, in MEGA², vol. II/3.5, pp. 1598–1675.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1682–1773.

⁴⁹ Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 28 December 1862, p. 435.

⁵⁰ See the index to the *Grundrisse*, written in June 1858 and contained in Notebook M (the same as that of the ‘1857 Introduction’), as well as the draft index for the third chapter, written in 1860: Marx, ‘Draft Plan of the Chapter on Capital’, in MECW, vol. 29, pp. 511–17.

⁵¹ Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 28 December 1862, p. 435. This statement seems to indicate that Marx realized how difficult it would be to complete his original project in six books. Michael Heinrich, ‘Reconstruction or Deconstruction? Methodological Controversies about Value and Capital, and New Insights from the Critical Edition’, in Riccardo Bellofiore and Roberto Fineschi (eds), *Re-reading Marx: New Perspectives After the Critical Edition*. Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009, p. 80.

he intended 'to conclude the presentation of capital, competition and credit'. In the same letter to Kugelmann, he compared the writing styles in the text published in 1859 and in the work he was then preparing: 'In the first part, the method of presentation was certainly far from popular. This was due partly to the abstract nature of the subject [...]. The present part is easier to understand because it deals with more concrete conditions.' To explain the difference, almost by way of justification, he added:

Scientific attempts to revolutionize a science can never be really popular. But, once the scientific foundations are laid, popularization is easy. Again, should times become more turbulent, one might be able to select the colours and nuances demanded by a popular presentation of these particular subjects.⁵²

A few days later, at the start of the New Year, Marx listed in greater detail the parts that would have comprised his work. In a schema in Notebook XVIII, he indicated that the 'first section [*Abschnitt*]', 'The Production Process of Capital', would be divided as follows:

- 1) Introduction. Commodity. Money.
- 2) Transformation of money into capital.
- 3) Absolute surplus value. [...]
- 4) Relative surplus value. [...]
- 5) Combination of absolute and relative surplus value. [...]
- 6) Reconversion of surplus value into capital. Primitive accumulation. Wakefield's theory of colonization.
- 7) Result of the production process. [...]
- 8) Theories of surplus value.
- 9) Theories of productive and unproductive labour.⁵³

Marx did not confine himself to the first volume but also drafted a schema of what was intended to be the 'third section' of his work: 'Capital and Profit'. This part, already indicating themes that were to comprise *Capital*, Volume III, was divided as follows:

- 1) Conversion of surplus value into profit. Rate of profit as distinguished from rate of surplus value.
- 2) Conversion of profit into average profit. [...]
- 3) Adam Smith's and Ricardo's theories on profit and prices of production.
- 4) Rent. [...]
- 5) History of the so-called Ricardian law of rent.
- 6) Law of the fall of the rate of profit.
- 7) Theories of profit. [...]
- 8) Division of profit into

⁵² Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 28 December 1862, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 436.

⁵³ Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63*, vol. III, in MECW, vol. 33, p. 347.

industrial profit and interest. [...] 9) Revenue and its sources. [...] 10) Reflux movements of money in the process of capitalist production as a whole. 11) Vulgar economy. 12) Conclusion. Capital and wage labour.⁵⁴

In Notebook XVIII, which he composed in January 1863, Marx continued his analysis of mercantile capital. Surveying George Ramsay [1855–1935], Antoine-Elisée Cherbuliez [1797–1869] and Richard Jones, he inserted some additions to the study of how various economists had explained surplus value.

Marx's financial difficulties persisted during this period and actually grew worse in early 1863. He wrote to Engels that his 'attempts to raise money in France and Germany [had] come to nought', that no one would supply him with food on credit, and that 'the children [had] no clothes or shoes in which to go out'.⁵⁵ Two weeks later, he was on the edge of the abyss. In another letter to Engels, he confided that he had proposed to his life's companion what now seemed an inevitability: 'My two elder children will obtain employment as governesses through the Cunningham family. Lenchen is to enter service elsewhere, and I, along with my wife and little Tussy, shall go and live in the same City Model Lodging-House in which Red Wolff once resided with his family'.⁵⁶ At the same time, new health problems had appeared. In the first two weeks of February, Marx was 'strictly forbidden all reading, writing or smoking'. He suffered from 'some kind of inflammation of the eye, combined with a most obnoxious affection of the nerves of the head'. He could return to his books only in the middle of the month, when he confessed to Engels that during the long idle days he had been so alarmed that he 'indulged in all manner of psychological fantasies about what it would feel like to be blind or insane'.⁵⁷ Just over a week later, having recovered from the eye problems, he developed a new liver disorder that was destined to plague him for a long time to come. Since Dr Allen, his regular doctor, would have imposed a 'complete course of treatment' that would have meant breaking off all work,

⁵⁴ Marx, *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63*, vol. I, in MECW, vol. 31, pp. 346–7. The first chapter had already been outlined in Notebook XVI of the economic manuscripts of 1861–63. Marx prepared a schema of the second in Notebook XVIII, see *ibid.*, p. 299.

⁵⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 8 January 1863, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 442.

⁵⁶ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 13 January 1863, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 445.

⁵⁷ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 13 February 1863, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 453

he asked Engels to get Dr Eduard Gumpert [?] to recommend a simpler ‘household remedy’.⁵⁸

During this period, apart from brief moments when he studied machinery, Marx had to suspend his in-depth economic studies. In March, however, he resolved ‘to make up for lost time by some hard slogging’.⁵⁹ He compiled two notebooks, XX and XXI, that dealt with accumulation, the real and formal subsumption of labour to capital, and the productivity of capital and labour. His arguments were correlated with the main theme of his research at the time: surplus value.

In late May, he wrote to Engels that in the previous weeks he had also been studying the Polish question⁶⁰ at the British Museum: ‘What I did, on the one hand, was fill in the gaps in my knowledge (diplomatic, historical) of the Russian-Prussian-Polish affair and, on the other, read and make excerpts from all kinds of earlier literature relating to the part of the political economy I had elaborated.’⁶¹ These working notes, written in May and June, were collected in eight additional notebooks A to H, which contained hundreds of more pages summarizing economic studies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁶²

Marx also informed Engels that, feeling ‘more or less able to work again’, he was determined to ‘cast the weight off his shoulders’ and therefore intended to ‘make a fair copy of the political economy for the printers (and give it a final polish)’. He still suffered from a ‘badly swollen liver’, however,⁶³ and in mid-June, despite ‘wolfing sulphur’, he was still ‘not quite fit’.⁶⁴ In any case, he returned to the British Museum and in mid-July reported to Engels that he had again been spending ‘ten hours a day working at economics’. These were precisely the days when, in analysing the reconversion of surplus value into capital, he prepared in Notebook XXII a recasting of Quesnay’s *Tableau*

⁵⁸ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 21 February 1863, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 460.

⁵⁹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 24 March 1863, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 461.

⁶⁰ See the more than sixty pages contained in IISH, Marx-Engels Papers, B 98. On the basis of this research, Marx began one of his many unfinished projects; see Karl Marx, *Manuskripte über die polnische Frage (1863–1864)*. S-Gravenhage: Mouton, 1961.

⁶¹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 29 May 1863, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 474.

⁶² IISH, Marx-Engels Papers, B 93, B 100, B 101, B 102, B 103, B 104 contain some 535 pages of notes. To these should be added the three notebooks RGASPI f.1, d. 1397, d. 1691, d. 5583. Marx used some of this material for the compilation of notebooks XXII and XXIII.

⁶³ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 29 May 1863, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 474.

⁶⁴ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 12 June 1863, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 479.

économique.⁶⁵ Then he compiled the last notebook in the series begun in 1861 – n. XXIII – which consisted mainly of notes and supplementary remarks.

At the end of these two years of hard work, and following a deeper critical re-examination of the main theorists of political economy, Marx was more determined than ever to complete the major work of his life. Although he had not yet definitively solved many of the conceptual and expository problems, his completion of the historical part now impelled him to return to theoretical questions.

2. The writing of the three volumes

Marx gritted his teeth and embarked on a new phase of his labours. From summer 1863, he began the actual composition of what would become his *magnum opus*.⁶⁶ Until December 1865, he devoted himself to the most extensive versions of the various subdivisions, preparing drafts in turn of Volume I, the bulk of Volume III (his only account of the complete process of capitalist production),⁶⁷ and the initial version of Volume II (the first general presentation of the circulation process of capital). As regards the six-volume plan indicated in 1859 in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx inserted a number of themes relating to rent and wages that were originally to have been treated in volumes II and III. In mid-August 1863, Marx updated Engels on his steps forward:

In one respect, my work (preparing the manuscript for the press) is going well. In the final elaboration the stuff is, I think, assuming a tolerably popular form. [...] On the other hand, despite the fact that I write all day long, it's not getting on as fast as my own impatience, long subjected to a trial of patience, might demand. At all events, it will be 100% more comprehensible than No. 1.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 6 July 1863, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 485.

⁶⁶ See Michael Heinrich, 'Entstehungs- und Auflösungsgeschichte des Marxschen *Kapital*', pp. 176–9, in Werner Bonefeld and Michael Heinrich (eds), *Kapital & Kritik. Nach der 'neuen' Marx-Lektüre*. Hamburg: VSA, 2011, pp. 176–9, which argues that the manuscripts from this period should be regarded not as the third version of the work begun with the *Grundrisse*, but as the first draft of *Capital*.

⁶⁷ Karl Marx, *Marx's Economic Manuscript of 1864–1865*, Fred Moseley (ed.). Leiden: Brill, 2015.

⁶⁸ 'No. 1': that is the 1859 *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 15 August 1863, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 488.

Marx kept up the furious pace throughout the autumn, concentrating on the writing of Volume I. But his health rapidly worsened as a result, and November saw the appearance of what his wife called the ‘terrible disease’ against which he would fight for many years of his life. It was a case of carbuncles,⁶⁹ a nasty infection that manifested itself in abscesses and serious, debilitating boils on various parts of the body.

Because of one deep ulcer following a major carbuncle, Marx had to have an operation and ‘for quite a time his life was in danger’. According to his wife’s later account, the critical condition lasted for ‘four weeks’ and caused Marx severe and constant pains, together with ‘tormenting worries and all kinds of mental suffering’. For the family’s financial situation kept it ‘on the brink of the abyss.’⁷⁰

In early December, when he was on the road to recovery, Marx told Engels that he ‘had had one foot in the grave’⁷¹ – and two days later, that his physical condition struck him as ‘a good theme for a short story’. From the front, he looked like someone who ‘regale[d] his inner man with port, claret, stout and a truly massive mass of meat’. But ‘behind on his back, the outer man, a damned carbuncle.’⁷²

In this context, the death of Marx’s mother obliged him to travel to Germany to sort out the legacy. His condition again deteriorated during the trip, and on the way back this forced him to stop off for a couple of months with his uncle Lion Philips, at Zaltbommel in the Netherlands. During this time, a carbuncle larger than anything before appeared on his right leg, as well as extensive boils on his throat and back; the pain from these was so great that it kept him awake at night. In the second half of January 1864, he wrote to Engels that he felt ‘like a veritable Lazarus [. . .], assailed on all sides at once.’⁷³

⁶⁹ In recent years, dermatologists have reviewed the discussion on the causes of Marx’s disease. Sam Shuster suggested that he suffered from hidradenitis suppurativa, in ‘The nature and consequence of Karl Marx’s skin disease’, *British Journal of Dermatology*, vol. 158 (2008), n. 1, pp. 1–3, while Rudolf Happle and Arne Koenig claimed even less plausibly that the culprit was his heavy smoking of cigars. ‘A lesson to be learned from Karl Marx: smoking triggers hidradenitis suppurativa’, *British Journal of Dermatology*, vol. 159 (2008), n. 1, pp. 255–6. For Shuster’s reply to this suggestion, see *ibid.*, p. 256.

⁷⁰ Jenny Marx, in Hans Magnus Enzensberger (ed.), *Gespräche mit Marx und Engels*. Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1973, p. 288.

⁷¹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 2 December 1863, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 495.

⁷² Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 4 December 1863, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 497.

⁷³ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 20 January 1864, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 507.

After he returned to London, all the infections and skin complaints continued to take their toll on Marx's health into the early spring, and he was only able to resume his planned work towards the middle of April, after an interruption of more than five months. In that time, he continued to concentrate on Volume I, and it seems likely that it was precisely then that he drafted the so-called 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production', the only part of the initial version that has been preserved.

Towards the end of May, new purulent growths appeared on his body and caused indescribable torments. Bent on continuing with the book at all costs, he again avoided Dr Allen and his urgings of a 'regular course of treatment', which would have disrupted the work he simply 'had to get done'. Marx felt all the time that 'there was something wrong', and he confessed his misgivings to his friend in Manchester: 'The tremendous resolution I have to summon up before I can tackle more difficult subjects also contributes to this sense of inadequacy. You excuse the Spinozistic term.'⁷⁴

The arrival of summer did not change his precarious circumstances. In the first days of July, he came down with influenza and was unable to write.⁷⁵ And two weeks later, he was laid up for ten days because of a serious pustulent lesion on his penis. Only after a family break in Ramsgate, in the last week of July and the first ten days of August, did it become possible to press on with his work. He began the new period of writing with Volume III: Part Two, 'The Conversion of Profit into Average Profit', then Part One, 'The Conversion of Surplus Value into Profit' (which was completed, most probably, between late October and early November 1864). During this period, he assiduously participated in meetings of the International Working Men's Association, for which he wrote the *Inaugural Address* and the *Statutes* in October. Also in that month, he wrote to Carl Klings [1828-?], a metallurgical worker in Solingen who had been a member of the League of Communists, and told him of his various mishaps and the reason for his unavoidable slowness:

I have been sick throughout the past year (being afflicted with carbuncles and furuncles). Had it not been for that, my work on political economy, *Capital*, would already have come out. I hope I may now complete it finally

⁷⁴ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 26 May 1864, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 530.

⁷⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 1 July 1864, in MECW, vol. 41, p. 545.

in a couple of months and deal the bourgeoisie a theoretical blow from which it will never recover. [. . .] You may count on my remaining ever a loyal champion of the working class.⁷⁶

Having resumed work after a pause for duties to the International, Marx wrote Part Three of Volume III, entitled ‘The Law of the Tendency of the Rate of Profit to Fall’. His work on this was accompanied with another flare-up of his disease. In November, ‘yet another carbuncle appeared below [his] right breast’⁷⁷ and confined him to bed for a week; it then continued to give him trouble when he ‘leaned forward to write.’⁷⁸ The next month, fearing another possible carbuncle on his right side, he decided to treat it himself. He confided to Engels that he was reluctant to consult Dr Allen, who knew nothing of his prolonged recourse to an arsenic-based remedy, and who would give him a ‘dreadful dressing-down’ for ‘carbuncle behind his back.’⁷⁹

From January to May 1865, Marx devoted himself to Volume II. The manuscripts were divided into three chapters, which eventually became parts in the version that Engels had printed in 1885: (1) The Metamorphoses of Capital; (2) The Turnover of Capital; and (3) Circulation and Reproduction. In these pages, Marx developed new concepts and connected up some of the theories in volumes I and III.

In the New Year too, however, the carbuncle did not stop persecuting Marx, and around the middle of February, there was another flare-up of the disease. He told Engels that, unlike in the previous year, his ‘faculties were not affected’ and he was ‘perfectly able to work.’⁸⁰ But such forecasts proved to be over-optimistic: by early March, the ‘old trouble [was] plaguing [him] in various sensitive and “aggravating” places, so that sitting down [was] difficult.’⁸¹ In addition to the ‘furuncles’, which persisted until the middle of the month, the International took up an ‘enormous amount of time’. Still, he did not stop work on the book, even if it meant that sometimes he ‘didn’t get to bed until four in the morning.’⁸²

⁷⁶ Karl Marx to Carl Klings, 4 October 1864, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 4.

⁷⁷ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 4 November 1864, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 12.

⁷⁸ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 14 November 1864, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 22.

⁷⁹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 2 December 1864, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 51.

⁸⁰ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 25 February 1864, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 107.

⁸¹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 4 March 1865, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 115.

⁸² Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 13 March 1865, in MECW, vol. 42, pp. 129–30.

A final spur for him to complete the missing parts soon was the publisher's contract. Thanks to the intervention of Wilhelm Strohn [?], an old comrade from the days of the League of Communists, Otto Meissner [1819–1902] in Hamburg had sent him a letter on 21 March that included an agreement to publish 'the work *Capital: A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*'. It was to be 'approximately 50 signatures⁸³ in length [and to] appear in two volumes.'⁸⁴

Time was short, and once in late April, Marx wrote to Engels that he felt 'as limp as a wet rag [...], partly from working late at night [...], partly from the diabolical muck [he had] been taking.'⁸⁵ In mid-May, 'a ghastly carbuncle' appeared on his left hip, 'near the inexpressible part of the body.'⁸⁶ A week later, the furuncles were 'still there', although fortunately 'they only trouble[d him] locally and [did] not disturb the brain-pan'. He made good use of the time when he was 'fit for work' and told Engels that he was 'working like a mule.'⁸⁷

Between the last week of May and the end of June, Marx composed a short text *Wages, Price and Profit* (1865).⁸⁸ In it, he contested John Weston's [?] thesis that wage increases were not favourable to the working class, and that trade union demands for higher pay were actually harmful. Marx showed that, on the contrary, 'a general rise of wages would result in a fall in the general rate of profit, but not affect the average prices of commodities, or their values.'⁸⁹

In the same period, Marx also wrote Part Four of Volume III, entitling it 'Conversion of Commodity-Capital and Money-Capital into Commercial Capital and Money-Dealing Capital (Merchant's Capital)'. At the end of July 1865, he gave Engels another progress report:

There are 3 more chapters to be written to complete the theoretical part (the first 3 books). Then there is still the 4th book, the historical-literary one, to

⁸³ Fifty signatures were equivalent to 800 printed pages.

⁸⁴ 'Agreement between Mr Karl Marx and Mr Otto Meissner, Publisher and Bookseller', in MECW, vol. 20, p. 361.

⁸⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 22 April 1865, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 148.

⁸⁶ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 13 May 1865, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 158.

⁸⁷ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 20 May 1865, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 159.

⁸⁸ This was published in 1898 by Eleanor Marx, as *Value, Price and Profit*. This commonly used title was taken as the basis for the German translation that appeared the same year in *Die Neue Zeit* [The New Times].

⁸⁹ Karl Marx, *Value, Price and Profit*, in MECW, vol. 20, p. 144.

be written, which will, comparatively speaking, be the easiest part for me, since all the problems have been resolved in the first 3 books, so that this last one is more by way of repetition in historical form. But I cannot bring myself to send anything off until I have the whole thing in front of me. Whatever shortcomings they may have, the advantage of my writings is that they are an artistic whole, and this can only be achieved through my practice of never having things printed until I have them in front of me in their entirety.⁹⁰

When unavoidable slowdowns and a series of negative events forced him to reconsider his working method, Marx asked himself whether it might be more useful first to produce a finished copy of Volume I, so that he could immediately publish it, or rather to finish writing all the volumes that would comprise the work. In another letter to Engels, he said that the 'point in question' was whether he should 'do a fair copy of part of the manuscript and send it to the publisher, or finish writing the whole thing first'. He preferred the latter solution, but reassured his friend that his work on the other volumes would not have been wasted:

[Under the circumstances], progress with it has been as fast as anyone could have managed, even having no artistic considerations at all. Besides, as I have a maximum limit of 60 printed sheets,⁹¹ it is absolutely essential for me to have the whole thing in front of me, to know how much has to be condensed and crossed out, so that the individual sections shall be evenly balanced and in proportion within the prescribed limits.⁹²

Marx confirmed that he would 'spare no effort to complete as soon as possible'; the thing was a 'nightmarish burden' to him. It prevented him 'from doing anything else' and he was keen to get it out of the way before a new political upheaval: 'I know that time will not stand still for ever just as it is now.'⁹³

Although he had decided to bring forward the completion of Volume I, Marx did not want to leave what he had done on Volume III up in the air. Between July and December 1865 he composed, albeit in fragmentary form,

⁹⁰ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 31 July 1865, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 173.

⁹¹ The equivalent of 960 pages. Later, Meissner signalled his openness to modify his agreement with Marx: see Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 13 April 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 357.

⁹² Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 5 August 1865, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 175.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

Part Five ('Division of Profit into Interest and Profit of Enterprise. Interest-Bearing Capital'), Part Six ('Transformation of Surplus-Profit into Ground-Rent') and Part Seven ('Revenues and Their Sources').⁹⁴ The structure that Marx gave to Volume III between summer 1864 and the end of 1865 was therefore very similar to the 12-point schema of January 1863 contained in Notebook XVIII of the manuscripts on theories of surplus value.

The lack of financial difficulties that had allowed Marx to forge ahead with his work was not to last long; they reappeared after a year or so had passed, and his health took another turn for the worse in the course of the summer. On top of this, his duties for the International were particularly intense in September, in connection with its first conference, in London. In October, Marx paid a visit to Engels in Manchester, and when he returned to London he had to face more terrible events: his daughter Laura had fallen ill, the landlord was again threatening to evict his family and send in the bailiffs, and 'threatening letters' began to pour in from 'all the other riff-raff'. His wife Jenny was 'so desolate' that – as he put it to Engels – he 'did not have the courage to explain the true state of things to her' and 'really [did] not know what to do'.⁹⁵ The only 'good news' was the death of a 73-year-old aunt in Frankfurt, from whom he expected to receive a small share of the inheritance.

3. The completion of Volume I

At the beginning of 1866, Marx launched into the new draft of *Capital*, Volume I. In mid-January, he updated Wilhelm Liebknecht [1826–1900] on the situation: 'Indisposition, [...] all manner of unfortunate mischances, demands made on me by the International Association etc., have confiscated every free

⁹⁴ This division was followed by Engels when he published *Capital*, Volume III, in 1894. See Carl-Erich Vollgraf, Jürgen Jungnickel and Stephen Naron, 'Marx in Marx's Words? On Engels' Edition of the Main Manuscript of Volume III of *Capital*', in *International Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 32 (2002), n. 1, pp. 35–78. See also the more recent: Carl-Erich Vollgraf, 'Das Kapital – bis zuletzt ein "Werk im Werden"' in *Marx-Engels Jahrbuch*, vol. 2012/13, pp. 113–33; and Regina Roth, 'Die Herausgabe von Band 2 und 3 des *Kapital* durch Engels', in *ibid.*, pp. 168–82. For a critical assessment of Engels's editing, see Michael Heinrich, 'Engels' Edition of the Third Volume of *Capital* and Marx's Original Manuscript', in *Science & Society*, vol. 60 (1996–1997), n. 4, pp. 452–66. A different point of view is contained in Michael R. Krätke, *Kritik der politischen Ökonomie Heute*. Hamburg: VSA, 2017, esp. the final chapter 'Gibt es ein Marx-Engels-Problem?'

⁹⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 8 November 1865, in MECW, vol. 42, pp. 193–4.

moment I have for writing out the fair copy of my manuscript.' Nevertheless, he thought he was near the end and that he would 'be able to take Volume I of it to the publisher for printing in March'. He added that its 'two volumes' would 'appear simultaneously'.⁹⁶ In another letter, sent the same day to Kugelmann, he spoke of being 'busy 12 hours a day writing out the fair copy',⁹⁷ but hoped to take it to the publisher in Hamburg within two months.

Contrary to his predictions, however, the whole year would pass in a struggle with the carbuncles and his worsening state of health. At the end of January, his wife Jenny informed the old comrade-in-arms Johann Philipp Becker that her husband had 'again been laid low with his former dangerous and exceedingly painful complaint'. This time it was all the more 'distressing' for him because it interrupted 'the copying out of his book that he [had] just begun'. In her view, 'this new eruption [was] simply and solely due to overwork and long hours without sleep at night'.⁹⁸

Just a few days later, Marx was struck by the most virulent attack yet and was in danger of losing his life. When he recovered enough to start writing again, he confided to Engels:

It was a close shave this time. My family did not know how serious the case was. If the matter recurs in that form three or four times more, I shall be a dead man. I am marvellously wasted away and still damned weak, not in the mind but about my loins and in my legs. The doctors are quite right to think that excessive work at night has been the chief cause of this relapse. But I cannot tell these gentlemen the reasons that *force* this extravagance on me – nor would it serve any purpose to do so. At this moment, I have all kinds of little progeny about my person, which is painful but no longer in the least dangerous.⁹⁹

Despite everything, Marx's thoughts were still directed mainly at the task ahead of him:

What was most loathsome to me was the interruption in my work, which had been going splendidly since January 1st, when I got over my liver complaint. There was no question of 'sitting', of course, [...]. I was able to

⁹⁶ Karl Marx to Wilhelm Liebknecht, 15 January 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 219.

⁹⁷ Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 15 January 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 221.

⁹⁸ Jenny Marx to Johann Philipp Becker, 29 January 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, pp. 570–1.

⁹⁹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 10 February 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 223.

forge ahead even if only for short periods of the day. I could make no progress with the really theoretical part. My brain was not up to that. I therefore elaborated the section on the 'Working-Day' from the historical point of view, which was not part of my original plan.¹⁰⁰

Marx concluded the letter with a phrase that well summed up this period of his life: 'My book requires all my writing time.'¹⁰¹ How much the more was this true in 1866.

The situation was now seriously alarming Engels. Fearing the worst, he intervened firmly to persuade Marx that he could no longer go on in the same way:

You really must at last do something sensible now to shake off this carbuncle nonsense, even if the book is delayed by another 3 months. The thing is really becoming far too serious, and if, as you say yourself, your brain is not up to the mark for the theoretical part, then do give it a bit of a rest from the more elevated theory. Give over working at night for a while and lead a rather more regular life.¹⁰²

Engels immediately consulted Dr Gumpert, who advised another course of arsenic, but he also made some suggestions about the completion of his book. He wanted to be sure that Marx had given up the far from realistic idea of writing the whole of *Capital* before any part of it was published. 'Can you not so arrange things,' he asked, 'that the first volume at least is sent for printing first and the second one a few months later?'¹⁰³ Taking everything into account, he ended with a wise observation: 'What would be gained in these circumstances by having perhaps a few chapters at the end of your book completed, and not even the first volume can be printed, if events take us by surprise?'

Marx replied to each of Engels's points, alternating between serious and facetious tones. With regard to arsenic, he wrote: 'Tell or write to Gumpert to send me the prescription with instructions for use. As I have confidence in him, he owes it to the best of "Political Economy" if nothing else to

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 223–4.

¹⁰¹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 10 February 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 224.

¹⁰² Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 10 February 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, pp. 225–6.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 226.

ignore professional etiquette and treat me from Manchester.¹⁰⁴ As for his work plans, he wrote:

As far as this 'damned' book is concerned, the position now is: it was ready at the end of December. The treatise on ground rent alone, the penultimate chapter, is in its present form almost long enough to be a book in itself.¹⁰⁵ I have been going to the Museum in the day-time and writing at night. I had to plough through the new agricultural chemistry in Germany, in particular Liebig and Schönbein, which is more important for this matter than all the economists put together, as well as the enormous amount of material that the French have produced since I last dealt with this point. I concluded my theoretical investigation of ground rent 2 years ago. And a great deal had been achieved, especially in the period since then, fully confirming my theory incidentally. And the opening up of Japan (by and large I normally never read travel-books if I am not professionally obliged to). So here was the 'shifting system' as it was applied by those curs of English manufacturers to one and the same persons in 1848–50, being applied by me to myself.¹⁰⁶

Daytime study at the library, to keep abreast of the latest discoveries, and night-time work on his manuscript: this was the punishing routine to which Marx subjected himself in an effort to use all his energies for the completion of the book. On the main task, he wrote to Engels: 'Although ready, the manuscript, which in its present form is gigantic, is not fit for publishing for anyone but myself, not even for you.' He then gave some idea of the preceding weeks:

I began the business of copying out and polishing the style on the dot of January first, and it all went ahead swimmingly, as I naturally enjoy licking the infant clean after long birth-pangs. But then the carbuncle intervened again, so that I have since been unable to make any more progress but only to fill out with more facts those sections which were, according to the plan, already finished.¹⁰⁷

In the end, he accepted Engels's advice to spread out the publication schedule: 'I agree with you and shall get the first volume to Meissner as

¹⁰⁴ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 13 February 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 227.

¹⁰⁵ Marx later inserted the section on ground rent into Part Six of Volume III: 'Transformation of Surplus Profit into Ground Rent'.

¹⁰⁶ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 13 February 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 227.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

soon as it is ready.’ ‘But,’ he added, ‘in order to complete it, I must first be able to sit.’¹⁰⁸

In fact, Marx’s health was continuing to deteriorate. Towards the end of February, two huge new carbuncles appeared on his body, and he attempted to treat them alone. He told Engels that he used a ‘sharp razor’ to get rid of the ‘upper one’, lancing ‘the cur’ all by himself. ‘The infected blood [. . .] spurting, or rather leapt, right up into the air’, and from then he thought of the carbuncle as ‘buried’, albeit in need of ‘some nursing’. As for the ‘lower one’, he wrote: ‘It is becoming malignant and is beyond my control. [. . .] If this diabolical business advances, I shall have to send for Allen, of course, as, owing to the locus of the cur, I am unable to watch and cure it myself.’¹⁰⁹

Following this harrowing account, Engels rebuked his friend more severely than ever before: ‘No one can withstand such a chronic succession of carbuncles for long, apart from the fact that eventually you may get one that becomes so acute as to be the end of you. And where will your book and your family be then?’¹¹⁰ To give Marx some relief, he said he was prepared to make any financial sacrifice. Begging him to be ‘sensible’, he suggested a period of total rest:

Do me and your family the one favour of getting yourself cured. What would become of the whole movement if anything were to happen to you, and the way you are proceeding, that will be the inevitable outcome. I really shall not have any peace day or night until I have got you over this business, and every day that passes without my hearing anything from you, I worry and imagine you are worse again. *Nota bene*. You should never again let things come to such a pass that a carbuncle which actually ought to be lanced, is not lanced. That is extremely dangerous.¹¹¹

Finally, Marx let himself be persuaded to take a break from work. On 15 March he travelled to Margate, a seaside resort in Kent, and on the tenth day sent back a report about himself: ‘I am reading nothing, am writing nothing. The mere fact of having to take the arsenic three times a day obliges one to arrange one’s time for meals and for strolling. [. . .] As regards company here, it does not

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 20 February 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 231.

¹¹⁰ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 22 February 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 233.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 233–4.

exist, of course. I can sing with the Miller of the Dee¹¹²: “I care for nobody and nobody cares for me.”¹¹³

Early in April, Marx told his friend Kugelmann that he was ‘much recovered’. But he complained that, because of the interruption, ‘another two months and more’ had been entirely lost, and the completion of his book ‘put back once more.’¹¹⁴ After his return to London, he remained at a standstill for another few weeks because of an attack of rheumatism and other troubles; his body was still exhausted and vulnerable. Although he reported to Engels in early June that ‘there has fortunately been no recurrence of anything carbuncular,’¹¹⁵ he was unhappy that his work had ‘been progressing poorly owing to purely physical factors.’¹¹⁶

In July, Marx had to confront what had become his three habitual enemies: Livy’s *periculum in mora* (danger in delay) in the shape of rent arrears; the carbuncles, with a new one ready to flare up; and an ailing liver. In August, he reassured Engels that, although his health ‘fluctuate[d] from one day to the next’, he felt generally better: after all, ‘the feeling of being fit to work again does much for a man.’¹¹⁷ He was ‘threatened with new carbuncles here and there’, and although they ‘kept disappearing’ without the need for urgent intervention they had obliged him to keep his ‘hours of work very much within limits.’¹¹⁸ On the same day, he wrote to Kugelmann: ‘I do not think I shall be able to deliver the manuscript of the first volume (it has now grown to 3 volumes) to Hamburg before October. I can only work productively for a very few hours per day without immediately feeling the effects physically.’¹¹⁹

This time too, Marx was being excessively optimistic. The steady stream of negative phenomena to which he was daily exposed in the struggle to survive once more proved an obstacle to the completion of his text. Furthermore, he had to spend precious time looking for ways to extract small sums of money from the pawnshop and to escape the tortuous circle of promissory notes in which he had landed.

¹¹² A traditional English folk song.

¹¹³ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 24 March 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 249.

¹¹⁴ Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 6 April 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 262.

¹¹⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 7 June 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 281.

¹¹⁶ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 9 June 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 282.

¹¹⁷ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 7 August 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 303.

¹¹⁸ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 23 August 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 311.

¹¹⁹ Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 23 August 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 312.

Writing to Kugelmann in mid-October, Marx expressed a fear that as a result of his long illness, and all the expenses it had entailed, he could no longer 'keep the creditors at bay' and the house was 'about to come crashing down about [his] ears'.¹²⁰ Not even in October, therefore, was it possible for him to put the finishing touches to the manuscript. In describing the state of things to his friend in Hannover, and explaining the reasons for the delay, Marx set out the plan he now had in mind:

My circumstances (endless interruptions, both physical and social) oblige me to publish Volume I first, not both volumes together, as I had originally intended. And there will now probably be 3 volumes. The whole work is thus divided into the following parts:

- Book I. The Process of Production of Capital.
- Book II. The Process of Circulation of Capital.
- Book III. Structure of the Process as a Whole.
- Book IV. On the History of the Theory.

The first volume will include the first 2 books. The 3rd book will, I believe, fill the second volume, the 4th the 3rd.¹²¹

Reviewing the work he had done since the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, published in 1859, Marx continued:

It was, in my opinion, necessary to begin again from the beginning in the first book, i.e., to summarize the book of mine published by Duncker in one chapter on commodities and money. I judged this to be necessary, not merely for the sake of completeness, but because even intelligent people did not properly understand the question, in other words, there must have been defects in the first presentation, especially in the analysis of commodities.¹²²

Extreme poverty marked the month of November, too. Referring to a terrible everyday life that allowed no respite, Marx wrote to Engels: 'Not merely has my work been frequently interrupted by all this, but by trying to make up at night for the time lost during the day, I have acquired a fine carbuncle near my penis.'¹²³ But he was keen to point out that 'this summer and autumn it was

¹²⁰ Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 13 October 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 328.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., pp. 328–9.

¹²³ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 8 November 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 331.

really not the theory which caused the delay, but [his] physical and civil condition'. If he had been in good health, he would have been able to complete the work. He reminded Engels that it was three years since 'the first carbuncle had been lanced' – years in which he had had 'only short periods' of relief from it.¹²⁴ Moreover, having been forced to expend so much time and energy on the daily struggle with poverty, he remarked in December: 'I only regret that private persons cannot file their bills for the bankruptcy court with the same propriety as men of business.'

The situation did not change all winter, and in late February 1867, Marx wrote to his friend in Manchester (who had never failed to send him whatever he could): 'A grocer is sending the bailiffs in on Saturday (the day after tomorrow) if I do not pay him at least £5. [. . .] The work will soon be complete, and would have been so today if I had been subject to less harassment of late.'¹²⁵

At the end of February 1867, Marx was finally able to give Engels the long-awaited news that the book was finished. Now he had to take it to Germany, and once again he was forced to turn to his friend so that he could redeem his 'clothes and timepiece from their abode at the pawnbroker's';¹²⁶ otherwise he would not have been able to leave.

Having arrived in Hamburg, Marx discussed with Engels the new plan proposed by Meissner:

He now wants that the book should appear in 3 volumes. In particular he is opposed to my compressing the final book (the historico-literary part) as I had intended. He said that from the publishing point of view [. . .] this was the part by which he was setting most store. I told him that as far as that was concerned, I was his to command.¹²⁷

A few days later, he gave a similar report to Becker: 'The whole work will appear in 3 volumes. The title is *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*. The first volume comprises the First Book: "The Process of Production of Capital". It is without question the most terrible missile that has yet been hurled at the heads of the bourgeoisie (landowners included).'¹²⁸ After a few days in

¹²⁴ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 10 November 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 332.

¹²⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 21 February 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 347.

¹²⁶ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 2 April 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 351.

¹²⁷ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 13 April 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 357.

¹²⁸ Karl Marx to Johann Philipp Becker, 17 April 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 358.

Hamburg, Marx travelled on to Hannover. He stayed there as the guest of Kugelmann, who finally got to know him after years of purely epistolary relations. Marx remained available there in case Meissner wanted him to help out with the proofreading. Marx wrote to Engels that his health was 'extraordinarily improved'. There was 'no trace of the old complaint' or his 'liver trouble', and 'what is more, [he was] in good spirits'.¹²⁹ His friend replied from Manchester:

I always had the feeling that that damn book, which you have been carrying for so long, was at the bottom of all your misfortune, and you would and could never extricate yourself until you had got it off your back. Forever resisting completion, it was driving you physically, mentally and financially into the ground, and I can very well understand that, having shaken off that nightmare, you now feel quite a new man.¹³⁰

Marx wanted to fill others in about the forthcoming publication of his work. To Sigfrid Meyer [1840–1872], a German socialist member of the International active in organizing the workers' movement in New York, he wrote: 'Volume I comprises the Process of Production of Capital. [...] Volume II contains the continuation and conclusion of the theory, Volume III the history of political economy from the middle of the 17th century'.¹³¹

In mid-June, Engels became involved in correction of the text for publication. He thought that, compared with the 1859 *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 'the dialectic of the argument ha[d] been greatly sharpened'.¹³² Marx was heartened by this approval: 'That you have been satisfied with it so far is more important to me than anything the rest of the world may say of it'.¹³³ However, Engels noted that his exposition of the form of value was excessively abstract and insufficiently clear for the average reader; he also regretted that precisely this important section had 'the marks of the carbuncles rather firmly stamped upon it'.¹³⁴ In reply, Marx fulminated against the cause of his physical torments – 'I hope the bourgeoisie

¹²⁹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 24 April 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 361.

¹³⁰ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 27 April 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 362.

¹³¹ Karl Marx to Sigfrid Meyer, 30 April 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 367.

¹³² Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 16 June 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 381.

¹³³ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 22 June 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 383.

¹³⁴ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 16 June 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 380.

will remember my carbuncles until their dying day¹³⁵ – and convinced himself of the need for an appendix presenting his conception of the form of value in a more popular form. This twenty-page addition was completed by the end of June.

Marx completed the proof corrections at 2:00 a.m. on 1 August 1867. A few minutes later, he wrote to his friend in Manchester: ‘Dear Fred: Have just finished correcting the last sheet [. . .]. So, this volume is finished. I owe it to you alone that it was possible! [. . .] I embrace you, full of thanks.’¹³⁶ A few days later, in another letter to Engels, he summarized what he regarded as the two main pillars of the book: ‘1. (this is fundamental to all understanding of the facts) the twofold character of labour according to whether it is expressed in use value or exchange value, which is brought out in the very First Chapter; 2. the treatment of surplus value regardless of its particular forms as profit, interest, ground rent, etc.’¹³⁷

Capital was put on sale on 14 September 1867.¹³⁸ Following the final modifications, the table of contents was as follows:

Preface

1. Commodity and money
 2. The transformation of money into capital
 3. The production of absolute surplus value
 4. The production of relative surplus value
 5. Further research on the production of absolute and relative surplus value
 6. The process of accumulation of capital
- Appendix to Part 1, 1: The form of value.¹⁴⁰

Despite the long correction process and the final addition, the structure of the work would be considerably expanded over the coming years, and various further modifications would be made to the text. Volume I therefore continued to absorb significant energies on Marx’s part even after its publication.

¹³⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 22 June 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 383.

¹³⁶ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 16 August 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 405.

¹³⁷ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 24 August 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 407.

¹³⁸ The distribution to the bookstores began on September 11th. See Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie. Erster Band, Hamburg 1867*, in MEGA², vol. II/5, p. 674.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

4. In search of the definitive version

In October 1867, Marx returned to Volume II. But this brought a recurrence of his medical complaints: liver pains, insomnia, and the blossoming of ‘two small carbuncles near the *membrum*’. Nor did the ‘incursions from without’ or the ‘aggravations of home life’ leave off; there was a certain bitterness in his sage remark to Engels that ‘my sickness always originates in the mind.’¹⁴⁰ As always, his friend helped out and sent all the money he could, together with a hope that it ‘drives away the carbuncles.’¹⁴¹ That is not what happened, though, and in late November Marx wrote to say: ‘The state of my health has greatly worsened, and there has been virtually no question of working.’¹⁴²

The New Year, 1868, began much as the old one had ended. During the first weeks of January, Marx was even unable to attend to his correspondence. His wife Jenny confided to Becker that her ‘poor husband ha[d] once again been laid up and fettered hand and foot by his old, serious and painful complaint, which [was] becoming dangerous through its constant recurrence.’¹⁴³ A few days later, his daughter Laura reported to Engels: ‘Moor is once more being victimized by his old enemies, the carbuncles, and is, by the arrival of the latest, made to feel very ill at ease in a sitting posture.’¹⁴⁴ Marx began to write again only towards the end of the month, when he told Engels that ‘for 2–3 weeks’ he would ‘do absolutely no work’; ‘it would be dreadful,’ he added, ‘if a third monster were to erupt.’¹⁴⁵

The state of Marx’s health continued to fluctuate. In late March, he reported to Engels that it was such that he should ‘really give up working and thinking entirely for some time’. But he added that that would be ‘hard’ for him, even if he had ‘the means to loaf around.’¹⁴⁶ The new interruption came just as he was recommencing work on the second version of Volume II – after a gap of nearly three years since the first half of 1865. He completed the first

¹⁴⁰ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 19 October 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 453.

¹⁴¹ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 22 October 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 457.

¹⁴² Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 27 November 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 477.

¹⁴³ Jenny Marx to Johann Philipp Becker, ‘After 10 January 1868’, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 580.

¹⁴⁴ Laura Marx to Friedrich Engels, 13 January 1868, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 583.

¹⁴⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 25 January 1868, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 528.

¹⁴⁶ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 25 March 1868, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 557.

two chapters in the course of the spring,¹⁴⁷ in addition to a group of preparatory manuscripts – on the relationship between surplus value and rate of profit, the law of the rate of profit, and the metamorphoses of capital – which occupied him until the end of 1868.¹⁴⁸

At the end of April 1868, Marx sent Engels a new schema for his work, with particular reference to ‘the method by which the rate of profit is developed’.¹⁴⁹ In the same letter, he made it clear that Volume II would present the ‘process of circulation of capital on the basis of the premises developed’ in Volume I. He intended to set out, in as satisfactory a manner as possible, the ‘formal determinations’ of fixed capital, circulating capital and the turnover of capital – and hence to investigate ‘the social intertwining of the different capitals, of parts of capital and of revenue (=m)’. Volume III would then ‘the conversion of surplus value into its different forms and separate component parts’.¹⁵⁰

In May, however, the health problems were back, and after a period of silence Marx explained to Engels that ‘two carbuncles on the scrotum would perhaps have made even Sulla peevish’.¹⁵¹ In the second week of August, he told Kugelmann of his hope to finish the entire work by ‘the end of September’ 1869.¹⁵² But the autumn brought an outbreak of carbuncles, and in spring 1869, when Marx was still working on the third chapter of Volume II,¹⁵³ his liver took yet another turn for the worse. His misfortunes continued in the following years, with troublesome regularity, and prevented him from ever completing Volume II.

There were also theoretical reasons for the delay. From autumn 1868 to spring 1869, determined to get on top of the latest developments in capitalism, Marx compiled copious excerpts from texts on the finance and money markets

¹⁴⁷ Karl Marx, ‘Manuskripte zum zweiten Buch des “Kapitals” 1868 bis 1881’, in MEGA², vol. II/11, pp. 1–339.

¹⁴⁸ These texts have recently been published in Karl Marx, *Ökonomische Manuskripte 1863–1868*, in MEGA², vol. II/4.3, pp. 78–234 and pp. 285–363. The last part constitutes Manuscript IV of Volume II and contains new versions of Part One, ‘The Circulation of Capital’, and Part Two, ‘The Metamorphoses of Capital’.

¹⁴⁹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 30 April 1868, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 21.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 16 May 1868, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 35.

¹⁵² Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 10 August 1868, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 82.

¹⁵³ Marx, ‘Manuskripte zum zweiten Buch des “Kapitals” 1868 bis 1881’, in MEGA², vol. II/11, pp. 340–522.

that appeared in *The Money Market Review*, *The Economist* and similar publications.¹⁵⁴ Moreover, in autumn 1869, having become aware of new (in reality, insignificant) literature about changes in Russia, he decided to learn Russian so that he could study it for himself. He pursued this new interest with his usual rigour, and in early 1870 Jenny told Engels that, ‘instead of looking after himself, [he had begun] to study Russian hammer and tongs, went out seldom, ate infrequently, and only showed the carbuncle under his arm when it was already very swollen and had hardened’.¹⁵⁵ Engels hastened to write to his friend, trying to persuade him that ‘in the interests of the Volume II’ he needed ‘a change of life-style’; otherwise, if there was ‘constant repetition of such suspensions’, he would never finish the book.¹⁵⁶

The prediction was spot on. In early summer, summarizing what had happened in the previous months, Marx told Kugelmann that his work had been ‘held up by illness throughout the winter’, and that he had ‘found it necessary to mug up on [his] Russian, because, in dealing with the land question, it ha[d] become essential to study Russian landowning relationships from primary sources’.¹⁵⁷

After all the interruptions and a period of intense political activity for the International following the birth of the Paris Commune, Marx turned to work on a new edition of Volume I. Dissatisfied with the way in which he had expounded the theory of value, he spent December 1871 and January 1872 rewriting the 1867 appendix, and this led him to rewrite the first chapter itself.¹⁵⁸ On this occasion, apart from a small number of additions, he also modified the entire structure of the book.¹⁵⁹

Corrections and reworking also affected the French translation. From March 1872, Marx had to work on correcting the drafts, which were then sent to the printer in instalments between 1872 and 1875.¹⁶⁰ In the course of the

¹⁵⁴ Still unpublished, these notes are included in the IISH, Marx-Engels Papers, B 108, B 109, B 113 and B 114.

¹⁵⁵ Jenny Marx to Friedrich Engels, ‘About 17 January 1870’, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 551.

¹⁵⁶ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 19 January 1870, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 408.

¹⁵⁷ Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 27 June 1870, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 528.

¹⁵⁸ Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie. Ertser Band, Hamburg 1867*, in MEGA² vol. II/5, pp. 1–55.

¹⁵⁹ In 1867 Marx had divided the book into chapters. In 1872 these became sections, each with much more detailed subdivisions.

¹⁶⁰ Karl Marx, *Le Capital, Paris 1872–1875*, in MEGA², vol. II/7.

revisions, he decided to make further changes to the basic text, mostly in the section on the accumulation of capital. In the postscript to the French edition, he did not hesitate to attach to it ‘a scientific value independent of the original’,¹⁶¹

Although the rhythm was less intense than before – because of the precarious state of his health and because he needed to widen his knowledge in some areas – Marx continued to work on *Capital* during the final years of his life. In 1875, he wrote another manuscript of Volume III entitled ‘Relationship between Rate of Surplus-Value and Rate of Profit Developed Mathematically’,¹⁶² and between October 1876 and early 1881 he prepared new drafts of sections of Volume II.¹⁶³ Some of his letters indicate that, if he had been able to feed-in the results of his ceaseless research, he would have updated Volume I as well.¹⁶⁴

The critical spirit with which Marx composed his *magnum opus* reveals just how distant he was from the dogmatic author that both most of his adversaries and many self-styled disciples presented to the world. Unfinished though it remained,¹⁶⁵ those who today want to use essential theoretical concepts for the critique of the capitalist mode of production still cannot dispense with reading Marx’s *Capital*.

¹⁶¹ Karl Marx, ‘Afterword to the French Edition’ to *Capital*, Volume I, in MECW, vol. 35, p. 24.

¹⁶² Karl Marx, ‘Manuskripte und redaktionelle Texte zum dritten Buch des “Kapitals”. 1871 bis 1895’, in MEGA², vol. II/14, pp. 19–150.

¹⁶³ Karl Marx, ‘Manuskripte zum Zweiten Buch des “Kapitals”. 1876 bis 1881’, in MEGA², vol. II/11, pp. 525–828.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Karl Marx to Nikolai Danielson, 13 December 1881, in MECW, vol. 46, p. 161.

¹⁶⁵ The editorial work that Engels undertook after his friend’s death to prepare the unfinished parts of *Capital* for publication was extremely complex. It should be borne in mind that the text in question was prepared on the basis of incomplete and often heterogeneous material that Marx had written in various periods of his life, some of which contained observations different from others to be found elsewhere in *Capital*. Nevertheless, Engels published Volume II in 1885 and Volume III in 1894.

Part Three

Political Militancy

The Birth of the International Working Men's Association

1. The right man in the right place

On 28 September 1864, St. Martin's Hall in the very heart of London was packed to overflowing with some two thousand workmen. They had come to attend a meeting called by English trade union leaders and a small group of workers from the Continent: the advance notices had spoken of a 'deputation organized by the workmen of Paris', which would 'deliver their reply to the Address of their English brethren, and submit a plan for a better understanding between the peoples'.¹ In fact, when a number of French and English workers' organizations had met in London a year earlier, in July 1863, to express solidarity with the Polish people against Tsarist occupation, they had also declared what they saw as the key objectives for the working-class movement. The preparatory 'Address of English to French Workmen', drafted by the prominent union leader George Odger [1813–1877] and published in the bi-weekly *The Bee-Hive*, stated:

A fraternity of peoples is highly necessary for the cause of labour, for we find that whenever we attempt to better our social condition by reducing the hours of toil, or by raising the price of labour, our employers threaten us with bringing over Frenchmen, Germans, Belgians and others to do our work at a reduced rate of wages; and we are sorry to say that this has been done, though not from any desire on the part of our continental brethren to injure us, but through a want of regular and systematic communication between

¹ David Ryazanov, 'Zur Geschichte der Ersten Internationale', in *Marx-Engels Archiv*, vol. I (1925), p. 171.

the industrial classes of all countries. Our aim is to bring up the wages of the ill-paid to as near a level as possible with that of those who are better remunerated, and not to allow our employers to play us off one against the other, and so drag us down to the lowest possible condition, suitable to their avaricious bargaining.²

The organizers of this initiative did not imagine – nor could they have foreseen – what it would lead to shortly afterwards. Their idea was to build an international forum where the main problems affecting workers could be examined and discussed, but this did not include the actual founding of an organization to coordinate the trade union and political action of the working class. Similarly, their ideology was initially permeated with general ethical-humanitarian elements, such as the importance of fraternity among peoples and world peace, rather than class conflict and clearly defined political objectives. Because of these limitations, the meeting at St. Martin's Hall might have been just another of those vaguely democratic initiatives of the period with no real follow-through. But in reality it gave birth to the prototype of all organizations of the workers' movement, which both reformists and revolutionaries would subsequently take as their point of reference: the International Working Men's Association.³

It was soon arousing passions all over Europe. It made class solidarity a shared ideal and inspired large numbers of men and women to struggle for the most radical of goals: changing the world. Thus, on the occasion of the Third Congress of the International, held in Brussels in 1868, the lead writer of *The Times* accurately identified the scope of the project:

It is not [...] a mere improvement that is contemplated, but nothing less than a regeneration, and that not of one nation only, but of mankind. This is certainly the most extensive aim ever contemplated by any institution, with

² Ibid., p. 172.

³ Near the end of the life of the International, when considering for approval the revised Statute of the organization, members of the General Council raised the question of whether 'persons' should be substituted for 'men'. Friedrich Engels responded that 'it was generally understood that men was a generic term including both sexes', making the point that the association was and had been open to women and men, in Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the C.C., C.P.S.U. (ed.), *The General Council of the First International 1871-1872*. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1968, p. 256.

the exception, perhaps, of the Christian Church. To be brief, this is the programme of the International Workingmen's Association.⁴

Thanks to the International, the workers' movement was able to gain a clearer understanding of the mechanisms of the capitalist mode of production, to become more aware of its own strength, and to develop new and more advanced forms of struggle. The organization resonated far beyond the frontiers of Europe, generating hope that a different world was possible among the artisans of Buenos Aires, the early workers' associations in Calcutta, and even the labour groups in Australia and New Zealand that applied to join it.

Conversely, news of its founding inspired horror in the ruling classes. The idea that the workers too wanted to play an active role in history sent shivers down their spine, and many a government set its sights on eradicating the International and harried it with all the means at its disposal.

The workers' organizations that founded the International were something of a motley. The central driving force was British trade unionism, whose leaders – nearly all reformist in their horizons – were mainly interested in economic questions; they fought to improve the workers' conditions, but without calling capitalism into question. Hence they conceived of the International as an instrument that might favour their objectives, by preventing the import of manpower from abroad in the event of strikes.

Another significant force in the organization was the mutualists, long dominant in France but strong also in Belgium and French-speaking Switzerland. In keeping with the theories of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, they were opposed to any working-class involvement in politics and to the strike as a weapon of struggle, as well as holding conservative positions on women's emancipation. Advocating a cooperative system along federalist lines, they maintained that it was possible to change capitalism by means of equal access to credit. In the end, therefore, they may be said to have constituted the right wing of the International.

Alongside these two components, which formed the numerical majority, there were others of a different hue again. The third in importance were the communists, grouped around the figure of Marx and active in small groupings

⁴ Quoted in G. M. Stekloff, *History of the First International*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1928, p. [ii].

with very limited influence – above all in a number of German and Swiss cities, and in London. They were anticapitalist: that is, they opposed the existing system of production and espoused the necessity of political action to overthrow it.

At the time of its founding, the ranks of the International also included elements that had nothing to do with the socialist tradition, such as certain groups of East European exiles inspired by vaguely democratic ideas. Among these were followers of Giuseppe Mazzini, whose cross-class conception, mainly geared to national demands, considered the International useful for the issuing of general appeals for the liberation of oppressed peoples.⁵

The picture is further complicated by the fact that some groups of French, Belgian and Swiss workers who joined the International brought with them a variety of confused theories, some of a utopian inspiration; while the General Association of German Workers – the party led by followers of Ferdinand Lassalle, which never affiliated to the International but orbited around it – was hostile to trade unionism and conceived of political action in rigidly national terms.

All these groups, with their complex web of cultures and political/trade union experiences, made their mark on the nascent International. It was an arduous task indeed to build a general framework and to keep such a broad organization together, if only on a federal basis. Besides, even after a common programme had been agreed upon, each tendency continued to exert a (sometimes centrifugal) influence in the local sections where it was in the majority.

To secure cohabitation of all these currents in the same organization, around a programme so distant from the approaches with which each had started out, was Marx's great accomplishment. His political talents enabled him to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable, ensuring that the International did not swiftly follow the many previous workers' associations down the path to oblivion.⁶ It was Marx who gave a clear purpose to the International, and

⁵ There were even members of secret societies favouring republicanism and/or socialism, such as the Lodge of Philadelphia, among the early members. See Julian P. W. Archer, *The First International in France, 1864–1872*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1997, pp. 33–5.

⁶ See Henry Collins and Chimen Abramsky, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement*. London: MacMillan, 1965, p. 34.

Marx too who achieved a non-exclusionary, yet firmly class-based, political programme that won it a mass character beyond all sectarianism. The political soul of its General Council was always Marx: he drafted all its main resolutions and prepared all its congress reports (except the one for the Lausanne Congress in 1867, when he was totally occupied with the proofs for *Capital*). He was ‘the right man in the right place’,⁷ as the German workers’ leader Johann Georg Eccarius [1818–1889] once put it.

Contrary to later fantasies that pictured Marx as the founder of the International, he was not even among the organizers of the meeting at St. Martin’s Hall. He sat ‘in a non-speaking capacity on the platform’, as he recalled in a letter to his friend Engels. This is how he explained why he took part:

I knew that on this occasion ‘people who really count’ were appearing, both from London and from Paris, and I therefore decided to waive my usual standing rule to decline any such invitations. [...] At the meeting, which was chock-full (for there is now evidently a revival of the working class taking place) [...] it was resolved to found a ‘Workingmen’s International Association’, whose General Council is to have its seat in London and is to ‘intermediate’ between the workers’ societies in Germany, Italy, France and England. Ditto that a General Workingmen’s Congress was to be convened in Belgium in 1865.⁸

Despite the unpromising starting position, Marx immediately grasped the potential in the event and worked hard to ensure that the new organization successfully carried out its mission. Thanks to the prestige attaching to his name, at least in restricted circles, he was appointed to the 34-member standing committee,⁹ where he soon gained sufficient trust to be given the task of writing the *Inaugural Address* and the *Provisional Statutes* of the International. Marx realized that it was ‘impossible to make anything out of the stuff’ drafted during his absence, and he was determined that ‘not one single line should be allowed to stand’.¹⁰

⁷ Johann Georg Eccarius to Karl Marx, 12 October 1864, in MEGA², vol. III/13, p. 10.

⁸ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 4 November 1864, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 16.

⁹ At the founding meeting of the International, a standing committee was struck off to organize the association. This became its Central Council, which subsequently became known as the General Council. Henceforth, these committees are identified simply as the General Council.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 18 and 17. An ‘indisposition’ had prevented Marx from attending the first meeting of the sub-committee and the subsequent meeting of the full committee, *ibid.*, p. 16.

In the two texts he wrote, Marx firmly linked economic and political struggle to each other, and made international thinking and international action an irreversible choice.¹¹ The *Inaugural Address* states:

Everywhere the great mass of the working classes were sinking down to a lower depth, at the same rate at least that those above them were rising in the social scale. In all countries of Europe it has now become a truth demonstrable to every unprejudiced mind, and only decried by those whose interest it is to hedge other people in a fool's paradise, that no improvement of machinery, no appliance of science to production, no contrivances of communication, no new colonies, no emigration, no opening of markets, no free trade, not all these things put together, will do away with the miseries of the industrious masses; but that, on the present false base, every fresh development of the productive powers of labour must tend to deepen social contrasts and point social antagonisms. Death of starvation rose almost to the rank of an institution, during this intoxicating epoch of economical progress, in the metropolis of the British empire. That epoch is marked in the annals of the world by the quickened return, the widening compass, and the deadlier effects of the social pest called a commercial and industrial crisis.

The workers should be clear that 'the lords of the land and the lords of capital will always use their political privileges for the defence and perpetuation of their economic monopolies. So far from promoting, they will continue to lay every possible impediment in the way of the emancipation of labour.' Hence: 'To conquer political power has become the great duty of the working classes.'¹²

It was mainly thanks to Marx's capacities that the International developed its function of political synthesis, unifying the various national contexts in a project of common struggle that recognized their significant autonomy, but not total independence, from the directive centre.¹³ The maintenance of unity was gruelling at times, especially as Marx's anticapitalism was never the

¹¹ See Gian Mario Bravo, *Marx e la Prima Internazionale*. Bari: Laterza, 1979, pp. 18–19.

¹² See Karl Marx, 'Karl Marx, Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association', in Marcello Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, pp. 73–9.

¹³ See Karl Marx to Friedrich Bolte, 23 November 1871, in MECW, vol. 44, p. 252, where he explained: 'The history of the International was a continual struggle on the part of the General Council against the sects and amateur experiments which attempted to assert themselves within the International itself against the genuine movement of the working class. This struggle was conducted at the Congresses, but far more in the private dealings of the General Council with the individual sections.'

dominant political position within the organization. He told Engels how ‘very difficult’ it had been ‘to frame the thing so that our view should appear in a form that would make it acceptable to the present outlook of the workers’ movement. [. . .] It will take time before the revival of the movement allows the old boldness of language to be used. We must be *fortirer in re, suaviter in modo*.¹⁴ But Marx’s thoughts on the possible electoral uses of the International were different. A few months after its foundation, he wrote with reference to the English radical Edmond Beales [1803–1881] – who was standing in the parliamentary elections – that ‘we cannot become the pedestal for small parliamentary ambitions.’¹⁵

Over time, however, partly through his own tenacity, partly through occasional splits, Marx’s thought became the hegemonic doctrine.¹⁶ It was hard going, but the effort of political elaboration benefited considerably from the struggles of those years. The character of workers’ mobilizations, the antisystemic challenge of the Paris Commune, the unprecedented task of holding together such a large and complex organization, the successive polemics with other tendencies in the workers’ movement on various theoretical and political issues: all this impelled Marx beyond the limits of political economy alone, which had absorbed so much of his attention since the defeat of the 1848 revolution and the ebbing of the most progressive forces. He was also stimulated to develop and sometimes revise his ideas, to put old certainties up for discussion and ask himself new questions, and in particular to sharpen his critique of capitalism by drawing the broad outlines of a communist society. The orthodox Soviet view of Marx’s role in the International, according to which he mechanically applied to the stage of history a political theory he had already forged in the confines of his study, is thus totally divorced from reality.¹⁷

¹⁴ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 4 November 1864, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 18. Translation: ‘strong in substance, mild in manner’.

¹⁵ Karl Marx to Victor Le Lubez, 15 February 1865, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 92. Marx took the same line in 1871 in a letter to the Chartist leader George Julian Harney [1817–1897]: ‘At London, I regret saying, most of the workmen’s representatives use their position in our council only as a means of furthering their own petty personal aims: [. . .] to get into the House of Commons by hook or by crook’; Karl Marx to George Julian Harney, 21 January 1871, in MECW, vol. 44, pp. 100–1.

¹⁶ See Bravo, *Marx e la Prima Internazionale*, p. 165.

¹⁷ See Maximilien Rubel, *Marx critique du marxisme*, p. 41: ‘only the needs of mythology – if not mystification – could prompt them to see in this [political programme] the consequence of “Marxism”, that is, a fully realized doctrine, imposed from outside by an omniscient brain on an amorphous and inert mass of men in search of a social panacea.’

2. Organizational development and growth

During its lifetime and in subsequent decades, the International was depicted as a vast, financially powerful organization. The size of its membership was always overestimated, whether because of imperfect knowledge or because some of its leaders exaggerated the real situation or because opponents were looking for a pretext to justify a brutal crackdown. The public prosecutor who arraigned some of its French leaders in June 1870 stated that the organization had more than 800,000 members in Europe;¹⁸ a year later, after the defeat of the Paris Commune, *The Times* put the total at two and a half million; and Oscar Testut [1840–?], the main person to study it in the conservative camp, predicted this would rise above five million.¹⁹

In Britain too, with the sole exception of the steelworkers, the International always had a sparse presence among the industrial proletariat.²⁰ Nowhere did the latter ever form a majority, at least after the expansion of the organization in Southern Europe. The other great limitation was the failure to draw in unskilled labour,²¹ despite Marx's efforts in that direction beginning with the run-up to the first congress. The 'Instructions for Delegates of the Provisional General Council: The Different Questions' are clear on this:

Apart from their original purposes, they [trade unions] must now learn to act deliberately as organizing centres of the working class in the broad

¹⁸ See Oscar Testut, *L'Association internationale des travailleurs*. Lyons: Aimé Vingtrinier, 1870, p. 310.

¹⁹ *The Times*, 5 June 1871; Oscar Testut, *Le livre bleu de l'Internationale*. Paris: Lachaud, 1871. In reality, the membership figures were much lower. It has always been difficult to arrive at even approximate estimates, and that was true for its own leaders and those who studied it most closely. On this issue, Marx declared at a meeting of the General Council on 20 December 1870: 'respecting the list of members, it would be not well to publish what the real strength was, as the outside public always thought the active members much more numerous than they really were', in Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the C.C., C.P.S.U. (ed.), *The General Council of the First International 1870–1871*, p. 96. But the present state of research allows the hypothesis that, at its peak in 1871–1872, the tally reached more than 150,000: 50,000 in Britain, more than 30,000 in France Belgium and Spain, 6,000 in Switzerland, about 25,000 in Italy, around 11,000 in Germany (but mostly members of the Social Democratic Workers' Party), plus a few thousand each in a number of other European countries, and 4,000 in the United States. In those times, when there was a dearth of effective working-class organizations apart from the English trade unions and the General Association of German Workers, such figures were certainly sizeable. See the membership table of the International in Marcello Musto, 'Introduction', in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, p. 68.

²⁰ See Collins and Abramsky, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement*, p. 70; Jacques D'Hondt, 'Rapport de synthèse', in Colloque International sur La première Internationale (ed.), *La Première Internationale: l'institute, l'implantation, le rayonnement*. Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1968, p. 475.

²¹ See Collins and Abramsky, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement*, p. 289.

interest of its complete emancipation. They must aid every social and political movement tending in that direction. Considering themselves and acting as the champions and representatives of the whole working class, they cannot fail to enlist the non-society men into their ranks. They must look carefully after the interests of the worst paid trades, such as the agricultural labourers, rendered powerless by exceptional circumstances. They must convince the world at large that their efforts, far from being narrow and selfish, aim at the emancipation of the downtrodden millions.²²

However, the International remained an organization of employed workers; the jobless never became part of it. The provenance of its leaders reflected this, since all but a few had a background as artisans or brainworkers.

The resources of the International are similarly complicated. There was talk of fabulous wealth at its disposal,²³ but the truth is that its finances were chronically unstable. The sums collected were never higher than a few score pounds per annum;²⁴ barely enough to pay the general secretary's wage of four shillings a week and the rent for an office from which the organization was often threatened with eviction for arrears.

In one of the key political-organizational documents of the International, Marx summarized its functions as follows: 'It is the business of the International Working Men's Association to combine and generalize the spontaneous movements of the working classes, but not to dictate or impose any doctrinary system whatever.'²⁵

²² Karl Marx, 'Resolutions of the Geneva Congress (1866)', in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, p. 87.

²³ In his diary – *Tagebuchblätter aus dem Jahre 1867 bis 1869*. Leipzig: von Hirzel, 1901, vol. VIII, p. 406, General Friedrich von Bernhardt reported 'from reliable sources' that a fund of more than £5,000,000 was deposited in London for the use of the International. See Julius Braunthal, *History of the International*. New York: Nelson, 1966, p. 107.

²⁴ See Braunthal, p. 108, who affirms that no complete statement of the General Council's annual income has been found among its papers. But a report by the treasurer, Cowell Stepney, has been found covering the income of the General Council from individual members' subscriptions for the first six years. The figures were: 1865 – £23; 1866 – £9.13s.; 1867 – £5.17s.; 1868 – £14.14s.; 1869 – £30.12s.; 1870 – £14.14s. The last financial report submitted by Engels to the Hague Congress for the year 1870–2 showed a deficit of more than £25 owed by the General Council to members of the General Council and others. Copies of some balance sheets of the International have also been published in Collins and Abramsky, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement*, pp. 80–1.

²⁵ Marx, 'Resolutions of the Geneva Congress (1866)', in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, p. 85. See Karl Marx to Paul Lafargue, 19 April 1870, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 491: 'the General Council was not the Pope, [...] we allowed every section to have its own theoretical views of the real movement, always supposed that nothing directly opposite to our Rules was put forward'.

Despite the considerable autonomy granted to federations and local sections, the International always retained a locus of political leadership. Its General Council was the body that worked out a unifying synthesis of the various tendencies and issued guidelines for the organization as a whole. From October 1864 until August 1872 it met with great regularity, as many as 385 times. In the room filled with pipe and cigar smoke where the Council held its sessions on Wednesday evening, its members debated a wide range of issues, such as: working conditions, the effects of new machinery, support for strikes, the role and importance of trade unions, the Irish question, various foreign policy matters, and, of course, how to build the society of the future. The General Council was also responsible for drafting the documents of the International: circulars, letters and resolutions for current purposes; special manifestos, addresses and appeals in particular circumstances.²⁶

Britain was the first country where applications were made to join the International. In the first year of its existence, the General Council began serious activity to publicize the principles of the Association. This helped to broaden its horizon beyond purely economic questions, as we can see from the fact that it was among the organizations belonging to the (electoral) Reform League founded in February 1865.

In France, the International began to take shape in January 1865, when its first section was founded in Paris. Other major centres appeared shortly afterwards in Lyons and Caën. But it remained very limited in strength. Nevertheless, the French supporters of the International, who were mostly followers of Proudhon's mutualist theories, established themselves as the second largest group at the first conference of the organization, held in London between 25 and 29 September and attended by thirty delegates from England, France, Switzerland and Belgium, with a few representatives from Germany, Poland and Italy. The original plan had been to set up a general congress forthwith. But Marx held that 'the time was not yet ripe for it',²⁷ and in a letter to Engels he confessed that, with a still embryonic political structure, he could 'only foresee a disgrace'.²⁸ The delegates who assembled at the London

²⁶ See Georges Haupt, *L'Internazionale socialista dalla Comune a Lenin*. Turin: Einaudi, 1978, p. 78.

²⁷ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 24 June 1865, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 163.

²⁸ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 31 July 1865, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 174.

Conference in September 1865 provided information about the first steps taken by the International, especially at an organizational level. And this conference decided to call the first congress for the following year and laid down the main themes to be discussed there.

On this basis, Marx proposed a draft agenda and cited the main points in a letter to Hermann Jung [1830–1901], the corresponding secretary of the International for Switzerland:

1. Questions relating to the Association: 1) Questions relating to its organisation. 2) The establishment of friendly societies for the members of the Association. – Moral and material support to be given to the Association's orphans.
2. Social Questions: 1) Co-operative labour. 2) Reduction of the hours of labour. 3) Female and children's labour. 4) Trades Unions: their past, their present, and their future. 5) Combination of efforts, by means of the International Association, in the struggle between capital and labour. 6) International Credit, foundation of international credit institutions, their form and their mode of operation. 7) Direct and Indirect Taxation. 8) Standing armies and their effects upon production.
3. International Politics: The need to eliminate Muscovite influence in Europe by applying the right of self-determination of nations, and the re-establishment of Poland upon a democratic and social basis.
4. A Question of Philosophy: The religious idea and its relation to social, political, and intellectual development.²⁹

In the period between these two gatherings, the International continued to expand in Europe and established its first important nuclei in Belgium and French-speaking Switzerland. The Prussian Combination Laws, which prevented German political associations from having regular contacts with organizations in other countries, meant that the International was unable to open sections in what was then the German Confederation. The General Association of German Workers – the first workers' party in history,³⁰ founded in 1863 and led by Lassalle's disciple Johann Baptist von Schweitzer [1833–1875] – followed a line

²⁹ Karl Marx to Hermann Jung, 20 November 1865, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 400.

³⁰ At this time, the party had about 5,000 members.

of ambivalent dialogue with Otto von Bismarck [1815–1898] and showed little or no interest in the International during the early years of its existence; it was an indifference shared by Wilhelm Liebknecht, despite his political proximity to Marx. Johann Philipp Becker tried to find a way round these difficulties through the Geneva-based ‘Group of German-speaking Sections’.

While Liebknecht did not understand the centrality of the international dimension for the struggle of the workers’ movement, Marx also had deep theoretical and political differences with von Schweitzer. In February 1865 he wrote to the latter that ‘the aid of the Royal Prussian government for co-operative societies,’ which the Lassalleans welcomed, was ‘worthless as an economic measure, whilst, at the same time, it serve[d] to extend the system of tutelage, corrupt part of the working class and emasculate the movement.’ Marx went on to reject any possibility of an alliance between the workers and the monarchy:

Just as the bourgeois party in Prussia discredited itself and brought about its present wretched situation by seriously believing that with the ‘New Era’ the government had fallen into its lap by the grace of the Prince Regent, so the workers’ party will discredit itself even more if it imagines that the Bismarck era or any other Prussian era will make the golden apples just drop into its mouth, by grace of the king. It is beyond all question that Lassalle’s ill-starred illusion that a Prussian government might intervene with socialist measures will be crowned with disappointment. The logic of circumstances will tell. But the honour of the workers’ party requires that it reject such illusions, even before their hollowness is punctured by experience. The working class is revolutionary or it is nothing.³¹

The critique of state socialism was a common theme in Marx’s political reflections during that period. A few days after the letter to Schweitzer, he suggested to Engels that the position of the Lassalleans in Germany was akin to the ‘alliance of the “proletariat” with the “government” against the “liberal bourgeoisie”’; which the two of them had firmly opposed in 1847.³²

The activity of the General Council in London was decisive for the further strengthening of the International. In spring 1866, with its support for the strikers of the London Amalgamated Tailors, it played an active role for the

³¹ Karl Marx to Johann Baptist von Schweitzer, 13 February 1865, quoted in Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 18 February 1865, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 96.

³² Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 18 February 1865, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 97.

first time in a workers' struggle, and following the success of the strike, five societies of tailors, each numbering some 500 workers, decided to affiliate to the International. The positive outcome of other disputes attracted a number of small unions, so that, by the time of its first congress, it already had seventeen union affiliations with a total of more than 25,000 new members. The International was the first association to succeed in the far from simple task of enlisting trade union organizations into its ranks.³³

At any event, not everything went off smoothly. Frequent political conflicts on the General Council, together with the absence of Marx on several occasions for health reasons, encouraged the Mazzinians led by Luigi Wolff [?-1871] to rejoin battle with him. Marx had always been aware of their hostility, and in December 1865 he had written to Engels that 'if [he] resigned tomorrow, the bourgeois element [...] would have the upper hand'.³⁴

In March 1866, at a particularly unfavourable moment, he added: 'Everything is at sixes and sevens on the "International Council" [...] and a great desire is being manifested to rebel against the absent "tyrant", but at the same time to wreck the whole shop as well.'³⁵ In the same month he wrote to his cousin Antoinette Philips [1837-1885]:

During my forced and prolonged absence from the Council of the International Association, Mazzini had been busy in stirring a sort of revolt against my leadership. 'Leadership' is never a pleasant thing, nor a thing I ambition. I have always before my mind your father's saying [that...] 'the mules always hate the muleteer'. But having once fairly embarked in an enterprise which I consider of import, I certainly, 'anxious' man as I am, do not like to give way. Mazzini, a most decided hater of freethinking and socialism, watched the progress of our society with great jealousy.³⁶

Between 3 and 8 September 1866, the city of Geneva hosted the first congress of the International, with sixty delegates from Britain, France, Germany and Switzerland. By then the Association could point to a very favourable balance sheet of the two years since its foundation, having rallied to its banner more than one hundred trade unions and political organizations. Those taking part

³³ Collins and Abramsky, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement*, p. 65.

³⁴ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 26 December 1865, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 207.

³⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 10 March 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 238.

³⁶ Karl Marx to Antoinette Philips, 18 March 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 243.

in the congress essentially divided into two blocs. The first, consisting of the British delegates, the few Germans and a majority of the Swiss, followed the directives of the General Council drawn up by Marx (who was not present in Geneva). The second, comprising the French delegates and some of the French-speaking Swiss, was made up of mutualists. At that time, in fact, moderate positions were prevalent in the International, and the mutualists, led by the Parisian Henri Tolain [1828–1897], envisaged a society in which the worker would be at once producer, capitalist and consumer. They regarded the granting of free credit as a decisive measure for the transformation of society; considered women's labour to be objectionable from both an ethical and a social point of view; and opposed any interference by the state in work relations – including legislation to reduce the working day to eight hours – on the grounds that it would threaten the private relationship between workers and employers and strengthen the system currently in force.

Basing themselves on resolutions prepared by Marx, the General Council leaders succeeded in marginalizing the numerically strong contingent of mutualists at the congress, and obtained votes in favour of state intervention. On the latter issue, in the section of the *Instructions for Delegates of the Provisional General Council: The Different Questions* (1866) relating to 'Juvenile and children's labour (both sexes)', Marx had spelled things out clearly:

This can only be effected by converting social reason into social force, and, under given circumstances, there exists no other method of doing so, than through general laws, enforced by the power of the state. In enforcing such laws, the working class do not fortify governmental power. On the contrary, they transform that power, now used against them, into their own agency. They effect by a general act what they would vainly attempt by a multitude of isolated individual efforts.³⁷

Thus, far from strengthening bourgeois society – as Proudhon and his followers wrongly believed – these reformist demands were an indispensable starting point for the emancipation of the working class.

Furthermore, the 'instructions' that Marx wrote for the Geneva Congress underline the basic function of trade unions against which not only the

³⁷ Marx, 'Resolutions of the Geneva Congress (1866)', in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, p. 84.

mutualists but also certain followers of Robert Owen in Britain and of Lassalle in Germany³⁸ had taken a stand:

This activity of the Trades' Unions is not only legitimate, it is necessary. It cannot be dispensed with so long as the present system of production lasts. On the contrary, it must be generalized by the formation and the combination of Trades' Unions throughout all countries. On the other hand, unconsciously to themselves, the Trades' Unions were forming centres of organization of the working class, as the mediaeval municipalities and communes did for the middle class. If the Trades' Unions are required for the guerrilla fights between capital and labour, they are still more important as organized agencies for superseding the very system of wages labour and capital rule.

In the same document, Marx did not spare the existing unions his criticism. For they were 'too exclusively bent upon the local and immediate struggles with capital [and had] not yet fully understood their power of acting against the system of wages slavery itself. They therefore kept too much aloof from general social and political movements.'³⁹

He had argued exactly the same a year earlier, in an address to the General Council on 20 and 27 June that was posthumously published as *Value, Price and Profit* (1865):

[T]he working class ought not to exaggerate to themselves the ultimate working of these everyday struggles. They ought not to forget that they are fighting with effects, but not with the causes of those effects; that they are retarding the downward movement, but not changing its direction; that they are applying palliatives, not curing the malady. They ought, therefore, not to be exclusively absorbed in these unavoidable guerrilla fights incessantly springing up from the never-ceasing encroachments of capital or changes of the market. They ought to understand that, with all the miseries it imposes upon them, the present system simultaneously engenders the material conditions and the social forms necessary for an economical reconstruction of society. Instead of the conservative motto, 'A fair day's wage for a fair day's

³⁸ Lassalle advocated the concept of an 'iron law of wages', which held that efforts to increase wages were futile and a distraction for workers from the primary task of assuming political power in the state.

³⁹ Marx, 'Resolutions of the Geneva Congress (1866)', in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, p. 86.

work!' they ought to inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword, 'Abolition of the wages system!'⁴⁰

One of the main resolutions adopted at the congress concerned a measure that Marx thought essential to free the working class from the yoke of capital: the shortening of the working day.

A preliminary condition, without which all further attempts at improvement and emancipation must prove abortive, is the limitation of the working day. It is needed to restore the health and physical energies of the working class, that is, the great body of every nation, as well as to secure them the possibility of intellectual development, sociable intercourse, social and political action.⁴¹

As the delegates foresaw, their demand for '8 hours work as the legal limit of the working day' would eventually become 'the common platform of the working classes all over the world'.

Marx's comments on the results of this congress were generally positive. He wrote to his friend Ludwig Kugelmann in Hannover:

By and large, [...] it went off better than I expected. [...] I was unable to attend, [...] but I did write the programme for the London delegates. I deliberately confined it to points which allow direct agreement and combination of efforts by the workers and give direct sustenance and impetus to the requirements of the class struggle and the organisation of the workers into a class. The Parisian gentlemen had their heads stuffed full of the most vacuous Proudhonist clichés. They prattle incessantly about science and know nothing. They spurn all revolutionary action, i.e. arising from the class struggle itself, every concentrated social movement, and therefore also that which can be achieved by political means (e.g., such as limitation of the working day by law). Beneath the cloak of freedom and anti-governmentalism or anti-authoritarian individualism these gentlemen, who for 16 years now

⁴⁰ See Karl Marx, 'The Necessity and Limits of Trade Union Struggle', in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, p. 121. On the other hand, the need to differentiate between political and trade-union organization was always clear to Marx. In September 1869, in an interview with the German trade unionist Johann Hamann, *Volksstaat*, 27 November 1869, he stated: 'The trade unions should never be affiliated with or made dependent upon a political society if they are to fulfil the object for which they were formed. If this happens it means their death blow. The trade unions are the schools for Socialism', see Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Hamann, 'Bericht über eine Unterredung von Metallgewerkschaften mit Karl Marx in Hannover am 30. September 1869', in MEGA², vol. I/21, p. 906.

⁴¹ Marx, 'Resolutions of the Geneva Congress (1866)', in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, p. 83.

have so quietly endured the most wretched despotism, and are still enduring it, are in actuality preaching vulgar bourgeois economics, only in the guise of Proudhonist idealism! Proudhon has done enormous harm. His pseudo-critique and his pseudo-confrontation with the Utopians (he himself is no more than a philistine Utopian) [...] seized hold of and corrupted first the 'glittering youth', the students, then the workers, especially those in Paris. [...] In my Report I shall give them a discreet rap over the knuckles.⁴²

From late 1866 on, strikes intensified in many European countries. Organized by broad masses of workers, they helped to generate an awareness of their condition and formed the core of a new and important wave of struggles. The mobilizations did, however, usher in a period of contact and coordination with the International, which supported them with declarations and calls for solidarity, organized fundraising for strikers, and helped to fight attempts by the bosses to weaken the workers' resistance.

It was because of its practical role in this period that workers began to recognize the International as an organization that defended their interests and, in some cases, they asked to be affiliated to it.⁴³ For all the difficulties bound up with the diversity of nationalities, languages and political cultures, the International managed to achieve unity and coordination across a wide range of organizations and spontaneous struggles. Its greatest merit was to demonstrate the absolute need for class solidarity and international cooperation, moving decisively beyond the partial character of the initial objectives and strategies.

In Britain, on the other hand, the labour movement was undergoing a process of institutionalization. The Reform Act, resulting from the battle first joined by the Reform League, expanded the franchise to more than a million British workers. The subsequent legalization of trade unions, which ended the risk of persecution and repression, allowed the fourth estate to become a real presence in society, with the result that the pragmatic rulers of the country continued along the path of reform, and the labouring classes, so unlike their French counterparts, felt a growing sense of belonging as they pinned more

⁴² Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 9 October 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 326.

⁴³ See Jacques Freymond, 'Introduction', in Henri Burgelin, Knut Langfeldt and Miklós Molnár (eds), *La première Internationale*, vol. I (1866–1868). Geneva: Droz, 1962, p. xi.

of their hopes for the future on peaceful change.⁴⁴ The situation on the Continent was very different indeed. In the German Confederation, collective wage-bargaining was still virtually non-existent. In Belgium, strikes were repressed by the government almost as if they were acts of war, while in Switzerland they were still an anomaly that the established order found it difficult to tolerate. In France, it was declared that strikes would be legal in 1864, but the first labour unions still operated under severe restrictions.

The lack of theoretical-political advances in France – a country he regarded as crucial for the whole European workers' movement – was one of Marx's major preoccupations during this period. In early June 1866 he wrote to Engels: the 'faithful followers of Proudhon (my very good friends here, Lafargue and Longuet, are also among that number) [...] believe that the whole of Europe must and will sit quietly on its arse until the French monsieurs have abolished poverty and ignorance'.⁴⁵ Two weeks later, he mentioned a group of 'representatives (non-workers) of "jeune France", who at a meeting of the General Council 'trotted out their view that any nationality and even nations are antiquated prejudices'. Marx described such ideas – according to which the political institutions of the time should be 'broken down into small groups or communes' that would then form an 'association, but not a state' – as 'Proudhonized Stirnerism'. He poked fun at the fact this 'individualization of humanity and the "mutualism" it entails should develop by bringing history to a halt in every other country and the whole world waits until the French are ready to carry out a social revolution'. 'Then they will demonstrate the experiment to us, and the rest of the world, being bowled over by the force of their example, will do the same' – 'just what Fourier expected from his model phalanstery'. Marx perceptively noted in passing that, by the 'denial of nationalities', many French people 'seemed to imply their absorption by the model French nation'.⁴⁶

This was the backdrop to the congress of 1867, held in Lausanne between 2 and 8 September and attended by sixty-four delegates from six countries (with one each from Belgium and Italy). The International assembled with a

⁴⁴ See Collins and Abramsky, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement*, pp. 290–1.

⁴⁵ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 7 June 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 281.

⁴⁶ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 20 June 1866, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 287.

new strength that had come from its continuing broad-based expansion. Marx himself, busy working on the proofs of *Capital*, was absent both from the General Council when preparatory documents were being drafted and from the actual congress.⁴⁷ The effects were certainly felt – for example, in the focus on bald reports of organizational growth and in Proudhonian themes (such as the cooperative movement and alternative uses of credit) dear to the strongly represented mutualists. Engels expressed his concern to Marx: ‘The congress really does appear to have been swept away in the French tide this time, the number of Proudhonist resolutions is really far too large.’⁴⁸ But his friend reassured him: ‘None of that signifies. The main thing is that the congress was held, not what happened there. We’ll make sport of the Paris wisecracks in our General Report.’⁴⁹ That is what happened – and the confrontation between the two tendencies was merely postponed.

3. The defeat of the mutualists

Right from the earliest days of the International, Proudhon’s ideas were hegemonic in France, French-speaking Switzerland, Wallonia, and the city of Brussels. His disciples, particularly Tolain and Ernest Édouard Fribourg [?], succeeded in making a mark with their positions on the founding meeting in 1864, the London Conference of 1865, and the Geneva and Lausanne Congresses.

For four years the mutualists were the most moderate wing of the International. The British trade unions, which constituted the majority, did not share Marx’s anticapitalism, but nor did they have the same pull on the policies of the organization that the followers of Proudhon were able to exercise.

Basing themselves on the theories of the French anarchist, the mutualists argued that the economic emancipation of the workers would be achieved through the founding of producer cooperatives and a central People’s Bank. Resolutely hostile to state intervention in any field, they opposed socialization of the land and the means of production as well as any use of the strike weapon.

⁴⁷ Marx continued not to attend congresses, with the exception of the crucial Hague Congress of 1872.

⁴⁸ Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 11 September 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 425.

⁴⁹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 12 September 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 428.

Marx undoubtedly played a key role in the long struggle to reduce Proudhon's influence in the International. His ideas were fundamental to the theoretical development of its leaders, and he showed a remarkable capacity to assert them by winning every major conflict inside the organization. With regard to the cooperation, for example, in the 1866 *Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional General Council: The Different Questions*, he had already declared that: "To convert social production into one large and harmonious system of free and cooperative labour, general social changes are wanted, changes of the general conditions of society, never to be realized save by the transfer of the organized forces of society, viz., the state power, from capitalists and landlords to the producers themselves', recommending to the workers 'to embark in cooperative production rather than in cooperative stores. The latter touch but the surface of the present economical system, the former attacks its groundwork.'⁵⁰

The workers themselves, however, were already sidelining Proudhonian doctrines; it was above all the proliferation of strikes that convinced the mutualists of the error of their conceptions. Proletarian struggles showed both that the strike was necessary as an immediate means of improving conditions in the present and that it strengthened the class consciousness essential for the construction of future society. It was real-life men and women who halted capitalist production to demand their rights and social justice, thereby shifting the balance of forces in the International and, more significantly, in society as a whole. It was the Parisian bronze workers, the weavers of Rouen and Lyons, the coal miners of Saint-Étienne who – more forcefully than in any theoretical discussion – convinced the French leaders of the International of the need to socialize the land and industry. And it was the workers' movement that demonstrated, in opposition to Proudhon, that it was impossible to separate the social-economic question from the political question.⁵¹

The Brussels Congress, held between 6 and 13 September 1868, with the participation of ninety-nine delegates from France, Britain, Switzerland, Germany, Spain (one delegate), and Belgium (fifty-five), finally clipped the wings of the mutualists. The highpoint came when the assembly approved César De Paepé's

⁵⁰ Marx, 'Resolutions of the Geneva Congress (1866)', in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, p. 85.

⁵¹ See Freymond, 'Introduction', in Henri Burgelin, Knut Langfeldt and Miklós Molnár (eds), *La première Internationale*, vol. I (1866–1868), p. xiv.

[1646–1714] proposal on the socialization of the means of production – a decisive step forward in defining the economic basis of socialism, no longer simply in the writings of particular intellectuals but in the programme of a great transnational organization. As regards the mines and transport, the congress declared:

1. That the quarries, collieries, and other mines, as well as the railways, ought in a normal state of society to belong to the community represented by the state, a state itself subject to the laws of justice.
2. That the quarries, collieries, and other mines, and Railways, be let by the state, not to companies of capitalists as at present, but to companies of working men bound by contract to guarantee to society the rational and scientific working of the railways, etc., at a price as nearly as possible approximate to the working expense. The same contract ought to reserve to the state the right to verify the accounts of the companies, so as to prevent the possibility of any reconstitution of monopolies. A second contract ought to guarantee the mutual right of each member of the companies in respect to his fellow workmen.

As to landed property, it was agreed that:

the economical development of modern society will create the social necessity of converting arable land into the common property of society, and of letting the soil on behalf of the state to agricultural companies under conditions analagous to those stated in regard to mines and railways.

Similar considerations were applied to the canals, roads and telegraphs: ‘Considering that the roads and other means of communication require a common social direction, the Congress thinks they ought to remain the common property of society.’ Finally, some interesting points were made about the environment:

Considering that the abandonment of forests to private individuals causes the destruction of woods necessary for the conservation of springs, and, as a matter of course, of the good qualities of the soil, as well as the health and lives of the population, the Congress thinks that the forests ought to remain the property of society.⁵²

⁵² Karl Marx, ‘Resolutions of the Brussels Congress (1868)’, in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, p. 92.

In Brussels, then, the International made its first clear pronouncement on the socialization of the means of production by state authorities.⁵³ This marked an important victory for the General Council and the first appearance of socialist principles in the political programme of a major workers' organization.

In addition, the congress again discussed the question of war. A motion presented by Becker, which Marx later summarized in the published resolutions of the congress, stated:

The workers alone have an evident logical interest in finally abolishing all war, both economic and political, individual and national, because in the end they always have to pay with their blood and their labour for the settling of accounts between the belligerents, regardless of whether they are on the winning or losing side.⁵⁴

The workers were called upon to treat every war 'as a civil war'.⁵⁵ De Paepe also suggested the use of the general strike⁵⁶ – a proposal that Marx dismissed as 'nonsense',⁵⁷ but which actually tended to develop a class consciousness capable of going beyond merely economic struggles.

This time too, the verdict on the congress that Marx expressed to Engels was generally positive: '[Fredrick] Lessner [1825–1910] says that we accomplished so much despite being so little represented at the congress, which was almost entirely Belgian (with the addition of Frenchmen), because on all decisive points the Belgian workers, notwithstanding their Brussels leaders, voted with London.'⁵⁸

The difficulties of sending members to congresses were due to the scant resources at the disposal of the organization in London. Marx spoke of the matter with great irritation to Engels in the summer of 1869:

Yesterday there was a tragicomical meeting of the General Council. Dunning letters for cards, rent, arrears of secretary's salary, etc. In short, international bankruptcy, so we can't yet see how we can send a delegate [to the next congress]. [...] The gist of the story is this: the local committees (including

⁵³ This was possible thanks to the change in the Belgian sections, which moved to collectivism after their federal congress of July.

⁵⁴ Henri Burgelin, Knut Langfeldt and Miklós Molnár (eds), *La première Internationale*, vol. I (1866–1868), pp. 402–3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 403.

⁵⁶ See César De Paepe, 'Strike Against War', in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, pp. 230–1.

⁵⁷ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 16 September 1868, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 101.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

central committees) spend too much money and tax their people too highly for their national or local needs, and leave nothing over for the General Council. Money is always there to print idiotic addresses to the Spaniards etc., and for other follies. We shall be forced to declare to the next congress, either in written or spoken form, that we cannot continue to run the General Council in this way; but that they should be so kind, before they give us successors, to pay our debts, which would reach a much higher figure if most of our secretaries did not personally cover correspondence costs. If only I could somewhere see people who would not involve us in stupidities, I would greet with the greatest pleasure the exit of the Central Council from here. The business is becoming really tiresome.⁵⁹

These problems, which were already emerging in 1869, were the norm rather than the exception throughout the life of the International. In Spring 1870 Marx wrote ironically to Wilhelm Bracke [1842–1880], one of the founders, with Liebknecht, of the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Germany: 'As a consolation, the information that the finances of the General Council are below zero, steadily growing negative dimensions.'⁶⁰

In September 1868, Marx returned to the question of state socialism. In a letter to Engels, he suggested that what von Schweitzer had described the previous month in Hamburg at the congress of the General Association of German Workers as the 'apex of Lassalle's discoveries' – that is, state credit for the foundation of productive associations – was 'literally copied from the programme of French Catholic socialism', inspired by Philip Buchez [1796–1850], which went back to 'the days of Louis-Philippe' [1773–1850].⁶¹

Instead, strong opposition to the government would have been good for the social struggle: 'The most essential thing for the German working class is that it should cease to agitate by permission of the high government authorities.

⁵⁹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 4 August 1869, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 340.

⁶⁰ Karl Marx to Wilhelm Bracke, 24 March 1870, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 464. His daughter Jenny wrote of the divergence between what some people imagined to be material conditions of the International and the situation in reality. When the official French press and the London *Times*, writing of a major strike by steelworkers and miners in Le Creusot, suggested that it had been provoked by 'artificial excitement' and that the leader of the strike had received 55,000 francs from the International, Jenny wrote to the family friend Kugelmann: 'Would they [these claims] were true! It is a thousand pities the International cannot keep pace in its doings with the brilliant imaginings of these worthies', Jenny Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 30 January 1870, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 554.

⁶¹ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 19 September 1868, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 105.

Such a bureaucratically schooled race must undergo a complete course of “self-help”.⁶²

In a letter to Schweitzer, Marx set out at greater length his differences with the Lassallean tendency. The first question was his opposition to the strategy of ‘state aid versus self-help’, which Buchez, the leader of Catholic socialism, ‘[. . . had used] against the genuine workers’ movement in France’, and on the basis of which Lassalle himself had later made ‘concessions to the Prussian monarchy, to Prussian reaction (the feudal party) and even to the clericals.’ For Marx, it was essential that the workers’ struggle should be free and independent. ‘The main thing is to teach [the worker] to walk by himself’, especially in Germany, where ‘he is regulated bureaucratically from childhood onwards’ and believes in the authority of superiors.

The other significant area of disagreement was the theoretical and political rigidity of Lassalle and his followers. Marx criticized the comrade with whom he had been in touch for many years, on the grounds that ‘like everyone who claims to have in his pocket a panacea for the sufferings of the masses, [Lassalle] gave his agitation, from the very start, a religious, sectarian character’, and, being the founder of a sect, ‘he denied all natural connection with the earlier movement, both in Germany and abroad.’ Lassalle was guilty of the same error as Proudhon: that of ‘not seeking the real basis of his agitation in the actual elements of the class movement, but of wishing, instead, to prescribe for that movement a course determined by a certain doctrinaire recipe.’ For Marx, any ‘sect seeks its *raison d’être* and its *point d’honneur* not in what it has in common with the class movement, but in the particular shibboleth distinguishing it from that movement.’⁶³ His opposition to that kind of politics could not have been clearer.

In the fight against state socialism, Marx also took issue with Liebknecht. After one of his speeches in the Reichstag in summer 1869, Marx commented

⁶² Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 26 September 1868, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 115. Although he declined an invitation to the Hamburg Congress, Marx nevertheless found some signs of progress. To Engels he remarked: ‘I was glad to see that the starting points of any “serious” workers’ movement – agitation for complete political freedom, regulation of the working day and international co-operation of the working class – were emphasised in their programme for the congress. [...] in other words, I congratulated them on having abandoned Lassalle’s programme’, Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 26 August 1868, in MECW, vol. 43, pp. 89–90.

⁶³ Karl Marx to Johann Baptist von Schweitzer, 13 October 1868, in MECW, vol. 43, pp. 133–5. The actual letter has been lost, but fortunately Marx preserved his draft.

to Engels: ‘The brute believes in the future “state of democracy”! Secretly that means sometimes constitutional England, sometimes the bourgeois United States, sometimes wretched Switzerland. He has no conception of revolutionary politics.’⁶⁴

Apart from disputes and conflicts, however, there were also very positive developments. In late 1868, Marx reported to Kugelmann a major step forward at the recent congress of the American Labor Union, which had ‘treated women workers with full parity’. By contrast, Marx lamented, ‘the English, and to an even greater extent the gallant French, are displaying a marked narrowness of spirit in this respect. Everyone who knows anything of history also knows that great social revolutions are impossible without the feminine ferment. Social progress may be measured precisely by the social position of the fair sex.’⁶⁵

Finally, Marx was not at all worried about diversity. He was well aware that, ‘as the stage of development reached by different sections of the workers in the same country and by the working class in different countries necessarily varies considerably, the actual movement also necessarily expresses itself in very diverse theoretical forms’. In his view, ‘the community of action the International Working Men’s Association is calling into being, the exchange of ideas by means of the different organs of the sections in all countries and, finally, the direct discussions at the general congresses would also gradually create a common theoretical programme for the general workers’ movement’.⁶⁶

If the collectivist turn of the International began at the Brussels Congress in 1868, the Basle Congress of 5–12 September 1869 consolidated it and eradicated Proudhonism even in its French homeland; the French delegates too supported the declaration ‘that society has the right to abolish individual ownership of the land and to make it part of the community’.⁶⁷ After Basle, France was no longer mutualist. A relieved Marx could write to his daughter Laura Lafargue: ‘I am glad the Basle Congress is over, and has, comparatively speaking, passed off so well. I am always fretting on such occasions of public exhibition of the party “with all its ulcers”. None of the actors was up to the

⁶⁴ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 10 August 1869, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 343.

⁶⁵ Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 12 December 1868, in MECW, vol. 43, pp. 184–5.

⁶⁶ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 5 March 1869, in MECW, vol. 43, pp. 235–6.

⁶⁷ Henri Burgelin, Knut Langfeldt and Miklós Molnár (eds), *La première Internationale*, vol. II (1869–1872), p. 74.

high principles, but the higher class idiocy effaces the working-class blunders.’⁶⁸ The Basle Congress was also of interest because Mikhail Bakunin took part in the proceedings as a delegate. Having failed to win the leadership of the League for Peace⁶⁹ and Freedom, he had founded the International Alliance for Socialist Democracy in September 1868 in Geneva, and in December this had applied to join the International. In a letter to Marx, dated 22 December 1868, he wrote:

You asked if I continue to be your friend. Yes, more than ever, dear Marx, because I understand better than ever how right you are in following, and in inviting us all to march on the wide road of economic revolution, and in denigrating those among us who would lose themselves on the paths of either national or exclusively political enterprises. I now do what you yourself commenced to do more than twenty years ago. [...] My homeland now is the International of which you are one of the principal founders. So you see, dear friend, that I am your disciple – and I am proud to be it.⁷⁰

The General Council initially turned down the request from Bakunin, on the grounds that the International Alliance for Socialist Democracy continued to be affiliated to another, parallel transnational structure, and that one of its objectives – ‘the equalization of classes’⁷¹ – was radically different from a central pillar of the International: the abolition of classes. Shortly afterwards, however, the Alliance modified its programme and agreed to wind up its network of sections, many of which anyway existed only in Bakunin’s imagination.⁷² On 28 July 1869, the 104-member Geneva section was

⁶⁸ Karl Marx to Laura Lafargue, 25 September 1869, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 355.

⁶⁹ Of this organization, Marx wrote: ‘It is no less [...] than cowardice in action. [...] It deceive[s] the public with ambiguous, ineffectual and declamatory pronouncements’, Karl Marx to Auguste Vermorel, 27 August 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 414. On the occasion of its congress in 1867, he remarked to Engels: ‘The jackasses from the Peace Congress [...] completely changed their original programme and even smuggled into the new one, which is much more democratic, the words “the harmonizing of economic interests with liberty”, which could mean almost anything, including just free trade’, Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 4 September 1867, in MECW, vol. 42, p. 420.

⁷⁰ Mikhail Bakunin to Karl Marx, 22 December 1868, quoted in James Guillaume, *L’Internationale, Documents et Souvenirs (1864–1878)*, vol. I. New York: Burt Franklin, 1969, p. 153. See Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 13 January 1869, p. 201.

⁷¹ Mikhail Bakunin, ‘Four Anarchist Programmes’, in Arthur Lehning (ed.), *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1973, p. 174. The translation provided in this book is inaccurate and misleading. In *Fictitious Splits in the International*, Engels and Marx quoted directly from Bakunin’s original document (‘l’égalisation politique, économique et sociale des classes’), see Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘Against Sectarianism’, in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, pp. 287–9.

⁷² See Edward Hallett Carr, *Michael Bakunin*. New York: Vintage, 1961, p. 392.

accordingly admitted to the International.⁷³ Marx knew Bakunin well enough, but he had underestimated the consequences of this step. The influence of the famous Russian revolutionary rapidly increased in a number of Swiss, Spanish and French sections (as it did in Italian ones, after the Paris Commune), and at the Basel Congress, thanks to his charisma and forceful style of argument, he already managed to affect the outcome of its deliberations. The vote on the right of inheritance, for example, was the first occasion on which the delegates rejected a proposal of the General Council.⁷⁴ Having finally defeated the mutualists and laid the spectre of Proudhon to rest, Marx now had to confront a much tougher rival, who formed a new tendency – collectivist anarchism – and sought to win control of the organization.

⁷³ According to Carr, *Michael Bakunin*, p. 374: 'the wooden horse had entered the Trojan citadel'.

⁷⁴ See Karl Marx, 'On the Right of Inheritance', in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, p. 163f.

The Revolution in Paris

1. The struggle for liberation in Ireland

The late 1860s and early 1870s were a period rich in social conflicts. Many workers who took part in protest actions decided to make contact with the International, whose reputation was spreading ever wider, and to ask it to support their struggles. The year 1869 witnessed a significant expansion of the International all over Europe. Britain was an exception in this respect, however. While the union leaders fully backed Marx against the mutualists, they had little time for theoretical issues¹ and did not exactly glow with revolutionary ardour. This was the reason why Marx for a long time opposed the founding of a British federation of the International independent of the General Council.

This period also saw the birth of some sections of Irish workers in England and the appointment of the workers' leader John MacDonnell [1845–1906] as corresponding secretary for Ireland on the General Council. At its session on 16 November, Marx proposed a resolution expressing the International's 'admiration of the spirited, firm and high-souled manner in which the Irish people carry on their Amnesty movement'.² A few days earlier, he had told Engels in a letter how much he enjoyed the 'latest meetings in Ireland', at which 'the clerics were seized by their collars and removed from the speaker's stand'.³

¹ Jacques Freymond, 'Introduction', in Henri Burgelin, Knut Langfeldt and Miklós Molnár (eds), *La première Internationale*, vol. I (1866–1868), p. xix.

² Karl Marx, 'Draft Resolution of the General Council on the Policy of the British Government towards the Irish Prisoners', 18 November 1869, in MECW, vol. 21, p. 83.

³ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 12 November 1869, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 371.

While exhaustively analysing the Irish question, Marx not only continued the political battle – against the scepticism of British workers’ leaders – for the International to adopt a radical, not merely ‘humanitarian,’ position; he also developed an important turn with regard to his previous conceptions. He wrote to his friend Ludwig Kugelmann:

I have become more and more convinced – and the thing now is to drum this conviction into the English working class – that they will never be able to do anything decisive here in England before they separate their attitude towards Ireland quite definitely from that of the ruling classes, and not only make common cause with the Irish, but even take the initiative in dissolving the Union established in 1801, and substituting a free federal relationship for it. And this must be done not out of sympathy for Ireland, but as a demand based on the interests of the English proletariat. If not, the English people will remain bound to the leading-strings of the ruling classes, because they will be forced to make a common front with them against Ireland. Every movement of the working class in England itself is crippled by the dissension with the Irish, who form a very important section of the working class in England itself. The primary condition for emancipation here – the overthrow of the English landed oligarchy – remains unattainable, since its positions cannot be stormed here as long as it holds its strongly-entrenched outposts in Ireland. But over there, once affairs have been laid in the hands of the Irish people themselves, as soon as they have made themselves their own legislators and rulers, as soon as they have become autonomous, it will be infinitely easier there than here to abolish the landed aristocracy (to a large extent the same persons as the English landlords) since [...] it is not just merely an economic question, but also a national one, as the landlords there are [...] the mortally-hated oppressors of the nationality.⁴

Marx returned to the theme in an important ‘Confidential Communication’ of the International that he sent out on 28 March 1870.⁵ ‘In Ireland,’ he stated, ‘landlordism is maintained solely by the English army. The moment the forced union between the two countries ends, a social revolution will break

⁴ Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 29 November 1869, in MECW, vol. 43, pp. 390–1.

⁵ This text was an extract from a private circular sent by Marx to his friend and International member Kugelmann for him to forward it to its intended recipient: the Brunswick Committee of the German Social Democratic Workers’ Party. Marx appended to it a text he had written on or soon after 1 January 1870, entitled ‘The General Council to the Federal Council of Romance Switzerland’, and published, in 1872, in the brochure *Fictitious Splits in the International*.

out in Ireland, even if in outmoded form.' As to the British working class, 'by maintaining the power of their landlords in Ireland,' it made them 'invulnerable in England itself'. This was also true from a military point of view. For Ireland was 'the only pretext the English Government has for maintaining a large standing army, which in case of necessity, as has happened before, can be loosed against the English workers after getting its military training in Ireland.'⁶

Marx had become increasingly convinced that the independence of Ireland was an absolutely central question. In a letter he sent to Kugelmann in November 1869, he concluded: 'Not only does England's internal social development remain crippled by the present relationship to Ireland'; it also had a negative impact on British foreign policy particularly 'with regard to Russia and the United States of America'. Bearing in mind the 'fact' that 'the English Republic under Cromwell met shipwreck in Ireland', he now warned: '*Non bis in idem!*'⁷

In December 1869, Marx outlined to Engels the convictions he had developed on how the English working class should relate to the liberation of Ireland:

For a long time I believed it would be possible to overthrow the Irish regime by English working-class ascendancy. I always took this viewpoint in the *New-York Tribune*. Deeper study has now convinced me of the opposite. The English working class will never accomplish anything before it has got rid of Ireland. The lever must be applied in Ireland. This is why the Irish question is so important for the social movement in general.⁸

Moreover, as the 'world metropolis of landed property and capitalism,' England was decisive for the whole of Europe and the proletarian revolution in general. Marx expressed this nexus clearly, in March 1870, in a letter to Laura and Paul Lafargue [1842–1911]: 'To accelerate the social development in Europe, you must push on the catastrophe of official England. To do so, you must attack her in Ireland. That's her weakest point. Ireland lost, the British "Empire" is gone, and the class war in England, till now somnolent and chronic, will assume acute forms.'⁹

⁶ Karl Marx, 'Confidential Communication', in MECW, vol. 21, p. 120.

⁷ Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 29 November 1869, p. 391. Translation: 'Let this not happen a second time!'

⁸ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 10 December 1869, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 398.

⁹ Karl Marx to Laura and Paul Lafargue, 5 March 1870, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 449.

The 'Confidential Communication' of 28 March maintained that the 'first task' of the International should be to 'hasten the social revolution in England'. But that would occur only if the political set-up ensuring the 'enslavement of Ireland' was transformed – 'into an equal and free confederation, if possible, or complete separation, if need be'.¹⁰

A very similar point is made in a long and rich letter that Marx sent, in Spring 1870, to Sigfrid Meyer [1840–1872] and August Vogt [1830–1883], two members of the International, of German origin, in the United States: 'After studying the Irish question for years, I have come to the conclusion that the decisive blow against the ruling classes in England – and this is decisive for the workers' movement all over the world – cannot be struck in England, but only in Ireland'.¹¹

For Marx, however, there was something even 'more important' politically than the English occupation of Ireland, and that was the division that violent nationalism had produced within the ranks of the proletariat. In the 'Confidential Communication' he emphasized that 'the English bourgeoisie has not only exploited the Irish misery to keep down the working class in England by forced immigration of poor Irishmen'; it had also proved able to divide the workers 'into two hostile camps'.

In all the big industrial centres in England, there is a profound antagonism between the Irish and English proletarians. The average English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers wages and the standard of life. He feels national and religious antipathies for him. He regards him practically in the same way the poor whites in the southern states of North America regard the black slaves. This antagonism between the proletarians in England is artificially nourished and kept alive by the bourgeoisie. It knows that this split is the true secret of maintaining its power.¹²

In the letter to Meyer and Vogt, Marx pushed his point of view even further. He reminded them that the English worker 'feels himself to be a member of the ruling nation and, therefore, makes himself a tool of his aristocrats and capitalists against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself'.

¹⁰ Marx, 'Confidential Communication', in MECW, vol. 21, pp. 120–1.

¹¹ Karl Marx to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt, 9 April 1870, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 473.

¹² Marx, 'Confidential Communication', in MECW, vol. 21, p. 120.

‘The Irishman pays him back with interest in his own money’, rightly seeing the English worker as ‘the accomplice and the stupid tool of English rule in Ireland.’ The ruling classes encourage this antagonism as much as possible; it is ‘kept artificially alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short by all the means at the[ir] disposal.’¹³

Moreover, ‘the evil does not end here. It rolls across the ocean.’¹⁴ In the ‘Confidential Communication’ of March 1870, Marx pointed out: ‘The Irish, driven from their native soil, [...] reassemble in North America, where [...] their only thought, their only passion, is hatred for England.’ The English and American governments, or ‘the classes they represent’, ‘nourish these passions in order to perpetuate the covert struggle between the United States and England, and thereby prevent a sincere and serious alliance between the working classes on both sides of the Atlantic, and, consequently, their emancipation.’

Marx elaborated on these themes to Meyer and Vogt: ‘The antagonism between English and Irish [...] enables the governments of the two countries, whenever they think fit, to blunt the edge of social conflict by mutual bullying and, in case of need, by war between the two countries.’ In this letter to comrades on the other side of the Atlantic, Marx expounded better than anywhere else the political choices necessary in the existing situation:

England, as the metropolis of capital, as the power that has hitherto ruled the world market, is for the present the most important country for the workers’ revolution and, in addition, the only country where the material conditions for this revolution have developed to a certain state of maturity. Thus, to hasten the social revolution in England is the most important object of the International Working Men’s Association. The sole means of doing so is to make Ireland independent. It is, therefore, the task of the ‘International’ to bring the conflict between England and Ireland to the forefront everywhere, and to side with Ireland publicly everywhere.¹⁵

The International, and particularly the General Council in London, had to make the British workers realize that ‘the national emancipation of Ireland is

¹³ Karl Marx to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt, 9 April 1870, in MECW, vol. 43, pp. 474–5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 475.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

not a question of abstract justice or humanitarian sentiment, as certain enlightened liberals or religious figures were arguing. It was a basic question of class solidarity, 'the first condition of their own social emancipation'.¹⁶ As Marx put it in the 'Confidential Communication', 'England today is seeing a repetition of what happened on a gigantic scale in ancient Rome. A nation that enslaves another forges its own chains.' The International had come into being to prevent such a repetition.

2. Opposition to the Franco-Prussian War

In 1870, in every European country where the International was reasonably strong, its members gave birth to new organizations completely autonomous from those already in existence. In Britain, however, the unions that made up the main force of the International naturally did not disband their own structures. The London-based General Council therefore fulfilled two functions at once: as world headquarters and as the leadership for Britain, where trade union affiliations kept some 50,000 workers in its orbit of influence.

In France, the repressive policies of the Second Empire made 1868 a year of serious crisis for the International. The following year, however, saw a revival of the organization, and new leaders who had abandoned mutualist positions came to the fore. The peak of expansion for the International came in 1870, but despite its considerable growth the organization never took root in 38 of the 90 *départements*. The national total has been put somewhere between 30,000 and 40,000.¹⁷ Thus, although the International did not become a true mass organization in France, it certainly grew to a respectable size and aroused widespread interest.

In Belgium, membership peaked in the early 1870s at several tens of thousands, probably exceeding the number in the whole of France. It was here that the International achieved both its highest numerical density in the

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Jacques Rougerie spoke of 'some tens of thousands,' 'Les sections françaises de l'Association Internationale des Travailleurs,' in Colloque International sur La première Internationale (ed.), *La Première Internationale: l'institute, l'implantation, le rayonnement*, p. 111.

general population and its greatest influence in society. The positive evolution during this period was also apparent in Switzerland. In 1870, however, Bakunin's activity divided the organization into two groups of equal size, which confronted each other at the congress of the Romande Federation precisely on the question of whether his International Alliance for Socialist Democracy should be admitted to the Federation.¹⁸ When it proved impossible to reconcile their positions, the proceedings continued in two parallel congresses, and a truce was agreed only after an intervention by the General Council. The group aligned with London was slightly smaller, yet retained the name Romande Federation, whereas the one linked to Bakunin had to adopt the name Jura Federation, even though its affiliation to the International was again recognized.

During this period, Bakunin's ideas began to spread, but the country where they took hold most rapidly was Spain. In fact, the International first developed in the Iberian Peninsula through the activity of the Neapolitan anarchist Giuseppe Fanelli [1827–1877], who, at Bakunin's request, travelled to Barcelona and Madrid to help found both sections of the International and groups of the Alliance for Socialist Democracy. His trip achieved its purpose. But his distribution of documents of both international organizations, often to the same people, was a prime example of the Bakuninite confusion and theoretical eclecticism of the time; the Spanish workers founded the International with the principles of the Alliance for Socialist Democracy.

In the North German Confederation, despite the existence of two political organizations of the workers' movement – the Lassallean General Association of German Workers and the Marxist Social Democratic Workers' Party of Germany – there was little enthusiasm for the International and few requests to affiliate to it. During its first three years, German militants virtually ignored its existence, fearing persecution at the hands of the authorities. The weak internationalism of the Germans ultimately weighed more heavily than any legal aspects, however, and declined still further when the movement became more preoccupied with internal matters.¹⁹

¹⁸ Jacques Freymond (ed.), *Études et documents sur la Première Internationale en Suisse*. Geneva: Droz, 1964, p. 295.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. x.

Against this background, marked by evident contradictions and uneven development between countries, the International made provisions for its fifth congress in September 1870. This was originally scheduled to be held in Paris, but repressive operations by the French government made the General Council opt instead for Mainz; Marx probably also thought that the greater number of German delegates close to his positions would help to stem the advance of the Bakuninists, which had been taking place mainly in southern Europe. In May, after a General Council meeting at which his proposal was accepted, Marx remarked to Engels: ‘The transfer of the congress to Mainz – unanimously voted yesterday – will give Bakunin a fit.’²⁰

A month earlier, Marx had sent a long letter to Paul Lafargue that contained information about ‘Bakunin’s intrigues’ for Paris branches of the International. Bakunin, Marx wrote, had given his Alliance for Socialist Democracy the character of ‘a sect’, which was to ‘have general congresses of its own, [...] to form an independent international body, and at the same time to be a member of our Internationale’. In short, Bakunin was seeking to turn the International into an organization under his control, by means of an ‘interloping secret society’.²¹ A conflict thus began to develop between the two, with no holds barred.

Marx kept a close watch on the workers’ movement, to ensure that it did not acquire similar features. On the occasion of the founding of a new section of the International, he urged Paul Lafargue to do everything to prevent its being given ‘a sectarian name, either Communistic or other’. According to Marx:

Sectarian ‘labels’ should be avoided in the International Association. The general aspirations and tendencies of the working class emanate from the real conditions in which it finds itself placed. They are therefore common to the whole class although the movement reflects itself in their heads in the most diversified forms, more or less phantastical, more or less adequate. Those who interpret best the hidden sense of the class struggle going on before our eyes – the Communists – are the last to commit the blunder of affecting or fostering sectarianism.²²

²⁰ Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 18 May 1870, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 523.

²¹ Karl Marx to Paul Lafargue, 19 April 1870, in MECW, vol. 43, pp. 489–90.

²² Karl Marx to Paul Lafargue, 18 April 1870, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 485.

In summer 1870, in the course of preparations for the congress of the International, Marx also wrote to Hermann Jung and sent him a detailed note on the issues to be taken up there. These were:

- 1) The necessity of abolishing the public debt. Discussion on the right of indemnity to be accorded.
- 2) The relations between political action and the social movement of the working class.
- 3) Practical measures for converting landed property into public property. [...]
- 4) The conversion of currency banks into national banks.
- 5) Conditions of cooperative production on a national scale.
- 6) On the necessity for the working class to keep general statistics of labour in accordance with the resolutions of the Geneva Congress of 1866.
- 7) Reconsideration [...] of the question of measures to abolish war.

To these points he added the proposal of the Belgian general council to consider 'practical measures to set up agricultural sections within the International and to achieve solidarity between the proletarians in agriculture and the proletarians in other industries.'²³

However, the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war, on 19 July 1870, left no choice but to call off the congress. The conflict at the heart of Europe meant that the top priority now was to help the workers' movement express an independent position, far from the nationalist rhetoric of the time.

In his 'First Address on the Franco-Prussian War' (1870), Marx called upon the French workers to drive out Charles Louis Bonaparte [1808–1873] and to obliterate the empire he had established eighteen years earlier. The German workers, for their part, were supposed to prevent the defeat of Bonaparte from turning into an attack on the French people: 'if the German working class allows the present war to lose its strictly defensive character and to degenerate into a war against the French people, victory or defeat will prove alike disastrous'. Marx added:

The English working class stretch the hand of fellowship to the French and German working people. They feel deeply convinced that whatever turn the impending horrid war may take, the alliance of the working classes of all countries will ultimately kill war. The very fact that while official France and

²³ Karl Marx to Hermann Jung, 14 July 1870, in MECW, vol. 43, p. 538.

Germany are rushing into a fratricidal feud, the workmen of France and Germany send each other messages of peace and goodwill; this great fact, unparalleled in the history of the past, opens the vista of a brighter future. It proves that in contrast to old society, with its economical miseries and its political delirium, a new society is springing up, whose international rule will be *Peace*, because its national ruler will be everywhere the same – Labour! The pioneer of that new society is the International Working Men’s Association.²⁴

This text, in 30,000 copies (15,000 for Germany and 15,000 for France, printed in Geneva), was the first major foreign policy declaration of the International. One of the many who spoke enthusiastically in support of it was John Stuart Mill: ‘there was not one word in it that ought not to be there,’ he wrote, and ‘it could not have been done with fewer words.’²⁵

The leaders of the Social Democratic Workers’ Party, Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel [1840–1913], were the only two members of parliament in the North German Confederation who refused to vote for the special war budget,²⁶ and sections of the International in France also sent messages of friendship and solidarity to the German workers. Yet the French defeat sealed the birth of a new and more potent age of nation-states in Europe, with all its accompanying chauvinism.

This was the scenario that Marx had in mind in the ‘Second Address on the Franco-Prussian War’, when he wrote that ‘the present tremendous war might be but the harbinger of still deadlier international feuds, and lead in every nation to a renewed triumph over the workman by the lords of the sword, of the soil, and of capital.’²⁷

3. The Paris Commune takes power

After the German victory at Sedan and the capture of Bonaparte, a Third Republic was proclaimed in France on 4 September 1870. In January of the

²⁴ Karl Marx, ‘First Address on the Franco-Prussian War’, in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, p. 239.

²⁵ John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 32. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991, p. 244.

²⁶ The representatives of the Lassallean General Association of German Workers voted in favour.

²⁷ Karl Marx, ‘Second Address on the Franco-Prussian War’, in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, p. 241.

following year, a four-month siege of Paris ended in the French acceptance of Bismarck's conditions; an ensuing armistice allowed the holding of elections and the appointment of Adolphe Thiers [1797–1877] as President of the Republic, with the support of a huge Legitimist and Orleanist majority. In the capital, however, Progressive-Republican forces swept the board and there was widespread popular discontent. Faced with the prospect of a government that wanted to disarm the city and withhold any social reform, the Parisians turned against Thiers and on 18 March initiated the first great political event in the life of the workers' movement: the Paris Commune.

Although Bakunin had urged the workers to turn patriotic war into revolutionary war,²⁸ the General Council in London initially opted for silence. It charged Marx with the task of writing a text in the name of the International, but he delayed its publication for complicated, deeply held reasons. Well aware of the real relationship of forces on the ground as well as the weaknesses of the Commune, he knew that it was doomed to defeat. He had even tried to warn the French working class back in September 1870, in his 'Second Address on the Franco-Prussian War':

Any attempt at upsetting the new government in the present crisis, when the enemy is almost knocking at the doors of Paris, would be a desperate folly. The French workmen [...] must not allow themselves to be swayed by the national *souvenirs* of 1792 [...]. They have not to recapitulate the past, but to build up the future. Let them calmly and resolutely improve the opportunities of republican liberty, for the work of their own class organization. It will gift them with fresh herculean powers for the regeneration of France, and our common task – the emancipation of labour. Upon their energies and wisdom hinges the fate of the republic.²⁹

In a letter to Liebknecht, Marx complained of the 'too great honesty' of the Parisian revolutionaries. In trying to avoid 'the appearance of having usurped power', they had 'lost precious moments' by organizing the election of the Commune. Their 'folly' had been 'not wanting to start a civil war – as if Thiers had not already started it by his attempt at forcibly disarming

²⁸ See Arthur Lehning, 'Introduction', in Lehning (ed.), *Bakunin – Archiv*, vol. VI: *Michel Bakounine sur la Guerre Franco-Allemande et la Révolution Sociale en France (1870–1871)*. Leiden: Brill, 1977, p. xvi.

²⁹ Marx, 'Second Address on the Franco-Prussian War', p. 241.

Paris.³⁰ He made similar points to his friend Kugelmann a week later: ‘The right moment was missed because of conscientious scruples. [...] Second mistake: The Central Committee surrendered power too soon, to make way for the Commune. Again from a too honourable scrupulousness.’

At any event, alongside critical observations on the course of events in France, Marx never failed to highlight the exceptional combative spirit and political ability of the Communards. He continued:

What resilience, what historical initiative, what a capacity for sacrifice in these Parisians! After six months of hunger and ruin, caused rather by internal treachery than by the external enemy, they rise, beneath Prussian bayonets, as if there had never been a war between France and Germany and the enemy were not still at the gates of Paris! History has no like example of a like greatness.

Marx understood that, whatever the outcome of the revolution, the Commune had opened a new chapter in the history of the workers’ movement.

The present rising in Paris – even if it be crushed by the wolves, swine and vile curs of the old society – is the most glorious deed of our Party since the June Insurrection in Paris.³¹ Compare these Parisians, storming the heavens, with the slaves to heaven of the German-Prussian Holy Roman Empire, with its posthumous masquerades reeking of the barracks, the Church, the cabbage Junkers and above all, of the philistines.³²

Marx continued these reflections a few days later in another letter to Kugelmann. Whereas his close friend had wrongly compared the fighting in Paris to ‘petty-bourgeois demonstrations’ like those of 13 June 1849 in Paris, Marx again exalted the courage of the Communards: ‘World history,’ he wrote, ‘would indeed be very easy to make if the struggle were taken up only on condition of infallibly favourable chances.’ His thinking here shows just how remote he was from the kind of fatalist determinism that his critics attributed to him:

[History] would, on the other hand, be of a very mystical nature if ‘accidents’ played no part. These accidents themselves fall naturally into the general

³⁰ Karl Marx to Wilhelm Liebknecht, 6 April 1871, in MECW, vol. 44, p. 128.

³¹ Marx is referring to the workers’ uprising of June 1848, which was drowned in blood by a conservative republican government.

³² Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 12 April 1871, in MECW, vol. 44, pp. 131–2.

course of development and are compensated again by other accidents. But acceleration and delay are very dependent upon such 'accidents', which include the 'accident' of the character of those who first stand at the head of the movement.³³

The circumstance that worked against the Commune was the presence of the Prussians on French soil, allied with the 'bourgeois riff-raff of Versailles'. Bolstered by their understanding with the Germans,³⁴ the Versaillais 'presented the Parisians with the alternative of taking up the fight or succumbing without a struggle'. In the latter case, 'the demoralization of the working class would have been a far greater misfortune than the fall of any number of "leaders"'. Marx concluded: 'The struggle of the working class against the capitalist class and its state has entered upon a new phase with the struggle in Paris. Whatever the immediate results may be, a new point of departure of world-historic importance has been gained.'³⁵

A fervid declaration hailing the victory of the Paris Commune would have risked creating false expectations among workers throughout Europe, eventually becoming a source of demoralization and distrust. Marx therefore decided to postpone delivery and stayed away from meetings of the General Council for several weeks. His grim forebodings soon proved all too well founded, and on 28 May, little more than two months after its proclamation, the Paris Commune was drowned in blood. Two days later, he reappeared at the General Council with a manuscript entitled *The Civil War in France* (1871); it was read and unanimously approved, then published over the names of all the Council members.

The document had a huge impact over the next few weeks, greater than any other document of the workers' movement in the nineteenth century. Speaking of the Paris Commune, Marx wrote:

The few but important functions which would still remain for a central government were not to be suppressed, as has been intentionally misstated,

³³ Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 17 April 1871, in MECW, vol. 44, pp. 136–7.

³⁴ See Karl Marx to Léo Frankel and Louis Eugène Varlin [1839–1871] (draft), 13 May 1871, in MECW, vol. 44, p. 149: 'The Prussians won't hand over the forts to the Versailles people, but after the definitive conclusion of peace (26 May), they will allow the government to invest Paris with its gendarmes. [...] Thiers & Co. had [...] asked Bismarck to delay payment of the first instalment until the occupation of Paris. Bismarck accepted this condition. Prussia, being herself in urgent need of that money, will therefore provide the Versailles people with every possible facility to hasten the occupation of Paris. So be on your guard!'

³⁵ Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 17 April 1871, in MECW, vol. 44, p. 137.

but were to be discharged by Communal and thereafter responsible agents. The unity of the nation was not to be broken, but, on the contrary, to be organized by Communal Constitution, and to become a reality by the destruction of the state power which claimed to be the embodiment of that unity independent of, and superior to, the nation itself, from which it was but a parasitic excrescence. While the merely repressive organs of the old governmental power were to be amputated, its legitimate functions were to be wrested from an authority usurping pre-eminence over society itself, and restored to the responsible agents of society.³⁶

The Paris Commune had been an altogether novel political experiment:

It was essentially a working-class government, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour. Except on this last condition, the Communal Constitution would have been an impossibility and a delusion. The political rule of the producer cannot coexist with the perpetuation of his social slavery. The Commune was therefore to serve as a lever for uprooting the economical foundation upon which rests the existence of classes, and therefore of class rule. With labour emancipated, every man becomes a working man, and productive labour ceases to be a class attribute.³⁷

For Marx, the new phase of class struggle that opened with the Paris Commune could be successful – and therefore produce radical changes – only through the realization of a clearly anticapitalist programme:

the Commune intended to abolish [...] class property which makes the labour of the many the wealth of the few. It aimed at the expropriation of the expropriators. It wanted to make individual property a truth by transforming the means of production, land, and capital, now chiefly the means of enslaving and exploiting labour, into mere instruments of free and associated labour. [...] If co-operative production is not to remain a sham and a snare; if it is to supersede the capitalist system; if united co-operative societies are to regulate national production upon common plan, thus taking it under their own control, and putting an end to the constant anarchy and periodical convulsions which are the fatality of capitalist production – what else,

³⁶ Karl Marx, 'On the Paris Commune', in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, pp. 215–16.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 217–18.

gentlemen, would it be but communism, 'possible' communism? The working class did not expect miracles from the Commune. They have no ready-made utopias to introduce by decree of the people. They know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economical agencies, they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men. They have no ideals to realize, but to set free the elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant.³⁸

Three English editions of *The Civil War in France* in quick succession won acclaim among the workers and caused uproar in bourgeois circles. It was also translated fully or partly into a dozen other languages, appearing in newspapers, magazines and booklets in various European countries and the United States.

Despite Marx's passionate defence, and despite the claims both of reactionary opponents and of dogmatic Marxists eager to glorify the International,³⁹ it is out of the question that the General Council actually pushed for the Parisian insurrection. Prominent figures in the organization did play a role – Leo Frankel [1844–1896], for example, though Hungarian by origin, was placed in charge of work, industry and trade – but the leadership of the Paris Commune was in the hands of its radical Jacobin wing. Of the eighty-five representatives elected at the municipal elections of 26 March,⁴⁰ there were fifteen moderates (the so-called '*parti des maires*', a group of former mayors of the arrondissements) and four radicals, who immediately resigned and never formed part of the Council of the Commune. Of the sixty-six remaining, eleven, although revolutionary, were without a clear political tendency, fourteen came from the Committee of the National Guard, and fifteen were radical-republicans and socialists; in addition there were nine Blanquists, and seventeen members of the International.⁴¹ Among the latter were Édouard

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 218–19.

³⁹ See Georges Haupt, *Aspect of International Socialism 1871–1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, who warned against 'the reshaping of the reality of the Commune in order to make it conform to an image transfigured by ideology', p. 25.

⁴⁰ There were 92 seats, but the multiple election of some individuals meant that there were only 85 actual council members.

⁴¹ See Jacques Rougerie, *Paris libre 1871*. Paris: Seuil, 1971, p. 146; Pierre Milza, *L'année terrible*. Paris: Perrin, 2009, p. 78.

Vaillant [1840–1915], Benoît Malon [1841–1893], Auguste Serrailier [1840–1872], Jean-Louis Pindy [1840–1917], Albert Theisz [1839–1880], Charles Longuet [1839–1903] and the previously mentioned Varlin and Frankel. However, coming as they did from various political backgrounds and cultures, they did not constitute a monolithic group and often voted in different ways. This too favoured the hegemony of the Jacobin perspective of radical republicanism, which was reflected in the Montagnard-inspired decision in May (approved by two-thirds of the Council, including the Blanquists) to create a Committee of Public Safety. Marx himself pointed out that ‘the majority of the Commune was in no sense socialist, nor could it have been.’⁴²

During the ‘bloody week’ (21–28 May) that followed the irruption of the Versaillais into Paris, some ten thousand Communards were killed in fighting or summarily executed; it was the bloodiest massacre in French history. Another 43,000 or more were taken prisoner, 13,500 of whom were subsequently sentenced to death, imprisonment, forced labour or deportation (many to the remote colony of New Caledonia). Another 7,000 managed to escape and take refuge in England, Belgium or Switzerland. The European conservative and liberal press completed the work of Thiers’s soldiers, accusing the Communards of hideous crimes and trumpeting the victory of ‘civilization’ over the insolent workers’ rebellion. From now on, the International was at the eye of the storm, held to blame for every act against the established order. ‘When the great conflagration took place at Chicago,’ Marx mused with bitter irony, ‘the telegraph round the world announced it as the infernal deed of the International; and it is really wonderful that to its demoniacal agency has not been attributed the hurricane ravaging the West Indies.’⁴³

Marx had to spend whole days answering press slanders about the International and himself: ‘at this moment,’ he wrote, [he was] ‘the best calumniated and the most menaced man of London.’⁴⁴ Meanwhile, governments all over Europe sharpened their instruments of repression, fearing that other uprisings might follow the one in Paris.

⁴² Karl Marx to Domela Nieuwenhuis, 22 February 1881, in MECW, vol. 46, p. 66.

⁴³ Karl Marx, ‘Report of the General Council to the Fifth Annual Congress of the International,’ in Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the C.C., C.P.S.U. (ed.), *The General Council of the First International 1871–1872*, 1968, p. 461.

⁴⁴ Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 18 June 1871, in MECW, vol. 44, p. 157.

Despite the bloody denouement in Paris and the wave of calumny and government repression elsewhere in Europe, the International grew stronger and more widely known in the wake of the Commune. For the capitalists and the middle classes it represented a threat to the established order, but for the workers it fuelled hopes in a world without exploitation and injustice.⁴⁵ Insurrectionary Paris fortified the workers' movement, impelling it to adopt more radical positions and to intensify its militancy. The experience showed that revolution was possible, that the goal could and should be to build a society utterly different from the capitalist order, but also that, in order to achieve this, the workers would have to create durable and well-organized forms of political association.⁴⁶ Enormous vitality was apparent everywhere. Attendance at General Council meetings doubled, while the press linked to the International increased in both number and overall sales, after the emergence of many new papers.

4. The political turn of the London conference

Two years had passed since the last congress of the International, but a new one could not be held under the prevailing circumstances. The General Council therefore decided to organize a conference in London; it took place between 17 and 23 September 1871, in the presence of twenty-two delegates⁴⁷ from Britain (Ireland too being represented for the first time), Belgium, Switzerland and Spain, plus the French exiles. Despite the efforts to make the event as representative as possible, it was in fact more in the way of an enlarged General Council meeting.

Marx had announced beforehand that the conference would be devoted 'exclusively to questions of organization and policy',⁴⁸ with theoretical discussions left to one side. He spelled this out at its first session:

The General Council has convened a conference to agree with delegates from various countries the measures that need to be taken against the

⁴⁵ See Georges Haupt, *L'internazionale socialista dalla Comune a Lenin*, p. 28.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 93–5.

⁴⁷ In fact, only nineteen delegates participated in the conference, since one could not attend and two were present only at the first two sessions.

⁴⁸ Karl Marx, 15 August 1871, in Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the C.C., C.P.S.U. (ed.), *The General Council of the First International 1870–1871*, p. 259.

dangers facing the Association in a large number of countries, and to move towards a new organization corresponding to the needs of the situation. In the second place, to work out a response to the governments that are ceaselessly working to destroy the Association with every means at their disposal. And lastly to settle the Swiss dispute once and for all.⁴⁹

Marx summoned all his energies for these priorities: to reorganize the International, to defend it from the offensive of hostile forces, and to check Bakunin's growing influence. By far the most active delegate at the conference, Marx took the floor as many as 102 times, blocked proposals that did not fit in with his plans, and won over those not yet convinced.⁵⁰ The gathering in London confirmed his stature within the organization, not only as the brains shaping its political line, but also as one of its most combative and capable militants.

The most important decision taken at the conference, for which it would be remembered later, was the approval of Vaillant's Resolution IX. The leader of the Blanquists – whose residual forces had joined the International after the end of the Commune – proposed that the organization should be transformed into a centralized, disciplined party, under the leadership of the General Council. Despite some differences, particularly over the Blanquist position that a tightly organized nucleus of militants was sufficient for the revolution, Marx did not hesitate to form an alliance with Vaillant's group: not only to strengthen the opposition to Bakuninite anarchism within the International, but above all to create a broader consensus for the changes deemed necessary in the new phase of the class struggle. In an intervention at one of the sessions on 20 September, Marx argued:

[T]he tribune is the best instrument of publicity [and] one should never believe that it is of small significance to have workers in Parliament. [. . .] To give but one example: when during the [Franco-Prussian] war, which was fought in France, Bebel and Liebknecht undertook to point out the responsibility of the working class in the face of those events, all of Germany was shaken; and even in Munich, the city where revolutions take place only

⁴⁹ Karl Marx, 17 September 1871, in Henri Burgelin, Knut Langfeldt and Miklós Molnár (eds), *La première Internationale*, vol. II (1869–1872), p. 152. The 'Swiss dispute' was linked to disagreement with the anarchists. See Marcello Musto, 'Introduction', in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, p. 36f.

⁵⁰ See Miklós Molnár, *Le déclin de la première internationale*, p. 127.

over the price of beer, great demonstrations took place demanding an end to the war – which, in Munich, won many workers to the International Association. The governments are hostile to us, one must respond to them with all the means at our disposal and launch a general crusade against them. To get workers into Parliament is synonymous with a victory over governments, but one must choose the right men. [. . .]. The Association has always demanded, and not merely from today, that the workers must occupy themselves with politics.⁵¹

Marx returned to the subject on the following day. In the part of his intervention that was transcribed and preserved, he ‘explained the history of abstention from politics and said that one should not get worked up over this question.’⁵² And he added: ‘The men who propagated this doctrine were well-meaning utopians, but those who want to take such a road today are not. They reject politics until after a violent struggle, and thereby drive the people into a formal, bourgeois opposition, which we must battle against at the same time that we fight against the governments.’⁵³ According to Marx, the International should give the following message to governments: ‘We know you are the armed power which is directed against the proletarians; we will move against you in peaceful ways where it is possible, and with arms if it should become necessary.’⁵⁴ The resolution passed at the London Conference therefore stated:

that against this collective power of the propertied classes the working class cannot act, as a class, except by constituting itself into a political party, distinct from, and opposed to, all old parties formed by the propertied classes; that this constitution of the working class into a political party is indispensable in order to ensure the triumph of the social revolution and its ultimate end – the abolition of classes; and that the combination of forces which the working class has already effected by its economic struggles ought at the same time to serve as a lever for its struggles against the political power of landlords and capitalists.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Karl Marx, ‘On the Political Action of the Working Class,’ in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, pp. 278–9.

⁵² Karl Marx, ‘On the question of Abstentionism,’ in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, p. 280.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘On the Political Action of the Working Class and Other Matters,’ in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, p. 285.

The conclusion was clear: 'the economic movement [of the working class] and its political action are indissolubly united'.⁵⁶

Whereas the Geneva Congress of 1866 established the importance of trade unions, the London Conference of 1871 shifted the focus to the other key instrument of the modern workers' movement: the political party. It should be stressed, however, that the understanding of this was much broader than that which developed in the twentieth century. Marx's conception should therefore be differentiated both from the Blanquists' – the two would openly clash later on.⁵⁷

For Marx, the self-emancipation of the working class required a long and arduous process – the polar opposite of the theories and practices in Sergei Nechaev's [1847–1882] *Catechism of a Revolutionary* (1869), whose advocacy of secret societies was condemned by the delegates in London⁵⁸ but enthusiastically supported by Bakunin.

Only four delegates opposed Resolution IX at the London Conference, but Marx's victory soon proved to be ephemeral. For the call to establish what amounted to political parties in every country and to confer broader powers on the General Council had grave repercussions in the internal life of the International; it was not ready to move so rapidly from a flexible to a politically uniform model of organization.⁵⁹

Marx was convinced that virtually all the main federations and local sections would back the resolutions of the Conference, but he soon had to think again. On 12 November, the Jura Federation – the anarchist-led Swiss group of the International – called a congress of its own in the small commune

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ In the early 1870s the working-class movement was organized as a political party only in Germany. Usage of the term 'party,' whether by the followers of Marx or of Bakunin, was therefore very confused. Even Marx used the term in a vague manner. For him, according to Maximilien Rubel, *Marx critique du marxisme*, p. 183, 'the concept of party [...] corresponds to the concept of class'. It is useful to emphasize that the conflict which took place in the International between 1871 and 1872 did not focus on the construction of a political party – an expression uttered only twice at the London Conference and five times at the Hague Congress – but rather on the 'use [...] of the adjective "political"', Haupt, *L'Internazionale socialista dalla Comune a Lenin*, p. 84.

⁵⁸ See Henri Burgelin, Knut Langfeldt and Miklós Molnár (eds), *La première Internationale*, vol. II (1869–1872). Geneva: Droz, 1962, p. 237; and Karl Marx, 'Declaration of the General Council on Nechayev's Misuse of the Name of the International Working Men's Association', in MECW, vol. 23, p. 23.

⁵⁹ See Jacques Freymond and Miklós Molnár, 'The Rise and Fall of the First International', in Milorad M. Drachkovitch (ed.), *The Revolutionary Internationals, 1864–1943*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966, p. 27.

of Sonvilier, and, although Bakunin was unable to attend, it officially launched the opposition within the International. In the 'Circular to All Federations of the International Working Men's Association' issued at the end of the proceedings, James Guillaume [1844–1916] and the other participants accused the General Council of having introduced the 'authority principle' into the International and transformed its original structure into 'a hierarchical organization directed and governed by a committee'. The Swiss declared themselves 'against all directing authority, even should that authority be elected and endorsed by the workers', and insisted on 'retention of the principle of autonomy of the Sections,' so that the General Council would become 'a simple correspondence and statistical bureau'.⁶⁰ Lastly, they called for a congress to be held as soon as possible.

Although the position of the Jura Federation was not unexpected, Marx was probably surprised when signs of restlessness and even rebellion against the political line of the General Council began to appear elsewhere. In a number of countries, the decisions taken in London were judged an unacceptable encroachment on local political autonomy. The Belgian Federation, which at the conference had aimed at mediation between the different sides, began to adopt a much more critical stance towards London, and the Dutch too later took their distance. In southern Europe, where the reaction was even stronger, the opposition soon won considerable support. Indeed, the great majority of Iberian Internationalists came out against the General Council and endorsed Bakunin's ideas, partly, no doubt, because these were more in keeping with a region where the industrial proletariat had a presence only in the main cities, and where the workers' movement was still very weak and mainly concerned with economic demands. In Italy too, the results of the London Conference were seen in a negative light. Those who followed Mazzini gathered in Rome from 1 to 6 November 1871, in the General Congress of Italian Workers' Societies (the more moderate labour bloc), while most of the rest fell in with Bakunin's positions. Those who met at Rimini between 4 and 6 August 1872 for the founding congress of the Italian Federation of the International took the most radical position against the General Council: they would not participate

⁶⁰ Various authors, 'Circulaire du Congrès de Sonvilier', in Burgelin, Langfeldt and Molnár (eds), *La première Internationale*, vol. II (1869–1872), pp. 264–5.

in the forthcoming congress of the International but proposed to hold an ‘anti-authoritarian general congress’⁶¹ in Neuchâtel, Switzerland. In fact, this would be the first act of the impending split.

Across the Atlantic, too, various feuds limited the expansion of the International.⁶² Apart from the English, support for the General Council still came from a majority of the Swiss, from the French (now mostly Blanquists), the weak German forces, the recently constituted sections in Denmark, Ireland and Portugal, and the East European groups in Hungary and Bohemia. But all these added up to much less than Marx had expected at the end of the London Conference.

The opposition to the General Council was varied in character and sometimes had mainly personal motives; a strange alchemy held it together and made leadership of the International even more difficult. Still, beyond the fascination with Bakunin’s theories in certain countries and Guillaume’s capacity to unify the various oppositionists, the main factor militating against the resolution on ‘Working-Class Political Action’ was an environment unwilling to accept the qualitative step forward proposed by Marx. For all the accompanying claims of utility, the London turn was seen by many as crass interference; not only the group linked to Bakunin but most of the federations and local sections regarded the principle of autonomy and respect for diverse realities as one of the cornerstones of the International. This miscalculation on Marx’s part accelerated the crisis of the organization.⁶³

⁶¹ Various authors, *Risoluzione, programma e regolamento della federazione italiana dell’Associazione Internazionale dei Lavoratori*, in Gian Mario Bravo, *La Prima Internazionale*, p. 787.

⁶² See Musto (ed.), ‘Introduction’, in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, p. 20.

⁶³ See Freymond and Molnár, ‘The Rise and Fall of the First International’, pp. 27–8.

The Conflict with Bakunin

1. The crisis of the International

The final battle came towards the end of summer 1872. After the terrible events of the previous three years – the Franco-Prussian War, the wave of repression following the Paris Commune, the numerous internal skirmishes – the International could at last meet again in congress. In the countries where it had recently sunk roots, it was expanding through the enthusiastic efforts of union leaders and worker-activists suddenly fired by its slogans: it was in 1872 that the organization experienced its fastest growth in Italy, Denmark, Portugal and the Netherlands, at the very time when it was banned in France, Germany and the Austro-Hunarian Empire. Yet most of the membership remained unaware of the gravity of the conflicts that raged on within its leading group.¹

The Fifth Congress of the International took place in The Hague between 2 and 7 September. The crucial importance of the event impelled Marx to attend in person, accompanied by Engels. In a letter to Kugelmann, he noted that it had been ‘a matter of life and death for the International; and before I resign I want at least to protect it from disintegrating elements.’² In fact, it was the only congress of the organization in which he took part.

Neither César De Paepe – perhaps aware that he would be unable to play the same mediating role as in London the previous year³ – nor Bakunin made it to the Dutch capital.

¹ See Georges Haupt, *L'internazionale socialista dalla Comune a Lenin*. Turin: Einaudi, 1978, p. 88.

² Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, 29 July 1872, in MECW, vol. 44, p. 413.

³ On the role of the Belgian revolutionary in those years see César de Paepe, *Entre Marx et Bakounine*. Paris: Maspero, 1974.

By an irony of fate, the congress unfolded in Concordia Hall, although concord was little in evidence there; all the sessions were marked by irreducible antagonism between the two camps, resulting in debates that were far poorer than at the two previous congresses.

Approval of The Hague Congress resolutions was possible only because of its distorted composition. Though spurious and in many respects held together by instrumental purposes, the coalition of delegates that was in the minority at the congress actually constituted the most numerous part of the International.⁴

The most important decision taken by Marx at The Hague was to incorporate Resolution IX of the 1871 London Conference into the statutes of the Association, as a new article, 7a. Whereas the *Provisional Statutes* of 1864 had stated that 'the economic emancipation of the working class is the great end to which every political movement ought to be subordinate as a means', this insertion mirrored the new relationship of forces within the organization. Political struggle was now the necessary instrument for the transformation of society since: 'the lords of land and the lords of capital will always use their political privileges for the defence and perpetuation of their economic monopolies, and for the enslavement of labour. The conquest of political power has therefore become the great duty of the working class.'⁵

The International was now very different from how it had been at the time of its foundation: the radical-democratic components had walked out after being increasingly marginalized; the mutualists had been defeated and many converted; reformists no longer constituted the bulk of the organization (except in Britain); and anticapitalism had become the political line of the whole Association, as well as of recently formed tendencies such as the anarcho-collectivists. Moreover, although the years of the International had witnessed a degree of economic prosperity that in some cases made conditions less parlous, the workers understood that real change would come not through such palliatives but only through the end of human exploitation. They were

⁴ See Guillaume, *L'Internationale, Documents et Souvenirs (1864-1878)*, vol. II, pp. 333-4; cf. Freymond, 'Introduction', in Henri Burgelin, Knut Langfeldt and Miklós Molnár (eds), *La première Internationale*, vol. I (1866-1868). Geneva: Droz, 1962, p. 25.

⁵ Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, 'General Rules of the International Working Men's Association', in Marcello Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite! The International 150 Years Later*, p. 268.

also basing their struggles more and more on their own material needs, rather than the initiatives of particular groups to which they belonged.

The wider picture, too, was radically different. The unification of Germany in 1871 confirmed the onset of a new age in which the nation-state would be the central form of political, legal and territorial identity; this placed a question mark over any supranational body that required its members to surrender a sizeable share of their political leadership. At the same time, the growing differences between national movements and organizations made it extremely difficult for the General Council to produce a political synthesis capable of satisfying the demands of all.

The initial configuration of the International had thus become outmoded, just as its original mission had come to an end. The task was no longer to prepare for and organize Europe-wide support for strikes, nor to call congresses on the usefulness of trade unions or the need to socialize the land and the means of production. Such themes were now part of the collective heritage of the organization as a whole. After the Paris Commune, the real challenge for the workers' movement was a revolutionary one: how to organize in such a way as to end the capitalist mode of production and to overthrow the institutions of the bourgeois world. It was no longer a question of how to reform the existing society, but how to build a new one.⁶ For this new advance in the class struggle, Marx thought it indispensable to build working-class political parties in each country. The document 'To the Federal Council of the Spanish Region of the International Working Men's Association', written by Engels in February 1871, was one of the most explicit statements of the General Council on this matter:

Experience has shown everywhere that the best way to emancipate the workers from this domination of the old parties is to form in each country a proletarian party with a policy of its own, a policy which is manifestly different from that of the other parties, because it must express the conditions necessary for the emancipation of the working class. This policy may vary in details according to the specific circumstances of each country; but as the fundamental relations between labour and capital are the same everywhere and the political domination of the possessing classes over the exploited

⁶ See Freymond, 'Introduction', in Burgelin, Lanfeldt and Molnár (eds), *La première Internationale*, vol I (1866–1868), p. x.

classes is an existing fact everywhere, the principles and aims of proletarian policy will be identical, at least in all western countries. [...] To give up fighting our adversaries in the political field would mean to abandon one of the most powerful weapons, particularly in the sphere of organization and propaganda.⁷

From this point on, therefore, the party was considered essential for the struggle of the proletariat: it had to be independent of all existing political forces and to be built, both programmatically and organizationally, in accordance with the national context. At the General Council session of 23 July 1872, Marx criticized not only the abstentionists – who had been attacking Resolution IX of the London Conference – but the equally dangerous position of ‘the working classes of England and America,’ who let the middle classes use them for political purposes.⁸ On the second point, he had already declared at the London Conference that ‘politics must be adapted to the conditions of all countries,’⁹ and the following year, in a speech in Amsterdam immediately after The Hague Congress, he stressed:

Someday the worker must seize political power in order to build up the new organization of labour; he must overthrow the old politics, which sustain the old institutions, if he is not to lose Heaven on Earth, like the old Christians who neglected and despised politics. But we have not asserted that the ways to achieve that goal are everywhere the same. [...] We do not deny that there are countries [...] where the workers can attain their goal by peaceful means. This being the case, we must also recognize the fact that in most countries on the Continent the lever of our revolution must be force; it is force to which we must some day appeal in order to erect the rule of labour.¹⁰

Thus, although the workers’ parties emerged in different forms in different countries, they should not subordinate themselves to national interests.¹¹

⁷ Friedrich Engels, ‘On the Importance of Political Struggle’, in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, pp. 274–5.

⁸ Karl Marx, 23 July 1872, in Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the C.C., C.P.S.U. (ed.), *The General Council of the First International 1871–1872*, p. 263.

⁹ Karl Marx, 20 September 1871, in Henri Burgelin, Knut Langfeldt and Miklós Molnár (eds), *La première Internationale*, vol. II (1869–1872). Geneva: Droz, 1962, p. 195.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, ‘On The Hague Congress’, in MECW, vol. 23, p. 255.

¹¹ See Haupt, *L’Internazionale socialista dalla Comune a Lenin*, p. 100.

The struggle for socialism could not be confined in that way, and especially in the new historical context internationalism must continue to be the guiding beacon for the proletariat, as well as its vaccine against the deadly embrace of the state and the capitalist system.

During The Hague Congress, harsh polemics preceded a series of votes. Following the adoption of article 7a, the goal of winning political power was inscribed in the statutes, and there was also an indication that a workers' party was an essential instrument for this. The subsequent decision to confer broader powers on the General Council made the situation even more intolerable for the minority, since the Council now had the task of ensuring 'rigid observation of the principles and statutes and general rules of the International', and 'the right to suspend branches, sections, councils or federal committees and federations of the International until the next congress'.¹²

For the first time in the history of the International, its highest congress also approved expulsions. Those of Bakunin and Guillaume caused quite a stir, having been proposed by a commission of enquiry that described the Alliance for Socialist Democracy as 'a secret organization with statutes completely opposite to those of the International'.¹³ Finally, the congress authorized publication of a long report, *The Alliance for Socialist Democracy and the International Working Men's Association* (1873), which traced the history of the organization led by Bakunin and analysed its public and secret activity country by country. Written by Engels, Lafargue and Marx, the document was published in French in July 1873 and contains an extensive critique of Bakunin's 'revolutionary revolutionism'. The three authors argue that, for Bakunin, political power will be destroyed not by combating 'existing states and governments with the means employed by ordinary revolutionaries, but on the contrary to hurl resounding, grandiloquent phrases'.¹⁴ Bakunin's objective was not to overthrow 'the Bonapartist State, the Prussian or Russian State [. . .], but an abstract state, the state as such, a state that nowhere exists'.¹⁵

¹² Burgelin, Langfeldt and Molnár (eds), *La première Internationale*, vol. II (1869–1872), p. 374. The opposition had already advocated reducing the General Council's power at the Sonvilier Congress of November 1871, but Marx declared at The Hague: 'we would prefer to abolish the General Council rather than see it reduce to the role of letter box', *ibid.*, p. 354.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 377.

¹⁴ Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Paul Lafargue, 'Critique of Bakunin's Politics', in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, p. 182.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

The opposition at the congress was not uniform in its response to these attacks, some abstaining and others voting against. On the final day, however, a joint declaration read out by the worker Victor Dave [1845–1922] from The Hague section stated:

1. We the [...] supporters of the autonomy and federation of groups of working men shall continue our administrative relations with the General Council [...].
2. The federations which we represent will establish direct and permanent relations between themselves and all regular branches of the Association. [...].
4. We call on all the federations and sections to prepare between now and the next general congress for the triumph within the International of the principles of federative autonomy as the basis of the organization of labour.¹⁶

This statement was more a tactical ploy, designed to avoid responsibility for a split that by then seemed inevitable, rather than a serious political undertaking to relaunch the organization. In this sense, it was similar to the proposals of the ‘centralists’ to augment the powers of the General Council, at a time when they were already planning a far more drastic alternative.

For what took place in the morning session on 6 September – the most dramatic of the congress – was the final act of the International as it had been conceived and constructed over the years. Engels stood up to speak and, to the astonishment of those present, proposed that ‘the seat of the General Council [should] be transferred to New York for the year 1872–1873, and that it should be formed by members of the American federal council’.¹⁷ Thus, Marx and other ‘founders’ of the International would no longer be part of its central body, which would consist of people whose very names were unknown – Engels proposed seven, with the option to increase the total to a maximum of fifteen. The delegate Maltman Barry [1842–1909], a General Council member who supported Marx’s positions, described better than anyone the reaction

¹⁶ Various authors, ‘Statement of the Minority’, in Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the C.C., C.P.S.U. (ed.), *The Hague Congress of the First International*, vol. I: *Minutes and Documents*. Moscow: Progress, 1976, pp. 199–200.

¹⁷ Friedrich Engels, 5 September 1872, in Burgelin, Langfeldt and Molnár (eds), *La première Internationale*, vol. II (1869–1872), p. 355.

from the floor: 'Consternation and discomfiture stood plainly written on the faces of the party of dissension as [Engels] uttered the last words. [. . .] It was sometime before anyone rose to speak. It was a *coup d'état*, and each looked to his neighbour to break the spell.'¹⁸ Engels argued that 'inter-group conflicts in London had reached such a pitch that [the General Council] had to be transferred elsewhere',¹⁹ and that New York was the best choice in times of repression. But the Blanquists were violently opposed to the move, on the grounds that 'the International should first of all be the permanent insurrectionary organization of the proletariat'²⁰ and that 'when a party unites for struggle [. . .] its action is all the greater, the more its leadership committee is active, well armed and powerful'. Vaillant and other followers of Blanqui present at The Hague thus felt betrayed when they saw 'the head' being shipped 'to the other side of the Atlantic [while] the armed body was fighting in [Europe]'.²¹ Realizing that it would no longer be possible to exercise control over the General Council, they left the congress and shortly afterwards the International.

Many even in the ranks of the majority voted against the move to New York as tantamount to the end of the International as an operational structure. The decision, approved by only three votes (twenty-six for, twenty-three against), eventually depended on nine abstentions and the fact that some members of the minority were happy to see the General Council relocated far from their own centres of activity.

Another factor in the move was certainly Marx's view that it was better to give up the International than to see it end up as a sectarian organization in the hands of his opponents. The demise of the International, which would certainly follow the transfer of the General Council to New York, was infinitely preferable to a long and wasteful succession of fratricidal struggles.

¹⁸ Maltman Barry, 'Report of the Fifth Annual General Congress of the International Working Men's Association, Held at The Hague, Holland, September 2-9, 1872', in Hans Gerth, *The First International: Minutes of The Hague Congress of 1872*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1958, pp. 279-80.

¹⁹ Friedrich Engels, 5 September 1872, in Burgelin, Langfeldt and Molnár (eds), *La première Internationale*, vol. II (1869-1872), p. 356.

²⁰ Édouard Vaillant, *Internationale et Révolution. A propos du Congrès de La Haye*, in Bert Andréas and Miklós Molnár (eds), *La première Internationale*, vol. III: *Les conflits au sein de l'Internationale, 1872-1873*. Geneva: Institut Universitaire de Hautes Études Internationales, 1971, p. 140.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

Opposition to sectarian groups and to the reduction of the workers' movement to numerically insubstantial party churches was a constant feature of Marx's political thinking in this period. In *The Alleged Splits in the International* (1872), which he wrote together with Engels, he asserted:

The first phase of the proletariat's struggle against the bourgeoisie is marked by a sectarian movement. That is logical at a time when the proletariat has not yet developed sufficiently to act as a class. Certain thinkers criticize social antagonisms and suggest fantastic solutions thereof, which the mass of workers is left to accept, preach, and put into practice. The sects formed by these initiators are abstentionist by their very nature – i.e., alien to all real action, politics, strikes, coalitions, or, in a word, to any united movement. The mass of the proletariat always remains indifferent or even hostile to their propaganda. The Paris and Lyon workers did not want the St.-Simonists, the Fourierists, the Icarians, any more than the Chartists and the English trade unionists wanted the Owenites. These sects act as levers of the movement in the beginning, but become an obstruction as soon as the movement outgrows them; after which they became reactionary. Witness the sects in France and England, and lately the Lassalleans in Germany, who after having hindered the proletariat's organization for several years ended up becoming simple instruments of the police. To sum up, we have here the infancy of the proletarian movement, just as astrology and alchemy are the infancy of science. If the International were to be founded, it was necessary that the proletariat go through this phase.

In contrast to 'sectarian organizations, with their vagaries and rivalries,' Marx argued that the International should be a

genuine and militant organization of the proletarian class of all countries, united in their common struggle against the capitalists and the landowners, against their class power organized in the state. The International's Rules, therefore, speak of only simple 'workers' societies', all aiming for the same goal and accepting the same program, which presents a general outline of the proletarian movement, while having its theoretical elaboration to be guided by the needs of the practical struggle and the exchange of ideas in the sections, unrestrictedly admitting all shades of socialist convictions in their organs and Congresses.²²

²² Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, 'Against Sectarianism', in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, pp. 288–9.

Still, it is not convincing to argue – as many have done²³ – that the key reason for the decline of the International was the conflict between its two currents, or even between two men – Marx and Bakunin – however great their stature. Rather, it was the changes taking place in the world around it that rendered the International obsolete. The growth and transformation of the organizations of the workers' movement, the strengthening of the nation-state as a result of Italian and German unification, the expansion of the International in countries like Spain and Italy (where the economic and social conditions were very different from those in Britain or France), the drift towards even greater moderation in the British trade union movement, the repression following the Paris Commune: all these factors together made the original configuration of the International inappropriate to the new times.

Against this backdrop, with its prevalence of centrifugal trends, developments in the life of the International and its main protagonists naturally also played a role. The London Conference, for instance, was far from the saving event that Marx had hoped it would be; indeed, its rigid conduct significantly aggravated the internal crisis, by failing to take account of the prevailing moods or to display the foresight needed to avoid the strengthening of Bakunin and his group.²⁴ It proved a Pyrrhic victory for Marx – one which, in attempting to resolve internal conflicts, ended up accentuating them. It remains the case, however, that the decisions taken in London only speeded up a process that was already under way and impossible to reverse.

In addition to all these historical and organizational considerations, there were others of no lesser weight regarding the chief protagonist. As Marx had reminded delegates at a session of the London Conference in 1871, 'the work of the Council had become immense, obliged as it was to tackle both general questions and national questions.'²⁵ It was no longer the tiny organization of 1864 walking on an English and a French leg; it was now present in all European countries, each with its particular problems and characteristics. Not only was the organization everywhere wracked by internal conflicts, but the arrival of

²³ For a critical analysis of such positions see Molnár, 'Quelques remarques à propos de la crise de l'Internationale en 1872', in *Colloque International sur La première Internationale* (ed.), *Le déclin de la Première Internationale*, 1963, p. 439.

²⁴ Molnár, *Le déclin de la Première Internationale*, p. 144.

²⁵ Karl Marx, 22 September 1872, in Henri Burgelin, Knut Langfeldt and Miklós Molnár (eds), *La première Internationale*, vol. II (1869–1872), p. 217.

the Communard exiles in London, with new preoccupations and a variegated baggage of ideas, made it still more arduous for the General Council to perform its task of political synthesis.

Marx was sorely tried after eight years of intense activity for the International.²⁶ Aware that the workers' forces were on the retreat following the defeat of the Paris Commune – the most important fact of the moment for him – he therefore resolved to devote the years ahead to the attempt to complete *Capital*. When he crossed the North Sea to the Netherlands, he must have felt that the battle awaiting him would be his last major one as a direct protagonist.

From the mute figure he had cut at that first meeting in St. Martin's Hall in 1864, he had become recognized as the leader of the International not only by congress delegates and the General Council but also by the wider public. Thus, although the International certainly owed a very great deal to Marx, it had also done much to change his life. Before its foundation, he had been known only in small circles of political activists. Later, and above all after the Paris Commune – as well as the publication of his magnum opus in 1867, of course – his fame spread among revolutionaries in many European countries, to the point where the press referred to him as the 'red terror doctor'. The responsibility deriving from his role in the International – which allowed him to experience up close so many economic and political struggles – was a further stimulus for his reflections on communism and profoundly enriched the whole of his anticapitalist theory.

2. Marx versus Bakunin

The battle between the two camps raged in the months following The Hague Congress, but only in a few cases did it centre on their existing theoretical and ideological differences. Marx often chose to caricature Bakunin's positions, painting him as an advocate of 'class equalization'²⁷ (based on the principles of

²⁶ Karl Marx to César De Paepe, 28 May 1872, in MECW, vol. 44, p. 387: 'I can hardly wait for the next Congress. It will be the end of my slavery. After that I shall become a free man again; I shall accept no administrative functions any more, either for the General Council or for the British Federal Council.'

²⁷ Mikhail Bakunin, 'Programme of the Alliance [International Alliance of Socialist Democracy]', in Arthur Lehning (ed.), *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1973, p. 174.

the 1869 programme of the Alliance for Socialist Democracy) or of political abstentionism *tout court*. The Russian anarchist, for his part, who lacked the theoretical capacities of his adversary, preferred the terrain of personal accusations and insults. The only exception that set forth his positive ideas was the incomplete 'Letter to La Liberté' (a Brussels paper) of early October 1872 – a text which, never sent, lay forgotten and was of no use to Bakunin's supporters in the constant round of skirmishes. The political position of the 'autonomists' emerges from it clearly enough:

There is only one law binding all the members [...] sections and federations of the International [...]. It is the international solidarity of workers in all jobs and all countries in their economic struggle against the exploiters of labour. It is the real organization of that solidarity through the spontaneous action of the working classes, and the absolutely free federation [...] which constitutes the real, living unity of the International. Who can doubt that it is out of this increasingly widespread organization of the militant solidarity of the proletariat against bourgeois exploitation that the political struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie must rise and grow? The Marxists and ourselves are unanimous on this point. But now comes the question that divides us so deeply from the Marxists. We think that the policy of the proletariat must necessarily be a revolutionary one, aimed directly and solely at the destruction of States. We do not see how it is possible to talk about international solidarity and yet to intend preserving States [...] because by its very nature the State is a breach of that solidarity and therefore a permanent cause of war. Nor can we conceive how it is possible to talk about the liberty of the proletariat or the real deliverance of the masses within and by means of the State. State means dominion, and all dominion involves the subjugation of the masses and consequently their exploitation for the sake of some ruling minority. We do not accept, even in the process of revolutionary transition, either constituent assemblies, provincial government or so called revolutionary dictatorships; because we are convinced that revolution is only sincere, honest and real in the hands of the masses, and that when it is concentrated in those of a few ruling individuals it inevitably and immediately becomes reaction.²⁸

²⁸ Mikhail Bakunin, 'A Letter to the Editorial Board of *La Liberté*', in Lehning (ed.), *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, pp. 236–7.

Thus, although Bakunin had in common with Proudhon an intransigent opposition to any form of political authority, especially in the direct form of the state, it would be quite wrong to tar him with the same brush as the mutualists. Whereas the latter had in effect abstained from all political activity, weighing heavily on the early years of the International, the autonomists – as Guillaume stressed in one of his last interventions at The Hague Congress – fought for ‘a politics of social revolution, the destruction of bourgeois politics and the state.’²⁹

How, then, did the ‘negative politics’ that the autonomists saw as the only possible form of action differ from the ‘positive politics’ advocated by the centralists? In the resolutions of the International Congress of Saint-Imier, held between 15 and 16 September 1872 on the proposal of the Italian Federation and attended by other delegates returning from The Hague, it is stated that ‘all political organization can be nothing other than the organization of domination, to the benefit of one class and the detriment of the masses, and that if the proletariat aimed to seize power, it would itself become a dominant and exploiting class’. Consequently, ‘the destruction of all political power is the first task of the proletariat’, and ‘any organization of so-called provisional and revolutionary political power to bring about such destruction can only be a further deception, and would be as dangerous to the proletariat as all governments existing today’.³⁰ As Bakunin stressed in another incomplete text, ‘The International and Karl Marx’ (1872), the task of the International was to lead the proletariat ‘outside the politics of the State and of the bourgeois world’; the true basis of its programme should be ‘quite simple and moderate: the organization of solidarity in the economic struggle of labour against capitalism’.³¹ In fact, while taking various changes into account, this declaration of principles was close to the original aims of the organization and pointed in a direction very different from the one taken by Marx and the General Council after the London Conference of 1871.³²

²⁹ James Guillaume, ‘Anarchist politics’, in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, p. 290.

³⁰ Mikhail Bakunin and James Guillaume, ‘The Destruction of Political Power’, in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, p. 294.

³¹ Mikhail Bakunin, ‘The International and Karl Marx’, in Sam Dolgoff (ed.), *Bakunin on Anarchy*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971, p. 303.

³² On Bakunin’s rejection of the conquest of the state by the working class organized in a political party, see Lehning, ‘Introduction’, in idem (ed.), *Bakunin – Archiv*, vol. VI: *Michel Bakounine sur la Guerre Franco-Allemande et la Révolution Sociale en France (1870–1871)*, p. cvii.

This profound opposition of principles and objectives shaped the climate in The Hague. Whereas the majority looked to the 'positive' conquest of political power,³³ the autonomists painted the political party as an instrument necessarily subordinate to bourgeois institutions and grotesquely likened Marx's conception of communism to the Lassallean *Volksstaat* [People's State] that he had always tirelessly combated. However, in the few moments when the antagonism left some space for reason, Bakunin and Guillaume recognized that the two sides shared the same aspirations.³⁴ In *The Alleged Splits in the International*, Marx had explained that one of the preconditions of socialist society was the elimination of the power of the state:

All socialists see anarchy as the following program: Once the aim of the proletarian movement – i.e., abolition of classes – is attained, the power of the state, which serves to keep the great majority of producers in bondage to a very small exploiter minority, disappears, and the functions of government become simple administrative functions.

The irreconcilable difference stemmed from the autonomist insistence that the aim must be realized immediately. Indeed, since they considered the International not as an instrument of political struggle but as an ideal model for the society of the future in which no kind of authority would exist, Bakunin and his supporters proclaim

anarchy in proletarian ranks as the most infallible means of breaking the powerful concentration of social and political forces in the hands of the exploiters. Under this pretext, [they ask to] the International, at a time when the Old World is seeking a way of crushing it, to replace its organization with anarchy.³⁵

Thus, despite their agreement about the need to abolish classes and the political power of the state in socialist society, the two sides differed radically over the fundamental issues of the path to follow and the social forces required to bring about the change. Whereas for Marx the revolutionary subject par excellence was a particular class, the factory proletariat, Bakunin turned to

³³ See Guillaume, *op. cit.*, p. 342.

³⁴ See, for example, Guillaume, *L'Internationale, Documents et Souvenirs (1864– 1878)*, vol. II, pp. 298–9.

³⁵ From Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Against Sectarianism', in Musto (ed.), *Workers Unite!*, p. 289.

the 'great rabble of the people', the so-called 'lumpenproletariat', which, being 'almost unpolluted by bourgeois civilization, carries in its inner being and in its aspirations, in all the necessities and miseries of its collective life, all the seeds of the socialism of the future.'³⁶ Marx the communist had learned that social transformation required specific historical conditions, an effective organization and a long process of the formation of class consciousness among the masses; Bakunin the anarchist was convinced that the instincts of the common people, the so-called 'rabble', were both 'invincible as well as just', sufficient by themselves 'to inaugurate and bring to triumph the Social Revolution.'³⁷

Another disagreement concerned the instruments for the achievement of socialism. Much of Bakunin's militant activity involved building – or fantasizing about building – small 'secret societies', mostly of intellectuals: a 'revolutionary general staff composed of dedicated, energetic, intelligent individuals, sincere friends of the people above all,'³⁸ who will prepare the insurrection and carry out the revolution. Marx, on the other hand, believed in the self-emancipation of the working class and was convinced that secret societies conflicted with 'the development of the proletarian movement because, instead of instructing the workers, these societies subject them to authoritarian, mystical laws which cramp their independence and distort their powers of reason.'³⁹ The Russian exile opposed all political action by the working class that did not directly promote the revolution, whereas the stateless person with a fixed residence in London did not disdain mobilizations for social reforms and partial objectives, while remaining absolutely convinced that these should strengthen the working-class struggle to overcome the capitalist mode of production rather than integrate it into the system.

The differences would not have diminished even after the revolution. For Bakunin, 'abolition of the state [was] the precondition or necessary

³⁶ Bakunin, 'The International and Karl Marx', op. cit., p. 294.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 294–5.

³⁸ Mikhail Bakunin, 'Programme and Purpose of the Revolutionary Organization of International Brothers', in Lehning (ed.), *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, p. 155. Evidence of Bakunin's deficient sense of reality is his claim: 'Therefore there should be no vast number of these individuals. A hundred powerfully and seriously allied revolutionaries are enough for the international organization of the whole Europe. Two or three hundred revolutionaries are enough for the largest country's organization'; *ibid.*

³⁹ Karl Marx, 'Record of Marx's speech on Secret Societies', in MECW, vol. 22, p. 621.

accompaniment of the economic emancipation of the proletariat';⁴⁰ for Marx, the state neither could nor should disappear from one day to the next. In his 'Political Indifferentism', which first appeared in *Almanacco Repubblicano* [Republican Almanac] in December 1873, he challenged the hegemony of the anarchists in Italy's workers' movement by asserting that

if the political struggle of the working class assumes violent forms and if the workers replace the dictatorship of the bourgeois class with their own revolutionary dictatorship, then [according to Bakunin] they are guilty of the terrible crime of *lèse-principe*; for, in order to satisfy their miserable profane daily needs and to crush the resistance of the bourgeois class, they, instead of laying down their arms and abolishing the state, give to the state a revolutionary and transitory form.⁴¹

It should be recognized, however, that despite Bakunin's sometimes exasperating refusal to distinguish between bourgeois and proletarian power, he foresaw some of the dangers of the so-called 'transitional period' between capitalism and socialism – particularly the danger of bureaucratic degeneration after the revolution. In his unfinished *The Knouto-Germanic Empire and the Social Revolution*, on which he worked between 1870 and 1871, he wrote:

But in the People's State of Marx, there will be, we are told, no privileged class at all. All will be equal, not only from the juridical and political point of view, but from the economic point of view. [...] There will therefore be no longer any privileged class, but there will be a government, and, note this well, an extremely complex government, which will not content itself with governing and administering the masses politically, as all governments do today, but which will also administer them economically, concentrating in its own hands the production and the just division of wealth, the cultivation of land, the establishment and development of factories, the organization and direction of commerce, finally the application of capital to production by the only banker, the State. [...] It will be the reign of scientific intelligence, the most aristocratic, despotic, arrogant and contemptuous of all regimes. There will be a new class, a new hierarchy of real and pretended scientists and scholars, and the world will be divided into a minority ruling in the

⁴⁰ Mikhail Bakunin, 'Aux compagnons de la Fédération des sections internationales du Jura', in Lehning et al., *Bakunin – Archiv*, vol. II: *Michel Bakounine et les Conflits dans l'Internationale*. Leiden: Brill, 1965, p. 75.

⁴¹ Karl Marx, 'Political Indifferentism', in MECW, vol. 23, p. 393.

name of knowledge and an immense ignorant majority. [...] Every state, even the most republican and most democratic state [...] are in their essence only machines governing the masses from above, through an intelligent and therefore privileged minority, allegedly knowing the genuine interests of the people better than the people themselves.⁴²

Partly because of his scant knowledge of economics, the federalist path indicated by Bakunin offered no really useful guidance on how the question of the future socialist society should be approached. But his critical insights already point ahead to some of the dramas of the twentieth century.

3. Two opposing conceptions of revolution

The International would never be the same again. The great organization born in 1864, which had successfully supported strikes and struggles for eight years, adopted an anticapitalist programme and established a presence in all European countries, finally imploded at The Hague Congress. Nevertheless, the story does not end with Marx's withdrawal, since two groupings, much reduced in size and without the old political ambition and capacity to organize projects, now occupied the same space. One was the 'centralist' majority issuing from the final congress, which favoured an organization under the political leadership of a General Council. The other was the 'autonomist' or 'federalist'⁴³ minority, who recognized an absolute autonomy of decision-making for the sections. All that the two groups had in common was a rapid decline.

Marx and Bakunin continued their dispute at a distance. In 1873, for example, in an article 'Political Indifferentism' that first appeared in Italy in the *Almanacco Repubblicano* [Republican Almanac] of 1874, he ridiculed his rival's positions on the conduct of workers' struggles by peaceful means:

Workers must not go on strike; for to struggle to increase one's wages or to prevent their decrease is like recognizing Wages: and this is contrary to the

⁴² Mikhail Bakunin, *Marxism, Freedom and the State*. London: Freedom Press, 1950, p. 21.

⁴³ The term 'autonomist' International, used by Georges Haupt in *L'Internazionale socialista dalla Comune a Lenin*, p. 70, has been preferred to the expression 'federalist' International used by Jacques Freymond, see 'Introduction', in Andréas and Molnár (eds), *La première Internationale*, vol. III: *Les conflits au sein de l'Internationale, 1872-1873*, p. viii.

eternal principles of the emancipation of the working class! [...] Workers must not struggle to establish a legal limit to the working day, because this is to compromise with the masters, who can then only exploit them for 10 or 12 hours, instead of 14 or 16. [...] Workers should even less desire that, as happens in the United States of America, the State whose budget is swollen by what is taken from the working class should be obliged to give primary education to the workers' children; for primary education is not complete education. It is better that working men and working women should not be able to read or write or do sums than that they should receive education from a teacher in a school run by the State. It is far better that ignorance and a working day of 16 hours should debase the working classes than that eternal principles should be violated!⁴⁴

Marx also pointed out that Bakunin was not happy with violent forms of working-class political struggle:

If the workers replace the dictatorship of the bourgeois class with their own revolutionary dictatorship, then they are guilty of the terrible crime of *lèse-principe*; for, in order to satisfy their miserable profane daily needs and to crush the resistance of the bourgeois class, they, instead of laying down their arms and abolishing the State, give to the State a revolutionary and transitory form.⁴⁵

For Bakunin, moreover, 'workers must not even form single unions for every trade, for by so doing they perpetuate the social division of labour as they find it in bourgeois society'. In short, 'the workers should fold their arms and stop wasting time in political and economic movements', for 'such movements can never produce anything more than short-term results'. In Marx's view, although such positions might be understandable in a period of growth of capitalism and formation of the working-class masses, they were not tolerable in the second half of the nineteenth century:

The first socialists (Fourier, Owen, Saint-Simon, etc.), since social conditions were not sufficiently developed to allow the working class to constitute itself as a militant class, were necessarily obliged to limit themselves to dreams about the model society of the future and were led thus to condemn all the

⁴⁴ Karl Marx, 'Political Indifferentism', in MECW, vol. 23, pp. 392–3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 393.

attempts such as strikes, combinations or political movements set in train by the workers to improve their lot. But while we cannot repudiate these patriarchs of socialism, just as chemists cannot repudiate their forebears the alchemists, we must at least avoid lapsing into their mistakes, which, if we were to commit them, would be inexcusable.⁴⁶

In addition to the various articles and interventions designed to discredit each other, Bakunin's positions and the most interesting traces of the polemic between the two men are contained in *Statism and Anarchy* (1873), the only major work that Bakunin ever completed, and in Marx's marginal notes on his personal copy of the book. Both pieces of writing, a sizeable volume and brief critical remarks on it, belong to a period when Marx and Bakunin had each withdrawn from the active political scene to devote themselves to theoretical work – in Marx's case with the hope of finishing the remaining volumes of *Capital*.

Bakunin continued to accuse Marx of having a 'state-communist program'⁴⁷ and of being responsible for the fact that his followers everywhere assumed the 'the side of the state and its supporters against popular revolution.'⁴⁸ Again he wrongly equated Marx's theories with those of Lassalle: 'Marx's theory provided a meeting point: a vast, unified, strongly centralized state. This was what Lassalle wanted, and Bismarck was already doing it. Why should they not join forces?'⁴⁹ Starting from this imaginary construct, Bakunin asserted:

We have already expressed several times our profound aversion to the theory of Lassalle and Marx, which recommends to the workers, if not as their ultimate ideal, then at least as their immediate and principal objective, the creation of a people's state. As they explain it, this will be nothing other than the proletariat raised to the level of a ruling class. If the proletariat is to be the ruling class, it may be asked, then whom will it rule? There must be yet another proletariat which will be subject to this new rule, this new state.⁵⁰

In response to these baseless criticisms, Marx drafted some notes that offer precise indications about the nature of state power and the prerequisites of

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 394.

⁴⁷ Mikhail Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 33.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 135.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 184.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 177.

social revolution. In the 'Conspectus on Bakunin's *Statism and Anarchy*' (1874–1875), he described his anarchist rival's ideas as 'schoolboyish rot':

A radical social revolution is bound up with definite historical conditions of economic development; these are its premises. It is also only possible, therefore, where alongside capitalist production the industrial proletariat accounts for at least a significant portion of the mass of the people. [...] Mr Bakunin [...] understands absolutely nothing of social revolution, only its political rhetoric; its economic conditions simply do not exist for him. Now, since all previous economic formations, whether developed or undeveloped, have entailed the enslavement of the worker (whether as wage labourer, peasant, etc.), he imagines that radical revolution is equally possible in all these formations. What is more, he wants the European social revolution, whose economic basis is capitalist production, to be carried out on the level of the Russian or Slav[ic] agricultural and pastoral peoples, and that it should not surpass this level [...] Willpower, not economic conditions, is the basis of his social revolution.⁵¹

As to the workers' movement, 'instead of fighting in individual instances against the economically privileged classes,' it has 'gained sufficient strength and organisation to use general means of coercion in its struggle against them.'⁵² During this phase, therefore, the proletariat takes part in political struggle by employing the very instruments of the bourgeois world that it seeks to destroy: '[It] still moves within political forms, which more or less correspond to it, it has at that stage not yet arrived at its final organisation, and hence to achieve its liberation has recourse to methods which will be discarded once that liberation has been attained.'⁵³ Marx accused Bakunin of considering this possible form of struggle of the workers' movement as inevitably bound to become contaminated by the political power existing today. According to Marx, things could not be otherwise: if the proletariat captures the power to rule, 'its enemies and the old organisation of society will not yet have disappeared'. To eliminate them, it will have to use 'forcible means, that is to say, governmental means'. During that period, the proletariat 'remains a class itself, and if the economic conditions which give rise to the class struggle and the

⁵¹ Karl Marx, 'Conspectus of Bakunin's *Statism and Anarchy*', in MECW, vol. 24, p. 518.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 519.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 521.

existence of classes have not vanished they must be removed or transformed by force.⁵⁴ However, this will not be a permanent condition, because ‘the class rule of the workers over the strata of the old world who are struggling against’ – a rule so fiercely rejected by Bakunin – ‘can only last as long as the economic basis of class society has not been destroyed.’⁵⁵ When that happens, class rule itself will disappear, and so too will the state ‘in the present political sense’.

This would have significant repercussions for the type of democracy that would be established in the new society. According to Marx, Bakunin did not understand that, with a change in ‘the economic foundation, the economic interrelations of the voters,’ the form of representation would also acquire a radically different meaning. In socialist society, there exists ‘1) government functions no longer exist; 2) the distribution of general functions has become a routine matter which entails no domination; 3) elections lose their present political character.’⁵⁶

Following his critical observations in the ‘*Conspectus on Bakunin’s Statism and Anarchy*’, and notwithstanding the health problems that continued to afflict him, Marx pursued his historical-political and economic research for a number of years. These studies, together with the stimulus from the major revolutionary events of the time, enabled him to make progress not only in his critique of capitalism, but also in his conception of the possible shape of post-capitalist society.

4. Socialism in Russia?

In his political writings, Marx had always identified Russia as one of the main obstacles to working-class emancipation on the European stage. But in his final years, he began to look rather differently at this country, having glimpsed in certain changes under way there some of the conditions for a major social transformation. Indeed, Russia seemed more likely to produce a revolution than Britain, where capitalism had created the proportionately largest number of factory workers in the world, but where the labour

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 517.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 521.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 519.

movement, enjoying better living conditions partly based on colonial exploitation, had grown weaker and undergone the negative conditioning of trade-union reformism.⁵⁷

From the late 1850s, Marx followed – and greeted very favourably – the peasant movements in Russia that preceded the abolition of serfdom in 1861. Then in the seventies, having learned to read Russian, he kept up to date with events by consulting statistics and more thorough texts on social-economic changes, and by corresponding with prominent Russian scholars.

In 1881, as his growing interest in archaic forms of community led him to study contemporary anthropologists, and as his reflections constantly reached beyond Europe, a chance happening encouraged him to deepen his study of Russia. In mid-February, he received a brief but engaging letter from Vera Zasulich [1848–1919], a member of the Populist Black Redistribution group, who had made an attempt on the life of the St. Petersburg police chief. A great admirer of Marx, whom she thought must be aware of the great popularity of *Capital* in Russia, Zasulich asked him a ‘life and death question’⁵⁸ for Russian revolutionaries and summarized the two different viewpoints that had emerged in their discussions:

Either the rural commune [*obshchina*], freed of exorbitant tax demands, payment to the nobility and arbitrary administration, is capable of developing in a socialist direction, that is, gradually organizing its production and distribution on a collectivist basis. In that case, the revolutionary socialist must devote all his strength to the liberation and development of the commune.

If, however, the commune is destined to perish, all that remains for the socialist, as such, is more or less ill-founded calculations as to how many decades it will take for the Russian peasant’s land to pass into the hands of the bourgeoisie, and how many centuries it will take for capitalism in Russia to reach something like the level of development already attained

⁵⁷ See what Marx and Engels wrote in 1882 in their preface to the second Russian edition of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: ‘During the Revolution of 1848–49, not only the European princes, but the European bourgeois as well, found their only salvation from the proletariat, which was just beginning to awaken, in Russian intervention. The Tsar was proclaimed the chief of European reaction. Today he is a prisoner of war of the revolution, in Gatchina [the castle where Alexander III took refuge after his father’s assassination] and Russia forms the vanguard of revolutionary action in Europe’, in MECW, vol. 24, p. 426.

⁵⁸ Vera Zasulich, ‘A Letter to Marx’, in Shanin (ed.), *Late Marx and the Russian Road*. New York: Monthly Review, pp. 98–9.

in Western Europe. Their task will then be to conduct propaganda solely among the urban workers, while these workers will be continually drowned in the peasant mass which, following the dissolution of the commune, will be thrown onto the streets of the large towns in search of a wage.⁵⁹

Zasulich further pointed out that some of those involved in the debate argued that ‘the rural commune is an archaic form condemned to perish by history, scientific socialism and, in short, everything above debate’. Those who held this view called themselves Marx’s ‘disciples *par excellence*’: ‘Marxists’. Their strongest argument was often: ‘Marx said so.’⁶⁰

For nearly three weeks, Marx remained immersed in his papers, well aware that he had to provide an answer to a highly significant theoretical question and to express his position on a crucial political matter. The fruits of his labour were three long drafts and the eventual reply he sent to Zasulich. To summarize his analysis of the passage from ‘feudal production to capitalist production’,⁶¹ Marx chose a quotation from the French edition of *Capital* that he had inserted in November 1877 into a (never sent) letter to the editorial board of *Otechestvennye Zapiski* [Annals of the Fatherland]: the ‘dissolution of the economic structure of feudal society’ set free the elements of ‘the economic structure of capitalist society’ in ‘Western Europe.’⁶² The process did not occur throughout the world, therefore, but only in the Old Continent. Marx repeated that he had ‘expressly restricted [...] the historical inevitability’ of the passage from feudalism to capitalist to ‘the countries of Western Europe.’⁶³

Taking this as a kind of premise, he then developed some rich and detailed thoughts on the *obshchina*, as the germ of a future socialist society, and examined the concrete possibilities that this might come to pass in reality. To Marx the *obshchina* was not predestined to suffer the same fate as similar West European forms in earlier centuries, where ‘the transition from a society founded on communal property to a society founded on private property’⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Karl Marx, ‘Drafts of the Letter to Vera Zasulich: Second Draft’, in MECW, vol. 24, p. 360 (hereafter: Marx, followed by the indication of the number of the draft and the page number).

⁶² Karl Marx, *Le Capital*, MEGA², vol. II/7, p. 634. This point, added while Joseph Roy was working on the French translation, was not included by Engels in the fourth German edition of 1890, which became the standard version for later translations of Marx’s magnum opus.

⁶³ Karl Marx, ‘Second Draft’, in MECW, vol. 24, p. 360.

⁶⁴ Karl Marx, ‘Third Draft’, in MECW, vol. 24, p. 367.

was more or less uniform. To the question whether this was inevitable in Russia, Marx replied: 'Absolutely not.'

With his usual flexibility and lack of schematism, Marx considered the possibility that the rural commune might change. In his view, the *obshchina* was open to two kinds of evolution: 'either the element of private property [...] will gain the upper hand over the collective element, or the latter will gain the upper hand over the former. [...] All this depends on the historical surroundings in which it finds itself';⁶⁵ those existing at the time did not exclude a socialist development.

The first point that Marx underlined was the coexistence of the rural commune with more advanced economic forms. Marx observed that Russia was 'contemporary with a higher culture, it is linked to a world market dominated by capitalist production. By appropriating the positive results of this mode of production, it is thus in a position to develop and transform the still archaic form of its rural commune, instead of destroying it.'⁶⁶ The peasantry 'can thus incorporate the positive acquisitions devised by the capitalist system without passing through its Caudine Forks.'⁶⁷ Addressing those who denied the possibility of leaps and saw capitalism as an indispensable stage for Russia too, Marx asked ironically whether Russia had had 'to pass through a long incubation period in the engineering industry [...] in order to utilize machines, steam engines, railways, etc.' Similarly, had it not been possible 'to introduce in the twinkling of an eye, the entire mechanism of exchange (banks, credit institutions, etc.), which it took the West centuries to devise?'⁶⁸ Russia could not slavishly repeat all the historical stages travelled by England and other West European countries. Logically, therefore, even the socialist transformation of the *obshchina* could happen without its being necessary to pass through capitalism.

In the end, Marx thought it essential to assess the historical moment at which this hypothesis was being considered. The 'best proof' that a socialist development of the rural commune was 'in keeping with the historical tendency of the age' was the 'fatal crisis [here Marx's political hopes led

⁶⁵ Karl Marx, 'First Draft', in MECW, vol. 24, p. 352.

⁶⁶ Marx, 'Second Draft', MECW, vol. 24, p. 362.

⁶⁷ Marx, 'Third Draft', MECW, vol. 24, p. 368.

⁶⁸ Marx, 'First Draft', MECW, vol. 24, p. 349.

him to write one ‘fatal’ too many] which capitalist production has undergone in the European and American countries where it has reached its highest peak’. Drawing on ideas suggested by his reading of *Ancient Society* (1877), the book of the anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan [1818–1881], he expected that the economic crisis then under way might create favourable conditions for the ‘destruction’ of capitalism and ‘the return of modern society to a higher form of the most archaic type-collective production and appropriation.’⁶⁹

This makes it clear that Marx was not thinking of the ‘primitive type of cooperative or collective production [resulting] from the weakness of the isolated individual’, but of the fruits of the ‘socialization of the means of production.’⁷⁰ The *obshchina*, he noted, was ‘the most modern form of the archaic type’ of communist property, which had itself ‘passed through a whole series of evolutions.’⁷¹

Marx criticized the ‘isolation’ of the archaic agricultural communes for, being closed in on themselves and having no contact with the outside world, they were politically speaking the economic form most in keeping with the reactionary tsarist regime: ‘the lack of connection between the life of one commune and that of the others, this localized microcosm, [...] always gives rise to central despotism over and above the communes.’⁷²

Marx had certainly not changed his complex critical judgement on the rural communes in Russia, and the importance of individual development and social production remained intact in his analysis. The drafts of his letter to Zasulich show no glimpse of that dramatic break with his former convictions. The new element is a theoretical openness to other possible roads to socialism that he had never previously considered or had regarded as unattainable.⁷³

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 357.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 351.

⁷¹ Marx, ‘Second Draft’, MECW, vol. 24, p. 362.

⁷² Marx, ‘First Draft’, op. cit., p. 353.

⁷³ See Marian Sawer’s excellent work *Marxism and the Question of the Asiatic Mode of Production*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977, p. 67: ‘What happened, in the 1870s in particular, was not that Marx changed his mind on the *character* of the village communities, or decided that they could be the basis of socialism as they were; rather, he came to consider the possibility that the communities could be revolutionized not by capitalism but by socialism. [...] He does seem to have entertained seriously the hope that with the intensification of social communication and the modernization of production methods the village system could be incorporated into a socialist society. In 1882 this still appeared to Marx to be a genuine alternative to the complete disintegration of the *obshchina* under the impact of capitalism.’

Marx concluded that the alternative envisaged by the Russian Populists was achievable:

Theoretically speaking, then, the Russian 'rural commune' can preserve itself by developing its basis, the common ownership of land, and by eliminating the principle of private property which it also implies; it can become a direct point of departure for the economic system towards which modern society tends; it can turn over a new leaf without beginning by committing suicide; it can gain possession of the fruits with which capitalist production has enriched mankind, without passing through the capitalist regime.⁷⁴

If it was to come to pass, however, this hypothesis had to 'descend from pure theory to the Russian reality'.⁷⁵ To this end, Marx tried to identify the 'capacity for further development' of the *obshchina*.⁷⁶ At that precise moment, it:

occupies a unique position, without precedent in history. Alone in Europe, it is still the predominant organic form of rural life throughout an immense empire. The common ownership of land provides it with the natural basis for collective appropriation, and its historical setting, its contemporaneity with capitalist production, lends it – fully developed – the material conditions for cooperative labour organized on a vast scale. It can thus incorporate the positive acquisitions devised by the capitalist system; [. . .] it can gradually replace parcel farming with combined agriculture assisted by machines; [. . .] it may become the direct starting point for the economic system towards which modern society tends and turn over a new leaf without beginning by committing suicide.⁷⁷

This alternative was possible, and it was certainly better suited to Russia's social-economic context than 'capitalized farming on the English model'.⁷⁸ But it could survive only if 'collective labour supplanted parcel labour – the source of private appropriation'. For that to happen, two things were required: 'the economic need for such a change and the material conditions to bring it about'.⁷⁹ The fact that the Russian agricultural commune was contemporaneous with capitalism in Europe offered it 'all the conditions necessary for collective

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 354.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Marx, 'Third Draft', MECW, vol. 24, p. 368.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Marx, 'First Draft', MECW, vol. 24, p. 358.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 356.

labour',⁸⁰ while the peasant's familiarity with the *artel*⁸¹ would facilitate the actual transition to 'cooperative labour'.⁸²

Political will and a favourable set of historical circumstances were therefore the basic prerequisites for the survival and radical transformation of the *obshchina*. In other words, despite all the upheavals that capitalism threatened to bring about, the socialist transformation of an archaic form of community like the *obshchina* was still possible:

It is no longer a matter of solving a problem; it is simply a matter of beating an enemy. To save the Russian commune, a Russian revolution is needed. [...] If revolution comes at the opportune moment, if it concentrates all its forces so as to allow the rural commune full scope, the latter will soon develop as an element of regeneration in Russian society and an element of superiority over the countries enslaved by the capitalist system.⁸³

Marx returned to similar themes in 1882. In January, in the preface to the new Russian edition of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, which he co-authored with Engels, the fate of the Russian rural commune is linked to that of proletarian struggles in Western Europe:

In Russia we find, face to face with the rapidly developing capitalist swindle and bourgeois landed property, which is just beginning to develop, more than half the land owned in common by the peasants. Now the question is: can the Russian *obshchina*, a form of primeval common ownership of land, even if greatly undermined, pass directly to the higher form of communist common ownership? Or must it, conversely, first pass through the same process of dissolution as constitutes the historical development of the West? The only answer possible today is this: If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for communist development.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ The *artel* form of cooperative association, originally of Tatar origin, was based on blood ties and attended to the collective responsibility of its members toward the state and third parties.

⁸² Marx, 'First Draft', MECW, vol. 24, p. 356.

⁸³ Ibid., pp 359–60.

⁸⁴ Marx and Engels, 'Preface to the Second Russian Edition of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*', in MECW, vol. 24, p. 426.

As to the reply to Zasulich, so long in the composition, he eventually sent it off on 8 March 1881. Although he had written several long and closely argued drafts, he decided to send her quite a short final version, in which he excused himself for not having provided the ‘concise exposé, intended for publication,’ which she had requested.⁸⁵ Still, his ‘few lines’ were meant to ‘dispel any doubts’ that Zasulich might have ‘as to the misunderstanding in regard to my so-called theory.’⁸⁶ Marx referred her to the quotation on the ‘expropriation of the agricultural producer’ from the French edition of *Capital* and stressed that his analysis was ‘expressly limited to the countries of Western Europe,’ which saw ‘the transformation of one form of private property into another form of private property.’⁸⁷ In the Russian case, by contrast, ‘communal property would have to be transformed into private property.’⁸⁸ Hence his conclusion:

The analysis provided in *Capital* does not adduce reasons either for or against the viability of the rural commune, but the special study I have made of it, and the material for which I drew from original sources, has convinced me that this commune is the fulcrum of social regeneration in Russia, but in order that it may function as such, it would first be necessary to eliminate the deleterious influences which are assailing it from all sides, and then ensure for it the normal conditions of spontaneous development.⁸⁹

Marx’s dialectical position therefore did not lead him to claim that a new economic system, based on the association of the producers, could come about through a fixed sequence of predefined stages. At the same time, he denied that the development of the capitalist mode of production was a historical inevitability in any part of the world.

Marx’s densely argued considerations on the future of the *obshchina* are poles apart from the equation of socialism with productive forces – an idea which asserted itself strongly in the Second International and social-

⁸⁵ Karl Marx, ‘Letter to Vera Zasulich,’ in MECW, vol. 24, p. 370. Cf. Musto, *The Last Marx (1881–1883): An Intellectual Biography*.

⁸⁶ Marx, ‘Letter to Vera Zasulich,’ MECW, vol. 24, p. 370.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 370–1.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 371.

democratic parties (even with sympathy for colonialism) and in the communist movement in the twentieth century. Marx spurned any rigid linking of social changes to economic transformations alone. Instead, he highlighted the specificity of historical conditions, and the centrality of human intervention in the shaping of reality and the achievement of socialism.

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