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The Cambridge Companion to MARX

Edited by Terrell Carver

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
secularization of the (real) religious absolute, a formula for human self-perfectibility, and the self-deification of humankind. Success or failure of this outlook “is almost entirely due to its prophetic, fantastic and irrational elements.” Kolakowski unconscionably attributes this religious paraphernalia to Marx as a way of connecting him to his self-appointed disciples. Backing theoretical arguments and political expedients with textual authority should not, however, be ridiculed. It has proved a mixed blessing in the past, to be sure. But there is no reason to abandon the practice or to expunge it in principle. However tiresome some of its manifestations may have been, an appeal to Marx’s textual authority is not a bad habit, taken in itself. It is a good habit, and Marx’s critical reception will remain a continuing phenomenon.

FURTHER READING

Blumenberg (1972).
Carver (1982).
Hobsbawm (1982).
Nicolaeovsky and Maichen-Helen (1976).
Rubel and Manale (1975).
Thomas (1985).

3 Social and political theory: Class, state, revolution

Marx’s writings include over a thousand pages of theories, explanations, and arguments concerning capitalist societies, some brief but intriguing discussions of precapitalist societies, and at most ten pages of general statements about all (or all class-divided) societies. The meaning of the general statements, important though they are, can be discovered only by understanding how they are used in his historically specific inquiries. So no matter how abstract one’s favorite questions about Marx’s social and political theories may be, it is helpful to begin with his favorite specific target, capitalist society.

CAPITALISM AS A SOCIAL SYSTEM

A society is capitalist, in Marx’s way of thinking, if the production of material goods is dominated by the use of wage labor, that is, the use of labor power sold, to make a living, by people controlling no significant means of production and bought by other people who do have significant control over means of production and mostly gain their income from profits on the sale of the results of combining bought labor power with those productive means. The proletariat are, roughly, the first group – in the Communist Manifesto’s slightly flamboyant description – “a class of laborers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labor increases capital” (Marx, 1974b: 73). The bourgeoisie are, roughly, the second group, whose income mainly derives from the sale of commodities produced with bought labor power. Marx thinks that these relations of control in the process of production have a pervasive influence on politics, culture, and society. This view was not uncommon in his generation: It was shared by Max Weber, his great
opponent in social theory in the next generation, and it is now banal. More distinctively, Marx takes the relation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat to be intrinsically antagonistic and seeks to explain all the major institutional features of a capitalist society in terms of this relation.

Much of Marx's theorizing about capitalism is concerned with the question of what holds a capitalist society together during the long periods in which it looks, to most participants, as if capitalism will last forever. Even in this account of a relatively enduring structure, he considers the antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat to be basic, in two ways. First, all major respectable institutions in a mature capitalist society [one that has eliminated holdovers from feudalism] possess their most important characteristics because of the functions they serve in advancing the interests of the bourgeoisie. Because the interests of the bourgeoisie in a mature capitalist society conflict, as a whole, with most other people's, this system of institutions is a system of class rule, creating acquiescence and destroying resistance in spite of objective reasons to rebel. In the Communist Manifesto, Marx calls the state under capitalism "a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" [Marx, 1974b: 69]. According to The German Ideology, ide-propagating institutions are also controlled by the economically dominant class. "The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production" [Marx and Engels, 5/1976: 59]. In addition to this overriding impact on the shape of institutions, the basic antagonism is supposed to determine the importance of social movements. These affect many people in important ways only insofar as they affect the relative strength of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, the "two great hostile camps" into which society is, more and more, divided [Marx, 1974b: 68].

In part because the basic social relation is one of conflict, Marx thinks that the most accurate understanding of the structure of a stable capitalist society will reveal internal sources of change that will inevitably destroy and transform it. But before these sources of revolution can be understood, many aspects of the grand and simple structural claims cry out for clarification. Why is the relation between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat inherently antagonistic?

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Strictly speaking, who is in each class? What other classes are there? What is really intended by the dramatic claims of bourgeois control in the theory of the state and ideology? Short of extreme cynicism and antirevolutionary despair, what conception of people's psychology could sustain the claim about ideology?

CLASS ANTAGONISM

It takes no great insight to see that there is an inherent conflict of interest between sellers and buyers of labor power. Buyers always want to buy cheap, and sellers always want to sell dear. This conflict of interest, though serious enough, seldom gives rise to the "more or less veiled civil war" that Marx presents as intrinsic to production using wage labor [Marx, 1974b: 78]. Marx's theory of capitalism depends on an argument that sellers in the labor market are burdened with special inequalities.

Consider a manufacturing economy in which all means of producing material commodities (i.e., equipment, raw materials, and land) are owned by a relatively small group, the capitalists, each of whom possesses substantial purchasing power beyond what is required for individual consumption. There is also a much larger group, the workers, who control no significant means of production and must sell their labor power in order to survive. Assuming that everyone pursues his or her advantage purely through buying and selling, the state operates only to protect the exchange from violence and fraud. Marx is no more than half-ironic in calling such a situation "a very Eden of the innate rights of man," for as he goes on to say, "both buyer and seller are determined only by their own free will... and they exchange equivalent for equivalent" [Marx, 1977: 280].

But two notable inequalities make the respective prospects of buyers and sellers very different. First, the capitalists determine the shape of technology. In the face of any long-term shortage of labor power, they can instruct their engineers to emphasize labor-saving innovations. "This war has the peculiarity that its battles are won less by recruiting than by discharging the army of labor" [Marx and Engels, 9/1977: 226, italics in original]. The workers cannot engineer their own makeup to reduce their need for steady employment. Second, a given capitalist bargaining with a given worker is under no
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These few hints will suffice to show that the very development of modern industry must progressively turn the scale in favour of the capitalist against the working man, and that consequently the general tendency of capitalist production is not to raise, but to sink the average standard of wages, or to push the value of labour more or less to its minimum limit. Such being the tendency of things in this system, is this saying that the working class ought to renounce their resistance against the encroachments of capital, and abandon their attempts at making the best of the occasional chances for their temporary improvements? If they did, they would be degraded to one level mass of broken wretches past salvation. I think I have shown that their struggles for the standard of wages are incidents inseparable from the whole wages system, that in 99 cases out of 100 their efforts at raising wages are only efforts at maintaining the given value of labour.

[Marx and Engels, 20/1985: 148; italics in original]

"The tendency of things in this system" is the tendency that would actually emerge if workers only faced one another as competitive sellers. But in fact they must cooperate to mutual advantage, breaking the rules of market activity by occupying factories, keeping out strikers or engaging in other forms of nonrevolutionary militance. The economic rationality of such activism is the overall theme of Value, Price and Profit, in which Marx emphasizes, in particular, the success of British workers in shortening the working day and in bringing about a long-term increase in real wages from 1849 to 1859. In this collective resistance to the "tendency of things," workers rarely do better than maintain the value of their labor power. About this value, Marx makes four other claims in his post-1850 writings. First, this standard yields not comforts but merely necessities ("means of subsistence... so-called necessary requirements") for the typical worker in the typical year [Marx, 1977: 275]. Second, what counts as relevantly necessary is determined not just by requirements for physical survival but also by a socially established standard of neediness, "not mere physical life, but... the satisfaction of certain wants springing from the social conditions in which people are placed and reared up" [Marx and Engels, 20/1985: 143]. Third, the value of labor power is value of Marx's standard kind, the time that would be expended by workers using typical techniques with typical intensity, to produce the commodity in question – here, to sustain the worker at the relevant standard of subsistence for a day (if the value of a day's labor power is
in question]. Finally, he expects long-term constancy in the economy as a whole for the so-called rate of exploitation, the ratio to the value of labor power employed of labor time devoted to capitalists' wants, that is, to producing their consumption goods and their means of expanding production. This is, for example, an essential premise of Marx's explanation, in Capital, volume 3, of the tendency for the average rate of profit to decline.

The rate of exploitation determines the proportionate shares of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in any gains from technological improvement. And Marx thinks that there continually will be such gains. Industrial capitalism "never views or treats the existing form of a modern production process as the definitive one" (Marx, 1977: 617). Even if the value of a day's wage basket does not increase but remains at, say, four hours of social labor decade after decade, technological progress will put more and more in the basket. If despite this progress, capitalism fails to be a cornucopia for workers, lifting typical workers in typical times far above the mere satisfaction of needs, this will be because needs become more demanding as technology becomes more productive. Like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emile Durkheim, and many conservative social theorists, Marx believes that needs evolve in just this way because they are partly based on social comparison:

A house may be large or small; as long as the surrounding houses are equally small it satisfies all social demands for a dwelling. But let a palace arise beside the little house, and it shrinks from a little house to a hut.... The rapid growth of productive capital brings about an equally rapid growth of wealth, luxury, social wants, social enjoyments. Thus, although the enjoyments of the worker have risen, the social satisfaction that they give has fallen in comparison with the increased enjoyments of the capitalist, which are inaccessible to the worker, in comparison with the state of development of society in general. Our desires and pleasures spring from society; we measure them, therefore, by society and not by the objects which serve for their satisfaction. Because they are of a social nature, they are of a relative nature. [Marx and Engels, 9/1977: 216]

Presumably Marx thought that the rate of exploitation would remain constant because it reflects this comparative dimension of need. The deprivation of widely shared needs is what motivates the large-scale risk taking that is sufficient to resist the "tendency of things." Such a strong motivation is essential because resistance must overcome the bargaining advantages of capitalists against a background of bourgeois control of the state.

The complexities of the later view may make it harder to argue for Marx's revolutionary conclusion, but at least they save his basic ideas about class antagonism under capitalism from the out-of-the-way Museum of Strange Social Beliefs of the nineteenth century. In the United States, for example, though most workers could do less well without dying, about two-thirds of workers are at or below the standard that the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics describes as "what is necessary for health, efficiency, the nurture of children, and for participation in community activities" (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1966: 2). Also, without telling wild tales of impoverishment, the more complex view embodies Marx's claim that capitalism is inherently based on exploitation.

This claim is surprisingly hard to interpret. Although Marx believes that capitalism is inherently exploitative, he argues explicitly against the view that the worker is paid less than the value of the labor power sold in the typical wage bargain. Marx does think that profit depends on surplus value, the difference between the time typically spent by a worker producing the commodity in question and the value of that amount of labor power. But the existence of surplus value is no more of a sign that someone has been sold short than is the existence of a difference between the value of what a rented horse contributes and the value of the rent paid for the use of that horse [Marx and Engels, 20/1985: 130]. Indeed, it is part of Marx's theory of value that a day's work is paid at its value as long as the wage basket sustains a worker for a day at the customary level of subsistence. Even though this bargain must usually generate surplus value in a viable capitalist economy, workers and capitalists "exchange equivalent for equivalent" [Marx, 1977: 280].

Why does Marx persist, nonetheless, in seeing the relation between capitalists and workers as exploitative in a pejorative sense? Marx's analysis of "the tendency of things" in the capitalist labor market may be a start in answering this question, which has been an important topic in recent discussions of Marx's concept of exploitation; see also Cohen [1979], Roemer [1985], and Holmstrom [1977]. Marx argues that if workers were to respect the officially sanctioned rules for the pursuit of economic well-being, superior resources of capitalists would lead to the extraction of the maximum surplus
compatible with survival. Doing better requires risky disruptive activity from many workers and generally yields nothing better than the satisfaction of needs. In rough summary, typical inequalities at the background of wage bargaining make it a fight to do more than survive, and so they limit the fruits of this fight to necessities. A system that regulates the outcome of class location in this way could surely be called exploitative in a pejorative sense even if one were cheated and even if equivalent were exchanged for equivalent in the central economic act.

Dramatis personae

In investigating life prospects in capitalist societies, Marx employs the broad concepts of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, involving general relations of control over labor power and means of production. But he adopts different, though related, usages when he investigates a question of social psychology: How do the social processes through which people obtain their material resources affect attitudes and conduct that are important to the large-scale evolution of their society? In the broad definition, intellectuals, even those in institutions sustaining bourgeois dominance, are not usually members of the bourgeoisie, as they typically lack control of means of production. But Marx, in the Communist Manifesto, locates “bourgeois ideologists” in the bourgeoisie itself [i.e., in their objective class situation]; in a third usage, he notes that they may join the proletariat by deciding to ally with it; see Marx, 1974b: 77]. Salaries, company presidents and directors of personnel are other categories whose bourgeois status is clear enough, despite the consequences of directly applying these broad definitions.

In the context of social psychology, Marx might have been prepared to identify the proletariat with whatever group of people makes a living in circumstances creating a tendency to ally with others in collective, disruptive resistance to “the tendency of things” in the labor market. But Marx could not be satisfied with such an abstract conception, because of his urgent needs as an activist. In most of his discussions of the class basis of social action, he employs more definite conceptions of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, conceptions with industrial cores.

Clearly, the industrial proletariat — those selling their labor power to work industrial equipment — are especially important to Marx. But why? Their special importance is not a matter of special misery. The worst off are people who have given up on finding employment, the more Lumpenproletariat (literally, ragged proletariat) whom Marx dismisses as “that passively rotting mass . . . its conditions of life prepare it [far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue than for proletarian revolution]” [Marx, 1974b: 77]. As for numbers, the industrial proletariat were about a tenth of the working population of Britain in Marx’s time and a tiny fraction of the population of Germany in 1848, even though Marx thought “that country is on the eve of a bourgeois revolution . . . [that] will be the prelude to the immediately following proletarian revolution” [Marx, 1974b: 98]. Rather, the special feature of the industrial proletariat is a matter of unity, a special tendency for their situation in production to give rise to widespread, cooperative resistance to employers controlling the means of production. Taking part in specialized, interactive, interdependent, but relatively unskilled work, industrial proletarians tend to defend their individual interests at work in relatively collective ways. In addition, the extensive linkage of factories and firms in the network of industrial production encourages an awareness of more than local interests. This nationwide unification of production gives rise to the tactic of the nationwide strike, encouraging a new sense of social power. For their part, the industrial bourgeoisie are given a leading role in their “great camp,” also on account of dynamic advantages having nothing to do with special numbers or a special level of income.

Despite his emphasis on the industrial factions, Marx intends the class terms simpliciter to extend much further than the industrially qualified ones. In the Communist Manifesto, his discussion of the organizing effects of industry is continuous with a description of a revolutionary triumph, possibly imminent, that will constitute both proletarian rule and “win[n]ing the battle of democracy” — hardly the rule of a small fraction of a class (Marx, 1974b: 86). In later writings on important social actions, including his great narratives of the Parisian working class, Marx often uses the word proletariat to embrace garment workers, construction workers, and others who do not employ industrial equipment. In practice, the notion he uses in strategic inquiries is that of people whose way of making a living encourages support for the industrial proletariat in its struggles. In a
mature capitalist society, the bourgeoisie outside industry would be similarly related to the industrial core, involving alliance in social conflict. Of course, the tendencies toward alliance with the industrial proletariat are typical of such work situations, and ones that would operate in the absence of intervening forces (above all, ideological) from outside the production process.

In addition to the two main groups, Marx recognizes a third, the petty bourgeoisie, consisting of those who control means of production and work them with their own labor. In principle, the petty bourgeoisie could have been divided among the two great camps, say, according to whether they employ wage labor as well. The family farm with hired hands is petty bourgeoisie to Marx.) But Marx regards such classifications as obscuring a distinctive social basis for distinctive tendencies in conduct and belief. The situation of the petty bourgeoisie pulls them toward both the two leading groups at once, and there is no general spontaneous priority of one pull over the other. As owners (and frequently as employers), the petty bourgeoisie see themselves as humble relatives of the bourgeoisie and hope to succeed by excelling in the same activities. Yet competition with the bourgeoisie and conflicting interests concerning taxation and credit are constant sources of grievance. In any case, the expected fate of the small business is to fail, thereby creating new proletarians.

Of course, other people, especially numerous in the twentieth century, also are pulled in both ways at once if Marxist arguments are right. For example, most professors, engineers, and doctors have relatively bourgeois life-styles, count on individual achievement to get ahead, and yet are threatened by bourgeois control (as Marxists see it) over government, as well as by corporate policies. Most Marxists have found it natural to locate these nonowners of means of production, who are intermediate in terms of interests and spontaneous alliances, in a modern petty bourgeoisie, analogous to the classical one that Marx identifies.

Although only a declining minority of the work force in any industrialized country is in the industrial proletariat, two-thirds or more of the population are in the proletariat as a whole (counting by families distinguished according to their main source of income, as one should in a category meant to illuminate alliances). The notions of class that guide Marx's strategic inquiries make his claims about the dominance of the two leading classes at least arguable today. Still, the question of how wide the social—psychological notion of the proletariat extends has been a matter of urgent inquiry for millions of Marxists (and others) since Marx. V. I. Lenin (1967, originally 1899) and Mao Tse-tung (Zedong) (1965, originally 1927) thought that capitalism can give rise to a class differentiation of the peasantry in which both farm workers and some relatively vulnerable small farmers become natural allies of the industrial proletariat. They have important antecedents in Marx's writings on the French and German peasantry, as Gilbert points out (1981: chap. 11). It is often hard to draw the line between the "worker—peasant alliance" described by Lenin and Mao and a capacious proletarian class including many peasants (see Meisner, 1986). In some societies, for example, such as former colonies in Africa, the well-being of factory workers compared with that of other workers might contribute to a further revision of Marx's detailed typology, depriving industrial proletarians of core status. However these and other questions ought to be resolved, the existence of perplexing and important issues in classification is to be expected, given Marx's ways of dividing up a society into classes. Unlike "the lower two income-fifths," his basic classificatory concepts are intrinsically theory laden. On the face of it, the assessment of diverse, deep, and relatively general hypotheses may be required to determine who is apt to ally with the industrial proletariat or whether such an alliance is the main basis for socially significant conduct.

The State

Marx's theory of the state under capitalism is probably the most important instance of his view that in mature capitalist societies, all major, respectable, stable institutions are instruments of class rule. At the same time, it is the most helpful basis for understanding the notions of control and social interest underlying his talk of class rule.

Marx's general characterizations of the state under capitalism are impassioned metaphors. In the Communist Manifesto, he says that "the bourgeoisie has . . . conquered for itself in the modern representative state, exclusive political sway. The executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" (Marx, 1974b: 69). Twenty-three years later, in
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The Civil War in France, he wrote even more dramatically that in France, and by clear implication other mature capitalist societies, the state power has "assumed more and more the character of the national power of capital over labor, of a public force organized for social enslavement, of an engine of class despotism" [Marx, 1974d: 207]. Like most metaphors that stick in the mind, these cry out for interpretation. On relatively literal readings, several of them would yield a conspiracy theory: Leading political figures periodically receive orders from the leaders of the business community after discussions of how best to serve the interests of big business. But this is not Marx's intended reading, for he emphasizes the existence of a division of labor [normally in the interest of the bourgeoisie] in which political decision making is the activity of those whose career is politics. For example, he regards the France of Louis Bonaparte's empire as a society in which the bourgeoisie "used ... [the] state power mercilessly and ostentatiously as the national war engine of capital against labor," and he also says, a paragraph later, that under the sway of this state "bourgeois society, freed from political cares, attained a development unexpected even by itself. Its industry and commerce expanded to colossal proportions [etc.]" [Marx, 1974d: 208]. Faced with this and many other departures from the literal reading, one might take the metaphors to be flamboyant hyperbole for an underlying view that money talks in politics: Even under universal suffrage, a very rich person has political resources well in excess of his or her one vote. One hopes that Marx is not merely this sensible. His talk of social enslavement and war engines would not be just hyperbolic but also pernicious. And his basic claim would be so banal that his theory of the state would not even be worth discussing.

The ruling class is itself a ubiquitous metaphor of Marx's that has died and become a Marxist term of art. One might use it to sum up the dramatic claims about the capitalist state as the master claim (in urgent need of interpretation): "The bourgeoisie is the ruling class, politically." When one surveys the concrete statements about the bourgeoisie and politics that seem meant to support or embody this hypothesis, it turns out to consist of three related claims. The first is a claim about the actions of the state [i.e., the organized apparatus of people with authority, employing the most coercive force and monopolizing permission to use force]. The state nearly always acts in the long-term interests of the bourgeoisie as a whole. The second is a claim about why the state does what it does. In every period, institutional mechanisms make the actions of successful political figures reflect the long-term interests of the bourgeoisie. Finally, there is a claim about what it would take to end the conformity of state policies to bourgeois interests, the claim that this requires a socialist revolution.

Each subhypothesis, quite as much as the grand one, needs to be developed with care so that it is distinctively Marxist but not bizarre. Thus, the first claim is concerned with long-term interests on balance, among which an interest in acquiescence and stability often plays an important role. Often it is not in the interest of the bourgeoisie for the state to use its coercive power to stop a phenomenon whose nonoccurrence would be preferable, all else being equal, from the standpoint of bourgeois interests. During Marx's long exile in London, trade union activists were no longer being arrested. The resulting uproar would not, then and there, have been worth the gain. During much of this time, the same activities did invite arrest in France, as they had in Britain a generation earlier. Marx views all of these policies as reflecting the interests of the bourgeoisie as applied to state action in different circumstances.

In general, a government acting solely in the long-term interests of the bourgeoisie must take into account the interests of the proletariat. Such a government sometimes makes a particular choice because the interests of the proletariat would otherwise be violated, with relevant consequent costs in instability. Similarly, though no one would suppose that the cabinet of either the United Kingdom or the United States acts in the interests of the Politburo of the Soviet Union, even at the height of the cold war, all those patriots did often take into account the interests of the Politburo. The concessions on the part of government that might be dictated by bourgeois interests can be quite substantial. For example, the first volume of Capital contains a long narrative of the winning of the Ten Hours Bill in Britain through nonrevolutionary actions.

A reform that benefits the proletariat and has immediate economic costs for the bourgeoisie is, nonetheless, an instance of Marx's connection between government action and bourgeois interests if the need for stability makes it a concession in the interest of the bourgeoisie. This role for concessions complicates the testing of his hypothesis. In practice, the test, for Marx, is history: The crucial question is
whether his background hypotheses about state action provide better explanations of reforms and other socially important events than do rival explanatory frameworks, for example, appeals to humanitarian developments seen to be internal to culture or intrinsic to material progress under capitalism. One learns much about Marx's concepts (and history as well) by considering which rival hypotheses are employed in the best explanation of the rise and fall of the welfare state in Britain or of the New Deal reforms in the United States. Whatever the historians' verdict, Marx's assessments of the origins of reform usually turn out to coincide with the opinions of shrewd partisans of the status quo. When Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court Charles Evans Hughes sustained a crucial piece of New Deal legislation as a means of containing "the paralyzing consequences of industrial warfare" (National Labor Relations Board v. Jones and Laughlin Steel), an important aspect of Marx's theory came to the aid of the majority in the highest court in a very capitalist country.

Marx's discussions of the second topic, mechanisms connecting what officials do with the interests of the bourgeoisie, introduce an important dynamic element into his political theory. In every period under capitalism, definite mechanisms link those actions with this interest (the second subhypothesis). However, Marx believes that the mechanisms can change quickly and dramatically. Thus the third paragraph of part 3 of The Civil War is a remarkable tour de force in which Marx suggests how five different sets of political institutions, from the first French Republic to the Second Empire, might be taken to have connected state action with bourgeois interests as those interests changed and encountered different challenges.

Despite this diversity, Marx sees some constant mechanisms as helping connect political action and social interests. One is the role of the bourgeoisie in fiscal success in particular and in prosperity in general. In The German Ideology, Marx goes so far as to state that "the modern State . . . purchased gradually by the owners of property by means of taxation, has fallen entirely into their hands through the national debt" [Marx and Engels, 5/1976: 90]. Governments live on credit, depending on capitalists to pick up huge but routine loans. So every politician who is not willing to lead a revolution must cope with the fact that the bourgeoisie can throw finances into chaos if they think their interests are threatened. (Salvatore Allende's Chile illustrates the point in a more recent setting, involving bourgeois interests on an international scale.) More generally, when bourgeois interests are threatened, there is apt to be a spontaneous lowering of the pace of investment, with dire consequences for employment and income. Another mechanism functions in the realm of public opinion, a main ingredient in the survival of regimes and the success of individual political careerists. There Marx emphasizes bourgeois ownership of the major media— in his time, the mass-circulation newspapers. Finally, the innovations for which Marx praises the Paris Commune as a working-class government that brought state power closer to the people imply, by contrast, sources of bourgeois political power that he wanted to destroy. For example, his advocacy of the communard maximum for officials' salaries, the average skilled worker's wage, implies concern that the similarity of income and life-styles between major business leaders and major political leaders breeds a similarity of outlook (see 1974d: 209).

Regardless of whether these mechanisms have the net impact that Marx assigns them, they demonstrate the variety of ways in which the actions of officeholders can be influenced by the interests of nonofficeholders without the need for conspiracy. When Marxists discuss twentieth-century politics in the setting of universal suffrage, they add other, historically specific, items to the list, in the spirit of Marx's own dynamism, for example, campaign expenditures, differential access to elaborate nationwide bureaucracies, and the employment of the bourgeoisie in major cabinet positions.

Of course, one need not be a Marxist to believe that state action generally conforms to bourgeois interests and that this is no accident. One might also think that processes protected or, in any case, permitted by the state can break the connection between state action and social interests, hardly the basis for calling the state an engine of class despotism. Perhaps Marx's metaphors would be in place as long as one claimed, instead, that the disruptive and illegal use of coercion on the part of nonofficials, or the threat of its outbreak, is the only stimulus to important concessions. Marx himself says this and something more, absorbing more completely the military aspects of his metaphors: It would take a revolution, a large-scale, disciplined use of violence for radical political ends, to create a state of affairs in which government does not act in the interests of the bourgeoisie.

In the Communist Manifesto, Marx's revolutionary claim could
not be clearer: “We traced the more or less veiled civil war, raging within existing society, up to the point where that war breaks out into open revolution, and where the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat” (Marx, 1974b: 78). But in the Communist Manifesto there is little justification for this insistence on revolution, and indeed, it does not fit well with Marx’s description of parliamentary democracy, “the modern representative state,” as the ultimate form of bourgeois rule. It was after the dramatic shift to nonparliamentary institutions in France in response to the proletarian militance of 1848–9 that Marx wrote his most powerful works on politics under capitalism, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1852) and The Civil War in France (1871). These works help fill the gap in the revolutionary argument. If the bourgeoisie is losing its political dominance when politics is played by parliamentary rules of the game, it will use its remaining political resources to sustain a new regime that breaks those rules and creates new ones, containing challenges by broader, more direct uses of coercion. More precisely, more repressive arrangements will be established unless the proletarian resource of numbers and commitment is mobilized to answer force with superior force in a successful revolution.

For obvious reasons, the question of whether Marx thought revolution was necessary for radical social change has been a topic of heated controversy. A few, most notably Shlomo Avineri, have gone so far as to deny that Marx ever insisted on the need for political revolution, even in the 1840s. Others, including George Lichtheim and Stanley Moore, have argued that Marx abandoned this strategy in response to the failure of the revolutions of 1848 and the effective but nonrevolutionary activities in Britain that he noted during his London exile. This assertion that Marx grew out of his revolutionary emphasis has some support in a series of brief comments that he made between 1870 and 1880, largely in connection with the Paris Commune and the widespread rumor that it had been a Marxist plot (see, e.g., Marx, 1974d: 324, 395). In these remarks, he accepts the possibility that a worker’s government might come to power through elections in England, the Netherlands, or the United States. There is evidence, on the other side from the same period, in the revolutionary implications of more theoretical writings, for example, The Civil War in France, the 1872 preface to the Communist Manifesto, and the discussion of the dictatorship of the proletariat in The Critique of the Gotha Program. And the evidential force of the electoral remarks is somewhat blunted by their context: Marx’s concern during this period with protecting fellow members of the International Working Men’s Association from mounting persecution. Still, it would be good to have a means of reconciling all of the texts from Marx’s later years.

The best means for a reconciliation of a broadly revolutionary sort is the conclusion of Engels’s preface to the English edition of Capital, volume I:

Surely, . . . the voice ought to be heard of a man whose whole theory is the result of a lifelong study of the economic history and condition of England, and whom that study led to the conclusion that, at least in Europe, England is the only country where the inevitable social revolution might be effected entirely by peaceful and legal means. He certainly never forgot to add that he hardly expected the English ruling classes to submit, without a “proslavery rebellion,” to this peaceful and legal revolution. [Marx, 1977: 113; see also Marx’s reported comments in the New York World interview of 1871, in Marx, 1974d: 400]

Here, Marx’s collaborator speaking in Marx’s name, says that a workers’ government might be elected, yet he also implies that for political ends, socialism would require the large-scale use of violence by the workers. Presumably neither Marx nor Engels thought that Her Majesty’s armed forces would be the means for putting down the proslavery uprising. This reflection on politics and force has important implications for political organizing under capitalism. A workers’ movement whose practice is confined to electoral agitation will hardly be able to win a civil war with the bulk of material and professional expertise on the other side. At the very least, Engels’s comment shows that Marx’s explicit concessions regarding elections are compatible with the view that socialism requires broadly based, well-organized workers’ violence directed toward the securing of socialism and prepared for under capitalism. The difference in timing – that is, the conduct of this war after an electoral victory – is a departure from the literal claim that revolution is required. But it is no greater than other departures that are naturally understood when anyone proposes that a social change requires revolution.
Thus, there is an analogous, understood geographical hedge. No one thinks that a separate socialist revolution would be essential in Guatemala once socialism has triumphed everywhere else in North America.

IDEOLOGY

Like class, proletariat, and all of his other most characteristic terms, ideology is a word that Marx took from others, in this case, from theorists of the French Enlightenment, and put to his own uses. In its original meaning, ideology was the scientific study of ideas, a neutral usage close to the usual modern one in which an ideology is any socially significant system of beliefs. But Marx’s intended meaning is almost always different, above all because he almost always uses the label as entailing condemnation. His important discussions of what he calls ideologies are directed at socially significant systems of belief, presupposition, or sentiment that depend on a false perception of reality, the currency of which is due to truth-distorting social forces. These features probably constitute the most important meaning that the term came to have for Marx. The absence of explicit definitions obscures the issue, although Allen Wood sheds useful light on it (1981: 117–20). In any case, the phenomenon just described plays a central role in Marx’s analysis of any class society, and of his terms, ideology is the one that best fits it.

Standing behind many disputes over Marx’s concept of ideology is an issue that is much more than a matter of words. Did Marx think one could distinguish among the systems of ideas that play an important role in social change some that contain much more truth than others, or did he think one could do no more than characterize their social origins, especially their origins in social interests, and take a stand for or against those interests? The working definition that I have proposed is intentionally biased toward the former, nonrelativist reading. In The German Ideology, Capital, and elsewhere, Marx traces socially important ideas, for example, certain characteristic claims of David Ricardo and other classical political economists, to eras in which economic conditions “permitted . . . impartial investigation within the bounds of the bourgeois horizon” (Marx, 1977: 96).

The origins are bourgeois, yet the beliefs are endorsed as largely true. Though Marx’s thousands of pages of writings on economics are mostly directed at economists whose views he takes to be distorted by bourgeois interests, his impolite epithets about social causation—for example, “hired prizefighters” — never serve as substitutes for normal scientific arguments that their views are false (Marx, 1977: 97). In his descriptions of how workers are driven by industrial capitalism to appreciate the nature of their class interests, Marx attributes the currency of certain ideas to processes involving class interest without any suggestion that such a bias would deprive the outlook of title of truth. As one would expect regarding the working definition that Marx proposed, just as there are truth-distorting social forces, there are truth-promoting ones. Marx does believe that systems of ideas that guide social conduct in influential ways are the result of social processes in which class interests play an essential role. But he does not think that the acknowledgment of this role precludes truth judgments, and he does not regard those assessments of truth or falsehood as mere expressions of support or opposition directed at the underlying class interests.

Of course, a hypothesis that a certain kind of process tends to distort judgment in a certain realm of belief might sometimes be so widely shared that no question is begged when a causal explanation is used to argue against the truth of a belief. If as Marx proposes, Kantian disdain for interests and consequences was ultimately a response to the impotence of the German burghers, this undermines Kantian claims to insight (see Marx and Engels, 3/1976: 195–6). But such use of premises concerning causes of belief in arguments over their truth are no different in their logic from a critical scientist’s arguments about the bad design of an experimental setup.

Because the relevant truth-distorting forces are so diverse, talk of Marx’s theory of ideology has misleading implications of unity. However, Marx does have a relatively unified answer, employing the main notion of ideology, to a question that had preoccupied the theorists of the French Enlightenment: Why have there been so many false beliefs about society and human nature? Like any reader of history today, the Enlightenment theorists were impressed by the prevalence of such falsehoods, including, but by no means limited to, religious beliefs. [Even the devout assess most religious systems as false.] In attempting to explain this misfortune, they often appealed to the intellectual limitations of past eras or to the elusiveness of self-interested propagandists, for example, devious priests. But
these answers to their good question were not satisfying. There had been intelligence and evidence enough to warrant disbelief in most of the illusions that they identified; people had not been so gullible in general; and dissenters had made eloquent dissenting arguments.

As far as societies divided into classes are concerned, Marx's main answer is that much ideology is inevitable in a class society, because the economically dominant class requires the existence of false beliefs for its continued dominance and has resources for perpetuating beliefs that are in its interests. Physical coercion, even physical coercion organized by a state, is not enough to maintain the status quo in a society in which a minority depends on the extraction of a surplus from a vast majority of working people. A society characterized by such dominance will not last for long unless most people believe that its continued existence is in their interest or that there is no realistic alternative to it, or unless they are crippled, as a social force, by internal divisions. In Marx's most extensive general discussion of ideology, he writes, "Each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society" [Marx and Engels, 5/1976: 60]. Using the bourgeoisie and the French Revolution to illustrate his point, he immediately adds that such a new ruling class can initially rely on real facts to justify its necessary claim. "Its interest really is more connected [i.e., more connected than that of the old ruling class] with the common interest of all other non-ruling classes," for these other subordinate classes have been recruited to help overthrow the old regime because the old rulers were a source of common deprivations. But Marx also thinks that there is a point in the history of every class society at which there is a realistic alternative social structure that is in most people's interests. At this point, the beliefs, presuppositions, and sentiments that are necessary for stability require a false perception of reality.

Assuming that an economically dominant minority acquires a need for false belief, why is this need met for long periods of time? Marx's answer, in the same work, is that "the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control, at the same time, over the means of mental production" [Marx and Engels, 5/1976: 59; see also Marx, 1974b: 85]. Workers in the sphere of culture need food, clothing, and shelter as much as anyone else does but do not themselves produce these means of living. Vast amounts of work are involved in idea propagation, whether through building cathedrals or putting out a mass-circulation daily paper. A class that controls the means of production, disposing of the surplus left after the material goods producers' needs are met, will have the means to dominate the output of idea-producing institutions.

Like other arguments in The German Ideology, this one is broad in scope, simple in presentation, and plausible at first hearing. Even those who doubt its applicability to capitalism would often accept its general validity for precapitalist class societies. But here, as elsewhere in the work, further reflection raises important questions. Marx and Engels always supposed that there is, typically, a division of social labor in which those who control the means of production and those who propagate ideas are rarely the same people. What, then, could be meant by "control" in the claim that the former control idea-propagating institutions? To some extent, the question can be answered by transferring Marx's notion of ruling-class control of politics to ideological institutions. But a relevant psychological question remains (analogous to one that was neglected in the previous discussion of the capitalist state). If a belief is ideological, then in the final analysis, its currency is not due to mere intellectual limits in evidence gathering and theorizing. At some point, people must advance the belief as true when they ought, rationally speaking, to know better than to believe in its truth. Are they lying? The claim that lying is essential seems the sort of Enlightenment cynicism that Marx avoids as being too cheap. For all the impoliteness of his attacks on ideological economists, Marx surely did not think that they were literally lying for pay. It would be just as bizarre to suppose that the controllers of means of production who are at the origins of the ideological process lie when they say that the dominant economic relations are in most people's interests. Yet all of Marx's discussions of making a profit suggest that major business people possess good evidence for a different view of the interests of the majority. Because most of these purveyors of ideology are neither stupid nor mentally disturbed, there is an urgent need for a psychological mechanism likely to sustain their supposed nonrationality.

In criticizing historians who suppose that ideas determine the course of history, independent of class interests, Marx makes an
appeal to common sense that suggests one way to fill the gap. He states: "Whilst in ordinary life every shopkeeper is very well able to distinguish between what someone professes to be and what he really is, our historiography has not yet won even this trivial insight. It takes every epoch at its word and believes that everything it says and imagines about itself is true" [Marx and Engels, 5/1976: 62]. The neglected fact that he has in mind might simply be that people sometimes lie. But this realization is too trivial to be an insight, not a historian has been unaware of it, and it is not relevant to the particular idealist errors that Marx has just been criticizing. More likely, the shopkeeper's insight that he has in mind is the fact that people's interests can mold their beliefs (especially their beliefs about themselves), even when those interests are not their reasons for holding these beliefs. Suppose an unemployed person stops by the neighborhood grocer and asks to buy groceries on credit for the second month in a row. She assures the grocer that what she learned and what she was told in a recent job interview make it certain that she will get a job soon. Even if he knows that she is honest and generally rational, the sensible grocer will think that her need for groceries, rather than her reason for believing in her good prospects, is probably the cause of her belief.

It is mere common sense that such motivated nonrationality plays a role in everyday life. Marx's controversial claim is that this mechanism is crucial to the ideological processes needed to sustain whole social structures. The British manufacturers who, for many years, claimed that a ten-hour workday would mean the collapse of British industry believed what they were saying. But their belief was based on their interest in persuading others of this proposition, together with the normal interest in avoiding the mental pain of lying. Journalists propagated this belief, and many eminent economists claimed to have demonstrated its proof, when they obviously should have known better [see Marx, 1977: 333–8, "Senior's 'Last Hour'"]. The idea propagators assumed that what was in the interests of the bourgeoisie was in the interests of most people, an assumption based on interests created by institutional hierarchies on which their success had depended. In these hierarchies, success depended on approval by superiors, and the highest superiors had a direct interest in continued support by the bourgeoisie. The chain of command in a newspaper, leading to those directly dependent on the board of dire
who seek to change society must concentrate on combating ideologies that emerge from institutions under bourgeois control.

For Marx, at least in his later years, the central ideological supports for continued bourgeois dominance were divisive ideas of racial or ethnic inferiority, or racism in a broad sense of the term. In a letter to two comrades from the 1848 revolutions who had immigrated to New York, Marx analyzes, in this spirit, the antagonism between ethnically English and ethnically Irish workers living in England, adding that their situation is much the same as that of "poor whites" and blacks in the southern United States. "This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite its organization ... the secret which enables the capitalist class to maintain its power" [italics in original]. Though Marx recognizes that many English workers believe objectively that they are threatened by Irish competition, he regards anti-Irish sentiment to be "artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes" [Marx, 1974d: 169]. It is, after all, a consequence of Marx's most fundamental economic argument that the typical worker's well-being depends on unity in working-class activism, not on special competitive advantages. And it is a consequence of another, important argument about workers' social psychology that industrial production gives rise to interactions promoting an awareness of this need for unity. Marx concludes: "It is the special task of the Central Council in London [of the International Working Men's Association] to arouse the consciousness in the English working class that for them the national emancipation of Ireland is not a question of abstract justice or humanitarian sentiment but the first condition of their own social emancipation" [Marx, 1974d: 170]. After considerable dispute, Marx did persuade the Central Council to adopt this view and to organize large demonstrations of mostly English workers in support of Irish independence. Indeed, the main day-to-day activity of the International was a project of fighting divisions among workers, through strike support across national borders and corresponding efforts, often successful, to persuade workers imported to break strikes in England to refuse to do so [see Marx, 1974d: 395–6].

Unfortunately, Marx's assessment of racism is of considerable contemporary interest. In a late twentieth-century North American set-

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ting, Michael Reich offers empirical arguments in support of Marx's most distinctive claim, that racism works against the material interests of most people in the majority group. David Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Reich develop an interesting variant of Marx's approach to the mechanisms of divisiveness, emphasizing changes in the structure of production imposed by firms, not for technological or commercial reasons, but in order to reduce workers' activism.

Whatever its fate as a hypothesis about the persistence of racism, Marx's account is an important corrective to guesses about his large-scale strategy that his emphasis on class struggle might otherwise inspire. In general, Marx contends that effective socialists must not just argue for the virtues of socialism but must also engage in struggles for prerevolutionary gains, drawing larger lessons, advancing the solidarity needed for revolution, learning, and developing the trust on which democratic leadership depends. A natural guess might be that the most important of these reform struggles are concerned with typical goals of trade union negotiations—wages, the pace of work and the like, goals whose general achievement would immediately benefit all workers. In fact, because both unity and ideology are so important to Marx (important in their impact on material well-being, among other reasons), the explicit pursuit of measures reducing inequalities among workers is his main reform project.

ENDING CAPITALISM

Marx's characteristic explanations of institutions and policies appeal to social functions, objective functions that do not always correspond to the instrumental reasoning of their participants. So far, his explanatory strategy is shared by respectable, even conservative academic theorists of succeeding generations, for example, Durkheim, the British school of social anthropology, and structural-functionalist sociologists in the United States. But they propose that the ultimate function of each element in the social system, including the economy, is the perpetuation of the whole social system, so that the system would last forever were it not for the intervention of external or nonsocial forces. Marx regards the ultimate function as the advancement of the interests of one class, which conflict with the interests of the rest of society. Institutions work to perpetuate their dominance,
but their dominance, which ensures conflict, is not itself explained as ultimately stabilizing. The fact that domination and conflict are entailed by the basic function permits Marx to say what he does claim concerning capitalism and most other social systems: An accurate understanding of what sustains them will reveal that they inevitably will pass away and as a result of internal processes, be replaced by radically different systems. As Marx wrote in the Grundrisse, in an important discussion of Greco-Roman social change, “Thus, the preservation of the old community includes the destruction of the conditions on which it rests, turns into its opposite” (Marx, 1974a: 494).

In particular, one of the few preconceptions about Marx that is absolutely, uncontroversially true is that he thought that capitalism would inevitably be overthrown as a result of its internal dynamics and that socialism would be established. He expresses this, his most important belief about the future of capitalism, in a famous apocalyptic passage toward the end of Capital:

Along with the constant decrease in the number of capitalist magnates, who usurp and monopolize all the advantages of this process of transformation, the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation and exploitation grows; but with this there also grows the revolt of the working class, a class constantly increasing in numbers, and trained, united and organized by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production. The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production which has flourished alongside and under it. The centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labour reach a point at which they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated.

(Marx, 1977: 929)

The process that Marx describes has two broad aspects, growth in suffering on the part of the proletariat, and growth in unification, that is, increased solidarity among proletarians, together with increased centralization of capitalist production, making it possible for a workers' state to seize and control an economy. (A fleeting warning on questions whose detailed discussion lies beyond this chapter: We have seen that Marx's notion of control is broad and flexible, and it would have amazed most followers of Marx before the 1920s to be told that central planning is the only means of control by a workers' state.)

In this and other passages, Marx is asserting the inevitability of capitalism's downfall—"with the inexorability of a law of Nature," as he adds in the next paragraph. It is important to see what this claim does not entail, bold though it is. For here, common preconceptions are distorting. Inevitably does not mean spontaneously, and Marx in fact gives an important role to disciplined efforts by revolutionaries who, as participants in day-to-day class struggles, raise revolutionary ideas, emphasize the need for unity, and, when the situation makes revolution possible, lead it in a bold and coordinated way. In the Communist Manifesto, written for one such group, the Communist League, he says, "The Communists fight for the attainment of the immediate aims, for the enforcement of the momentary interests of the working class; but in the movement of the present, they also represent and take care of the future of that movement" (Marx, 1974b: 97). Explicit advocacy of a socialist future is an important aspect of that caretaking, as in the propagation of the Communist Manifesto itself. How else could a revolution succeed if ideological institutions are at work sustaining capitalism? Although he occasionally warns of dangers of recklessness, Marx's main thrust in the revolutions of 1848–9 was to advocate bold initiatives in workers' violence, as he himself defiantly noted in the editorial announcing his expulsion from Prussia (Marx and Engels, 9/1977: 451–4). Given the theory of bourgeois control of the institutions of coercion, how could a proletarian revolution succeed without boldness, coordination, and, consequently, leadership?

Admittedly, Marx thinks that capitalism was doomed from the start and that conditions sufficient to guarantee this ultimate doom consist of the pursuit of narrow, relatively short-term nonrevolutionary advantages by capitalists and workers. But this is not to say that capitalism passes away regardless of whether large numbers of people eventually come to desire a radical alternative and to deliberate as to the best means of achieving it. For example, I do not want food now; my present situation guarantees that I will eat within eight hours...and this does not entail the bizarre conclusion that I will eat food without wanting to. Marx regards processes initially motivated by short-term, narrow goals as eventually giving rise to long-term, societal goals, "transforming circumstances and men" (Marx, 1974b: 213).

The confident claim of inevitability is, also, not a claim that anyone will be able confidently to predict the success of a socialist
revolution or to offer a nontautological general description of circumstances in which socialism must triumph (as opposed to the tautology, say, that triumph must occur when the proletariat is strong enough and desperate enough). One reason for nonprediction is rational self-doubt concerning relevant strategies. In this spirit, in the 1872 Preface to the Manifesto, Marx portrays the Paris Commune as a social experiment establishing new and crucial insights into political means for establishing socialism—insights of which no one had been aware in 1848 (Marx, 1974b: 66). For all Marx knew, other lessons may be essential. Marx saw the first successful establishment of capitalist control as having occurred in the seventeenth century after a long process of trying, failing, and learning, at least from the time of the urban communes of the Middle Ages. There is no sign that he was sure that socialists had learned what they needed to know in his generation or that they could ever have certainty of sufficient insight before the fact.

A final question about the general form of Marx's vision of the future concerns the pattern in which the inevitable process of self-destruction might unfold. The image of a bursting integument suggests an overall trend of increasing pressure in suffering and unity up to the point at which capitalism ends, like a sausage bursting on a grill. But an internal process that must bring about the downfall of a social system cannot fit another pattern. There is an initial long-term increase in unity or suffering or both until the objective conditions for revolution are in place. During the longer or shorter end phase, from this point on, recurring crises produce urgent needs for a different system; there are adequate basic resources for creating one; and a radical solution is inevitable sooner or later because the people who are burdened by this system are resourceful, rational, and not permanently afflicted with bad luck. Within the end phase, there need not be a trend of worsening or increased unification.

Did Marx believe that one or the other pattern was the inevitable form in which the inevitable doom would unfold? In the apocalyptic passage from Capital he states that there is a "constant decrease in the number of capitalist magnates" and that the proletariat is "a class constantly increasing in number." Marx's discussions of the concentration of capital make it clear that the former claim is not meant literally but refers to the tendency of a greater and greater proportion of output to be dominated by a relatively small group of firms (e.g., Marx, 1977: 777–81). The two claims of constant change in one direction are accompanied by much vaguer claims that the mass of misery . . . grows and that "with this there also the revolt of the working class." Marx does not explicitly state that either phenomenon is "constantly increasing," that is, that in every major phase of capitalist development it has an increasing trend. And he does not say that the average intensity of suffering or solidarity will increase at all. (Distinctions between suffering or solidarity are important and explicit elsewhere in Capital.) Here as in other visionary summaries, the rhetoric of the past is certain of its own. Marx offers reasons for supposing that there are growing trends in suffering and unity that will extend through the lives of his audience, the normal time horizon of political advocacy. But a reader in the late twentieth century might wonder whether Marx would have accepted the possibility of the troubled, stagnant, end phase of capitalism last long enough. As we shall see, a number of his arguments concerning trends in his lifetime imply that such an end phase would arrive when ownership is concentrated, industrial capitalism dominates production everywhere, and repressive, non-parliamentary institutions have become a standard response to capitalist crises. Marx hoped and expected that capitalism would end before a prolonged end phase of this kind. But if he thought such prolonged senility was precluded by the nature of the system, it is not clear why.

CLASS INTEREST AND REVOLUTION

Marx thinks that the beliefs and attitudes required for successful proletarian revolution are the result of a centuries-long process in which "what the bourgeoisie . . . produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers." The description of this process is the longest single argument in the Communist Manifesto (Marx, 1974b: 73–9), and long portions of Capital, volume 1, also contribute to it. Even in feudal societies, Marx notes in the Communist Manifesto, proletarians struggle against the bourgeoisie. But they are "an inchoate mass" and first "unite to form more compact bodies" when organized by the bourgeoisie against common feudal enemies, as in Oliver Cromwell's New Model Army and the levée en masse of the
French Revolution [75]. With the coming of industry, the competitive use of individual skills becomes less effective as a means of betterment, while successful collective resistance becomes crucial to resisting attacks on living standards. "Thereupon the workers begin to form combinations (trade unions).... Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers" [76]. Improved communications, centralization of means of production, and lessons learned in specifically political struggles are some of the ingredients in the process of self-transformation, which begins with the birth of trade unionism but continues long afterward. Over the long run, "the advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeois, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association" [79].

Marx's descriptions of sources of change, like his descriptions of sources of stability, produce problems concerning motivation. What is the new psychology of "revolutionary combination" that provides the motivation for overthrowing capitalism? Marx insists that activists of his kind, unlike previous radicals, do not appeal to "an idea to which reality [will] have to adjust itself, but rather base themselves in the real movement which abolishes the present state of things" [Marx and Engels, 5/1976: 49; italics in original]. While scorning moral preaching as a means of change, he tries to convince the typical proletarian that the triumph of socialism would be in his or her own interest, through arguments not meant to rely on impartial benevolence for their effect. [Marx, 1974b: 85; Marx and Engels, 1975: 139; Marx and Engels, 5/1976: 247, 419, 457].

The rejection of preaching and the emphasis on actual interests have suggested to some that Marx is appealing to individual self-interests and is not depending on concern for others beyond the circle of intimate attachment. If so, Marx presumably thought that the modern proletariat would be capable of launching a revolution because participation in a revolution establishing the workers' control of production would be in the individual self-interest of each (or, in any case, of enough). This would not be true of previous groups of working people because their social situations precluded general awareness of the advantages of workers' rule, because they lacked the literacy, mobility, and extralocal contacts required for workers' rule, and because the lack of

centralization in the means of production was an insuperable barrier to collective control.

In a brief but important discussion in The Logic of Collective Action [Olson, 1971: 102–10], Mancur Olson showed that this could not be Marx's motivational claim if his theory of revolution were internally consistent. Suppose Marx did believe that

1. Any proletarian who takes part in revolution is motivated by individual self-interest alone, "the rational, selfish pursuit of individual interests," as Olson puts it [108].

Marx's theory of the state also dictates that

2. Revolutionary activity is dangerous, requires the simultaneous activity of many people, and is opposed by the well-established means of coercion.

Because of the dangers, a rational, selfish revolutionary would have to expect substantial self-centered gains from participation, or the avoidance of substantial costs. Because of the needed scale of activity, the social pressures characteristic of small-group activity will not create sufficient self-centered costs for nonparticipation. Coercion of revolutionaries by revolutionaries clearly is not the main motivator for Marx, and in any case, appeals to this tactic, exceptionally risky for nonofficials, would beg the question of what motivates the revolutionary coerencers. The essential motivating resource must be one that Marx does emphasize:

3. A successful socialist revolution will benefit all proletarians (or, in any case, the vast majority).

As Olson points out, these benefits of revolution would be a "public good" for proletarians. People would receive them regardless of whether they had taken part in the revolution. Marx certainly says enough about distribution under socialism to make clear that the gains are not confined to the revolutionary veterans, like booty or service medals. [If there are any special benefits for participants, their expected value, prior to successful revolution, is small because of the risks of revolutionary action.]

Because of the nature of revolutionary risks and potential revolutionary benefits, the rational choice for a self-interested individual is to seek a safe refuge on the eve of revolution, wishing the revolution-
aries well. One fewer revolutionary will not make much difference to the prospects of success, which depend on large numbers [2], refuge will avoid risks [2], and if the revolution triumphs, one will benefit anyway [3]. So points 1 through 3 are incompatible with something Marx certainly believed:

4. There will be a successful socialist revolution.

Without extensive textual argument, Olson proposed that Marx is committed to all four points. Olson presented his argument as a demonstration that Marx's views of revolution are internally inconsistent. Those less willing to embrace this conclusion have certainly been challenged to clarify Marx's meaning in a way that removes the inconsistency, see Holmstrom [1983], Miller [1984], and, for a position sympathetic to Olson, Buchanan [1979]. Because the interpretive claims of points 2 through 4 are so strong, these clarifications have been directed toward replacing the first attribution.

In one of his very few general and explicit discussions of self-interest, Marx asserts: "The communists do not oppose egoism to selflessness or selflessness to egoism. . . . They do not put to people the moral demand: love one another, do not be egoists, etc.: on the contrary, they are very well aware that egoism, just as much as selflessness, is in definite circumstances a necessary form of the self-assertion of individuals" [Marx and Engels, 5/1976: 247]. Here Marx refuses to commit himself to either of the two ultimate forms of motivation that Olson considers available in principle, "emotion and irrationality" and "cold and egoistical calculations" [Olson, 1971: 108]. And surely there are many sources of reasons for action, including nonmoral sources, that are not located in either category. As Aristotle sensibly points out in a discussion of friendship that Marx must certainly have read, one can have a friend, caring enough about him to do things for his sake at some personal cost, when one would not have become his friend were it not for prior personal benefits of association and when one's friendship would eventually cease if, over the long run, it ceased to be of personal benefit on balance. That is, one genuinely cares about the welfare of the other. But one's caring is not a matter of moral conviction or altruism; it is sensitive to facts about one's own personal self-interest, even when this interest does not coincide with the aggregate welfare of the couple, self plus friend.

Marx's connection between interests and revolutionary motivations would seem to be similarly subtle. He does think it essential to successful proletarian revolution that sufficient numbers come to believe point 3. But he does not seem to assign point 3 to this role because he thinks it is a premise in a further argument that revolutionary action is in the individual self-interest of each revolutionary. Indeed, while presenting them as paradigmatic revolutionaries, he praises the communards for their "self-sacrificing heroism" [Marx, 1974: 226]. Rather than point 1, he seems to rely on

5. A proletarian who takes part in revolution is motivated by a concern for the general well-being of proletarians that would not exist if she did not think that a successful revolution would create a new society working in her individual self-interest [if she should survive]. For most, the belief that one has personally benefited from others' past risk taking in the proletarian interest is also essential.

Of course, people must also think that there is a reasonable chance that the revolution will succeed and a reasonable chance that their lives after the decision to participate will be better than before. On the other hand, Marx's discussions of workers who put their lives or livelihoods in jeopardy — for example, communards, Chartists, revolutionaries of 1848–9, and British textile workers demonstrating in support of the Union blockade in the United States Civil War — present as models of proletarian decision-making workers for whom the threshold chance of benefit is not especially high and may even have been less than fifty-fifty. Presumably, passive submission in the face of the odds they encountered would not have been compatible with self-respect. That much egoism would conflict with self-assertion, in the terms of the passage in The German Ideology.

Why does Marx think that the motivation described in point 5 is powerful, and much more powerful than the motivations associated with mere moral conviction? The analogies with friendship are hardly enough, for concern for nonintimates will, presumably, be essential to at least some revolutionary acts. Here Marx's reading of working-class and revolutionary history, his acquaintance with working-class militants and his own participation in revolutionary activities provided data that were crucial to his view. He thinks that previous proletarian struggles have already demonstrated (and en-
hanced] the power of this form of motivation and that purely moral motivations have proved weak, by contrast, in the more philan-
thropic responses to social hardship. Of course, even if he were right in supposing that class allegiance as described in point 5 could be a powerful motive, he could have been wrong to suppose that it would be strong enough to sustain a successful revolution. This will depend in part, on the other aspect of the alleged inevitable process of social
transformation, the extent of the capitalist deprivations that revolu-
tion is expected to remove.

Marx’s emphasis on the role of industry in creating the grave dan-
gers of capitalism has led to a further controversy, concerning the
locale of socialist revolution. Given only the general account of how
the bourgeoisie creates proletarians capable of overthrowing it, one
would expect the most industrialized countries to be the first places
where socialism triumphs. And this is sometimes taken to be Marx’s
own prediction. But it was not. For example, in the Communist Man-
ifesto he says: “The Communists turn their attention chiefly to Ger-
many, because that country is on the eve of a bourgeois revolution
[that] will be but a prelude to an immediately following proletarian
revolution” (Marx, 1974b: 98). Though “immediately” in such a con-
text does not refer to a matter of weeks, it surely allows less time than
required for the thorough industrialization of largely agrarian, semi-
feudal mid-nineteenth-century Germany. Rather, Marx thinks that
special opportunity for socialist revolution has emerged in a little
industrialized country because of developments in the international
system of capitalist economies, in which industrialization has played
a special role. Aspects of mature capitalism in the most advanced
countries, Britain and France in particular, had been imported into
Germany or, rather, forced on Germany by international competition.
Above all, a small but concentrated and politically sophisticated pro-
letariat had arisen in such centers as Cologne. Meanwhile, the Ger-
man elites for their part remained divided and largely archaic com-
pared with those of the most advanced countries [see Marx, 1975:
247–56; Marx and Engels, 5/1976: 75]. Though Marx’s prediction
about Germany was wrong, his openness to such a possible first suc-
cess in proletarian revolution makes his thinking about revolution
more flexible on the whole. The most general hypotheses, the ones
that support the broadest, most abstract, longest-term expectations
might be not just inadequate but also misleading as a guide in framing

more specific expectations. Gilbert (1979) argues that this is a com-
mon pattern when relatively small scale auxiliary hypotheses are
needed to apply scientific theories.

ECONOMIC CRISIS

The tendency for the amount of suffering to increase, or immis-
ceration, in a particularly repulsive term of Marxological jargon, al-
ways has an economic aspect for Marx. In the 1840s, this aspect
includes a supposed tendency for competition actually to depress
wages to the level of bare physical survival. In later writings, how-
ever, the expected average standard of living that replaces this desper-
ate trend is dreary, hard-won, but not a plausible basis for widespread
revolutionary action. Still, because of the business cycle, the average
standard usually is not the standard of most workers. Industrial

crises are at the core of economic worsening, as Marx came to see it.

The sort of crisis with which Marx is concerned is a general crisis
of overproduction, a general glut on the market. On the verge of such
a crisis, firms throughout the economy find themselves with swol-
en inventories of goods, which they cannot sell at a price that would
yield the rate of profit they have come to expect. This sets a chain
reaction in motion. Firms cut back orders for new means of produc-
tion, that is, new productive equipment, parts, and raw materials,
because they have more goods to sell than they want. These cut-
backs result in layoffs of workers by firms producing means of pro-
duction. These layoffs result in a decline in consumption, further
oversupply, more cutbacks in orders for new means of production,
and so on, in a downward spiral that continues until a trough is
reached of high unemployment, low use of industrial capacity, and
stagnation in commerce and technology.

The first such crisis occurred in 1825 in Britain while Marx was a
little boy. Crises of overproduction continue to this day. Until World
War II, they were a regular and often a devastating feature of eco-

conomic life in advanced capitalist economies. The Great Depres-
sion of the 1930s was the worst setback in terms of unemployment [25% of-
officially in the worst year in the United States, 22.5% in Great

Britain] and unused industrial capacity. It is at least arguable that
there was an overall tendency until World War II for crises of overpro-
duction to worsen. In terms of economic predictions, Marx’s expecta-
tion of recurrent industrial crises, often severe and with a long-term tendency to get worse, turned out to be remarkably accurate. Unfortunately, the detailed reasoning that supports this expectation is scattered throughout Marx's economic writings, including important but isolated passages in all the volumes of *Capital*. Still, the basic argument is clear enough.

Marx views crises of overproduction as an inevitable result of one intrinsic aspects of capitalism, the drive to expand production and the profit-oriented goals of capitalist expansion [see, e.g., Marx, 1981: 358]. The imperatives of competition repeatedly lead to a general effort to expand production. But successful expansion depends on the realization of a rate of return that investors have come to expect, that is, its achievement when goods are actually sold and workers and suppliers are paid. The circumstances of an expanding capitalist economy are bound to prevent the realization of this goal sooner or later precipitating a crisis.

Under capitalism, as Marx portrays it, there is constant competition among firms for market shares as well as constant competition among whole bourgeois classes in the world economy. So there is constant pressure to expand lest another firm expand at one's own expense. Suppose, then, that firms are coping well with this imperative and, on the whole, expanding production. At some point, the boom will create downward pressure on the actual returns on investment, realized in sales of the expanded output. For example, if credit were readily available, then firms, eventually stimulated by one another's orders, are likely to have used loans to push expansion beyond the limits of effective demand, as they finally discover to their dismay when the bills come due [see Marx, 1969: 492; 1981: 631]. But even without such credit-based pressure, production would outrun its previous profit-making capacity as low unemployment and high demand for labor increase wage costs [see, e.g., Marx, 1970: 391]. Each firm is helped if other firms' workers buy more, but not enough to compensate for its own added burden, in the average case.

The first firms to increase the capital intensity of their new equipment may evade these pressures until the innovations are generally adopted. But at that point, wage pressure and market competition dissolve further advantages from innovation, leaving the increased capital costs.

Because virtually anything can be sold to someone at some price, a crisis of overproduction would result if firms always quickly responded to the first difficulties in selling by reducing prices to cut back inventories. But competition for market shares combines with the eternal absence of perfect foresight to make other conduct rational, conduct that eventually precipitates a crisis. A firm that cuts prices at the first signs of trouble would often turn out to have done so unnecessarily. Unable to offer the usual rate of return, it will be unable to obtain the financial fuel for expansion and innovation and will eventually be devoured by more effective competitors. Until they have overwhelming evidence that the effort is doomed, firms in an investment boom must try to achieve the rate of return that was expected on the basis of past successes. For firms of average luck and competence, the overwhelming evidence comes too late. It consists of the full inventories throughout the economy that trigger the downward spiral, setting off one of "the industrial earthquakes... in which the trading world can only maintain itself by sacrificing a part of its wealth, of profits and even of productive forces to the gods of the netherworld" [Marx and Engels, 197/977: 228].

This last phrase, along with others that are more reminiscent of operas by Gluck than of standard economics texts, occurs in the last paragraph of *Wage-Labor and Capital*. It is part of a compact and prescient description, in this relatively early work (1847), of alleged sources of a general tendency for crises to worsen:

As the capitalists are compelled... to exploit the already existing means of production on a larger scale and to set in motion all the mainsprings of credit to this end, there is a corresponding increase in industrial crises... They become more frequent and more violent, if only because, as the mass of production, and consequently the need for extended markets, grows, the world market becomes more and more contracted, fewer and fewer new markets remain available for exploitation, since every preceding crisis has subjected to world trade a market hitherto unconquered or only superficially exploited.

As capitalism develops, larger firms take advantage of economies of scale and greater access to credit in order to bankrupt smaller firms and take over their share of the market. But as firms grow larger, they must plan on a larger scale and farther in advance. As a result they are less willing and able to reduce production when signs of crisis develop. Also, dominant firms have a greater capacity to rely
on credit, as opposed to retained profits, thereby losing an automatic check on overproduction. Finally, in the dominant nations, expectations formed in an era of expansion into weak or precapitalist economies are bad preparation for the loss of such opportunities.

Until the end of World War II, all of this was true or highly plausible. But since then, there has been of course been no crisis on the scale of the Great Depression. Would a resurrected Marx be surprised by the turn of events? The answer is less clear than it might seem, although he would, no doubt, be disappointed by the survival of capitalism. In his discussions of industrial crises, Marx assumes that there is sharp competition for market shares. But he also has powerful and prophetic arguments that there is an ongoing tendency for production to be concentrated in fewer and fewer firms. Occasionally he notes what is obvious enough, that the tendency toward concentration will, at a certain point, reduce the sharpness of competition, with significant effects on pricing and planning [see, e.g., Marx, 1981: 368]. Even without explicit agreements, a few giant firms are more apt than are many small ones to maintain their markups, responding to problems of inadequate demand by collectively reducing production. Informal coordination is easier, and the great prize of market competition—the elimination of a rival—is immeasurably harder to attain. There is still competition in this late-capitalist economy, less than before domestically but more internationally, for the reasons that Marx sketched in 1847. With less domestic competition comes sluggish expansion with a high average rate of unemployment, continuous inflation, a lower rate of innovation, and increased emphasis on purely financial sources of profit [see Steindl, 1976].

Economists of Marx's time often doubted the possibility that processes internal to the manufacturing sector could generate general crises of overproduction. But they agreed on another source of economic suffering, a continuing downward trend in the rate of profit [i.e., the total rate of return on investment] since the seventeenth century. Marx has a different attitude toward this trend and the growing problems of unemployment and stagnation that accompany it, but he is well aware that acknowledgment of this tendency is banal. Indeed, he is proud of its banality. He offers an explanation of the downward trend that is based on his view that the average rate of profit depends on the outcome of class struggle and the capital intensity of technology. He thinks that this success strongly confirms his theory of profit precisely because “the previous writers in economics perceived the phenomenon [of the declining rate of profit], but tortured themselves with their contradictory attempts to explain it... [One might well say that] it forms the mystery around whose solution the whole of political economy since Adam Smith revolves” [Marx, 1981: 319].

Marx’s solution to the mystery appeals, on the one hand, to a historical trend of increased capital intensity in the means of production, as industrial capitalism spreads and the concentration of capital encourages economies of scale and projects with long gestation periods. On the other hand, the rise of the modern labor movement enables workers to defend themselves against any long-term increase in the rate of exploitation, absorbing their proportionate share of the benefits of the new technology. Innovation continues because it offers vital competitive advantages and temporary superprofits to the first innovators. But in the long run and in the typical firm, the return that an investment yields will stand in the usual ratio to the labor costs required to create it [constant rate of exploitation] but will require more in the way of costs paid to suppliers of productive equipment [increased capital intensity]; see Capital, vol. 3, pt. 3; Capital, vol. 1, chap. 25.

This is certainly a remarkable instance of the use of an economic theory to connect historical and social phenomena with an important economic magnitude. The use of a new theory to solve a standard problem is always important when it is vindicated. And all the factors that Marx emphasizes could be expected to dominate economic life throughout the nineteenth century. But is it inevitable that these same trends continue as long as capitalism exists? The question is especially pressing now, because the increase in capital intensity seems to have ended, in Britain and the United States, in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Marx does present the downward trend in profit and the trends in the explanatory factors as general tendencies throughout the life of capitalist societies. Yet Marx’s own account of increased capital intensity implies a leveling off once industrial production is pervasive and the concentration of capital has gone as far as is permitted by the subsidiary countervailing trends that he allows. This may be another case in which Marx’s own explanation of a trend in contemporary capitalism dictates the emergence of different trends in a fur-
ther phase—in the unhoped-for event of capitalism’s enduring. Of course, innovation continues to this day and continues to make human labor more productive in terms of physical output. The question is whether there is any tendency for the new technology that a typical firm employs in order to produce its commodity, to increase the ratio of the cost of productive commodities bought from other firms to the cost of labor power bought from the firm’s workers. Some wonderful innovations, for example, the switch from textile production by handlooms to textile production by power looms, increase capital intensity, but others, equally wonderful, for example, the switch from calculation using vacuum-tube computers to calculation using transistorized computers, enormously reduce it.

WARR

The apocalyptic passage in Capital, ending with the expropriation of the expropriators, speaks of “misery, oppression, slavery, degradation and exploitation,” with no indication that all these costs must be those normally called economic. In fact, Marx regarded war as an inherent cost of capitalism. He did most of his writing in the long era of peace between the Napoleonic wars and the wars marking the emergence of a unified Germany under Prussian leadership. Yet the inaugural address of the International Working Men’s Association, which he wrote in 1864 in the era of European peace, ends with a detailed condemnation of bourgeois foreign policy for “squandering in piratical wars the people’s blood and treasure” [Marx, 1974d: 81]. At the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, both French and German sections of the International denounced both governments for engaging in “dynastic war” as “a criminal absurdity” [Marx, 1974d: 173–6]. Marx’s own denunciation includes perhaps his most powerful prophecy, a detailed description of alliances and issues relevant to World War I, written forty-four years before its outbreak [Marx, 1974d: 183].

Marx regards war as intrinsic to capitalism and not because of irrationality or evil intent. “The bourgeoisie finds itself involved in a constant battle... at all times, with the bourgeoisie of foreign countries” [Marx, 1974b: 76]. The most important and violent aspects of the conflict are due to the drive of the most powerful bourgeois classes to use their countries’ resources to dominate weaker societies, thereby creating exceptionally high profits. This worldwide process so impresses Marx that it dominates the concluding chapters of the account of capitalism’s past and future, in volume 1 of Capital. In Marx’s view, the initial proliferation of large-scale capitalist manufacturing enterprises depended on enormous and concentrated profits from the imperial expansion that culminated in the first British Empire. “The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of black skins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production.” Because political domination is the basis for superprofits from cheap raw materials, cheap labor, and trade advantages, such expansion is not confined to commercial competition but inevitably leads to “the commercial war of the European nations, which has the globe as its battlefield. It begins with the revolt of the Netherlands from Spain, assumes giant dimensions in England’s Anti-Jacobin War, and is still going on in the shape of the Opium Wars against China, etc.” [Marx, 1977: 915]. Marx’s account of the rise of capitalist manufacturing, in chapter 31, is almost entirely devoted to the process of political and economic domination, worldwide. Then after the apocalyptic chapter foreseeing the expropriation of the expropriators, he ends volume 1 with a chapter entitled “The Modern Theory of Colonization,” describing how contemporary capitalist powers are coping with their need to export exploitative relations of production that benefit the bourgeoisie of the home country, thereby reversing the tendency of earlier colonies to benefit settler-farmers instead.

As time goes on, there is a general tendency for “the commercial war, with the globe for its theatre” to become more violent. As Marx notes early on, in the passage already quoted from Wage-Labor and Capital, the finitude of the planet guarantees that there will be less and less unexploited territory to which great powers can go to evade conflict with others—as France, for example, turned its attention to North Africa and parts of the Middle East after its defeat in India. Also, the concentration of capital in fewer and fewer firms gives more influence in the bourgeoisie to huge firms with worldwide interests, as opposed to smaller, domestically oriented firms, which have sometimes been an important anti-imperial force. Finally, be-
cause of mounting pressures at home, the surrender of foreign objectives carries an increased risk of domestic calamity.

To this tendency toward increasing international violence, Marx would add a trend toward increased repression domestically. Economic crisis, working-class militancy, and the need to prepare for war all are challenges requiring especially speedy, well-coordinated, and effective political control. If the proletariat is relatively unified, parliamentary democracy will tend to be a bad vehicle for such control. Decision making is too dispersed and slow, and there are too many opportunities for agitation and action against bourgeois interests. So, in the crises of late capitalism, Marx thinks that there are more frequent impositions of the sort of regime he labels Caesarism or Imperialism in connection with Louis Bonaparte, which today Marxists would call fascism, characterized by the direct use of force without traditional due-process protections, the outlawing of political oppositions and trade unions, and the centralization of political power and access to propaganda in a nationalist party operating in the interests of a bourgeois in crisis.

More obviously and more sadly than his account of industrial crises, Marx's account of the political costs of capitalist development fits the basic facts of life worldwide through World War II. Of course, it is another question whether his argument provides the best explanation of those facts or fits events in the second half of the twentieth century. In these disputes, V. I. Lenin's Imperialism has been extremely influential, as both paradigm and target. The first chapter of Franz Neumann's Behemoth, an account of the Nazi regime written shortly after the Nazi seizure of power, is a concise and powerful example of the use of apparatus developed by Marx in The Eighteenth Brumaire to account for the most terrifying episode in political violence, so far.

Marx's emphasis on lethal force employed by governments sometimes surprises readers who expect him to neglect the political in favor of the economic. But it is a natural outcome of his theory of the state, and an essential feature of his revolutionary expectations. The most memorable phrase in the Communist Manifesto is transparent falsehood in the interests of rhetoric. Workers have a great deal to lose besides their chains. Death, prison, and, in our less gentle era, excruciating torture are real losses, which appear more acute once one abandons the thesis of the 1840s, that wages are bound to de-

cline to the physical minimum. However, in wartime, people's lives are at risk in any case, so that what one has to lose in revolution may well be taken anyway in defending one's societal enemies against their enemies. The threats posed by industrial depression are not so dramatic, which surely helps account for the special association of revolution with war, starting in Marx's lifetime in the Paris Commune at the end of the Franco-Prussian War.

IN GENERAL

In addition to his long and detailed discussions of capitalist societies, Marx's writings contain an epoch-making account of the rise of capitalism out of feudalism (above all, in Capital, volume 1) and fragmentary but often brilliant and suggestive theorizing about the structure and history of various kinds of society in Greco-Roman antiquity, feudalism, and the Chinese and Indian empires (see, e.g., Marx 1974a: 471–91, 483–506; 1981: 926–7; Marx and Engels, 1975: 79–80; 5/1976: 33–4; 84–5). There are, besides, important speculations about the origins of the first class-divisions (e.g., Marx, 1977: 181–3, 471–2), together with the ever-dominant vision of workers' rule and of communism. Even if Marx had made no general statement about social structures and change, any fair sample of these specific inquiries would suggest that he is guided by hypotheses and explanatory strategies extending, at the very least, to all class-divided societies. Because it is most detailed, his theory of capitalist society is helpful in identifying the more generally applicable principles. Also, shedding light in the reverse direction, the interpretation of Marx's more general principles clarifies his analysis of capitalism, as he uses some of the same terms, for example, class, ruling class, ideology, mode of production, and productive forces, in discussing all of these historical phenomena.

Whenever Marx describes a society in which class divisions dominate the production of material goods, his theory of institutions has the same general character as his theory of the capitalist social system. A class, a minority, dominates the extraction of a surplus from those who do the physical work of material production. The major features of political institutions are explained as the means by which the organization and legitimation of coercion serve the interests of that class. The standard output of idea-propagating institu-
tions is explained as serving the same function of class rule. The relevant notions of control over institutions are the broad and indirect ones required by the more detailed discussions of capitalist society.

In short, Marx’s writings on capitalist society seem to be a good guide to the untangling of his famous, dense statement that the relations of production in a society constitute “the economic structure . . . , the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness” [Marx, 1975: 182]. But urgent questions of typology remain, concerning the social relations constituting the economic foundation itself. What is a class? What makes a class the ruling one? What differences among societies constitute basic differences in type, distinguishing their economic foundations?

A class is a group of people in relevantly similar situations with respect to relations of control employed in the process of material production, that is, relations of control [and noncontrol] over resources such as labor power, people, land, raw materials, technology, skills and knowledge, and goods whose exchange yields productive resources. But what is a relevant similarity? People in the same class can control different items, as Marx notes in a fragmentary chapter on classes at the end of volume 3 of Capital. For example, owners of vineyards, mines, and fisheries are not in three different classes [Marx, 1981: 1026].

“At this point the manuscript breaks off,” as Engels, the editor, puts it. And many commentators have implied that with this breaking off, Marx probably threw up his hands in profound frustration. Perhaps, though, the task they have in mind is not one that Marx imposed on his social theory. Before the reminder about forests, mines, and fisheries, Marx asked, “What makes a class?” and proposed that the answer “arises automatically from answering another question: ‘What makes wage-labourers, capitalists and landowners the formative elements of the three great social classes?’” [Marx, 1981: 1025–6]. [Marx thought that conflicts between manufacturing capitalists and landowners were quite important before the triumph of industrial production, and the preceding chapters have largely been concerned with the history of rent, in which these conflicts were prominent.] In effect, Marx is asking us to look at the specific class divisions that he has been using to distinguish different groups, to consider why these are the most important distinctions in these societies according to his social theories, and to generalize our answer. Following Marx’s clue, one would say that the different classes in society occupy the various situations in terms of the relations of production that are apt to give rise to conflicts. Those conflicts are important to determining the major features of political and cultural institutions, and the evolution of the society.

If this is the criterion by which classes are distinguished, it has the interesting consequence that there is no rule that could, in principle, be used to sort out people in a society into classes without studying the actual interactions among economic processes on the one hand and between political and cultural processes on the other. Also, it would be a tautology that when classes exist, then relations of production have a relevant impact on political and cultural life. But the tautology would not purchase suspiciously cheap victories, because empirical argument would be needed to show that classes, in Marx’s sense, exist in a social setting. Evidently, “What makes a class?” is a quandary only if one insists that the terms for analyzing the economic make no reference to the superstructure. Certainly, there is nothing unscientific about a refusal to cut this deep when separating the source of the explanations from what is explained. It is a tautology that an aggregate of uniform molecules is a chemically pure substance. But it is not a tautology that molecules exist, and atomic theory triumphed by successfully explaining the facts, including facts about the different behaviors of pure substances and mixtures.

In several of Marx’s discussions of precapitalist societies, the conceptual tie between the analysis of the economic foundation and processes in the superstructure is even more intimate. The implicit definitions of specific classes, and above all of ruling classes, refer to the political and military means by which they dominate the extraction of a surplus. Thus Marx thinks the basic class relation in the great Asian empires was the direct subordination of farmers in socially isolated villages to “the state . . . which confronts them directly as simultaneously landowner and sovereign . . . Sovereignty here is landed property concentrated on a national scale. . . . [T]here is no private landed property” [Marx, 1981: 927]. Marx locates the transition from the feudal mode of production in the middle of the seventeenth century in England, a late date that precludes defini-
tions of feudalism depending on such medieval institutions as corvée labor (see, e.g., Marx, 1977: 915–16; 1981: 452–3). What defines the feudal ruling class is the fact that it derives a surplus mainly as a direct result of military and political domination over territories, as against, say, the exploitation of the market advantages of ownership (see Dobb, 1963).

Because Marxists might have grounds for allying with a bourgeoisie in a semifeudal country, the most heated disputes over economic typology among Marxists have concerned the distinction between feudalism and capitalism, and, by extension, the character of those differences that constitute basic differences in type among underlying economic structures and, hence, whole societies. It might seem that the question of basic type is settled by answering a quantitative question involving output: What class produces the most? But this standard is not sufficiently discriminating, because as Marx was well aware, production by small peasant proprietors has dominated output in societies as different as those of sixteenth-century England and the early Roman Empire (see Marx, 1974a: 476–9, 487; 1977: 877). His own proposal is that “what distinguishes the various economic formations of society... is the form in which this surplus labor is in each case extorted from the immediate producer, the worker” [Marx, 1977: 325]. Of course there is often more than one such mode of surplus extraction at work. The dominant one is, presumably, the one giving the surplus-extractors the special resources to control political and cultural institutions. In this spirit, in a passage in volume 3 of Capital, paralleling the one just quoted, Marx speaks of the criterial process of surplus-extraction as determining “the relationship of domination and servitude... [on which] is based the entire configuration of the economic community... and hence also its specific political form. It is... the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social edifice” [Marx, 1981: 927]. In his main discussion of Greco-Roman antiquity in the Grundrisse, Marx speaks of a basic change in social type at the point at which certain slave-owning families gain control of an apparatus of conquest that was initially a means of reproducing roughly egalitarian relations among all slave-owning families. All still extract a surplus, but only the magnates extract a surplus in a way that generates resources for dominating society.

In short, Marx seems to distinguish societies in terms of their ruling classes. This does not provide easy answers to all questions of whether societies are feudal or capitalist, but it does open some possibilities that are otherwise closed, for example, the possibility that an agrarian society in which much production is carried on by a peasantry employing relatively primitive techniques might, for all that, be wholly capitalist.

In general, Marx’s ways of describing the economic foundations force some qualification of the view that he is an economic determinist. He does believe that the most important explanations of stable institutions and radical change appeal, in the final analysis, to people’s situations in a mode of material production, a mode that consists of relations of control in the process of production (i.e., “relations of production”), patterns of cooperation in the work process, and technologies employed. But crucial relations of production may entail the existence of phenomena that are both political and economic. In an appropriate understanding of economic determinist, economic cannot be understood as nonpolitical throughout its scope. The scope of the mode of production is determined by the extent to which economic relations are used, in the final analysis, to explain political and cultural phenomena via the notions of class control. Obviously, some statements about economics and politics will then turn out to have less content than they would in another theoretical framework, for example, the statement that the dominant economic class controlled the state in the Chinese Empire. But Marx’s explanatory framework still generates distinctive claims that are the means of comparing it with rivals. (For a once-influential argument that the relations between foundation and superstructure create destructive circularity, see Acton, 1955: 164–7. For a reply to Acton different from my implicit response, see Cohen, 1978: 231–6. R. W. Miller, 1984: chap. 7, and D. Miller et al., 1987, consider some of the underlying issues of explanation and confirmation.)

A theory of what holds societies together would be profoundly incomplete for Marx, whose main interest was in bringing about basic social change. In a few passages, most notably an autobiographical paragraph in the preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Marx goes as far as to make general statements about the nature of basic social change, meant to hold for all class-divided societies [Marx, 1975:424–8].

In the crucial paragraph in the preface, Marx confronts directly the
question of how an economic structure, that is, a network of relations of production, of one basic type, changes into one of a different basic type. He says that this change is due to the growth of productive forces in the first structure up to a point at which the structure turns into a fetter on the forces; an era of revolution then puts into place a new type of structure that is, once again, a form of development of the forces. This passage strongly supports a certain technological determinist interpretation: Economic structures change when and because a new type of structure has become best suited to facilitate the further growth of technology, which has a universal and autonomous tendency to develop; see Cohen [1978] and Plekhanov [1956, originally 1895].

Not all of the preface statement can be taken as strictly intended. For example, Marx says that no economic structure ends "before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed" [1975: 426], yet he was a socialist who thought that industrial capitalism "never views or treats the existing form of a modern production process as the definitive one" [1977: 617]. Still, it is desirable to find an interpretation of his general theory of history that fits as closely as his basic and obvious views allow to the letter of this text, his most detailed general statement about basic change. The technological determinist interpretation has the closest fit to the preface and to some other general statements about change, in The Poverty of Philosophy, for example, and is compatible with most of the rest.

On the other hand, the characteristic liability of this interpretation is its relatively bad fit with Marx's historical explanations, the means by which he seeks to vindicate his theory of history. His paradigmatic explanations of a basic change in type, the history of the rise of capitalism at the end of volume I of Capital, makes virtually no reference to a change in technology. In his discussions of slave ownership, feudal overlordship, and Asiatic empires, Marx describes the corresponding modes of production as much less than optimal technologically in the time of their flourishing. In his explanations of change in the mode of production, aspects of economic structure that are not explained as due to the requirements of technological progress are as apt as not to be presented as the ultimate causes of important changes in technology.

Most of these historical texts could be accommodated by an interpretation that gives a kind of fettering of the forces an essential role, without requiring optimality or a universal, autonomous tendency in the forces that is the ultimate basis for explaining the nature of social change. This fettering theory would not describe, in general terms, conditions in which social change is bound to occur. But Marx may not have meant his theory to function in such an enterprise, which he sometimes appears to mock as a project of "using as one's master key a general historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being super-historical" (Marx and Engels, 1975: 294). Rather, the fettering theory is directed at an important question, supremely troubling to a revolutionary, posed by the theory of ruling-class domination: If a minority that dominates the extraction of a surplus also controls political and idea-propagating institutions, how can change come about as a result of processes internal to the society in question? The answer might be that basic internal change comes about, when it does, because activities permitted by the old economic structure, as means of reproducing the material basis for the rule of the old ruling class, eventually give a subordinate class sufficient power and motivation to overthrow the old ruling class: In particular, these activities give the ascendant class access to sufficiently enhanced productive power while frustrating that class, and others as well, by the extent of barriers to further productive growth that are ultimately imposed. Here there is no requirement that the new economic structure be productively optimal; the large-scale nature of technological progress may be due to independent features of the economic structure, and changes enhancing productive power may involve the reorganization of the work process without the development of new technology.

This account has the usual advantages and liabilities of a compromise. It fits the preface almost as well as does the technological determinist interpretation, but not quite as well. There is certainly an implication of explanatory asymmetry in favor of the productive forces in the statement that "relations [of production are] appropriate to a given stage in the development of [the] material forces of production" [Marx, 1975: 425]. Also, although this fettering interpretation fits most of Marx's historical explanations, it clashes with some, in which the sources of basic change are located entirely within the relations of production. For example, the discussion in the Grundrisse of the rise of class divisions among free citizens in ancient Greece and Rome is, quite explicitly, a description of how
processes of conquest and commerce that were means of reproducing old relations of production in the face of population growth gave a new ruling class the capacity to transform society, without any fettering of productive forces. Marx’s descriptions of the fall of the Roman Empire similarly emphasize a self-destructive tendency in the ways in which relations of control were sustained.

A theory of history fitting all of Marx’s historical explanations would have to locate the source of change quite broadly in the mode of production as a whole: When basic internal change occurs, it is due to actions that people engage in as a result of resources and motivations whose currency is explained by their situation in the mode of production. The fettering theory describes only one scenario, one way in which processes initially reproducing an economic structure can lead to its destruction. In addition to the good fit with historical texts, this “mode of production interpretation,” like the fettering interpretation, fits most general statements well, including some [e.g., Marx, 1981: 927; Marx and Engels, 5/1976: 50] that seem to conflict with technological determinism and others, notably the opening of the Communist Manifesto that are quite nontechnological in emphasis. The distinctive liability of the mode of production interpretation is its relatively bad fit with the paragraph in the preface. There Marx repeatedly assigns the development of productive forces [literally, “productive powers,” Produktivkräfte] an essential explanatory role; see Carver [1983] and Miller [1984] for the mode of production theory and its relation to Marx’s writings.

No theory seems compatible with both all the general statements and all the historical explanations, even allowing standard departures from literalism. Perhaps the question of what theory of history Marx used in his work is itself more ambiguous than it seems. It is a familiar situation for an intellectual pioneer to organize his inquiries around general propositions modeled on earlier ways of thinking while freely if un-self-consciously breaking with these propositions in practice. Sigmund Freud thought that he was loyal to a model of blind instinctual drives and repression long after theorizing based on the drama of the Oedipal situation had led him to emphasize other motives and defenses in practice. Isaac Newton thought that gravitational attraction must be propagated by contact. In the preface, Marx singled out the Hegelian origins of his thinking. Perhaps he thought of his inquiries as guided by the fettering theory, which is a materialist transformation of G. W. F. Hegel’s philosophy of history but was not constrained by it in pursuing the broader opportunities for explanation expressed in the mode of production theory.

Very little every paragraph in this chapter could be accompanied by three concise paragraphs describing why other readers of Marx, crude and influential, think that this paragraph is wrong, in emphasis or substance. My wish, nonetheless, is that this chapter will give fellow readers of Marx some help in pursuing a kind of question about Marx’s social theory that is especially pressing these days. Not at any time since the Great Depression has the endurance of capitalism been a less hopeful prospect to those who have grown up under it. For twenty years after the end of World War II, it was a common belief in English-speaking countries that advanced capitalist societies would eliminate poverty, unemployment, and racial inequality, would reduce crime to a matter of marginal anxiety, and would give each generation a more enjoyable and more leisureed experience of life. Few think so any more. At the same time, received ideas of how to apply Marx’s social theories to tasks of social betterment are objects of laughter, anger, or anguish. If expectations of capitalism in an advanced industrial setting are low, expectations of central planning are abysmal. It is hard to pursue questions about the harms of capitalism in the resulting glitter of capitalist triumphalism. This seems an especially good time to ask to what extent Marx’s descriptions of the harms of domination by capitalist markets are correct even if the alternative of central planning is misguided. His methods and some of his hypotheses may be useful models for those moving beyond the great non sequitur of capitalist triumphalism, “If central planning is worse than capitalism at its best, then there is no great harm in giving capitalist markets free rein.”

Further reading
Marx and Engels, Communist Manifesto, in Marx [1974b].
Avineri [1970].
Carver [1982].
Cohen [1978].
Elster [1985].
Lichtheim [1967].
Miller [1984].
Miller [1987].
Wood [1981].