The Young Hegelians, Marx and Engels

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I From Hegel to Hegelianism

In The Communist Manifesto completed just before the outbreak of the 1848 revolutions, its joint authors, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, depicted communism as a theory which explained how the development of industrial capitalism would lead to a proletarian revolution. In that revolution, private property in the means of production would be abolished, the political state would be superseded, and humanity would enter into a higher state of freedom. Twentieth-century commentators, following the Manifesto’s characterisation of modern communism, attempted to relate its genesis to the industrial revolution and the emergence of the working class.

But the Manifesto was polemic, not history. The connection between human emancipation, industrial workers and communism owed little or nothing to first-hand observation, and was anything but obvious. In the Rhineland town of Trier, where Marx had been born into a lawyer’s family in 1818, and – except for his student years in Berlin – spent his first twenty-five years, the changes associated with industrialisation had barely begun. Paris, where he took refuge as an exile at the end of 1843, was a city of workers, but the vast majority worked in small workshops employing handicraft skills. Similarly, the ‘communism’ that Marx espoused from around the end of 1843 was not built upon first-hand encounters with the new wage workers of industrial Europe, but upon a series of bold speculative connections designed to escape from the impasse reached in discussions among radicals about how Germany could be ‘emancipated’.

References to the works of Marx and Engels are taken from either Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Collected Works (MECW) (1975–2005), 50 vols. (Moscow; London and New York) or Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels/Gesamtaugabe (MEGA), begun in Moscow and Frankfurt in the 1920s, under David Ryazanov, but discontinued under Stalin; resumed in Berlin by Dietz Verlag, 1975–98, then refounded under the Internationale Marx-Engels Stiftung (IMES) and published in Berlin by Akademie Verlag (1998–).
Engels, born to a merchant’s household in 1820 in the cotton textile town of Elberfeld-Barmen in neighbouring Westphalia, was from an early age more familiar with the conditions of workers. He briefly described their condition in his home town as early as 1839 (MECW, ii, pp. 7–25); and this knowledge was greatly deepened by the twenty-one months he spent in England between 1842 and 1844, representing his father’s firm in Manchester. His first-hand depiction of the terrible conditions in which Manchester workers lived, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (MECW, iv, pp. 295–584), has remained one of the great classic accounts of the nineteenth-century industrial city. But it is important to remember that Engels’ communism was not a response to his Manchester experience. For he had already been converted to ‘communism’ in the autumn of 1842 before he left Germany.

In order to explain how workers came to bear the weight of such high and world-transforming expectations, it is necessary to start, not from the condition of workers, but from the condition of German philosophy, especially in the years between the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815 and the 1848 March Revolution in Berlin – the period which German historians call *Vormärz*. In Prussia, the largest and most powerful state of the German Confederation, and particularly in its Rhineland province, newly acquired from Napoleon after his defeat in 1815, it was not industrialisation, but the legacy of the French Revolution and the political and religious turmoil unleashed by it, which explained the radicalism of the political thought that developed in the 1830s and 1840s.

The French Revolution of 1789 had appeared to vindicate in practice the philosophical hopes of Enlightened Germany, especially those of its most famous philosopher, Immanuel Kant. The French had embarked upon the construction of a constitution based upon reason. All the sharper, therefore, was the disappointment when the Revolution degenerated into terror and war. Kant’s admirer, the playwright, Friedrich Schiller, best expressed the German reaction. For a moment, he wrote in 1795, there had seemed to be ‘the physical possibility of setting law on the throne, of honouring man at last as an end in himself, and making true freedom the basis of political associations’. But it was ‘a vain hope’ and the result had been either ‘a return to the savage state’ or to ‘complete lethargy’ (Schiller 1982, p. 25).

There were many explanations for why the Revolution had ended in disaster. But most important in this context was that provided by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. At the time of the storming of the Bastille, Hegel was an eighteen-year-old theology student at Tübingen; and he still
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drank to that anniversary in later life. By 1815, however, he had become
the most prominent thinker in Germany and in 1818, he was called to the
Philosophy Chair in Berlin, where he remained until his death in 1831.
Hegel saluted the French Revolution as a decisive event in world history,
but believed that it had ended in failure because a viable constitution could
not be built out of the abstract and mechanical ideas of reason and freedom
deployed by its leaders. Or as Schiller had remarked, ‘a moment so prodigal
of opportunity’ found ‘a generation unprepared to receive it’ (Schiller 1967,
p. 25).

During the debate that followed 1789, defenders of the Revolution,
most notably Kant, had argued that all beliefs and institutions must be made
subject to the demands of reason. Kant’s argument had been a response to
the criticism of Burke and his followers, that in the name of a disembodied
notion of universal reason, the revolutionaries had wilfully ignored the
lessons of history and experience. Hegel’s response to this conflict was to
find a way of bringing reason and history together. Reason, he argued,
was not an abstract and timeless entity. It was embodied in language and
culture, and found its concrete manifestation in ‘the spirit of the people’.
Since languages and cultures differed across time and space, this also meant
that reason itself had a history. Therefore, far from being an arbitrary event,
the Revolution represented a fundamental moment in the world-historical
progress of reason.

The French failed because they were unable to reconcile ‘the rights of
man’ with those of ‘the citizen’. As a result, ideas of representative gov-
ernment, division of labour and modern commercial society jostled with
 incompatible notions of popular sovereignty, direct democracy, social equal-
ity and a revival of ideals of virtue associated with the ancient Roman repub-
lic. Hegel’s aim was to get beyond these divisions. Against those thinkers,
from Hobbes to Rousseau and Kant – representatives of ‘modern natural
law’ in Hegel’s terminology – who had attempted to base the state upon a
contract (thus assuming that individuals might have an existence prior to,
and exterior to the state), Hegel returned to Aristotle’s dictum that unlike
beasts or gods, man was by nature a political animal (Everson 1996, p. 14).
The state was therefore neither ‘provisional’ (the product of a social con-
tract), nor the means to an end (the legal and political mechanism necessary
to protect life and property). As the embodiment of ‘ethical life’ (Sittlichkeit),
the modern state was an end in itself. ‘Union as such’, he wrote, ‘is itself
the true content and end, and the destiny of individuals is to lead a universal
But Hegel was equally critical of those who had hoped to revive the ethos of the ancient republic. His depiction of the modern state in the *Philosophy of Right*, published in 1821, was designed to demonstrate its superiority over the Greek *polis*. In contrast to the ancient state, which was based upon slavery, the modern state, by which Hegel meant the state after the French Revolution, was based upon the presupposition that all were free. On this basis, Hegel claimed that the modern state was a political community. Through its observance of rational and universal norms in the construction of the constitution and in the conduct of public administration, the state enabled the self-conscious individual subject to will the general will of the community as his or her own.

In contrast to the Ancients, Hegel argued, modern ‘ethical life’ could incorporate both moral ‘subjectivity’ (the ability of the individual to subject moral and political demands to the judgement of reason), and self-interested ‘particularity’ (the ability of the individual to pursue personal ends in economic and cultural life). This was possible because, between household and political life (*oikos* and *polis*, as they had been depicted in Aristotle’s *Politics*) Hegel introduced a new category, ‘civil society’, designed to encompass modern commercial society, as portrayed by Adam Smith (see Dickey 1987; Riedel 1984; Waszek 1988).

Ideas of citizenship went back to the heroic times of Sparta, Athens and the Roman republic. But ‘civil society’ had only emerged after the disappearance of the ancient *polis*. Hegel traced its emergence to the Roman Empire, in part to the notion of legal personhood brought into being by Roman law, but above all to the coming of Christianity and the idea of a ‘soul’ whose identity owed nothing to the polity, to which a particular individual might belong. Thus Hegel’s political thought contained a fundamental Christian component, which indirectly at least linked Christianity to the individualism of modern economic life.

Not only were the ‘rights of man’ Christian in origin, but Christianity once properly understood provided the foundation of the modern state in which ‘all were free’. From the Renaissance onwards, there had been

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1 Hegel did not literally mean that all were now free, just as he did not literally mean that what is real (or actual) is rational and that what is rational is real. Reality or actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) in Hegel’s thought did not primarily refer to the existing state of affairs, but rather to a state of development or becoming. Reality was not a state, but a process of transition from the abstract to the concrete. Thus in the case of freedom, Hegel supposed that in the modern world after the French Revolution, its principles would gradually be inscribed in the constitutions and institutions of all states. He was perfectly aware that this was not the current situation in Prussia or elsewhere in Metternich’s Europe.
political thinkers, most prominently Machiavelli, who chided Christianity for its focus on the City of God at the expense of the earthly republic. Rousseau in his *Social Contract* even devised a civic religion, intended to restore the patriotic ethos of the ancient republic. In the radical phase of the French Revolution in 1793–4, hostility between the Catholic Church and the Revolution led to the Jacobin assault on Christianity and in Robespierre’s case, the ambition to replace it by a Rousseau-inspired ‘Cult of the Supreme Being’.

Hegel came to believe that much of this antagonism, whether derived from the Enlightenment or from the Revolution, was the result of a primitive and dogmatic reading of Christianity, which failed to recognise its civic dimensions. He argued that the freedoms associated with the modern state had first been introduced by Christianity after the fall of the Greek *polis*. Furthermore, it was the Christian notion of freedom that connected the two commanding events of modern history: the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution. The Reformation had made explicit the essential freedom embodied in Christianity as a religion of free individuals. For ‘in Protestantism, there is no *laity*, so that there is likewise no clergy to act as an exclusive depositary of Church doctrine’ (Hegel 1991, no. 270, p. 299).

Its notion of freedom of conscience had also been decisive in nurturing the development of civil society. This was why the freedom of the modern individual was identified with the Protestant principle. But that freedom had remained ‘abstract’, so long as the subject was unable to discover his or her inner freedom mirrored in the institutions of the outer political and social world. This was why the French Revolution was such an important world-historical event. For although the Revolution ended in the Terror, inner feeling had been turned into a concrete external form, and henceforth would become the basis of all true social and political order.

In Protestant Germany, this convergence of spiritual and political history was now reaching fulfilment. In Prussia, a rational reform programme was accomplishing peacefully what the French Revolution had attempted to create by force. There was, therefore, no further need for a religious flight from the world. Now the state rather than the church had become ‘the positive and definite embodiment of the spiritual kingdom’ (Hegel 1991, no. 360, p. 380, 1956, p. 441). Religion was no longer a phenomenon set

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2 ‘The repudiation of work no longer earned the reputation of sanctity.’ ‘Industry, crafts and trades now have their moral validity recognised, and the obstacles to their prosperity which originated with the Church have vanished’ (Hegel 1956, p. 423).
apart from the everyday world of work, the family or the state. This was what Hegel meant by ‘secularisation’; it was a ‘sacred’ process, through which the divine became incarnate in human culture.

Hegel’s practical politics had been that of the Prussian ‘Reform Era’ and his credibility had depended upon hopes of a continuing process of reform (‘secularisation’ in Hegel’s usage). Within the state depicted in The Philosophy of Right, emphasis was placed upon constitutional monarchy, a uniform legal code and a reforming bureaucracy; the relationship between state and society was mediated through an estate-based representative system and reinforced by the organisation of trades and professions into corporations for civic and welfare ends. In the course of the 1820s, however, the balance of power had shifted against the reformers. The French Revolution and Prussian military defeat had led to an evangelical revival, which attracted many conservatives, among them the future monarch, Frederick William IV. Evangelical Christianity was to be based not upon reason, but upon revelation and faith. Its emphasis was upon original sin, divine right and the independence of the Church. Conservatives also emphasised the priority of property rights over social obligations and sought to reverse the depersonalisation of power, which they associated with rationalism and infidelity. Not surprisingly, they were deeply sceptical of Hegel’s Christian credentials (see Breckman 1999; Dickey 1993, pp. 301–48; Toews 1980).

2 Hegelians, Saint-Simonians and the formation of Young Hegelianism

In July 1830, at a time of high unemployment and depressed trade, the restored Bourbon king, Charles X, made a rash attempt to dissolve the newly elected parliamentary assembly and suspend press freedom. The response in Paris was a three-day insurrection, in which the king was toppled, and the crown transferred to the ‘citizen king’, Louis Philippe from the House of Orléans. Parallel constitutional disturbances followed in Belgium, in the Reform Bill crisis in Britain, in parts of Germany and elsewhere in Europe. Contemporaries recognised that these upheavals brought to an end any hope of restoring the old order.

3 The Prussian ‘reform era’ began as an attempt to recover from catastrophic military defeat by Napoleon. A series of fundamental military, political, educational and economic reforms between 1807 and 1821 under the leadership of Stein and Hardenberg were designed to transform Prussia into a modern constitutional state. Hegel was invited to the professorship in Berlin to strengthen the reformers.
The French Revolution of 1830 also challenged the Hegelian position from an unanticipated direction. It highlighted the aspirations of workers, who were prominent among the fighters on the barricades. Most immediately, it raised the question of poverty or what was coming to be called ‘the social question’. Concern about the rising population, the multitudes forced off the land, and the increase in the numbers of the urban poor had already begun to mount in the 1820s. But the publication of The Doctrine of Saint-Simon shortly followed by the July Revolution turned poverty into an acute political question. According to The Doctrine of Saint-Simon, the French Revolution had not eliminated tyranny and slavery; it had not brought to an end ‘the exploitation of man by man’. Such oppression had continued in the relationship between the capitalist and the wage worker.4

In Prussia these arguments made a particularly strong impression upon Marx’s future teacher, Eduard Gans, Professor of Law and Hegel’s closest colleague and follower at the University of Berlin. In The Philosophy of Right, Hegel had written about poverty as a problem of ‘pauperism’ and the growth of the ‘rabble’. He considered charity, the poor law, provision of work and colonisation as possible remedies, but made no attempt to treat workers as citizens. In the 1820s, Gans reiterated this approach. But in 1833–4, he abandoned Hegel’s ‘corporations’ and instead proposed that workers be allowed to form associations akin to trade unions. These associations would reduce the imbalance between masters and workers and end their exclusion from political life. Gans accepted Hegel’s picture of secularisation and therefore opposed ‘New Christianity’. But he was deeply impressed by the Saint-Simonian stress upon the dangers of unfettered competition. His visits to France and England had alerted him to the growing disparity between wealth and poverty and the threat of class antagonism (see Gans 1995; Waszek 2006).

The attempt to establish the Saint-Simonian Church proved a tragi-comic fiasco. But the broader impact of the Saint-Simonians’ critique of Christianity, especially their conception of the present, was profound. History, according to the Doctrine, was divided into ‘organic’ and ‘critical’ epochs. In ‘organic’ epochs such as those of medieval Catholicism or ‘New Christianity’, the picture was of ‘union among members of ever widening

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4 See Saint-Simon 1958, pp. 63–9. The Doctrine was intended as the founding document of the Saint-Simonian Church. It was a collective and posthumous elaboration of The New Christianity which had appeared in 1825. According to Saint-Simon, ‘the general aim which you must present to all men in their work is the improvement of the moral and physical existence of the poorest class’ (Saint-Simon 1868–75, xxiii, p. 152).
associations... towards a common goal’. ‘Critical epochs’, on the other hand, were ‘filled with disorder; they destroy former social relations, and everywhere tend towards egoism’ (Saint-Simon 1958, p. 28). The present was the last stage of a ‘critical’ epoch, which had begun with Luther. Current Christianity, especially Protestantism, was marked by its lack of concern for man’s bodily existence. Pantheist ‘New Christianity’ stood for ‘the rehabilitation of matter’ and for the restoration of social harmony through the emancipation of both soul and body.

Among German admirers of ‘New Christianity’, therefore, Hegel’s picture of secularisation found itself in competition with a rhetoric that associated Protestantism with individualism, egoism and untrammelled competition. The poet Heinrich Heine identified Christianity with indifference to material need, and linked the Saint-Simonians with a ‘secret’ German tradition of pantheism (Heine 1959). According to the unorthodox Polish Hegelian, August Cieszkowski, both Christianity and Hegel were guilty of considering only the soul, but not the body of man. Hegel had prematurely ended history with the attainment of Absolute Knowledge. It would now have to be complemented by an activist ‘Philosophy of the Future’, which would bring into being ‘the social individual’ based upon ‘unity’ in life as well as thought (see Liebich 1979; Breckman 1999, ch. 5). In a similar vein, the radical journalist Moses Hess, often described as the first German communist, thought that Christianity had generated the exploitative egoism of the ‘money aristocracy’. Emancipation, the reconciliation of body and mind or the harmony between ‘spiritualism’ and ‘sensualism’, would require both ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ equality; hence both ‘pantheism’ and ‘the community of goods’ (Hess 1961, pp. 6–75).

But it was not the view from France that caused the breakup of the Hegelian School and the formation of the ‘Young Hegelians’. This was brought about by the 1835 publication of The Life of Jesus by David Strauss, a follower of Hegel and briefly a Lutheran pastor in Württemberg. Hegel had argued that religion and philosophy were identical in content. They differed only in form. Strauss argued that the rational truth embodied in Christianity, the union of the human and divine, could only become clear once the Gospels were freed from their archaic supernatural setting. In the New Testament, the ‘Idea’ had been encased in a narrative about the life and activity of a single individual. That narrative had been the product of ‘an unconscious mythologizing process’ shaped by the Old Testament picture of the Messiah. If Christianity were to be saved for modern science, the figure of Christ would have to be replaced by the idea of ‘humanity’ in the
whole of its history. For only the infinite spirit of the human race could bring about the union of finite and infinite, as depicted in Hegel’s portrayal of ‘Absolute Spirit’.

Strauss’ book unleashed a storm of controversy in Prussia and divided Hegelians. The democratic journalist and former Bürschenschaftler, Arnold Ruge, a Privatdozent at the University of Halle, led radicals defending Strauss. Among these ‘Young Hegelians’, as they were derisively called by their more conservative colleagues, the attributes of ‘Absolute Spirit’ were transferred to humanity. The historical process was now described as the coming to self-consciousness and realisation of the human species within an ethical community, in which individuals would achieve autonomy and the fulfilment of their human potential through identity with others (see Toews 1993, pp. 378–414).

The radicalism of the Young Hegelian critique was further sharpened at the beginning of the 1840s by the work of the erstwhile orthodox Hegelian Bruno Bauer, at that time attached to the University of Bonn. According to Bauer, Strauss’ break with Christianity was incomplete, and his association of Christianity with Old Testament Jewish aspirations unhistorical and un-Hegelian. Christianity did constitute a new beginning in world history, but a false one, for its victory over ‘nature’ was achieved by miracles rather than science and its conception of man was self-abasing. Now, however, with the final abolition of God and its replacement by the ‘I’ of ‘self-consciousness’, the true emancipation of humanity would begin (see Moggach 2003).

Karl Marx, the son of a converted Jewish lawyer, went to the local University of Bonn in 1836 to follow his father in a legal career. But after one year, he moved to Berlin University, where he read Hegel and switched to philosophy. At Berlin, Bauer was his philosophical mentor. In 1841, they planned together to publish a journal entitled The Annals of Atheism. Marx prepared a doctorate probably under Bauer and accompanied Bauer back to Bonn, when the latter gained a post at the university. But in 1842 at the behest of the new king, Frederick William IV, who remained darkly suspicious of Hegelianism, Bauer was dismissed from his academic post. For Young Hegelians, this was considered a ‘world-historical event’ in the battle between Christianity and modern consciousness; for Marx, it meant the end of any hopes of an academic career. He therefore moved to journalism and later in that year became editor of a liberal-radical newspaper, recently founded in Cologne, the Rheinische Zeitung.

Despite the anti-Hegelianism of the king, 1842 was a promising year in which to embark upon journalism. It was a year of relative press freedom
since for romantic conservative reasons the king declared himself keen to learn about the views of his subjects. In response, a group of liberal merchants and manufacturers in Cologne set up the Rheinische Zeitung to press for representative government and the extension of the Zollverein. The government welcomed what it hoped would be a Protestant pro-Prussian newspaper in the Catholic Rhineland, advocating free trade and moderate liberalism. It had not anticipated the recruitment of Young Hegelians to write for the paper and the radical constitutional agenda which they introduced. For this reason, the experiment barely lasted a year.

If religion was one great source of division among the Hegelians of the 1830s and 1840s, politics, not surprisingly, was the other. The Young Hegelians were republicans rather than liberals.\(^5\) Liberal preoccupations such as spiritual freedom, the sanctity of the person and individual rights were not uppermost among their concerns. Their republican ideal was of a state governed by laws rather than men, of citizens inspired by the civic ideals of the ancient polis rather than bourgeois attention to private interests. It was a republicanism constructed out of Hegel and a Jacobin reading of Rousseau. Drawing upon Hegel, it could be said that unity between individual and general will was made possible by the shared foundation of reason, which enabled each individual to prescribe the law to him- or herself. But seen from a more Jacobin perspective, one major defect of Hegel’s state was the smallness of the space accorded to active political participation.\(^6\) It was, as Gans described it, ‘a tutelary state’. More fundamentally, no Young Hegelian could fully accept Hegel’s notion of civil society. How could a political community, the embodiment of ‘ethical life’, accommodate a commercial society, in which each sought to further their self-interest at the expense of the other, in which each individual treated the other as means?

Marx’s early view of the state can be discerned from his time as editor of the Rheinische Zeitung in 1842. Like Bauer and Ruge, he continued to emphasise the rationality of the state. If the essence of the state was reason and freedom, the task of the free press was to make the existence of the state conform to its essence. What prevented the state from acting according to universal norms were, first, particular forms of religious consciousness and second, private economic interests. ‘Criticism’ would be victorious, it was assumed, because it was doing no more than raising to consciousness the

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\(^5\) For the importance of republican themes among the Young Hegelians, see Moggach 2006, pp. 1–24.

\(^6\) The emphasis upon the frequency or extensiveness of political participation, although often associated with Rousseau, derived more from Jacobin political practice during the French Revolution than from Rousseau himself. See Leopold 2007, p. 267.
real desires of the people. Sooner or later, it was believed, Frederick William would have to abandon the ‘Christian State’, which he had imposed upon Prussia. It was, therefore, a considerable shock when in 1843 the government closed down the opposition press without encountering any real opposition from the people. How then could the state be ‘the actualisation’ of freedom, if it persecuted philosophy and closed down the free press? How could the people collude in the suppression of their freedom? How else could the convergence between reason and reality be achieved? (see Löwy 2003). It was as a reaction to this moment of despair that Young Hegelians moved either towards a more explicit form of republicanism or, like Marx, to socialism or communism.

3 The breakup of the Young Hegelian movement

Bauer and his supporters remained closest to the original Hegelian position, albeit now depicted as post-Christian and republican. As Feuerbach complained, Bauer’s ‘self-consciousness’ was simply another word for Hegel’s ‘Absolute Spirit’ and could only take account of man as a rational reflective being. For Bauer, the mistake of the Enlightenment and of the French Revolution had been to assume that ‘sensuousness’ (the pursuit of happiness) rather than rational autonomy (reason-based independence of thought) was man’s essential characteristic. Only the establishment of a community of autonomous rational beings would ensure the victory of reason over nature. Cultural transcendence of nature had originally been conceived in religious terms (miracles, life after death). But now with the end of Christianity and knowledge of the rational course of history, man could take full responsibility for this process of self-making. For Bauer, its attainment meant the acquisition of a new form of self-consciousness, capable of rising above private economic interests and obsolete religious creeds. But such

7 Frederick William’s government was based upon a combination of authoritarianism and individualism; it emphasised the pre-social rights and privileges of different estates and categories of property. As a believer in Divine Right, supported by the Conservative Christian philosophies of Stahl and Schelling, the king detested all forms of rationalism, especially that of Hegel. It was for this reason that he had ensured the dismissal of Bauer.

8 In the early 1840s, the various followers of Saint-Simon or Fourier were known as socialist. ‘Communist’ described the position of French secret societies claiming allegiance to the ideas of Babeuf. Marx was closest to a socialist position. However, later in the 1840s in order to underline the allegiance of himself and Engels to a ‘proletarian’ form of socialism intent upon bringing down capitalist society by force, Marx and Engels described themselves as ‘communist’. But from the 1860s onwards, given working-class antipathy to the notoriety of ‘communism’, Marx and Engels were content to describe themselves as ‘socialist’.
self-consciousness could only be an individual acquisition. It was, therefore, impossible to attribute an emancipatory role to a social class. In the case of the working class, labour did not in itself engender free subjectivity; so socialism would simply mean the organisation of workers in their present unfree state. In Bauer’s view, revolution was certainly a prerequisite, but the emancipation of workers would be the result of the education provided by a rational republic (see Moggach 2000, 2006, pp. 114–36).

Bauer’s main rival was another of Hegel’s former students, Ludwig Feuerbach, formerly a philosophy teacher at Erlangen. Feuerbach had become famous in 1840 as the author of *The Essence of Christianity*, later translated into English by George Eliot. Among the Young Hegelians in 1842, however, he was particularly valued for his critique of Hegel himself (see Feuerbach 1972, pp. 153–75). For Feuerbach, the reality that Hegelian reason could not accommodate was nature and the bodily existence of man: ‘sensuousness’ or what the Saint-Simonians called ‘the rehabilitation of matter’. ‘Man’ (i.e. the human) was not simply a thinking being. He was first and foremost a sensuous, emotional being. He was not purely active like Hegel’s ‘spirit’, but both active and passive. Passivity meant the need of a natural being for another, for a means of life outside him/herself, expressed in physical existence and the sexual relationship. It was for this reason that ‘Man’ was a communal being. The essence of Man was only found in community, only in ‘the unity of I and Thou’.

But Man, according to Feuerbach, had been alienated from this essence by religion, and by Protestant Christianity in particular. Unlike animals, humans could turn their emotions into objects of thought. It was in this way that Man had been led to project his own essence as a species upon a fictive being, God. This was what Feuerbach meant by ‘alienation’. God was the perfected idea of the species viewed as an individual. In Christianity, this meant that the communal nature of Man, the union of ‘I and Thou’, had been replaced by the particular union of each individual with a personal external being: Christ, ‘the mediator’ who interposed himself between each individual and his or her fellow beings.

For Feuerbach, like Hegel, the point at which Christianity had manifested its true character had been the Reformation. But for Feuerbach, this meant the ever-sharper separation of spiritual from natural being. Protestantism, with its emphasis upon individual conscience and the priesthood of all believers, had dismantled the spiritual community of medieval religion and produced instead a turning to private affairs, an egoistical withdrawal from communal life and a material world divested of sanctity. In short, religion
was responsible for the individualism of modern society. In the coming age, Man would reappropriate his ‘species essence’. The fellowship of prayer would be replaced by the fellowship of work, and the atomised egos of modern society would reunite in a loving union no longer based upon the Christian soul, but upon ‘the whole Man’.9

For Marx, reality was also ‘sensuous’. But the sensuous reality that was to interest Marx was one in which individuals employed their mental and physical capacities in transforming the natural world as a result of their need to produce their means of subsistence. Marx was not excited by French ideas about pantheism or a new social religion. His wholly negative attitude towards religion remained closer to Bauer than to Feuerbach. He was drawn instead to French criticism of private property and the position of the proletariat. He had been impressed by P. J. Proudhon’s notorious What Is Property? (1840), as was already apparent in his Rheinische Zeitung articles about the dominance of private economic interests in the debates of the Rhenish Estates. Marx’s interest in socialism and the proletariat was probably first stimulated by the historical sequence of forms of property and exploitation laid out in The Doctrine of Saint-Simon, and was then greatly reinforced by reading Lorenz Von Stein’s compendious Socialism and Communism in Contemporary France, which appeared in 1842.10

This shift in Marx’s thinking can first be traced in an unfinished ‘critique’ of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, which he began after the closure of the Rheinische Zeitung in the spring of 1843 and continued in two essays written for the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher, the journal which he and Ruge briefly edited after leaving Prussia for Paris in the autumn of that year. The Young Hegelian hope that ‘Criticism’ would lead a movement towards the rational state in Prussia had not been borne out. But even had it been successful, according to Marx, Bauer’s assumption that religion would disappear with the removal of ‘the Christian state’ was false. The flourishing of religion in the United States, where there was a separation of church and state, was sufficient to demonstrate that ‘the emancipation of the state from religion’ was not ‘the emancipation of the real Man from religion’.

Marx was greatly impressed by Feuerbach’s critique of Hegel and Bauer. Emancipation was not the product of the progress of spirit or the

9 For Feuerbach’s break with Hegel, see especially Breckman 1999, ch. 3.
10 On the significance of Stein and other contemporary representations of the proletariat, see Marx and Engels 2002, pp. 27–39; see also Stein 2002, pp. 16–59.
development of self-consciousness. It depended upon a transformation of
the relations of ‘man to man’, and was located within civil society. Marx
chose the example of Bauer’s essay ‘On the Jewish Problem’ to make his
point. Bauer, Marx alleged, claimed that Jewish emancipation would require
two steps, first to recognise the superiority of Christianity over Judaism, and
then the superiority of ‘Criticism’ over Christianity. Marx’s response was
to reject this ‘theological’ distinction between Christianity and Judaism,
and substitute a ‘social’ approach. Extending an argument put forward by
Moses Hess, Marx defined Judaism as ‘practical need’, ‘egoism’ and money,
a position that deprived the world of all ‘specific value’. But Judaism had
not been enough to precipitate the full flowering of civil society. This
had been achieved by Christianity, which made ‘all natural, national, moral
and theoretical conditions extrinsic to man’ and dissolved ‘the human world
into a world of atomistic individuals who are inimically opposed to one
another’. The solution was not a reform of consciousness, but the elim-
ination of the social element that made ‘the Jew’ possible. For religion,
he argued, was not ‘the cause’, but only ‘the manifestation of secular
narrowness’. What religion revealed was the existence of a ‘defect’, the
alienation of Man’s species attributes into a fictive supernatural mediator
and the negation of Man’s communal capacities as a result (MECW, iii,
p. 175).

Both Ruge and Marx were also attracted by Feuerbach’s notion of alien-
ation, which they attempted to apply to Hegel’s conception of the modern
state. In 1842, Ruge abandoned his optimistic version of the Hegelian
idea of ‘secularisation’, in which the Protestantism and rationalism inherent
in Prussia’s history would come to inform the texture of everyday life in
state and society. Confronted instead by the unapologetic belligerence of
the Prussian ‘Christian state’, he shifted towards an explicitly republican
stance. Christianity, he now concluded, meant depoliticisation. Protestant
‘abstraction’ had turned the state into a transcendent entity. Protestantism
and liberalism had not promoted ‘ethical life’, but a civil society in which
the bourgeois flourished at the expense of the citoyen.

11 Despite the participation of those from Jewish or converted Jewish families like Moses Hess and Marx,
or leading Saint-Simonians in France, much socialist writing in the first half of the nineteenth century
contained anti-Semitic passages and was uncritical in its acceptance of anti-Jewish stereotypes. It was
especially prominent in the case of Fourier and Proudhon, who regarded Jewish emancipation at the
time of the French Revolution as a mistake. Later in the century, Engels at least publicly condemned
Marx's move from republicanism to communism

In his unfinished critique of the *Philosophy of Right* Marx's criticism of Hegel's state was more drastic. The modern state was the mediator between man and man's freedom, leading to an analogous 'bifurcation' between the atomised individual and the alienated species in the 'practical struggles' of mankind over 'the political state'. Marx denied Hegel's claim that there existed a higher unity between the state and the modern citizen, made possible by representative and administrative institutions, which mediated between state and civil society. In antiquity, the *respublica* had been 'the true and only content of the life and will of the citizens'. But now, Marx believed, 'property, contract, marriage, civil society' had developed as 'particular modes of existence' of the private individual 'alongside the political state' (*MECW*, iii, pp. 69, 77).

What predominated in all these areas, including the state, was private property. The modern state was the creature of private property. For citizenship had become an attribute of private property (suffrage property qualifications), just as state administration had become the private property of the bureaucracy 'over against other private aims'. Similarly, the place of monarchy and primogeniture in the constitution attested to the centrality of private property and the pre-social rights that they conferred (i.e the privilege of birth). Furthermore, just as Christianity had developed alongside 'man's separation from the community' on earth, so there had been an analogous 'abstraction' of the state. Since the French Revolution, the political constitution had acquired 'an unreal universality', while at the same time, all the bonds, which had 'restrained the egoistic spirit of civil society', had been removed. Marx confirmed his interpretation with an analysis of the French revolutionary *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* of 1789. In that document, 'political community' was turned into 'a mere means' of maintaining the 'so-called rights of Man', pre-eminently, the right to private property. The *citoyen* was 'declared to be the servant of the egoistic *homme*'. 'The essential and true Man' was not 'Man as *citoyen*, but Man as *bourgeois*' (*MECW*, iii, pp. 162–4).

In the unfinished 'Critique', Marx had pressed for a 'democracy' by which he meant a republic based upon the re-politicisation of society through the abolition of the distinction between civil society and the 'political state'. But in the following few months, he all but totally severed any relationship with a republican position through his insistence upon social revolution and the abolition of the modern political state. The distinction
between ‘political’ and ‘unpolitical’ man now seemed to him not simply the problem of Prussia or of Hegel’s state, but of the modern state as such. The ‘unreal universality’ of the republic left the egoism of bourgeois civil society unaffected. The ‘political state’ was incapable of transforming civil society, because it was itself the creature and product of civil society. It was for this reason that the Jacobins had failed when they attempted to assert the independence of the state. Similarly, Marx’s former ally, Ruge, was mistaken in assuming that the state could solve ‘the social problem’. As proof, he cited the failure of Napoleon’s attempt to abolish pauperism. In short, it was the very existence of civil society that posed the fundamental obstacle to man becoming a species being in his ‘everyday life’.

What was therefore needed, Marx came to think, was not a ‘political’ revolution, but a ‘human’ transformation of the ‘relations between man and man’, performed by a class outside and beneath civil society. This was the proletariat. For, as French socialists had already made clear, this class arose, not only from ‘industrial’ development, but also from the ‘the drastic dissolution’ of society. If civil society represented the sphere of private property, the proletariat stood for its ‘negation’ (MECW, iii, pp. 186–7). The proletariat stood outside the political sphere and, as Lorenz von Stein noted, was a creation of the French Revolution. For there could be no proletariat so long as birth rather than property had been the precondition for participation in the state. This transformation had been completed by the 1830 Revolution, which had resulted in the control of the state by the bourgeoisie and the removal of everything except property as the basis of citizenship. According to Stein, this had transformed the ‘propertyless’ into ‘the proletariat’, an ‘estate’ defined by its exclusion from political life (Stein 1848, i, pp. 166–7).

The belief that reason and freedom were incompatible with the existence of civil society underlay what became Marx’s major preoccupation in the ensuing twenty-five years: the critique of political economy. Marx’s aim was to set alongside Feuerbach’s notion of alienation as a means of interpreting religious belief an analogous process of alienation at work in the social relations of civil society. Although Marx distanced himself from Feuerbachian humanism from the time of the German Ideology, he in no way retreated from the idea of a parallel between religious alienation in the spiritual realm and social alienation in the domain of material production. In the Economic Manuscripts of 1863–4, Marx wrote, ‘The rule of the capitalist over the worker is therefore the rule of the object over the...
pre-eminent theoretical expression of this alienated social world, or as he later termed it, its ‘anatomy’. Marx reached this conclusion with the help of two essays submitted to the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* around the beginning of 1844.

The first article was by Hess. It shifted the focus of alienation from consciousness to activity. It defined life as ‘the exchange of productive life activity’ involving ‘the co-operative working together of different individuals’. By contrast, in ‘the inverted world’ of money and private property, this ‘species activity’ was displaced by the ‘egoistic’ satisfaction of private needs; Man’s species attributes became mere means towards individual self-preservation. Marx built upon this shift of perspective. In his first attempt to develop a critique of political economy — what were subsequently entitled the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* — he adopted ‘conscious life activity’ as his starting point. For, as he argued, ‘religious estrangement occurs only in the realm of consciousness’, ‘but economic estrangement is that of real life’ (*MECW*, xxxiv, p. 297; McLellan 1969).

The second essay was by Frederick Engels, who at that time was working for his father’s textile company in Manchester. It criticised political economy as the theoretical expression of this estranged world. Political economy presupposed private property without once questioning its existence. 14 As Marx developed the argument in the *Manuscripts*, political economy mistook a world in which Man had alienated his essential human attributes for the true world of Man. It conflated ‘the productive life’ of Man with Adam Smith’s ‘propensity to truck, barter and exchange’, and was therefore unable to distinguish Species-Man from the estranged world in which he currently had to act.

By focusing upon the estrangement of Man’s capacity to produce, Marx was once again able to connect his conception of history with that of Hegel. For in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel had according to Marx, grasped ‘the self-creation of Man as a process’ and in so doing had grasped the essence of labour, the creation of Man as ‘the outcome of Man’s own labour’ (*MECW*, iii, pp. 332–3). This enabled Marx to distance himself from the human, of dead labour over living, of the product over the producer…This is exactly the same relation in the sphere of material production, in the real social life process…as is represented by religion in the ideological sphere: the inversion of the subject into the object and *vice versa* (Marx, ‘Direct Results of the Production Process’, *MECW*, xxxiv, p. 398).

14 Friedrich Engels, ‘Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy’, *MECW*, iii, pp. 418–43. For the intellectual and political development of the young Engels, see Carver 1989; Claes 1987; Marx and Engels 2002, especially pp. 50–69.
implicit passivity of Feuerbach’s notion of ‘sensuousness’.

Man was not merely a ‘natural being’, but ‘a human natural being’, whose point of origin was not nature, but history. Unlike animals, Man made his activity ‘the object of his will’. He could form objects in accordance with the laws of beauty. Thus history could be seen as the humanisation of nature through Man’s ‘conscious life activity’ and at the same time, the humanisation of Man himself through ‘the forming of the five senses’. History was the process of Man becoming ‘species being’ and the basis of Man’s ability to treat himself as ‘a universal, and therefore a free being’ (MECW, iii, p. 280).

But if freedom was self-activity, and the capacity to produce, Man’s ‘most essential’ characteristic, it became possible to understand why estranged labour formed the basis of all other forms of estrangement and why, therefore, ‘the whole of human servitude is involved in the relation of the worker to production’. For estranged labour was the inversion of ‘conscious life activity’ and the greater the development of private property, the more the labour of the producer fell into the category of labour to earn a living. In other words, Man’s ‘essential being’ became ‘a mere means to his existence’. The ‘life of the species’ became ‘a means of individual life’. It meant not only that ‘the worker is related to the product of his labour as to an alien object’, but also the ‘estrangement of Man from Man’. ‘The alien being, to whom labour and the product of labour belong . . . can only be some other man than the worker’; ‘a man alien to labour and standing outside it’. In other words, ‘the capitalist’ (MECW, iii, pp. 275, 276, 278, 280).

Just as, according to Feuerbach, it was estrangement that had produced religion, and not religion that had produced estrangement, so, according to Marx, it was estrangement that had produced private property. That private property was the product of alienated labour was the ‘secret’ that was only revealed when private property had completed its domination over Man. It was only when private property had become ‘a world-historical power’, when most of mankind had been reduced to ‘abstract’ labour, and everything had been reduced to ‘quantitative being’, that the antithesis

15 This had been one of Marx’s major criticisms of Feuerbach in the so-called ‘Theses on Feuerbach’: ‘contemplative materialism’ did not ‘comprehend sensuousness as practical activity’. MECW, v, p. 5.

16 If the causal sequence had been reversed, the whole phenomenon of alienation would have disappeared. The translation of economic into human categories would have lost its point and there would have been no reason to place ‘the positive transcendence of private property as human self-estrangement in the imminent future rather than at any point in the past’. On the difficulties besetting the argument, see Marx and Engels 2002, pp. 120–39.
between property and lack of property was transformed into that between capital and labour, bourgeois and proletarian.

In this way private property was driven towards self-destruction by its own economic movement. As Marx later wrote, history was the judge, the proletariat the executioner. The proletariat executed the sentence that private property pronounced upon itself. The emergence of mass labour movements in the nineteenth century – whether of the Chartists in England or of the Social Democrats in Germany – was a reaction to the desire, whether of conservatives or liberals, to exclude the working classes from the political process (see Stedman Jones 1983c, pp. 90–179). Political exclusion or subordination was originally prompted by fear of another Terror consequent upon the sovereignty of the propertyless masses. Conversely, the aim of movements of the working classes was to gain a recognised place within the polity, from where the aspirations of their adherents could more effectively be advanced. These aims were quite distinct from those of Marx. In Marx’s view, estranged labour was heteronomous labour, the negation of freedom as self-activity, and ultimately a sign of mankind’s lack of control over the forms and purposes of its material exchange with nature (see Moggach 2000, pp. 56–62). Marx’s position also owed much to the vision of ‘the industrial revolution’ and the development of the working class put forward most powerfully in 1844 in *The Condition of the Working-Class in England* by his new, and henceforth closest political companion, Frederick Engels. For this reason, Marxian and social democratic aims, while ostensibly close, were ultimately quite distinct.

As private property had advanced to ‘world dominion’, the condition of the proletariat had become ever more ‘inhuman’. This polarisation meant that at one pole there was the ever-greater sophistication of imaginary appetite (the dietary and sexual excesses of the metropolitan rich), at the other barbarisation, the treadmill and rotten potatoes (a reference to workhouse punishment and the meagre diet of the Irish poor). But this journey of Man through the vale of estrangement had not been wholly negative.

17 In Engels’ treatment of England, the reduction of political to social had already occurred before Marx and Engels formulated their ‘materialist conception of history’ in *The German Ideology*. Engels had arrived in England in 1842, already persuaded by Moses Hess that England was heading for a revolution, which would not be ‘political, but social’. In an analysis of the political and legal system, he had concluded that the constitution was ‘one big lie’. The Chartist battle against the undemocratic state was therefore in reality not a political battle, but a social battle against the rule of property. ‘The struggle of democracy against aristocracy in England is the struggle of the poor against the rich. The democracy towards which England is moving is a social democracy.’ Engels, ‘The Condition of England. The English Constitution’, *MECW*, iii, p. 513.
First, private property had forced Man to become more productive to the point where with the aid of steam-power and automatic machinery, he/she now stood on the threshold of abundance. This was the significance of what Engels, following French commentators like Jean Baptiste Say and Adolphe Blanqui, called ‘the industrial revolution’ (see Stedman Jones 2002, 2004, chs. 4 and 5). First, as Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, Thomas Carlyle, Moses Hess and Engels himself had all in different ways pointed out, the old conditions of famine and scarcity had given way to a new form of crisis, what Fourier called ‘plethoric crisis’, the crisis of ‘overproduction’ – a sign of the discordance between the new possibilities of abundance and outmoded forms of property ownership. Second, dehumanisation – captured most graphically in Engels’ 1844 account of Manchester slums – had generated proletarian revolt. Revolutionary crisis was therefore imminent.

Marx’s theory of the advent of communism

During the years between 1844 and 1848, Marx with the help of Engels transformed this initial critique into a fully elaborated theory of communism: what was later called ‘the materialist conception of history’. Its ‘materialist’ form originated in the need to reply to Max Stirner, another of the Berlin Young Hegelians, a schoolteacher and friend of Bruno Bauer. In his Ego and Its Own, Stirner attacked the quasi-religious ethos of Feuerbachian humanism (see Stirner 1995). Feuerbach’s criticism of religion had focused upon the separation of human attributes (‘predicates’) from human individuals (‘subjects’) and their reassembly as attributes of a fictive God. But, as Stirner pointed out, Feuerbach himself did not return these alienated attributes to human individuals, but rather to another equally fictive creation, ‘Man’ or ‘Species Being’. ‘Man’ continued to be presented to individuals as their ‘vocation’ or ethical goal. ‘Man’ was in effect just another version of the Protestant God; it was an attack made worse by Feuerbach’s own admission that he had taken the term, species, from Strauss, who had employed it as a dynamic substitute for the place of Christ in orthodox Christianity.

18 During the 1820s and 1830s for the first time, contemporaries became aware of the relationship between factory production and the trade cycle. Investment in factory production and automatic machinery created the possibility of crises of overcapacity. The trade crises of 1825, 1837 and 1842 were each accompanied by the conspicuous presence of large quantities of unsold goods. See Matthews 1954.

Marx was certainly implicated in this attack upon Feuerbach. In 1843, he had written in the Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher that ‘the criticism of religion’ ended with the teaching that ‘Man is the highest being for Man’, and he proclaimed ‘the categorical imperative to overthrow all relations’, in which Man was ‘debased’ (MECW, iii, p. 182). Now, rather than concede communism’s ethical or voluntarist dimensions, Marx presented communism and all other ideas simply as expressions of the social situation from which they arose. Moreover, if, as Marx and Engels were to claim in the Communist Manifesto, ‘the history of all hitherto existing society’ was ‘the history of class struggles’, the existence of revolutionary ideas in a particular period presupposed ‘the existence of a revolutionary class’. Communism, therefore, was not ‘an ideal’. According to the German Ideology it was ‘the real movement which abolishes the present state of things’ (MECW, v, p. 60, p. 49).

The adoption of ‘class struggle’ in place of an ethical imperative enabled Marx to connect his new ‘materialist’ epistemology to the substantive conception of history that he had begun to sketch in his writings of 1844. For class struggle, as he later explained, could be connected to ‘historical phases in the development of production’.20 Central to Marx’s new approach was Adam Smith’s discussion of the division of labour. For this enabled Marx to introduce a dynamic historical principle of increasing productivity or the development of man’s productive capacity (Marx’s version of Hegel’s account of the self-making of man in The Phenomenology) which could be connected to the changing configurations of private property. The terms of 1844 – ‘the true natural history of man’ and ‘private property’ – were now renamed the ‘forces’ and ‘relations’ of production. Historically, the development of man’s power to produce was accompanied by a succession of social forms (property relationships), each appropriate to a particular stage in man’s productive development.21 The ‘capitalist mode of production’ was the last and by far the most dynamic of these social forms, whose structure had been systematically explored by political economy.

Political economy, it was claimed, took ‘the capitalist mode of production’ for granted. But social critics and ‘utopian socialists’ had noted its increasing tendency towards overproduction – a sign of its approaching end, and

20 Marx to Weydemeyer (5 March 1852), MECW, xxxix, p. 61. Ideas of class struggle were widely used at the time. So, as Marx himself stated, there was nothing particularly innovative in his adoption of the idea.

21 For a philosophically systematic, but also historically informed analysis of Marx’s theory of history, see Cohen 1978.
replacement by a higher social form. In Germany, the Historical School of Law had demonstrated that private property was far from a trans-historical feature of all human societies. As Niebuhr, Savigny and others had argued (on the basis of ancient Rome), the first forms of ownership were tribal and communal, and more generally, through most of history the ownership of property had been conditional upon fulfilling the duties of defence or citizenship.\textsuperscript{22} Niebuhr listed a historical succession of property forms, which Marx followed in \textit{The German Ideology}. An almost identical list also appeared later in Marx’s famous ‘Preface’ to \textit{The Critique of Political Economy} in 1859. There he mentioned ‘the asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production’. But whereas for Niebuhr, these were primarily forms of military organisation, Marx described them as ‘progressive epochs in the economic formation of society’ (\textit{MECW}, v, pp. 32–5, xxix, p. 263).

The historical path traced by \textit{The German Ideology} led to communism. But Marx’s communism was not that of the ‘positive community of goods’ proposed in the model settlements of Owen or Fourier, or of the \textit{Icaria} of Étienne Cabet. Instead, Marx drew upon a notion of ‘negative community’ found in the continental natural law tradition, and absorbed into the beginnings of Scottish political economy through translations of the works of the seventeenth-century German natural law theorist, Samuel Pufendorf.\textsuperscript{23} In this tradition, the original condition of the earth, that of a great primeval forest, had resembled that of the sea. Man could pick fruit, hunt deer or pasture sheep just as he could still fish in the sea – without impinging upon the rights or property of others. He was therefore innocent of any notion of property, whether private or communal. That was because Man’s needs were modest and his resources abundant.

With the growth of population, the satisfaction of need began to require co-operation and the division of labour. Forms of scarcity appeared and each contributor to the production process had to be apportioned an appropriate share of the product. Such organisation also necessitated the formation of an institution with the power to enforce agreed forms of distribution and to punish violations of property and person. Hence the foundation of the state.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22} For the importance of the impact made by the Historical School of Law, see Marx and Engels 2002, pp. 148–62.

\textsuperscript{23} See Pufendorf 1672; on the relationship of this natural law approach to the Scottish Enlightenment, see Moore and Silverthorne 1983.

\textsuperscript{24} On ‘negative community’, see Hont 1989 and Tuck 1979, ch. 3.
Crucial to Marx was the notion that primitive communism had been the product of abundance. This meant that private property, justice and the state had a historical origin. They had been invented to manage the onset of scarcity. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels praised capitalism and the bourgeoisie for driving the world towards a new epoch of abundance, created by the industrial revolution and the world market. As Marx was later to argue in *Capital*, the universal development of productive forces, the growth of large-scale industry and the harnessing of science in the service of production caused private property to become a ‘fetter’ upon the further development of the forces of production and this, according to Marx in 1859, would usher in ‘an era of social revolution’ in which capitalism, ‘the last antagonistic form of the social process of production’, would be overcome and ‘the prehistory of human society’ would draw to a close (*MECW*, xxix, pp. 263–4).

In the aftermath of insurrectionary situations, whether in June 1848, or again in the years following the Paris Commune in 1871, Marx claimed that the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ would be the initial form assumed by this ‘social revolution’. What this term meant and whether this was a momentary tactical move to please allies on the left or a more permanent change of position was a cause of long-running argument within the subsequent Marxist tradition.²⁵ But in either case, Saint-Simon and Comte had already described what would soon follow this interim situation as a transition from ‘the government of men’ to ‘the administration of things’. Engels later described this as a process in which the state would ‘wither away’.²⁶ In Marx’s somewhat different conception, the current distinction between the modern state and civil society would be dissolved, and in its place there would emerge a new form of the *Respublica* (‘the public thing’), in which concern for the common good would no longer be obstructed by the rule of private interests characteristic of civil society.²⁷ But in either case, with the end of scarcity, the need for justice, private property and the state conventionally understood, would disappear. In ‘the higher stage of communist society’, as Marx still maintained in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* in 1875, ‘the

²⁵ Around 1849–50, ideas about the need for a transitional dictatorship were widely shared, as much among democrats like Heinzen, as among revolutionary republicans and socialists like Willich, Schapper, Marx and the Blanquists (see Lattek 2006); the idea was republican and neo-Roman in inspiration. See Draper 1977; Hunt 1975, ch. 8.


²⁷ Marx nearly always referred to the abolition or transcendence (*Aufheben*) of the ‘modern state’ rather than the state as such. See the detailed analysis of Marx’s writings of 1843–4 in Leopold 2007, ch. 4.
The Young Hegelians, Marx and Engels

narrow horizon of bourgeois right’ could ‘be crossed in its entirety’ and society would ‘inscribe on its banners: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs’ (MECW, xxiv, p. 87).

6 The critique of the state

As Marx understood his task in 1844, a theory of communism presupposed not only a critique of political economy, but also a critique of the modern state; it required the completion of the project he had begun in 1842. In late 1844, his notebooks contained a ‘Draft Plan for a work on the Modern State’ whose heading was The History of the Origin of the Modern State or the French Revolution (MECW, xxiv, p. 87). In his original plans for Capital in 1857, there was once again the intention to include a book ‘on the state’.

The most familiar formulation of the theory associated with Marx’s name is to be found in the Communist Manifesto, where it was stated that, ‘each step in the development of the bourgeoisie was accompanied by a corresponding political advance of that class. . . the bourgeoisie has at last, since the establishment of Modern Industry and of the world market, 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 and Engels 2002, p. 221). This statement drew primarily upon English history and probably derived from Engels’ elaboration of his Chartist sources. Such a conception of the state could be traced back through Cobbett and Paine to the neo-Harringtonian views of the eighteenth-century country party; a cruder version of the same thought with obvious reference to England was to be found in The German Ideology, which stated, ‘to this modern private property corresponds the modern state, which, purchased gradually by the owners of property by means of taxation, has fallen entirely into their hands through the national debt and its existence has become wholly dependent on its commercial credit, which the owners of property, the bourgeoisie, extend to it, as reflected in the rise and fall of government securities on the stock exchange’ (MECW, v, p. 90).

By contrast, Marx’s emphasis was more upon the impotence of the modern state. In the ‘Draft Plan’, he wrote of ‘the self-conceit of the political

sphere to mistake itself for the ancient state’, and in an attack on Arnold Ruge written around the same time, he argued that ‘the administration has to confine itself to a formal and negative activity, for where civil life and its labour begin, there the power of the administration ends’. The modern state was ‘inseparable’ from ‘the slavery of civil society’, by which Marx meant ‘the unsocial nature of this civil life, this private ownership, this trade, this industry, this mutual plundering of the various circles of citizens’ (MECW, III, p. 198).

The moralistic tone of this denunciation was modified when Marx adopted an interpretation based upon class struggle in 1845. But the refusal to accord any independence to the political sphere did not change. Following up upon the new-found determination of the political superstructure by the current relationship between ‘forces and relations of production’, between 1845 and 1848, Marx and Engels committed themselves to a confident series of predictions about the coming revolution. England, which was furthest developed, was to expect the first proletarian revolution. France where there still existed a large intermediate class of peasants and petit bourgeois would have a plebeian social-democratic republican revolution. Germany, whose governments were still feudal-bureaucratic, would experience a bourgeois revolution akin to that of 1789. This whole scenario was placed in a framework of world revolutionary collapse, in which the German bourgeois revolution would ‘be rapidly followed’ by a proletarian revolution consequent upon the acceleration of productive forces under the aegis of bourgeois rule.

In 1848, revolutions across Europe duly occurred, but these predictions were not borne out. Chartism in England declined after the failure of the Kennington Common demonstration called to present the national petition on 10 April 1848. From the beginning, the German bourgeoisie showed itself to be fearful of unleashing popular revolutionary forces, and in the face of disorder, rallied to the pre-existing dominant class. In France, confronted by the threat of lower-class revolt, the bourgeoisie found itself unable or unwilling to rule in its own name and abdicated power to Louis Napoleon Bonaparte. By December 1848 the direction of events was clear. In Cologne in Germany, where he had resumed his editorship of the Neue Rheinische Zeitung, Marx recognised that the bourgeoisie was incapable of making a revolution and, therefore, changed his political strategy. Instead of working within the Cologne Democratic Society to push bourgeois liberalism to the left, he and his supporters now backed an alliance of working-class, petit bourgeois democrats and peasants to make a ‘democratic revolution’.

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He also encouraged the formation of a national and independent working-class party. Hopes for a renewal of revolution were no longer tied to the further development of the forces of production, but to the (unlikely) possibility that France might be provoked into war with Russia, thus pushing the French regime to the left as it had done in 1792. In place of revolution from above, hope was now invested in revolution from below. This was the context of Marx’s brief advocacy of ‘permanent revolution’ in his two ‘Addresses of the Central Committee of the Communist League’ in 1850.\textsuperscript{29}

In his subsequent writings about these years, \textit{The Class Struggles in France 1848–1850} of 1850 and \textit{The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte} of 1852, Marx attempted to explain the course of revolution in France. His approach to French history had been shaped by the French historians of the 1815–30 period, especially the prolific historian and Orléanist chief minister, François Guizot. In order to explain the development of revolution in France and its displacement of semi-feudal rule by a new commercial society based on talent and moneyed wealth, these historians had employed an English model. Hence a historical parallel was drawn between 1640, Cromwell and 1688 on the one hand, and 1789, Napoleon and 1830 on the other. Seen from this perspective, 1848 was an anomaly – neither the completion of the bourgeois revolution of the past, nor yet the proletarian revolution of the future. Hence the singular angle of vision from which Marx judged the sequence of recent events. What was important about the revolution, he argued, was not ‘its immediate tragic-comic achievements’, but ‘the creation of an opponent in combat with whom the party of insurrection ripened into a really revolutionary party’.\textsuperscript{30}

Marx’s aim was to uncover the fundamental existence of class struggle beneath the surface play of political and ideological events. Such an approach worked well, as it had for Restoration historians, when describing the struggle between Legitimists (supporters of the \textit{ancien régime}) and Orléanists (supporters of the ‘Citizen’ or ‘Bourgeois’ monarchy of Louis Philippe) as a conflict between land and mobile capital. But it offered little guidance in distinguishing between one political faction and another. There were no sociological criteria to distinguish the June insurgents from the \textit{Garde}

\textsuperscript{29} Marx was forced to leave Cologne and then Paris, arriving in London at the end of August 1849. For Marx’s role in the exile politics of German refugees in London in the aftermath of 1848, see Lattek 2006.

\textsuperscript{30} Marx, ‘The Class Struggle in France’, \textit{MECW}, x p. 47; for the impact of Guizot and other French historians upon Marx’s conception of the revolution in France, see Furet 1992.
There were no specific material interests to identify the ‘bourgeois republicans’, while the attempt to provide a common social foundation for the politics of the petit bourgeoisie was purely speculative.\textsuperscript{31}

Marx’s refusal to accord autonomous space to the political sphere was the most distinctive feature of these writings. Universal suffrage was treated as a form of illusion akin to the notion of the equality of exchanges in the economy or the apparent naturalisation of economic categories in what he was to call ‘the fetishism of commodities’. He considered all these to be symptoms of the alienating power of commercial society. But his refusal to accord universal suffrage its full import imposed serious limitations upon his understanding of the sequence of events. It led him to underestimate the ways in which the suffrage issue pushed the revolution in directions different from anything encountered in 1789 or 1830. For Marx, writing in *The Civil War in France*, universal suffrage was simply the deflation of petit bourgeois democratic illusions, a proof that it ‘did not possess the magic power which republicans of the old school ascribed to it’. Its one great merit was of ‘unchaining the class struggle’, of taking away from the middle strata their ‘illusions’ and tearing away from all sections of the ‘exploiting class’ their ‘deceptive mask’ (MECW, x, p. 65).

Just as almost a decade before, Marx appears to have avoided plain acknowledgement of a prosaic and disenchanting political reality by a desperate *fuite en avant*. In 1843 in response to the lack of a popular reaction to the closing down of the free press, he moved from a ‘political’ to a ‘human’ revolution. In 1850, he wrote of the sequence of events that had culminated in the implementation of universal male suffrage and a massive electoral majority for Bonaparte as the ripening of ‘the party of insurrection’ into ‘a really revolutionary party’. He had little to say about what was to be its most indisputable consequence – that, as a result of the political demand for universal male suffrage in France in 1848, and again in Germany in the 1860s, both the liberals and the more traditional parties of order found themselves defeated, not by radical democrats on the left, but by the

\textsuperscript{31} On the Garde Mobile and the June Insurgents, see Traugott 1985. On the bourgeois republicans, Marx remarked rather lamely that ‘it was not a faction of the bourgeoisie held together by great common interests and marked off by specific conditions of production. It was a clique of republican-minded bourgeois writers, lawyers, officers and officials’, Marx, ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’, MECW, xi, pp. 112–13. In the case of the petit bourgeoisie, Marx tried to align the views of democratic writers with shop-keepers. He admitted that in terms of education and individual position, ‘they may be as far apart from them as heaven from earth’ but, he went on, ‘what makes them representatives of the petit bourgeoisie is the fact that in their minds they do not get beyond the limits which the latter do not get beyond in life’ (MCEW, xi p. 130).
The Young Hegelians, Marx and Engels

demagogic manoeuvres of maverick post-Legitimist leaders on the right – Bonaparte and Bismarck.

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx brilliantly retraced the steps by which Bonaparte established his ascendancy. But he had nothing to say about the developments that looked forward to the insights of Michels and other analysts of mass democracy later in the century. He did not get beyond the thought that Napoleon’s regime was just a more effective way of giving the bourgeois supporters of the ‘Party of Order’ what they really wanted. The Second Empire was not therefore a defeat of the bourgeoisie, but a new form of bourgeois rule and hence a new stage in the development of the forces and relations of production. It was in this sense that the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the representative state depicted in *The Communist Manifesto* was thought to have been historically superseded by ‘Bonapartism’.

‘Bonapartism’ meant a much greater stress upon the role of state power in its own right. Towards the end of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx wrote: ‘France, therefore, seems to have escaped the despotism of a class only to fall back beneath the despotism of an individual and what is more, beneath the authority of an individual without authority. The struggle seems to be settled in such a way that all classes, equally impotent and equally mute, fall on their knees before the rifle butt.’ He went on to emphasise ‘the enormous bureaucratic and military organisation’ of this ‘executive power’, of ‘a host of officials numbering half a million, besides another army of another half million, this appalling parasitic body which enmeshes the body of French society like a net, and chokes all its pores’ (*MECW*, xi, p. 183).

The attempt to elevate ‘Bonapartism’ into a new and general form of bourgeois rule was also evident in Marx’s English writings, where from the early 1850s, he presented Palmerston as an English equivalent of Bonaparte, and made an attempt to align the English to the French state machine. In 1866, Engels wrote to Marx, ‘it is becoming more and more clear to me, that the bourgeoisie has not the stuff in it to rule directly in itself’, and that therefore (apart from England where a well-paid oligarchy still ruled) ‘a Bonapartist semi-dictatorship is the normal form’ (*MECW*, xlii, p. 266). In 1871 in *The Civil War in France*, Marx described ‘Bonapartism’ as ‘the only form of government possible at a time when the bourgeoisie had already lost, and the working class had not yet acquired, the faculty of ruling the nation’ (*MECW*, xxii, p. 330). As the proletariat became stronger, ‘the state power assumed more and more the character of the national power of capital over labour, of a public force organised for social enslavement, of
an engine of class despotism. After every revolution marking a progressive phase in the class struggle, the purely repressive character of the state power stands out in bolder and bolder relief” (MECW, xxii p. 329).

This way of characterising the changing relationship between the bourgeoisie and the modern state proved illusory. The idea of an increasingly coercive state to contain an increasingly belligerent working class was undercut by political developments in Britain and France. In Britain, from the time of the 1867 Reform Act, a significant proportion of the male working class became enfranchised, and yet during the years of Gladstonian liberalism there was little sign of the development of a more coercive state machine. Even starker was the contrast between the Bonapartism of the Second Empire and the subsequent development of the Third Republic. In France after 1871 – whatever the problems posed by Legitimism, Boulanger or the Dreyfus affair – the legislative did reassert control over the executive, and weak government proved compatible with universal male suffrage.

Marx vainly attempted to confront these difficulties in his 1875 Critique of the Gotha Programme. He criticised the Social Democrats for talking vaguely about ‘the present state’. Given their empirical diversity, the ‘present state’ was ‘a fiction’. But his own presumption continued to be that despite ‘their motley diversity of form [modern states] do have things in common: they all stand on the ground of modern bourgeois society’. ‘They thus also share certain essential characteristics.’ What were these ‘essential characteristics’? Marx did not specify, and as one critic has noted, the whole passage could be called ‘an impressive sounding tautology’. 32 Marx himself seemed well aware of his failure in this area. In a letter of 1862 to his admirer, Dr Kugelmann, he claimed that he had arrived at the basic principles at least from which even others could reconstruct his system, ‘with the exception perhaps of the relationship between the various forms of the state and the various economic structures of society’ (MECW, xli, p. 435).

More basic than the various attempts to update the Communist Manifesto’s picture of the bourgeois state was the persistence of Marx’s earlier ambition to delineate a polity freed from what he considered to be the crippling division between state and civil society. The opportunity arose when Marx in his capacity as Secretary of the International Working Men’s Association took upon himself the task of defending the establishment of the Commune of Paris in April–May 1871. 33 Between the resulting text, The Civil War in

33 On Marx’s activities during the First International and his relations with English trade unionists, see especially Collins and Abramsky 1965.
France, and the unfinished Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right of 1843, there is a striking continuity of preoccupation. Leaving aside the question of how far the reality of the Commune corresponded to Marx’s depiction of it, it is clear that his intention in The Civil War was to describe a new polity, what in 1843 he had called ‘democracy’, and what he now characterised as the political form assumed by working-class rule.\(^{34}\) It was as near to a tangible political theory as Marx got.

He described a form of self-organisation that had dispensed with the institutional assumptions and procedures of the modern state. Church and state were separated, the army was dismantled, working hours were regulated, and police powers were reduced to a minimum. Most striking was the political form this polity prescribed for itself. Rousseau’s arguments against representative government were repeated. There was no gap between delegates and those who delegated them. The Commune was a ‘working body’ and its members were paid the wages of skilled workingmen. There was no division between legislative and executive. The judiciary was elected. All delegates, both in central and local government, were instantly recallable. In 1843, Marx had written of choosing a delegate as one might choose one’s cobbler. In 1871, he expanded the point, this time taking the example of employers and their choice of skilled workmen.

But the form of political organisation was only half of the story. Marx’s radicalism encompassed not only the institutional structures and assumptions of the modern state, but also those of private property in the means of production and market exchange in civil society. Here Marx’s analysis became more vague and evasive. The depiction of a form of social organisation that had got beyond the practices of commercial society depended upon the critique of political economy, and in this area, Marx had run into problems far more formidable than he had ever anticipated.

7 Marx’s critique of political economy

Just before the Revolution of 1830, the epochal collective work of the Saint-Simonian school, The Doctrine of Saint-Simon, had claimed that the contemporary condition of the ‘worker’ and ‘the woman’ was the latest in a succession of different historical forms of ‘the exploitation of man by

\(^{34}\) The continuity of Marx’s preoccupation with the abolition and transcendence of the state between 1843 and 1871 is discussed in Avineri 1968, ch. 8. As Avineri notes, Marx used the Hegelian term, Aufhebung (dialectical surpassal), whose implications differed from the term employed by Engels, Absterben, a more ‘biological image of withering away’.
man’. Republicans, and many socialists too, attributed the plight of the worker to the ‘unequal exchange’ between capital and labour, and thought of it as another legacy of the system of ‘force and fraud’, which the French Revolution had failed to overcome.35

In contrast, Marx’s ‘Critique of Political Economy’ – the subtitle of his three major works between the 1840s and the 1870s – started from Engels’ original claim that political economy never questioned the private property basis of commercial society; or as Marx put it, it did not distinguish between Man’s material interchange with nature and the successive social forms within which that interchange was conducted. This juxtaposition was transformed into a continuous historical dialectic between matter (persons, means of production) and form (property relations).36 Marx used this distinction to challenge those who thought that the injustice of commercial society derived from an unfair exchange between the buyers and sellers of labour. Radical denunciation of the excesses of those who ‘bought cheap and sold dear’ did not satisfactorily explain the proletarian condition. Marx’s own critique started from the work of David Ricardo (1772–1823), whom Marx regarded as the last ‘scientific’ exponent of political economy before it had entered a ‘vulgar’ apologetic stage from around 1830. He therefore accepted that a freely made agreement ensured that labour was paid its value in the form of wages (that is, as Ricardo had shown, its cost of production). Rent had likewise also been defined by Ricardo as the necessary cost of bringing scarce means of production into use. So if labour was paid at its full value, and rent deducted as a necessary cost, where was the source of profit?

Marx argued that existing political economy could not answer that question, because it paid attention only to the exchange value of commodities. It had neglected the obvious fact that commodities were not only exchanged, but also used. While it was true to say that the exchange value of labour was determined by its cost of production (Ricardo’s subsistence theory), this was quite distinct from labour’s use value. For what the wage labourer sold was not a defined quantum of labour, but his/her capacity to labour or labour power. Marx argued that, while the use and exchange values of other

35 See for example the analyses found among English Chartist and Owenite writers in the 1830s and 1840s. See Stedman Jones 1983c, pp. 90–179.
36 The clearest exposition of Marx’s conception of the relationship between matter and form and his consequent understanding of the terms ‘forces’ and ‘relations’ of production is to be found in Cohen 1978.
commodities were equivalent, in labour’s case, the use value to the buyer exceeded the exchange value of the labour paid. This is why Marx placed such emphasis upon his distinction between ‘constant capital’ (machinery) and ‘variable capital’ (living labour). Machinery might be the means of increasing the amount of labour that the labourer performed. But living labour was the sole source of profit. In return for a wage, the capitalist had purchased the capacity to appropriate a surplus beyond labour’s exchange value by varying the length or intensity of work performed. ‘Exploitation’, therefore, was located, not in mechanisms of exchange (the wage contract), but within the interstices of production (how much labour the employer could extract from the worker during the hours of work). This was the basis of Marx’s theory of ‘surplus value’, the form of ‘exploitation’ specific to capitalism.

Marx’s ‘labour theory of value’ can also be traced back to a related socialist debate which had been current in England and France from the 1820s to the 1840s, and revolved around the issue whether the labourer ought to receive the whole produce of labour. In The Poverty of Philosophy written in 1847, Marx derided Proudhon’s ideal of the equivalence of value and price. Following Ricardo, he maintained that such equivalence was already the actual situation under capitalism. Ricardo had originally argued that the absolute magnitude, in terms of which one commodity normally exchanged against another (its equilibrium price), was determined by the ‘socially necessary labour’ time embodied in its production. Ricardo, however, had abandoned this theory after discovering that variations in periods of production caused equilibrium price (and therefore value) to deviate from socially necessary labour time. Marx, however, confusingly falling back upon the popular political belief (that he had elsewhere dismissed) that labour was the source of all value, quibbled with Ricardo’s revision. He did so not least in order to preserve a radically simplified picture of the equivalence of value and price, which he employed for purposes of exposition in the first volume of Capital published in 1867.

37 Marx claimed that the deviation was not that of value from socially necessary labour time, but of equilibrium price from value. One of the major flaws in Marx’s value theory was that he did not consistently recognise that the popular idea that labour was the source of all value and the Ricardian-derived claim that value was determined by socially necessary labour time were incompatible. For while the socially determined labour time theory started from the point at which the product was marketed, the labour-source-of-all-value theory referred solely to the production of the product. See Cohen, ‘The Labour Theory of Value and the Concept of Exploitation’, in Cohen 1988, pp. 208–38.
These simplified assumptions piled up problems for Marx’s theory of profit (which was supposed to be fully expounded in the subsequent volume of *Capital*). For if surplus value could only be generated by living labour, it would appear that the higher the ratio of machinery to living labour, the lower the profit. Yet in the real world profit rates were equalised across different sectors of the economy. In the manuscripts, published by Engels after Marx’s death as Volumes Two and Three of *Capital* in 1885 and 1894, it appeared that Marx’s solution to this problem was both perfunctory and arithmetically incorrect. In what became known as ‘the transformation problem’, Marx’s opponents, led by the Austrian economist, Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk, treated this failure as a refutation of the theory as a whole (see Böhm-Bawerk 1949).

Measured by Marx’s initial ambitions, however, this definitional failure was relatively minor.38 Far more serious, though barely noticed at the time, was the fact that Marx had not produced a theoretical analysis that demonstrated that capitalism would come to an end, whether in the near or far future.39 *Capital*’s main claim to originality consisted in its theory of surplus value. In other respects – including the celebrated passage in which the expropriators were expropriated – its image of capitalist breakdown did little more than elaborate the picture of increasing polarisation between

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38 Technically, it was also soluble. A mathematical resolution of the problem was put forward in 1907 by Von Bortkeiwicz, and others have been proposed since. See Desai 1979.

39 During the 1889–1914 period and well into the 1920s and 1930s, there was a widespread assumption among Second International socialists that capitalism would come to an end, not so much as a consequence of working-class revolt and ‘an epoch of revolution’, but more as a result of systemic economic failure. Engels had originally given sustenance to this idea in *Anti-Dühring* (see citation p. 591). It was reinforced by the 1891 Erfurt Programme of the German Social Democratic Party (drafted by Kautsky), which stated that ‘irresistible economic forces lead with the certainty of doom to the shipwreck of capitalist production’ (Kautsky 1910, p. 117). An attack on ‘The Theory of Collapse’ (*Die Zusammenbruchstheorie*) formed a central feature of Bernstein’s revisionism (see Tudor and Tudor 1988, pp. 159–73); the term may have originated in Engels’ editing of what became Volume Three of *Capital*, published in 1894. In 1988 and 1993, Marx’s original manuscript of 1864–5, from which Engels put together the bulk of *Capital*, Volume Three, was transcribed and published in the *Marx/Engels/Gesamtausgabe*, Teil 1, 1988; Ökonomische Manuskripte 1863–1867 Teil 2, 1993. It is therefore now possible to determine how much Engels was responsible for shaping and at times re-phrasing Marx’s ‘very incomplete first draft’. Engels clearly believed in the political importance of the volume, and wrote to Bebel (4 April 1883), ‘Our theory . . . is provided for the first time with an unassailable basis . . . it will again bring economic questions to the forefront of controversy’ (*MECW*, xlvii, p. 271). It was probably as a result of his resolve to produce an exposition in which the general line of argument comes graphically clear’ that Engels in his editing of the concluding chapter of ‘The Law of the Tendency of the Rate of Profit to Fall’ (centre-point of many theories of the final capitalist crisis), replaced what Marx’s manuscript referred to as the ‘shaking’ of capitalist production by the word, ‘collapse’. Marx, *Capital*, Volume Three, *MECW*, xxxvii, p. 245. See in particular, Roth and Moseley 2002, pp. 1–10; Vollgraf and Jungnickel 2002, pp. 35–78.
bourgeois and proletarian found in the *Communist Manifesto*.\(^{40}\) Indeed, in strictly economic terms, no part of *Capital*, published or unpublished, offered a model of what the breakdown of capitalism would look like. On the contrary, what models were to be found there either presented a picture of cyclical development without any tendency to deterioration or else of a model of balanced growth (see Desai 2002, ch. 5). Marx’s nearest approach to a notion of capitalist decline was to be found in his discussion of ‘the declining rate of profit’, a prominent part of Engels’ edition of *Capital*, Volume Three. There, the idea was that while surplus value could only be extracted from living labour, the development of capitalism was accompanied by an ever-increasing proportion of means of production (constant capital – machinery, plant etc.) to labour power (variable capital). The result was intensified accumulation and exploitation as capitalists fought for a proportionately dwindling bounty of surplus. Marx defined this as a ‘law’. But his own list of ‘counteracting tendencies’ was scarcely less powerful than ‘the law’ itself. He therefore contented himself with the claim that ‘the law and its counteracting tendencies’ ‘breed overproduction, speculation crises and surplus capital alongside surplus population’ (*MECW*, xxxvii, p. 240).

*Capital* contained an account neither of capitalist breakdown, nor of its putative successor. This mattered because despite his hostility to blueprints for the future, Marx could not but delineate the basic components of his vision of a post-capitalist alternative.\(^{41}\) Among the most important would be the abolition of the market, in which ‘the process of production has the mastery over Man, instead of being controlled by him’. The market would be replaced by a rational plan worked out between the associated producers. But to remove the market as the means whereby needs were harmonised with resources was to remove the central dynamic feature of the modern exchange economy. In pre-capitalist societies, as Marx’s own researches in the 1850s had demonstrated, the harmonisation of resources and needs was effected by non-market forces – customary norms, religious or political institutions. Needs were assumed to be static. Only within a generalised system of commodity production did it become possible for ‘the economic’ to become separated from other spheres of life; and it

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\(^{41}\) This hostility went back to his earliest discussions of communist schemes in 1843 and seems to have derived from a quasi-Hegelian belief that the shape of a new society would not be the product of utopian invention, but was immanent within the contours of the old.
was this freedom from institutional or customary restraint that explained capitalism’s enormous superiority in forwarding productive advance and the proliferation of new needs. Capital offered no solution to the objection that socialism might therefore simply replicate the rigid and static character of pre-capitalist economic forms.

In Volume One of Capital Marx had produced a cogent theory of the capitalist form of exploitation and its relation to the dynamics of the capitalist mode of production. But he had not succeeded in disclosing what one sympathetic reviewer, cited in the ‘Afterword’ to Capital, termed ‘the special laws which regulate the origin, existence, development, death of a given social organism and its replacement by another and higher one’. And by the early 1870s – if not before – Marx at least knew that such disclosure was not to be found in his unpublished work.

8 After Capital: Engels

During the 1860s, as Secretary of the International Working Men’s Association, Marx had become actively engaged with European labour movements. After the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune of 1871, however, Marx withdrew from front-line involvement in international affairs. He left the day-to-day management of political correspondence to Engels, who had recently retired from the family firm in Manchester and moved to London. The two men were already well known to the leaders of the newly founded German Social Democratic Party. Elsewhere in Europe and especially in Russia, acquaintance with Marx’s ideas increased in the 1870s, partly following the publication of Capital, but more immediately as a result of the notoriety of his defence of the Paris Commune. Between 1879 and 1892, German-inspired Social Democratic parties, which were influenced to some extent by what they took to be Marx’s ideas, were formed in every major European country.

It was from Engels rather than Marx that the future leaders of European socialism – Bernstein, Kautsky, Plekhanov among others – learnt what they understood as Marxism during the years before 1914. The turning point was the appearance of Engels’ Anti-Dühring in 1878. Urged by his German Social Democratic friends to write a polemical riposte to the radical Berlin Privatdozent, Eugen Dühring, Engels provided a general compendium of his own ideas, putatively those of Marx as well – on philosophy,


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science, dialectics, history, economics and politics. His overall aim was to insist upon the scientific status of the socialism that he and Marx had developed.

During the twentieth century Engels was widely condemned for his elevation of dialectics into a general cosmological framework governing all change. Following what he considered to be a materialist version of Hegel’s conception of the relationship between accident and necessity, Engels maintained that historical events, apparently governed by chance, were in fact ‘always governed by inner hidden laws’. Cosmology had formed a major component of the ‘utopian socialism’ of Fourier, the Saint-Simonians and Owen. The cosmological framework elaborated by Engels situated the socialist goal, while also incidentally obscuring the fact that Capital lacked a theory of the end of capitalism. This was apparent in Engels’ treatment of Marx’s famous passage at the end of the chapter on ‘Primitive Accumulation’ pronouncing ‘the expropriation of the expropriators’, and, in Hegel’s terminology, ‘the negation of the negation’. Dühring generally approved of the ‘Primitive Accumulation’ chapter, but objected to this resort to ‘dialectical crutches’ to help the chapter to its conclusion. Engels did not engage with the substantive claim only with the resort to Hegel. He insisted that only once Marx had established from history that ‘in fact the process has already partially occurred and partially must occur in the future’, he in addition characterised it ‘as a process which develops in accordance with a definite dialectical law’ (MECW, xxv, pp. 120, 124). Elsewhere in Anti-Dühring, Engels repeatedly invoked the crisis-ridden career of capitalism to suggest a terminal future. ‘Modern large-scale industry has called into being’ a ruling bourgeoisie which ‘proves that it has become incapable of any longer controlling the productive forces, which have grown beyond its power; a class under whose leadership society is racing to ruin like a locomotive whose jammed safety-valve the driver is too weak to open’ (MECW, xxv, pp. 145–6).

There was nothing new in the theory that Engels attempted to defend. It remained that of the Communist Manifesto, and Capital so far as it accorded with the Manifesto vision. The transition to socialism would take place in those countries like England and Germany where capitalism and the industrial proletariat were most developed. On the question as to when this transition might occur, he was much more pragmatic. Unlike Marx, who twenty years later still stuck to Engels’ original vision of England in 1844, Engels was quite clear about how economic and political change in England had accounted for the demise of Chartism. Socialism would
return, he believed, when Britain’s mid-Victorian prosperity was once more
challenged by the growth of international competition.

For all his preoccupation with ‘the dialectic’, Engels’ political and intel-
lectual position remained relatively uncomplicated and remarkably constant.
Socialism was the modern form of democracy; capitalism had brought to
power a new bourgeois class who controlled the state and exploited the
proletariat – the great majority of the people. The aim, therefore, was
to establish rule by a party that represented the proletarian majority and
abolish private ownership of the means of production – the main cause of
the poverty of the people. Once socialism was established, the state would
‘wither away’, the imbalance between town and country would be redressed
and the condition of women would be immeasurably improved.43

This democratic-socialist transformation was to be accomplished, if nec-
essary, by force. In his early life, the legacy of 1789, an upbringing under
Prussian absolutism and his experiences in 1848 all led him to associate
this change with violent revolution. But in later years, as the condition
of English, and to a lesser extent European, workers improved and their
political rights increased, Engels increasingly turned away from the roman-
tic insurrectionism of his youth.44 He was generally opposed to ‘anarchist’,
revolutionary or ‘Marxist’ sects and favoured mass constitutional working-
class parties. Unlike Marx, he was happy to acknowledge the improvements
that had occurred since the publication of his book in 1845, and to adjust
his theory to the changing political situation.45 During his last years, he was
probably more preoccupied with the danger of European war than with the
prospect of revolution.46

9 After Capital: Marx

In the years after 1870, there was a remarkable change in Marx’s gen-
eral outlook. Commentators have noticed shifts in particular areas, but
rarely attempted to make connections between them. They have therefore

43 Engels laid out his vision of the future of women in 1884 in ‘The Origins of the Family, Private
Property and the State. In the light of the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan’, MECW, xxvi, pp. 129–
236. Engels’ text built upon notes left by Marx, but added many reflections of his own. Engels
was more deeply affected than Marx by the form of feminism to be found in utopian socialism,
particularly the writings of Charles Fourier.
44 See Friedrich Engels, ‘Preface to the Second German Edition (1892) of The Condition of the Working
45 Engels to Marx (7 October 1858), MECW, xi, p. 344; Engels to Marx (8 April 1863), MECW, xli,
p. 465.
46 See Engels, ‘Can Europe Disarm?’ (February 1893), MECW, xxvii, pp. 367–94.
The Young Hegelians, Marx and Engels
generally missed the subtle but noticeable changes in the character of Marx’s
totality theory as a whole. These included a retreat from the universal and unilinear
terms in which he had framed his theory in 1867, a growing interest in
human pre-history and the virtual abandonment of the attempt to complete
Capital.\(^{47}\) Politically, this shift was marked by an acceptance of the strategy
of the Russian Populists in preference to the ‘orthodox’ Marxism of the
group gathered around ‘the father of Russian Marxism’, G. V. Plekhanov in
Geneva. There was a similar shift in Marx’s attitude to empire.\(^{48}\) In 1853, he
had described ‘England’s destruction of native industries’ in India as ‘revolutionary’. In the late 1870s, however, Marx no longer praised the breakdown of traditional and often communal social structures by European merchants
and colonisers (MECW, xxxix, p. 347). Primitive communal structures
left to themselves were resilient enough to survive in the modern world,
and in favourable political conditions, could even develop. But they had
been prevented from doing so by European colonisation.\(^{49}\) The old faith
in the world-transforming advance of the bourgeoisie and post-bourgeois
modernity faded. Post-capitalism yielded to anti-capitalism. The recurrent
points of emphasis in Marx’s late writings were that the pre-history of man
had been that of primitive communities, that capitalism was an unnatural
and ephemeral episode in the history of mankind, and that man’s future lay
in a return to a higher form of a primordial communal existence.
In his writings of the 1850s, especially the Grundrisse, Marx had fre-
quently argued that the Asiatic remained nearest to the original communal
form of society, but also that this form of communal property was inseparable from despotic rule. If in Asiatic and other pre-capitalist societies
communal ownership was coupled with despotism, it clearly had no place

\(^{47}\) Clearly, the difficulty in formulating his theory of profit was one of the issues which railed him; the
last substantial attempt he made to resolve these problems (directly relevant to the second volume
of Capital, what Engels published in 1894 as Volume Three) was a 132-page manuscript of 1875
entitled ‘The Rate of Surplus Value and Rate of Profit Rendered Mathematically’. Marx spent time
in the 1870s revising various editions of Capital, Volume One, but he appears to have made no
sustained attempt to correct or reformulate the 1864–5 manuscript of the putative successor volume
after 1867–8. See Vollgraf and Roth 2003. When asked by correspondents about the progress of the
volume around the end of the 1870s, Marx claimed that censorship would prevent its publication in
Germany and that he did not wish to embark upon publication before ‘the English industrial crisis
reaches a climax’. See letter to Danielson (10 April 1879), letter to Domela Nieuwenhuis (27 June
1880), MECW, xiv, p. 354, xvi, p. 16.

\(^{48}\) A more extensive version of this argument is to be found by Stedman Jones 2007a, pp. 186–214.

\(^{49}\) For instance, in the case of the East Indies, he no longer believed like Sir Henry Maine that the
destruction of the communes was the result of ‘the spontaneous forces of economic laws’. It was
rather ‘an act of English vandalism, pushing the native people not forwards but backwards’. Marx to
Vera Zasulich (first and third drafts), MECW, xxiv, pp. 359, 363.
in a communist future. But after 1870, Marx discarded the assumption that communal property and despotic rule went together. The change was most obvious in his references to Russia. In 1881, Vera Zasulich from the Geneva group around Plekhanov requested that Marx make clear his position on the Russian village commune. After the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, she asked, would the commune inevitably disappear as Russian capitalism developed? Or could it, before capitalist development became unstoppable, become ‘the direct starting point’ or ‘element of regeneration in Russian society’? In a reply that was never sent, Marx conceded that ‘isolation’ and an association with ‘centralised despotism’ was a weakness of the commune. But now he argued that ‘it is an obstacle which could easily be eliminated’ (MECW, xxiv, pp. 353, 354, 363, 368).

What had apparently convinced Marx to change his evaluation of the village commune in Russia were Nicholas Chernyshevsky’s essays on the community ownership of land. Chernyshevsky dismissed the Slavophile mysticism surrounding the backwardness of Russian communal institutions, but then went on to argue that this backwardness could be an advantage. For ‘in backward nations, thanks to the influences of the advanced nation’, it was possible to skip ‘an intermediary stage’ and jump ‘directly from a low stage to a higher stage’. This meant Russia could proceed straight from the village commune to socialism. Marx’s reversal of his original position appears to have been the result of a combination of difficulties, both theoretical and practical. The mounting theoretical problems he had already encountered can be detected by a comparison between the unmistakably unfinished character of the published volume of 1867 and the successive plans and manuscript drafts that had preceded it. In his original plan of 1857, Capital was presented as a logical sequence or ‘organic system’ modelled on Hegel’s Logic. Like Hegel’s ‘concept’, it developed in successively more developed and elaborated forms starting from the commodity and ending with the world market. The system was conceived as a moving circuit, in which the end point (the world market) was also a return to the point of departure (the commodity) but now universal and fully developed. ‘Universality’ would in turn precipitate collapse, since its progress had engendered increasingly formidable obstacles to its further development: for example, lengthening times of circulation, falling profit rates and an intensification of exploitation. But even allowing for the inevitable scaling down of

50 Cited in Wada 1983, p. 48. See also White 1996.
this original scheme, the 1867 publication was a poor expression of Marx’s theoretical intentions. As late as October 1866, Marx stated that production and circulation would be discussed within a single volume, thereby establishing the capitalist system as a circular process based on necessary laws (White 1996, ch. 4).

The inclusion of ‘circulation’ would have required a discussion of the expansion of capitalist relations across the world, what Marx called ‘expanded reproduction’. Since it was important to Marx to distinguish this economic process from ‘primitive accumulation’ (the origins of capitalism), it was necessary to explain how ‘expanded reproduction’ ‘dissolved’ earlier modes of production, and how it refashioned pre-existing societies along capitalist lines. In particular, it was important to explain the subordination of agriculture to capital. These were to be the topics covered in what Marx called ‘the genesis of capitalist ground-rent’, and just as England had provided the basis of the discussion of capitalist production, so, Russia, particularly after serf emancipation, would provide the basis for the discussion of the genesis of ‘capitalist ground-rent’.

But these plans were not followed through. The 1867 volume did not include the intended analysis of circulation, and therefore the chapter entitled ‘Direct Results of the Production Process’, designed to provide a transition between production and circulation, had to be dropped. Instead the published volume ended with ‘primitive accumulation’, a historical account of ‘the expropriation of the agricultural population from the land’ by means of enclosure and ‘bloody legislation’ in medieval and early modern Britain.

Was this British story to be understood as part of an inevitable and universal global process in which communal ownership died out? Readers of the first edition certainly assumed so. But Marx himself was beginning to back away from this position. It was at this time – in the years immediately after the publication of Capital – that Marx became acquainted with the arguments of Chernyshevsky and his followers. But as he was already discovering, instances in which peasant communal production was ‘dissolved’ in a purely economic process were hard to find. Furthermore, researches into the history of landholding in Germany, particularly those of G. L. Maurer, suggested that peasant communal ownership was far more resilient than had previously been supposed and in some areas had survived until recent times. This form of ownership, it seemed, did not simply ‘dissolve’ in the face of capitalist exchange relations. It was more probable that, as in Britain, it was destroyed by force or by destructive forms of taxation.

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Marx accepted Chernyshevsky’s claim. In 1873 in the second German edition of *Capital*, he dropped the sneering reference to Herzen, and instead introduced a fulsome tribute to Chernyshevsky, ‘the great Russian scholar and critic’.51 Acceptance of this claim also meant abandoning the universal terms in which he had originally framed his argument.52 In the French translation of 1875, the chapter on ‘Secret of Primitive Accumulation’ was amended to imply that the story of the dispossession of the English peasantry only applied to the path followed by Western Europe. This enabled Marx two years later to dissociate himself from the idea that *Capital*’s depiction of the process of ‘primitive accumulation’ necessarily applied to Russia.53 It is also clear that Marx had come to endorse the politics of populism. That is, he agreed that following the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, a socialist revolution must be made before capitalist development in the countryside destroyed the village commune (*MECW*, xxiv, pp. 357, 360).

Marx’s vision of the village commune in the 1870s should not be seen solely as a shift of position on Russia.54 It clearly went together with other changes, political and theoretical. The prospect of anti-capitalist revolution in the industrialised nations was becoming remote, in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, the defeat of the Commune, and the growth of moderate and constitutionally oriented labour movements in Western Europe and North America. Marx’s hopes were now invested in the unstable...

51 Marx, ‘Afterword to the Second German Edition’ (1873), *MECW*, xxxv, p. 15. Engels was much less predisposed than Marx to abandon the coupling between the village commune and despotism. See Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, *MECW*, xxv, p. 168; in 1894, although respectful, he continued to maintain that Chernyshevsky was not entirely blameless in encouraging ‘a faith in the miraculous power of the peasant commune to bring about a social renaissance’. Engels, ‘Afterword to “On Social Relations in Russia”’ (January 1894), *MECW*, xxvii, pp. 421–3, 431.

52 In the 1867 first edition of *Capital*, Marx had written – and added an exclamation mark for further emphasis – that ‘the country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future!’ Marx, ‘Afterword’ to *Capital*, *MECW*, xxxv, p. 9. In the 1870s, Marx stealthily backed away from this claim. In the second German edition of 1873, the exclamation mark was dropped.

53 Marx drafted, but did not send, a letter to the editor of *Otechestvenniye Zapiski*, Nikolai Mikhailovsky. Mikhailovsky described *Capital* as ‘a historico-philosophical theory of universal progress’, which argued that every country would undergo the same process of peasant expropriation as that experienced by England and assumed that Marx’s attitude to populism was summed up by his denunciation of Herzen. Marx referred him to the 1875 French edition and his praise of Chernyshevsky, implying that he shared the analysis of the populists. See Wada 1983, pp. 57–60; White 1996, ch. 5; for the letter, see *MECW*, xxiv, pp. 196–201.

54 In the twentieth century, Marx’s changing view about the village commune and ‘skipping a stage’ was generally treated as a particular response to the Russian situation. It was also a source of embarrassment since Russian ‘Marxism’, both in the work of Plekhanov and in Lenin 1899 was associated with the rejection of populism.

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future of tsarist Russia. At the outset of the Russo-Turkish War in 1877, he not only predicted Russian defeat, but also went on to claim that ‘this time the revolution will begin in the East’ (MECW, xiv, p. 278; Wada 1983, pp. 55–6). But this was a war that the Russians won.

This political disappointment was compounded by theoretical difficulty. Marx effectively gave up the attempt to finish Capital. His study of capitalist crisis was inconclusive, his attempts to resolve the relationship between surplus value and profit were unsuccessful, he was not satisfied with his theory of the modern state and he was suffering increasingly frequent bouts of ill health. But that did not prevent the growth of other interests, notably his Russian researches and an increasing preoccupation with the early history of man (see Kelley 1984b). The character of these interests also suggested a distancing from his previous perspectives. Firstly, references to capitalism, so expansive in the 1850s, became cursory and dismissive. The Russian rural commune could bypass capitalism, Marx argued, because it could appropriate its ‘positive acquisitions without experiencing all its frightful misfortunes’. But the ‘acquisitions’ mentioned were purely technological, and there was no mention of the changes in productivity, which this technology presupposed (MECW, xxiv, p. 34). Capitalist production was ‘merely the most recent’ of a succession of economic revolutions and evolutions that had taken place since ‘the death of communal property’. Despite its ‘wondrous development of the social productive forces’, ‘it has revealed to the entire world except those blinded by self interest, its purely transitory nature’ (MECW, xxiv, p. 361).

Conversely, capitalism’s primitive communal ancestor was endowed with ‘a natural viability’. ‘The vitality of primitive communities’, Marx claimed, ‘was incomparably greater than that of Semitic, Greek, Roman, etc. societies, and a fortiori that of modern capitalist societies’ (MECW, xxiv, p. 358). Or, as he noted of the work of the American anthropologist, Lewis Henry Morgan, both on the Grecian gens (tribal society) and on the character of the Iroquois, ‘unmistakably...the savage peeps through’. 55 Marx was greatly inspired by Morgan’s depiction of the gens as that form of primitive community which allegedly preceded patriarchy, private property, class and the state. Morgan inferred the existence of the gens from both his contemporary researches on the tribes of North America, especially the Iroquois, and from his classical study of Greece and Rome (Morgan 1877).


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Inspired by the new world which pre-history had opened up, Marx’s vision now encompassed, not ‘merely’ capitalism, but the whole trajectory of ‘civilisation’ since the downfall of the primitive community. Remarkably, he had now come to agree with the French ‘utopian’ socialist, Charles Fourier that ‘the epoch of civilisation was characterised by monogamy and private property in land’ and that ‘the modern family contained within itself in miniature all the antagonisms which later spread through society and its state’.  

‘Oldest of all’, he noted, primitive community contained ‘the existence of the horde with promiscuity; no family; here only mother-right could have played any role’: a fact denied only by ‘the donkey’ or ‘block-headed John Bull’, Sir Henry Maine, who transported his ‘patriarchal’ Roman family into ‘the very beginning of things’.  

Primitive community had preceded the subjection of women, and it had embodied ‘economic and social equality’. It was thanks to these ‘characteristic features’ borrowed from ‘the archaic prototype’ that ‘the new commune introduced by the Germanic peoples in all the countries they invaded was the sole centre of popular liberty and life throughout the middle ages’ (MECW, xxiv, pp. 350, 351). Kingship and private property in land – the political realm as such – both arose from the gradual dissolution of ‘tribal property and the tribal collective body’. Maine did not realise that the state was ‘an excrecence of society’. Just as it had only appeared at a certain stage of social development, so it would disappear again, once it reached another stage yet to be attained. ‘First, the tearing away of individuality from the originally not despotic chains (as the blockhead Maine understands it), but satisfying and comforting bonds of the group, of the primitive commune – then the one-sided spreading of individuality.’

‘Civilisation’, however, was approaching its term. Capitalism was now in a ‘crisis’, which will only end in its ‘elimination’ and in ‘the return of modern societies to the “archaic” type of communal property’ (MECW, xxiv, p. 349). Marx agreed with Morgan. ‘The new system towards which society tends... will be a revival in superior form of an archaic social type.’

10 Conclusion

Reason had been at its strongest in the late eighteenth-century attack upon ‘force and fraud’ – upon the unfounded claims of hierarchy, privilege and

56 Ibid, p. 120. For Fourier’s theory, see Fourier 1996, pp. 56–74.  
57 Krader 1972, pp. 102, 324.  
59 Krader 1972, p. 329.
feudal rule, upon the mystifications of priesthoods, and not least upon the unwarranted metaphysical pretensions of reason itself. Far less straightforward was the attempt to introduce reason and autonomy into the forms and purposes of mankind’s material exchange with nature, and the forms of social relations they entailed. The type of exploitation peculiar to commercial society could not so easily be aligned with that of feudalism or slavery. For one thing it did not involve the imposition of force. It was true that commercial society was based upon private property, and as Adam Smith had accepted nearly one century before, the origins of private property like those of the state went back to force. But the consequences of Marx’s identification of ‘surplus value’ as the root of capitalist exploitation were less explosive than he might initially have anticipated. For the fact that the labourer produced a surplus over and above his cost of production was not in itself a scandal. In every economic form, a certain proportion of the product was withheld from the producers in order to make possible investment in the future reproduction and growth of society. The real question was whether a system in which means of production were private property should be replaced by a society in which ownership was collective and production rationally planned.

According to Smith, commercial society was to be defended because despite its inequalities, its benefits to everybody greatly outweighed its costs (see Smith 1809, p. 10; Stedman Jones 2004, pp. 49–50). But in the 1830s and 1840s, these benefits were far from self-evident. Large numbers had been forced off the land, the sub-division of plots had brought the spectre of famine, hand-workers in such basic trades as shoe-making, tailoring and carpentry suffered cut-throat competition and outworkers endured declining wages, sometimes exacerbated by the threat of machines. In the new industrial towns, horrified observers, most eloquently Engels, described overcrowding, lack of sanitation, environmental pollution, child labour, industrial accidents and excessive hours of work. Angry workers protested about their conditions with increasing menace. By June 1848, these protests had turned into violent rebellion as ‘more than one hundred thousand men’ – most of them unemployed workers – took to the streets of Paris and engaged in what Tocqueville described as a ‘sort of “servile war”’ (Tocqueville 1971, p. 169).

Yet despite all these ominous developments, as Marx found in the twenty years following 1848, capitalism was not heading for self-destruction in fact, nor could he produce a convincing picture of capitalist breakdown in theory. The workers were not undergoing ‘immiseration’. There were even
signs of improvement – though he was loath to admit it. Furthermore, it was far from clear that the society beyond the ‘modern state’, which Marx sometimes invoked but never detailed, could organise itself as productively or efficiently as its capitalist predecessor.

Formed before 1848 by the anti-romanticism of Hegel, and the satire of Heine’s Romantische Schule, Marx’s writings of the 1850s and 1860s were of a resolutely modernist and anti-romantic kind. They were of a piece with his critique of political economy and his identification of socialism with a post-capitalist future, which would be heralded by a revolt of the new industrial working class. But many of these hopes had faded by the 1870s. Only this can explain why a disappointed Marx came to convince himself about the emancipatory possibilities of the supposedly archaic communal practices of the ‘rural commune’, and to believe that the key to the future might after all be discovered in the allegedly still living past.