

Karl Marx

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Karl Marx

By

Karl Korsch

With a Foreword by

Michael Buckmiller



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Foreword

Karl Korsch's study of Karl Marx appeared barely two years after it was intended to be published, on 14 November 1938. It was published in London by Chapman & Hall as the fifth and last volume in the series 'Modern Sociologists', edited by the English sociologists Morris Ginsberg and Alexander Farquharson. The version republished here is the third unrevised edition. By 1936 the series already contained volumes on Comte, Pareto, Veblen and Tylor.¹ In New York, Wiley & Sons brought out a near-simultaneous American edition of all the volumes in the series.

The series was part of an attempt to expand the intellectual horizons of English sociology in international directions and to create an academic shift in the discipline, which had entered a period of stagnation with the death of Herbert Spencer early in the century and with the gaze of anthropologists still fixated on the Empire. The labour-movement social research of the founders of the London School of Economics, Sidney and Beatrice Webbs, was of course an exception. So too was the intellectual impact that radiated from Morris Ginsberg, Professor of Sociology at the LSE, or the organisational skill of the General Secretary of the Sociological Society, editor of the *Sociological Review* and founder of the Institute of Sociology in London, Alexander Farquharson, who, in the early 1930s, succeeded in establishing sociology as a scientific subject in Great Britain. For some years the Institute had retained close links with the *Institut für Sozialforschung* in Frankfurt, which acquired an external base in London between 1934 and 1936. The organisational work of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* fell to Jay Rumney, a student of Morris Ginsberg and Harold Laski and a co-worker in the Institute's famed project on 'Authority and Family'.² Rumney would later take over the work of editing the 'Modern Sociologists' series.³

Karl Korsch was one of the founders of the Frankfurt Institute, a close and lifelong friend of Felix Weil, the Institute's generous patron, and remained a free collaborator of the critical theorists even during Max Horkheimer's directorship, with regular contributions to their journals. For that, the Institute paid Korsch a monthly stipend when he was in exile, at least down to the time it was refounded after the Second World War. Korsch had left Nazi Germany in

1 Marvin 1936; Marett 1936; Hobson 1936.

2 Rumney 1936, pp. 784–96.

3 Jay Rumney (1905–57) joined the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in 1938 and became Professor of Sociology at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, in 1940.

October 1933 and found a warm and productive reception (as he always would) in Bertolt Brecht's home in Denmark, 'Danish Siberia'.⁴ From there he moved repeatedly between Denmark, Sweden, where his wife Hedda Korsch had found employment in a reform-school in Stockholm, and London, where he himself found a more propitious climate for scientific work, lived on and off from March 1934 and was keen to settle down on a longer-term basis. Down to the middle of 1934 Korsch was engaged in completing and publishing the two book projects he had started – one on *Revolution and Counterrevolution*, the other the critical lectures on *Marx and Scientific Socialism* that he had given in Berlin between 1928 and 1933. Clearly, Jay Rumney's suggestion that the Marx monograph could be included in the 'Modern Sociologists' series modified these projects in the sense that he would now combine the essential ideas of both projected works in a single book, as the first draft of a synopsis dated 28 September 1934 clearly shows.⁵ That the choice for a volume on Marx should fall on Korsch seemed almost obvious. He was one of the few internationally renowned independent Marx scholars who saw themselves as actively involved in the Marxist workers' movement but who, despite (or possibly because of) their political involvement, transcended the party-political divisions of the 1920s and 1930s. As late as 1932 he edited a new edition of Marx's *Capital* Volume I for Kiepenheuer & Witsch. This earned him reproaches from both Social Democrats like Kautsky and Orthodox Communists like Hermann Duncker.

At the beginning of October Korsch went to the LSE to discuss the Marx book with the series-editor and got the impression that Ginsberg's interest in Marx himself barely exceeded a 'certain vague goodwill'.⁶ But on 3 December 1934 a contract was signed, and already by the middle of 1935 Korsch could hand over a manuscript of some 60,000 words to make the scheduled publication-date of Autumn 1935 or Spring 1936. He was far from happy about the word-limit and would much rather have written a book 'of 500,000 to 600,000 words', telling Paul Mattick: 'I've already written up most of the material for this in my manuscript, to a greater or lesser degree of perfection!'⁷ In other words, for him it was a matter of an ongoing transition, a formal change of emphasis in a much longer series of researches on the 'Marx' question. Before writing up the book, he had sifted through 'the more recent

4 That was how Brecht often referred to his lodgings at Skovsbostrand in Svendborg in Denmark in 1934.

5 Korsch 2001a, pp. 496–500. First published in Korsch 1967, pp. 211–14. On this see the notes for Korsch's lectures in Berlin. Korsch 1996, pp. 729–50.

6 Korsch to Hook, letter dated 2 October 1934, Korsch 2001a, p. 503.

7 Korsch to Mattick, letter dated 4 April 1935, Korsch 2001a, p. 543.

biographical work on Marx' and built up a picture of 'Marxism as reality', including the official positions and their relation to politics and social struggles, as these emerged in the literature.⁸ For his part he made a point of explaining why he remained a Marxist. One can also see this as Korsch's ticket to the active entry he hoped to make to an American labour-movement that was rather less dominated by dogma than it was in Europe. During the New Deal the American labour-movement was seeing expansion of a new kind.

Initially, however, Korsch's plans were messed up by his involvement in an affair that roused considerable public attention thanks to its political background, and eventually led, as far as Korsch was concerned, to political intrigue, which in turn meant that his English visa was no longer renewed.⁹ From the start of August 1935 to the Autumn of 1936 Korsch lived in the immediate vicinity of Bertolt Brecht's house in Skovsbostrand and resumed intensive work on the Marx book, the final draft of which he completed in June 1936, while completely reworking crucial parts of the book in the second half of August.¹⁰ At the end of August Jay Rumney travelled to Svendborg and worked with Korsch 'from morning to evening' to produce a manuscript that could be ready for publication.¹¹ The result was satisfactory to both of them and came, not surprisingly, to be called 'the Svendborg Marx'.

The completed German text was then dispatched to Paris in September, to the English translator and Korsch's close friend and collaborator Paul Partos, who had fled from Berlin to Paris in 1933 and who would send the English manuscript of the book to the series-editor Morris Ginsberg in London. By this time Korsch was already on his way to the USA, where the rest of his family had gone by August. Already on the ship Korsch began to revise the English translation, work he would continue in his new home. As if alluding to his own fate, in the Introduction he cites a sentence from Marx's letter to Ruge dated

8 See Korsch 1996, pp. 681 ff.

9 Korsch was dragged into this mysterious affair, one that harboured several riddles, thanks to his close collaboration and friendship with Dora Fabian. She committed suicide on 31 March 1935. At the time, Fabian was working on investigating the abduction of the world-renowned journalist Bertold Jacob, so that even her death could be portrayed as a possible crime committed by Nazi agents, something that remained unproven in the end and was probably not true, as the research of Charmian Brinson shows. Brinson 1997. Also see Korsch 2001a, p. 570.

10 On 23 August 1936, Korsch informed Sidney Hook that he was 'very busy rewriting the book of which I finished the first "final draft" two months ago' (Korsch 2001a, p. 623) and he must have been careful to avoid any further self-criticisms.

11 Rumney to Herbert Levy, letter dated 2 September 1936: picture-postcard copy in the Levy Papers. Also see Paul Partos to Korsch, 8 October 1936, Korsch Papers at the IISG.

January 1843: 'In Germany there is now nothing I can do'. His American friend and Marxist discussion-partner Sidney Hook retranslated parts of the Marx book and published those excerpts in 1937, with the title 'Leading Principles of Marxism: A Restatement'. This appeared in the New York journal *Marxist Quarterly*, No. 3 (October–December). In May 1938 Korsch received the final proofs from the publisher. The only corrections he made in terms of content were to the Introduction. He decided to leave the text as it was. The actual proof-corrections had been made in London by Herbert Levy, who suspected political grounds for the delay and already on 26 August 1937 asked Rumney (on Korsch's instructions) when the book was scheduled to appear. Levy took the chance to emphasise, 'this book as it is now will in future times be regarded as one of the (few) essential Marxist works of the first half of the 20th century. Its importance as a progress of Marxist analysis can only be compared with the works of Plechanow or Antonio Labriola, Lenin or Sorel, Luxemburg or Lukacs'.¹² Korsch received an answer from Rumney almost a year later. The latter meanwhile was teaching at Princeton, invited Korsch there to discuss the matter, and assured him that Levy would finish cross-checking the bibliography and give that final shape; the book could be published only once that was done.¹³ The actual reasons for the delay, down to November 1938, can only be inferred indirectly from the correspondence that survives. From a statement to Brecht it seems that Korsch finally retranslated the whole text and took the chance to rework much of the content, as a whole series of changes show. Indeed, the published version of the book lacks the name of any translator.

I had a look at the book again after a longish spell. When I was translating it, I tried to use only expressions that would be current in American English, in other words, I tried to render the cultivated thoughts of Marx, Hegel, etc. in a form in which they cannot in fact be rendered. Today, after some six years I think I have sufficient mastery of the local language to be able to mould and stretch it to cover even non-American ideas. If one were writing for a still far distant future, then least of all would a book on Marx count as a completely meaningless exercise, especially if one were to revert to the Baconian 'Aphorisms' that had originally been planned. For this and other projects for a new book that are at a more or less

12 Levy to Rumney, letter dated 26 August 1937, copy in Levy Papers.

13 Rumney to Korsch, letter dated 5 August 1938, copy in Levy Papers. My friend Wolf Nelki discovered a copy of the proofs among Herbert Levy's papers when his widow was moving house, but did not take them with him, so one has to conclude that they have either disappeared or been destroyed.

advanced stage, the only thing that is lacking is the strong suggestion that actually inspired me to start writing it in the cultural centre at Svendborg.¹⁴

The tone of resignation that comes through here reflects the actual reception of the book in the few months leading up to the start of the war in Europe. This put an almost complete end to the otherwise vaguely critical discussions about Marxism that characterised the 'free' countries. True, there were a few well-meaning and competent reviews, e.g. the reviews by Franz Borkenau,¹⁵ G.D.H. Cole,¹⁶ Paul Mattick,¹⁷ Sidney Hook¹⁸ or Arthur Rosenberg,¹⁹ as well as minor contributions in academic journals. In England the Marxist and Left Socialist Harold Laski thanked Korsch for sending him the book, described Korsch (despite all their differences) as 'the most distinguished Marxian alive', and said he would like to write a review for the *New Republic*, though no review was ever published. He regretted that Korsch had not sent him the manuscript, otherwise he would have helped him 'to make it the kind of book that students could use all over these United States'.²⁰ Obviously the circumstances were not favourable for any such thing. Only a few hundred copies were sold, the rest were destroyed by fire in a German bombing raid on London in 1940. The (North) American co-publisher had received only a few hundred copies from England and dispatched barely any review-copies.²¹

By a stroke of pure luck, Korsch, during a journey to Mexico in the Autumn of 1947, managed to get a complete copy, rescued from 'all the storms', as he put it, of the 'German (Paris) edition of my M-book', from Kati Horna, who had earlier been married to Paul Partos.²² The surprising encounter with his own book some ten years later made Korsch 'plan for a German edition, unrevised, because today I would write the whole thing differently'.²³ He allowed copies of the newly discovered text to be made for friends, gave one copy to Brecht who was going back to Europe, and two copies to the Celle solicitor Hilbert

14 Korsch to Brecht, letter dated 18 November 1942 (Korsch 2001b, p. 1050); see also Korsch to Bert F. Hoselitz, letter dated 1 May 1952 (Korsch 2001b, p. 1434).

15 Borkenau 1939, pp. 117–19.

16 Cole 1938.

17 Mattick 1939, pp. 185–8.

18 Hook 1929.

19 Rosenberg 1939, pp. 80–2.

20 Korsch 2001a, p. 748.

21 Korsch to Brecht, letter dated 31 July 1939, Korsch 2001a, p. 782.

22 Korsch to Partos, letter dated 4 July 1948, Korsch 1996, p. 1209. The manuscript Korsch found is now available in the Korsch Archive at the IISG, Nr. 117.

23 Ibid.

Mehrens, a close friend of his and former member of the Korsch group. The idea of publishing the largely unaltered 1936 text for a German readership was based on the hope that a wider public interest in Marx during the centenary year of the *Communist Manifesto* opened greater possibilities for publishing a book on him.²⁴ The detailed corrections Korsch would make are perfectly apparent from the critical apparatus of Götz Langkau's 1967 edition of the original German text.²⁵ The variants found in the English text were only noted in so far as Korsch himself made any reference to them. The decision to make only limited reference to the English version made sense, because almost simultaneously with the first German edition of 1963 the New York publisher Russel & Russel brought out a facsimile-reprint of the English edition of 1938.

Korsch's plan of publishing a German version of the book more or less simultaneously with the English edition goes back to the earliest stages of the project. Ilse Bloch, a close collaborator of the Korsch group and, later, wife of Korsch's student Heinz Langerhans, was expected to type out the manuscript on stencils and then run 50 or 200 copies off those for distribution to friends.²⁶ In any case, it is unlikely that this plan was ever realised. Hectographed copies of the Marx book have not so far been found, and Paul Partos, the friend with whom Korsch planned to reproduce the text, left Paris in January 1937, went to Spain and was active in the Civil War on the side of the FAI and CNT. Moreover, Korsch returned to the idea a whole year later when he wrote to Mattick, on 24 August 1938, saying he wished to bring out the German text one way or the other, 'printed or hectographed'.²⁷

Finally, even before the discovery of the 'Paris Marx', already in 1946 Korsch referred to a 'German edition of my/our book on Marx or even its reproduction as the first (descriptive) volume of a multi-volume "Critique of Marxism" (in both English and German)'.²⁸ But these ambitious plans were soon abandoned as any positive signals failed to appear from Europe. In April 1948 Brecht in

24 Korsch Archive, IISG, 118, Manuscript (in duplicate, with variant formulations), each of 235 pages, in German (1947). (American version A-1 and A-2). There is a further identical carbon-copy in the papers of Hilbert Mehrens (in the archive of Erich Gerlach in the Social Science Department library of the Leibniz University in Hannover) as well as a new, typed version of the corrected manuscript no. 118. (Ibid.) The copy that Bertolt Brecht took with him to Europe in 1947 and which Langkau labels 'A-3' was, at the time he edited the text, misplaced. It has since been found by the Swiss Brecht scholar Werner Wüthrich and is now available in the Brecht Archive in the Berlin Academy of Sciences.

25 Korsch 1967, p. XII.

26 Paul Partos to Karl Korsch, 13.1.1937.

27 Korsch 2001a, p. 665.

28 Korsch to Paul Partos, 12.12.1946, Korsch 2001b, pp. 1143 f.

Zurich 'still had no great news to convey' about the Marx book, which he had passed on to a few friends.²⁹ A few days later Korsch decided he would not like to have it published any more, 'on completely positive grounds' as compared to Brecht. He sent him a copy with a dedication that said 'the Svendborg Marx' and retained an identical copy for himself.³⁰

All the same, a year later he was still keen to have the Marx book published in Germany and sent his friend Hilbert Mehrens a carbon-copy with the following remarks:

The German text is naturally much better than the English... But the German text would of course also be very different in a new edition, one that was more critical and historically distanced. But precisely because I am now seriously working on a new book, I'd love it if the current version, or as much of it as you have, could appear in German, either as a German version of the English book or as a completely new book, something we could easily do, legally speaking, with a few revisions, changes of heading, etc. The only chapter I'd like to rework in a more fundamental way, either now or for a new edition, is the one on 'A New Type of Generalization' (I 6), because the issues are not completely clear there. Basically that would now have to be written as an intellectual summing-up of the specific methodological principles, different ones, that I broke the so-called 'dialectic' into (specificity, historical change, theoretical and practical critique, etc.).³¹

One can scarcely ignore the fact that around the year 1950, in this almost moribund corner of the international debate on Marx, Korsch took special pains to restore a more balanced and critical grasp of Marxism. That he was planning a major work on Marx and the history of Marxism is clear from the numerous passages in the papers he left behind where he starts and stops, starts again, then changes direction. These testify not just to the sheer richness of

29 Bertolt Brecht to Karl Korsch, April 1948, in Brecht 1981, pp. 533 f: Brecht's diary (the Arbeitsjournal) makes no reference to these conversations, although the Editions Robert Marin expressed an interest in the manuscript and wrote to Brecht that Lucien Goldmann 'has told me that you are in possession of the manuscript of Karl Korsch that has the title *Cent ans de marxisme* (...) I would be very interested in this book'. (Editions Robert Marin to Bert Brecht, 7.6 1948, in the Bertolt Brecht Archive, BBA 1763/15). On 12 July 1948 Steff Brecht wrote to his father from Paris, asking, 'What's happening about the Korsch manuscript?', BBA 528/15.

30 Karl Korsch to Bertolt Brecht, 12.5.48, in Korsch 2001b, p. 1198.

31 Korsch 2001b, p. 1240.

thought that was characteristic of him but also to the decline of his energies. On several questions Korsch returns to an intensive study of the scholarship on Marx, looks for unknown manuscripts by Marx and Engels, and opens contacts with reputed Marx scholars like Maximilien Rubel and Roman Rosdolsky.³² In particular, he corresponded with Rosdolsky about the 'Rough Draft' of *Capital* that had received scarcely any attention till then, having been published in the USSR in 1939–41 under the title *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*. There were only three copies of the *Grundrisse* available in the US libraries, but in 1953 the GDR brought out a reprint that Korsch delved into with zeal.³³ The projected common work on the *Grundrisse* did not materialise, however, and it was only in the 1960s that Rosdolsky found a publisher for his own path-breaking interpretation of that text.³⁴

Korsch's inability to make up his mind whether to allow a new publication of the book on Marx, either in German or in English, persisted into the early 1950s, and was sustained by two enquiries from publishers,³⁵ both of which met with a negative response in the end. The idea of working his new conceptions of Marx and Marxism, the ones he had developed more recently, into a new book with a much wider context and some title like 'Some unsettled problems of Marxism', 'Marxism revisited', or finally 'Work in progress' remained unfulfilled.³⁶

The reprint of the English edition two years after Korsch's death paved the way for the actual reception of the work. But the real breakthrough came with the scientific edition of the German manuscript that Götz Langkau put together from the Korsch archive in 1967. By then a new generation of young students had matured sufficiently to grasp both the political intention and the spirit behind Korsch's approach to Marx, which worked largely through a history of ideas. Translations in almost all international languages flowed from the peculiar significance of the work as a meaningful critical introduction to the key ideas of Marx, a fact Harold Laski had hoped readers would see as early as 1939 when discussing first impressions of the English edition. A book that

32 Apart from Korsch's letters to Rosdolsky, see the latter's replies and my introduction to their correspondence in Buckmiller 2006, pp. 303–57.

33 'No price would be too high for me', he wrote when requesting Hilbert Mehrens for a copy, letter dated 11 June 1949, Korsch 2001b, p. 1240.

34 Rosdolsky 1968.

35 Korsch to Walter Goldwater, 11 October 1952, Korsch 2001b, p. 1455; inquiry from Felix Morrow to Korsch, dated 10 June 1955 and Korsch's negative response on 1 September 1955, Korsch 2001b, p. 1581.

36 These are contained in Korsch 2015.

Korsch had written from a passionate commitment to the practical goals of the struggle for emancipation now found a receptive readership and soon became a classic of Marxist literature.

In the last fifty years a massive amount has been written and published about Marx and Marxism, and both the scholarship on Marx and editions of Marx's work have made substantial progress in these decades. That raises the issue of whether it still makes sense to publish a book on Marx that is almost sixty-five years old, that misses out on a whole half-century of Marx scholarship, and that the author himself claimed he no longer wanted published in the form in which it was first written. One can respond to that objection by noting that any work on Marx and Marxism that is at all substantial can only ever be a contribution to an ongoing debate and never the last word. That Korsch's study seems to have aged so little is probably bound up with the fact that he knew how to convey the most important aspects of Marx's thought in an impartial and precise way, and presented that in a form that made it comprehensible not just to the 'erudite public' for which the 'Modern Sociologists' series was written, but to his politically committed contemporaries. In a certain sense, what Korsch admired about Franz Mehring's biography of Marx and missed in other more recent biographies applies to his own book on Marx: 'None of the more recent . . . works display that outpouring of passionate commitment because of which Mehring's biographical researches on Marx, both his biography of Marx's life and, even more, the detailed editions of Marx's works, make an incomparably stronger impression on any sympathetic reader, despite all their shortcomings, arbitrariness and defects, than all the newer books that have been published, which, in their scientific form at least, are to some extent more advanced works.'³⁷ If the reader applies this spirit to the new edition of the impressive work presented below, then Korsch's book will prove to be a success even today.

Michael Buckmiller
Hannover, April 2010

37 Karl Korsch 1996b, p. 559.

Introduction

Karl Marx was born in Trier in 1818 and died as a political exile in London, 1883. When he had completed his studies at the universities of Bonn and Berlin, and served his first political apprenticeship as an editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung* in Cologne, 1842–3, he found himself cut off from almost every link with his native country. His father had died in 1838, he had ‘fallen out with his family’ since 1842, and all the plans for his future had collapsed under the blows of the Christian-Romantic reaction which set in with the accession of King Frederick William IV in 1840. ‘In Germany there is now nothing I can do’, Marx wrote to Arnold Ruge in January 1843. ‘In Germany one can only be false to oneself’. Thus, in the Autumn of 1843, after marrying the woman he had wooed for seven years, he went to Paris and, when expelled from France in 1845, turned to Belgium, where he stayed until the revolution of 1848 made possible a short return to political activity in his own country, as an editor of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, 1848–9. After that, expelled from Germany, France and Belgium, he spent the remaining three decades of his life in the great refuge of revolutionary exiles from all European countries, which in those times was London. He tried in vain to earn a living for his growing family through journalism and was saved from starvation only by the untiring services of his life-long friend and collaborator, Friedrich Engels, who devoted the next 18 years of his life to the hateful drudgery of ‘doggish commerce’, mainly to help his friend to complete his great scientific work, *Capital*. When finally he was able to retire from business with enough money to secure freedom from financial worries both for himself and Marx, it was almost too late. Though the main results of Marx’s ever widening and deepening studies had taken final shape in Volume I, published in 1867, the remaining parts of *Capital* were never completed. The incessant struggles and miseries inseparable from the life of an inflexible political emigrant had by 1873 finally worn out even that tremendous mental productivity which had been embodied in Marx. However, he went on for a further decade to pile up excerpts and notes for the future completion of his work, and now and then displayed the full vigour of the old days in such fully matured pieces of workmanship as the ‘Marginal Notes to the Gotha programme of the German workers’ party’ in 1875 and the recently published ‘Critical notes on the economic work of Adolf Wagner’, dated 1881–2.

Nor must we forget what Engels most aptly said at the funeral of his friend in 1883, that the man of science was ‘not even half the man’, but that this man Marx was ‘above all a revolutionary’. Of his two outstanding works, the

*Communist Manifesto*¹ and *Capital*,² the one was published on the eve of the revolution of 1848 as the working programme of the first international party of the militant vanguard of the proletariat. The other coincided with the beginning of the recovery of Western Europe from that protracted depression and stagnation of all progressive forces which had followed upon the bloody defeat of the insurrectionary workers of Paris in June 1848 and the ensuing failure of the European revolution of 1848–50 – a period most clearly characterised by the anti-democratic and anti-socialistic totalitarian régime of the third Napoleon in France between 1850 and 1870. Marx's theoretical exposition of the bourgeois world in *Capital* coincided, moreover, with his actual participation in the first open and comprehensive experiment in working-class unity, the International Working Men's Association, which was founded in 1864. Thus Marx's revolutionary theory and practice formed at all times an inseparable whole, and this whole is what lives on today. His real aim, even in this strictly theoretical work, was to co-operate in one way or another with the historical struggle of the modern proletariat, to whom he was the first to give a scientific knowledge of its class-position and its class-needs, a true and materialistic knowledge of the conditions necessary for its own emancipation and thus, at the same time, for the further development of the social life of mankind.

It is the purpose of this book to restate the most important principles and contents of Marx's social science in the light of recent historical events and of the new theoretical needs which have arisen under the impact of those events. In so doing we shall deal throughout with the original ideas of Marx himself rather than with their subsequent developments brought about by the various 'orthodox' and 'revisionist', dogmatic and critical, radical and moderate schools of the Marxists on the one hand, and their more or less violent critics and opponents on the other hand. There is today a struggle about Marx in practically every country of the civilised world – from Soviet Russia, where Marxism has become the official philosophy of the state, to the fascist and semi-fascist countries of central and southern Europe, South America, and East Asia, where Marxism is prosecuted and exterminated. Between those two extremes there lies the land of the as yet undecided battle between the so-called 'Marxist' and so-called 'anti-Marxist' ideas, and thus the only part of the world where it is still possible today to discuss with relative freedom the true significance of those genuine principles of Marx, which in the meantime have been adapted by friends and foes to an astonishing variety of political purposes which appear from the review of the various historical phases of Marxist

1 Marx and Engels 1931–2a.

2 Marx 1932.

thought. There are more problems involved in this apparent cleavage between Marxian ideology and its historical realisation than can be tackled in a small book. The reader is referred in this respect to the author's previous writings on the subject quoted in the bibliography at the end of this book.

To increase the utility of this presentation of Marxian theory, an attempt has been made to keep the single chapters as far as possible independent. Thus the reader not acquainted with the daring abstractions of classical economic science may leap over the somewhat difficult second chapter of the first part and read it later in connection with the second part, while a philosophically unprepared reader might reserve the highly general statements of Chapter Two, Section Four on the development of Marx from philosophy to science until he has studied the same problem in the more specific form in which it is presented in Chapter Two, Section Seven. In the same way many other cross-links connect the three parts of the book which, generally speaking, do not deal with independent branches of a compound-system but rather with the various aspects of *one* social, economic, and historical theory.

With Marx and Engels, as indeed with most writers in the field of social, historical, political thought, books have not only a history of their own, but those histories of books – their times and conditions of birth, their addressees, their very titles, and their further adventures in new editions, translations, etc. – form an inseparable part of the history of the theories themselves. It is, therefore, a deplorable fact that hitherto not only the bourgeois critics of the so-called 'contradictions in Marx' but even the most faithful adherents of Marx's materialistic science should have quoted his diverse theoretical statements without reference to time, addressees, and other historical indices necessary for their materialistic interpretation. This 'orthodox' procedure of quoting Marx's (or even Marx's and Engels's) statements quite in the abstract, just as the schoolmen quoted the words of Aristotle or the bible, is quite inadequate for a theoretical study of a given social theory from an historical and materialistic standpoint. We have, therefore, even refrained from imitating the example set by modern scientific works in which every item is quoted by its number only and all other information relegated to an annexed bibliography. We have rather put up with that apparent clumsiness which is unavoidably bound up with an immediate supply of all necessary information on the historical circumstances of each quotation. For the same reason we have made only scant use of abbreviations and even translated for further clarity the non-English titles of all books quoted in the text and footnotes. The original titles of books quoted in this way, as well as all other information not immediately required for the full understanding of the current text, and a detailed explanation of all abbreviations, are given in the usual manner in the bibliography.

As to terminology, the reader will find some unusual terms, or usual terms applied with a somewhat modified meaning. This was unavoidable in a book that had to deal with Hegelian and Marxian terms which can by no means be translated into conventional English. We have not availed ourselves of all the liberties which were declared necessary in an article contributed by Engels to the November 1885 issue of *The Commonwealth*. We have refrained from linguistic innovations as far as possible and even from coining new English terms corresponding to the many new-coined German terms used by Hegel, Marx, and present-day Marxists. However, we have followed the advice of Engels to risk a heresy rather than to render the difficult German words and phrases by more or less indefinite terms which do not grate upon our ears but obscure the meaning of Marx. Thus, for example, we speak of 'production-relations' rather than 'relationships', and in dealing with the first and foremost principle of Marx's materialistic method, the term 'specification' is used without quotes, although we are aware that this term means something more here than it connotes in everyday language. All such terms have been fully explained at their first occurrence and even several times, whenever this seemed necessary for a full understanding of the argument.

PART 1

Society



Marxism and Sociology

What is the relationship between Marxism and modern sociological teaching? If we think of the sociology begun by Auguste Comte, and in fact first named by him, we shall not find any affinity or link between it and Marxism. Marx and Engels, for all their keen desire to extend and enhance the knowledge of society, paid no attention to either the name or contents of that ostensibly new approach to the social sciences. Nor were they impressed by the gains the Comtist school made among the progressive intelligentsia of their time. It appears from their correspondence that once in the 1860s, Marx, mainly focused on the final manuscript of his principal work, picked up from the shelves of the British Museum and read through Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive* of 1830–42, 'because the English and French make such a fuss about the fellow'.¹ Yet there is even more evidence in the text of *Capital* itself that this reading left no mark in his theoretical work.² On still another occasion, when writing to an otherwise highly esteemed Comtist, Marx made it perfectly clear that he, as a politician, was 'thoroughly opposed to Comtism as a politician' and had 'a very poor opinion of it as a man of science'.³ Marx's attitude is theoretically and historically well founded.

The science of socialism, as formulated by Marx, owed nothing to this 'sociology' of the nineteenth and twentieth century, which originated with Comte and was propagated by John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer. It would be more correct to say that since the days when the young Auguste Comte, hitherto the most enthusiastic disciple of the Utopian Socialist Claude Henri de Rouvroy Saint-Simon, suddenly broke with his 'great master' to work out his own pedantic system of 'positivistic' sociology from a few of the formidable mass of ideas

1 See Marx's letter to Engels of 7 July 1866 (Marx, Karl 1931–2a, p. 345).

2 See the ironic dismissal of 'Comtist recipes for the cookshops of the future' in Marx's reply to the reviewer of *Capital* in the Paris *Revue positiviste*, contained in the postscript to the second edition of *Capital*, 1872–3, and a casual reference to 'Comte and his school' in a footnote to Marx 1932, p. 297. These are the only instances where Comte's name occurs in *Capital*, while Spencer's name does not occur at all. He is curtly mentioned, along with some other contemporary writers of 'pseudo-scientific' economic articles in the *Westminster Review*, in Marx's letter to Engels of 23 May 1868 (Marx 1931–2b, p. 58).

3 See Marx's letter to Beesly of 12 June 1871 (Marx 1931–2c).

continuously poured forth by that excessively productive mind,⁴ bourgeois social thought has been a reaction against the theory and thus also against the practice of modern socialism.⁵ Up to the present day, 'sociologists' have endeavoured to submit another way of answering the embarrassing questions first raised by the rising proletarian movement. Only from this standpoint is it possible to understand the essential unity of the manifold theoretical and practical tendencies which during the last hundred years have found their expression under the common denomination of sociology.

Marxism, then, stands in a much more original and direct relationship to those new problems which modern historical development has put on the agenda of present-day society, than the whole of the so-called 'sociology' of Comte, Spencer, and their followers. Bourgeois sociologists refer to the revolutionary-socialist science of the proletariat as an 'unscientific mixture of theory and politics'. Socialists, on the other hand, dismiss the whole of bourgeois sociology as mere 'ideology'.

There is, however, quite a different relationship between Marxian theory and another body of social thought which descended from an earlier time, when the name 'sociology' had not yet been invented, but when 'society' had already been discovered and recognised, along with physical nature, as an equally material and important realm of human knowledge and human action.

As Marx himself records in 1859,⁶ he embarked upon his new materialist theory of society sixteen years before, because of certain grave doubts which had recently assailed his belief in the idealist philosophy of Hegel. He had at that time just gone through the new and stimulating experiences of his first short period of political activity. As an editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung* (1842–3) he had for the first time found himself called upon to take part in the discussion of 'so-called material interests'. He had thus been led to occupy himself with 'economic questions'. On the other hand he had become aware of the decisive importance which a closer study of the ideas of 'French socialism and communism' was bound to have for the furtherance of revolutionary developments in Germany. While the combined effect of all these new impulses had already considerably undermined his faith in the old Hegelian formulae,

4 See Engels's letter to Toennies of 24.1.95, quoted in Mayer 1933, II, p. 552, and, for a non-partisan confirmation of his statement, among others, the faithful report given by Lévy-Bruhl 1900, p. 8.

5 For a brilliant discussion of the historical dispute between Positivism and Marxism, see the concluding paragraphs of Antonio Labriola's reply to Masaryk 1899; here quoted from Labriola 1928, p. 311.

6 See the 'Preface' to Marx 1859.

the real nature of that Prussian State which had been so sublimely exalted by Hegel was finally revealed to him by a most conclusive personal experience. He was compelled to resign from the staff of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, which under his leadership had become the most conspicuous organ of the progressive movement in pre-revolutionary Germany within less than a year. Nor was his withdrawal sufficient, as had been hoped by the frightened managers, to arrest the judgment of suppression pronounced against the *Rheinische Zeitung* by an equally frightened government.

Thus confronted with an increasing number of striking discrepancies between his philosophical creed and his actual experiences, Marx turned once more to Hegel. A detailed 'critical revision' of Hegel's *Philosophy of Law*, on which he concentrated for the next five months,⁷ led him to the conclusion that 'legal relations as well as forms of State cannot be understood out of themselves nor out of the so-called general development of the human mind but, on the contrary, are rooted in the material conditions of life, the aggregate of which Hegel, following the precedent of the English and French of the 18th century, grouped together under the name of "civil society", and that the anatomy of civil society is to be sought for in Political Economy'.

We see here the decisive significance which the concept of 'civil society' had gained for the young Marx, who was then just passing from Hegelian idealism to his later materialist theory. While still formally basing his criticism of Hegel's glorification of the state on the realistic statements concerning the nature of civil society embodied in the same Hegelian work, Marx now definitely abandoned Hegel and all his idealistic philosophy. Instead, he associated himself with those great enquirers into the social nature of man who, in the preceding centuries, had first set up the new idea of civil society as a revolutionary slogan, and had even unearthed, in the new science of political economy, the material foundations of that new and 'civilized' form of society.⁸

Hegel, indeed, had not derived the deep realistic knowledge which, under the heading of 'Civil Society',⁹ stands out in such sharp relief against the rest of his book from an independent study of the as yet extremely backward conditions of German society. He took both the name and contents of his 'civil society' ready-made from the French and English social philosophers, politicians, and economists. Behind Hegel, as Marx said, stood the 'English and French of the 18th century' with their new discoveries of the structure and movement of

7 Hegel 1920. See the comprehensive manuscripts of 1843 (Marx 1927–30a), pp. 401–553.

8 See, for example, Ferguson 1767 and Smith 1937.

9 See Hegel 1920, Part III, Section 2, esp. §§ 188 *et seq.* ('System of Needs'), §§ 230 *et seq.* ('Police').

society who, in their turn, reflected the real historical development which culminated in the Industrial Revolution in England after the middle of the eighteenth century and in the great French Revolution of 1789–1815.

Marx then, in developing his new socialist and proletarian science, took his cue from that early study of society which, although first communicated to him by Hegel, had really been born of the revolutionary epoch of the bourgeoisie. This appears most strikingly in his complete adoption of the scientific results of classical political economy as developed by William Petty and Pierre le Pesant Boisguillebert, François Quesnay, Adam Smith, and David Ricardo, and taken from them by Marx's immediate predecessors, the German idealist philosophers Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Hegel. There is, so far, not much difference between Marx's reference to political economy as an 'anatomy of civil society', and Hegel's philosophical attempt to base the state on civil society, and civil society on the 'system of needs' as explored by the new science of 'Political Economy'. He had even more expressly, in an earlier study, described the 'system of needs' as the 'first form of government', underlying such higher developed forms as the state and the law. Yet there is this tremendous difference from the outset that Hegel had all along used the realistic knowledge borrowed from the classical economists only for the purpose of enhancing the importance of his ultimately idealistic system, while Marx made political economy the pivot of a wholly materialist theory of society.

The very pungency with which Marx in his later writings repeatedly pointed out that post-classical bourgeois economy (the so-called 'vulgar' economy) had not advanced beyond Ricardo in any important points, and scornfully dismissed the new socio-scientific synthesis of Comte's 'positivism' for the infinitely greater achievement of Hegel,¹⁰ shows once more the lasting importance of that early phase of economic and social thought for the theory of Marx. This is true even though he far transcended those older theories in asserting the new development of society and the new needs and aims of the proletariat, now arising as an independent class. The proletariat guided by Marxian theory is therefore not only, as Engels put it, 'the inheritor of German classical philosophy'.¹¹ It is also the inheritor of classical bourgeois economics and

10 See Marx 1932, pp. 47–8, footnote 32, and Marx 1905, III, pp. 571–6, and the above-mentioned letter to Engels (Marx 1931–2a).

11 See the concluding sentence of *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical Philosophy* (Engels 1888), and an additional reference to the equal importance of the 'developed economic and political conditions in England and France', in the Preface to the first German edition of his pamphlet *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* (Engels 1880).

social research. As such, it has transformed the traditional classical theory in accordance with the intervening changes in historical conditions.

Marx no longer regards bourgeois society from the standpoint of its first phase of development and its opposition to the feudal structure of medieval society. He is not interested only in the static laws of its existence. He treats bourgeois society in all its aspects as a transitory historical phenomenon. He explores the whole process of its genesis, and the tendencies contained therein which, in their further development, will lead to its revolutionary overthrow. He finds these tendencies twofold: *objective* in the economic basis of bourgeois society, *subjective* in the new division of social classes arising out of this same economic basis and not out of politics, law, ethics, etc. Thus 'civil society', which until then had constituted a homogeneous whole, opposed only to feudalism, is now torn into two opposed 'parties'. The assumed 'civil society' is in reality 'bourgeois society', namely, a society based on the cleavage of classes, in which the bourgeois class controls other classes economically and therefore politically and culturally. So at last '*la classe la plus laborieuse et la plus misérable*' enters the widened horizon of social science. Marxian theory recognises the class-war of the oppressed and exploited wage-labourers to be a war for the abolition of present-day society. As a materialist science of the contemporary development of bourgeois society, Marxian theory is at the same time a practical guide for the proletariat in its struggle to realise proletarian society.

The later artificial detachment of sociology as a special branch of learning, which dates its scientific origin from Comte, and at its best allows the great original thinkers who did the real productive work in this field to stand as its 'forerunners', represents nothing more than an escape from the practical, and therefore also theoretical, tasks of the present historical epoch. Marx's new socialist and proletarian science which, in a changed historical situation, further developed the revolutionary theory of the classical founders of the doctrine of society, is the genuine social science of our time.

The Principle of Historical Specification

Marx comprehends all things social in terms of a definite historical epoch. He criticises all the categories of the bourgeois theorists of society in which that specific character has been effaced. Already in his first economic work we find him reproaching Ricardo for having applied the specifically bourgeois concept of *rent* to 'landed property of all epochs and of all countries. This is the error of all economists who represent bourgeois production conditions as eternal'.¹

The scope of the principle of historical specification is clearly demonstrated in this example. *Landed property* has been widely different in character and has played very different parts in the various historical epochs of society. The different ways in which primitive communal property in land had been broken up directly influenced the varied forms of the later development of society based upon private property.² Up to the Middle Ages landed property, i.e. agriculture, constituted the central category dominating all the other categories of production, just as *capital* does in present-day bourgeois society.³ The different ways in which, in different parts of the world, feudal property in land, upon the victory of the bourgeois mode of production, was subjected to capital, the different ways in which rent was transformed into a part of capitalistic surplus-value, and agriculture into an industry, determined to a great extent the structure of the various capitalistic systems which arose from it. They retain an importance even for the forms of the labour-movements which were later to arise within them, and for the different forms in which the transition to the socialist mode of production will ultimately be effected in each of the different systems. For this reason Marx investigated with particular care, to the end of his life, the history of landed property and rent as shown on the one hand in the *United States*, and on the other hand in *Russia*. Similarly, Lenin, in his book on *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, at the end of the nineteenth century, analysed the specific historical forms of this transitional process.⁴ Yet for both Marx and Lenin, all this comprehensive study of the various historical

1 See Marx 1931–2d 1, vi, p. 217.

2 See Marx 1859, p. 9, footnote 1.

3 See the MSS. of a *General Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx 1857).

4 Lenin 1929 [1899]. Lenin began to write this book in 1896 while he was in prison and went on with it during his exile in Siberia. The first Russian edition appeared in 1899, the second in 1907. German edition in vol. III of *Collected Works*, Vienna-Berlin, 1929.

forms serves only as a base for working out the specific character of *capitalistic rent* in fully developed *bourgeois society*.

In the fundamental analysis of the modern *capitalist mode of production* which forms the subject-matter of Volume I of *Capital*, Marx does not deal with the category of rent at all. What is discussed here, in addition to the general function of the soil as an element of the labour-process itself,⁵ is only the manner in which the historical transition to the modern capitalist mode of production reacted upon the conditions of the agricultural proletariat, first, in fully developed industrial countries,⁶ second, in such countries as Ireland that have fallen behind in the process of industrialisation,⁷ and finally in actual colonies.⁸ The proper place for a discussion of 'rent' is in a section of the third book of *Capital* in which the forms of *capitalist distribution* are analysed, as they arise from the historical forms of capitalist production.⁹ Even here, there is no room for an independent analysis of earlier historical forms. A few scattered remarks serve to illuminate the contrast between the modern bourgeois form of landed property and past historical forms; and consideration of the historical 'Genesis of Capitalistic Rent' is relegated to a supplementary chapter at the end.¹⁰

'Rent', then, as discussed in Marxian theory, is in no way a general term referring to landed property of all epochs. It refers to 'a specific historical form into which feudal land ownership and small peasants' agriculture have been *transformed* through the influence of capital and of the capitalistic mode of production'.¹¹ In this sense, and in this sense only, an analysis of modern capitalist rent, or of the portion of the surplus-value produced by the industrial capital which falls into the hands of the capitalist landowner, forms a necessary part of the complete analysis of the process of capitalistic production contained in the three volumes of *Capital*.

The principle of historical specification is further demonstrated by the way Marx deals with the different historical forms of 'capital' itself. Just as in the present epoch *industrial capital* appears as the standard form of all capital, so did '*Merchant-Capital*' and its twin brother, '*Interest-bearing Capital*', and

5 See Marx 1932, pp. 139 *et seq.*

6 Marx 1932, pp. 639 *et seq.*

7 Marx 1932, pp. 664 *et seq.*

8 *Ibid.*, the whole chapters xxiv and xxv dealing with 'So-called Primitive Accumulation' and 'Modern Colonial System'.

9 See Marx 1894, ii, pp. 153–348.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 315–48.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 153 *et seq.*

the various sub-forms of these (more exactly described by Marx as ‘capital for trading in goods’, ‘capital for trading in money’, ‘capital for lending money’), occupy an independent and, in certain respects, a predominating position in the epochs preceding capitalistic society and, indeed, in the first phases of capitalist society itself. Even within the fully developed capitalist economy of today, the merchant and the banker, though not involved in actual production like the industrial capitalist, perform a definite function in the circulation of capital. They also participate in the distribution of ‘surplus-value’; a considerable part of the yearly amount at the disposal of the capitalist class as a whole falls to their share as ‘commercial profit’ and ‘interest’ – just as we have seen another part of it going in the form of ‘rent’ to landed property-owners who have as little to do with actual production. Moneylenders’ capital has even recaptured an important position – though not, as some Marxists have recently believed, a definite supremacy – in its new form as an integral part of modern so-called ‘finance capital’, i.e. a system of highly concentrated capital obtained by the fusion of private and state-controlled bank-capital with trust and state-controlled industrial capital.¹²

The Marxian analysis of modern capitalist production starts from the assumption that the previously independent forms of trading capital and money-capital have been *transformed* into mere accessories of the now prevailing form. It is true that all capitalist production bears the stamp of its historical origin from the intrusion of the merchant into the sphere of feudal production. Capitalist production remains, even today, essentially *production for sale*. Every article resulting from capitalist production is to be sold as a commodity, whether to another industrial capitalist who needs it to carry on his own process of production or, ultimately, to the immediate consumer. Again, all capitalist production is conditioned by a given amount of disposable *money*. Thus the very way in which ‘capital’ first arose and gained control of production through the money supplied by wealthy individuals, merchants, usurers, etc. constantly repeats itself under the present conditions of fully developed industrial production. ‘Every new aggregate of capital’, says Marx, ‘comes on the stage, that is, on the market, whether of commodities, labour, or money, even in our days, in the form of money that by a definite process has to be transformed into capital.’¹³

Nevertheless the ‘secret’, not only of ‘how capital produces’ but also of ‘how capital *is* produced’ – and incidentally the key to the abolition of all capitalist

12 See Hilferding 1910 and Lenin 1931 [1917].

13 See Marx 1932, p. 109, and, for a more detailed analysis of the various forms which capital assumes in its different stages, Marx 1894, p. i.

exploitation and wage-slavery – can in no way be discovered through an analysis of the functions performed by those ‘accessory’ forms of capital in the process of circulation, or of the revenues which accrue to the capitalists concerned, in consideration of the ‘services’ performed in that sphere. ‘One will therefore understand’, says Marx, ‘why in our analysis of the basic form of capital, of the form in which it determines the economic organization of modern society, its popular, and, as it were, antediluvian forms, “trading capital” and “usurers’ capital”, for the present (viz. in the analysis of the actual process of capitalist production in Volume I of *Capital*) are entirely ignored.’¹⁴

Even when, in *Capital* volumes II and III, Marx comes back to these ‘antediluvian forms’ in dealing with capitalist circulation and distribution, he takes as his main theme not their historical development but only the specific forms into which they have been *transformed* by the action of modern industrial capital.¹⁵ The historical analyses which run through the whole of the sections concerned, and both of the supplementary chapters under the headings ‘Historical data concerning merchants’ capital’ and ‘Pre-capitalistic conditions’,¹⁶ merely serve to enlighten that great historical process through which, in the course of centuries and millenaries, *trade-* and *money-transactions* lost more and more of their originally dominant position until they assumed their present place as mere subordinate modes of existence of the various functions which industrial capital sometimes adopts and sometimes discards within the sphere of its circulation.

There is one aspect alone under which *rent* as well as *trading capital* and *money-capital* might have been treated as a proper theme in Marx’s analysis of the modern capitalist mode of production. According to an original and more comprehensive scheme of procedure, Marx would have followed up the more strictly economic topics of production, circulation and distribution, social classes, etc. as now discussed in the three volumes of *Capital*, by an investigation of what may be called ‘economic questions of a higher order’ such as the relation between *town and country* and the *international relations of production*.¹⁷

14 Marx 1932, p. 126.

15 Marx 1932, II, pp. i–iv; III, pp. xvi, xix, xxi–xxxv.

16 Marx 1932, III, pp. xx and xxxvi.

17 See Marx 1857, pp. 778–9, and Marx 1932, p. 317, where Marx expressly states that he cannot here go further into the cleavage between town and country, although ‘the whole economic history of society is summed up in the movement of this antagonism’. For a more detailed discussion see Korsch 1932, pp. 8 *et seq.*

Only with these later researches would Marx's analysis have reached the point where the antagonism of *landed property to capital*, as well as that of *trade- and money-capital to industrial capital*, survives in present-day society – the latter as a characteristic difference in general structure and outlook between trading cities and factory-towns, commercial and industrial states; the former as a persisting conflict between the aims of the rural farmers and the industrial and commercial interests represented by the towns; and, on an international scale, between primarily agricultural and definitely industrial countries.

The principle of historical specification as illustrated by the preceding examples (landed property and the various forms of capital) is strictly adhered to by Marx. He deals with all categories of his economic and socio-historical research in that specific form and in that specific connection in which they appear in modern bourgeois society.¹⁸ He does not treat them as eternal categories. Nor does he, for that matter, transform himself into an historian. While fully aware of the different specific forms in which many economic categories of modern bourgeois society had occurred in earlier epochs, he does not go into the history of 'money', of the 'exchange of commodities', of 'wage-labour', or of that of 'co-operation', the 'division of labour' etc. He discusses the different stages of the historical development of all these economic concepts, and of the political, juridical, and other ideological concepts bound up with them, only in so far as it is necessary for his main theme, i.e. the specific character assumed by them in modern bourgeois society.

The contrast which exists in this respect between Marx and his forerunners comes out most strikingly upon comparison. While the work of the last representative of classical bourgeois economy, David Ricardo, is devoted to the *Principles of Political Economy*,¹⁹ Marx restricted his economic research to 'modern bourgeois production'²⁰ and finally gave the work which contains his analysis and critique of the whole of traditional political economy the plain and definite name 'Capital'. Ricardo begins the exposition of his system with the general concept of 'value'; Marx commences the critical investigation of the theory and the facts underlying modern bourgeois economy with an external object, a palpable thing, the 'commodity'. While Ricardo frees the economic concept of 'value' from the last earthly impurities that were still attached to it by his predecessors, Marx regards even the more concrete term 'commod-

18 See Marx 1857, pp. 774 *et seq.*

19 Ricardo 1817.

20 Marx 1857, p. 712.

ity' as still too abstract to serve as a starting point for his critical analysis of modern bourgeois production. He therefore excludes from his application of the term those cases in which an exchange of commodities has occurred as an *isolated phenomenon*, under entirely different historical conditions. He deals with the 'commodity' only as an offshoot of '*general commodity production*' prevailing in modern industrial society. The single commodity, then, is not an independent entity. It is but one of the units into which that 'immense collection of commodities', which had been defined by the classical economists as the '*wealth of nations*', is to be resolved for the purpose of scientific investigation. It is an element of that mass of exchangeable products which Marx, by a most significant alteration of the accepted Smithian term, called '*bourgeois wealth*'²¹ or, more precisely, the '*wealth of those societies in which the capitalistic mode of production prevails*.'²² Only thus specifically defined do 'commodities' form the subject-matter of Marx's economic analysis. Only as properties of a commodity so defined do the general concepts of '*value in use*' and '*value in exchange*', and the other terms of the classical economic system derived from those fundamental concepts, interest him.

This applies even to the most general term of '*value*' which, according to Marx, must still be distinguished from '*value in exchange*' – the latter being only the external form in which the intrinsic '*value*' of a given commodity manifests itself in the ratio of exchange of such commodities.²³ This most abstract term, which Marx adopted from the later classical economists, has been highly suspect to some well-meaning but superficial interpreters of Marx who found that the concept of an intrinsic '*value*', distinct from exchange-value, reeks of scholasticism, metaphysical realism, Hegelian idealism and what not, and for this reason does no credit to a '*materialist*' science. As a matter of fact, the somewhat '*minute*' Marxian analysis of the '*form of value or value in exchange*' as contained in a section of the first chapter of *Capital*, has not unjustly been indicted, as Marx himself anticipated it to be,²⁴ on the count of difficulty. Nevertheless, there is no point in accepting the term '*exchange value*', as taken by Marx from his forerunners, the founders of classical political economy, and rejecting that of an intrinsic '*value*' which was used by him only as a means to work out more clearly the true contents of the classical

21 See Marx 1859, opening sentence.

22 See Marx 1932, opening sentence.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 2–5.

24 See the 'Preface' to Marx 1867.

value-concept, and to expose critically the 'fetishism' bound up with the term as used by his predecessors.²⁵

The Marxian interpretation of 'value' is far removed from that peculiar misconception by which some earlier writers had held it to be a physical property belonging to things along with those other physical properties which establish the utility of such things for human wants or their 'use-value'. Nor did he share the more refined mistake which in his time, in spite of several refutations, still lingered in the minds of the economists, and by which 'value' was regarded as a metaphysical property belonging, not to the things themselves nor to their substance but, as it were, to 'things in exchange'. Value, according to Marx, is first of all not a physical property. 'So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or in a diamond'.²⁶ The value pertaining to useful things when they are exchanged as commodities may well be called a 'metaphysical' quality, but only in that extremely unmetaphysical sense of being *not a physical but a social quality*, applying to the products of human labour or rather to the labour itself by which such useful things are produced and to the labourers producing them within a 'commodity-producing society', i.e. under the conditions prevailing in present-day capitalist society.

Modern economists have tried to improve upon classical economic theory by pointing to the fact that 'value' is not a property pertaining to a thing (or to the members of a class of things), but is rather a *relation* connecting two or more things, and Jevons has made much of that 'discovery'. In fact, there is nothing particularly new in this Jevonsian 'relativism' as against those classical writers who had defined the value pertaining to 'things of exchange' as a purely quantitative relation, and it altogether misses the point where the classical concept of 'value' was indeed vulnerable. Marx was fully conscious of the fact that all concepts of 'value' are strictly 'relative' terms. They either denote an immediate relation between objects and man (which is realised by actual 'use' or consumption), or a relation of a different order (realised by the 'exchange' of

25 It is interesting to note in this connection that Marx introduced the term 'value', as distinct from 'value in exchange', into the statement of his theory as late as 1867, while he had not used it in an otherwise identical exposition of his argument in 1859. He did so, in the writer's opinion, mainly for the sake of clarifying the more detailed critical exposure of the *fetishism of commodities* which was now added, in the first chapter of *Capital*, to the earlier statement of the theory, as contained in the *Critique of Political Economy*. In fact, as will be shown in Part II of this book, the mere theoretical contents of the Marxian argument can be expressed just as accurately, though perhaps not quite as definitely, without using the term of 'value' at all. But this is different with the more important critical implications of the term.

26 See Marx 1932, pp. 49–50.

such objects), viz., the quantitative relation in which use-values of one sort are exchanged for those of another sort whenever they are exchanged. The relations of the latter order had been regarded by the classical economists as the only 'value' to be dealt with in a strictly economic science, and had been styled by them 'value in exchange', as distinguished from mere utility or 'value in use'. Marx easily agreed with the classical writers when they established the difference in kind prevailing between '*exchange-value*' as a quantitative relation arising through the selling and buying of commodities on the market, i.e. by a social process; and '*use-value*' as a merely qualitative relation between external objects and man. But he did not agree with them in the *ultimate location* of the social relations manifesting themselves in the 'value'-relations of commodities as established by their exchange. For the purpose of bringing out the point which really interested him, he made use of the as yet vague distinction, made by the classicists, between 'exchange-value' as the apparent phenomenon and 'value' as the hidden entity underlying its appearance. By an apparently notional development (in the best Hegelian style) of the various connotations of the classical term 'value', he in fact disclosed the real social nature of the *fundamental human relations* underlying the so-called 'value' of the classicists. They do not arise between the commodities as exchanged on the market nor, for that matter, between the persons selling and buying such commodities, but rather they are previously established by the definite forms in which the workers producing such commodities cooperate in their production under the control of the capitalist. Thus, the relation manifested by the 'value' of things is essentially a '*social relation of production arising between men and men*'. Indeed, as we shall see in a more detailed way in the second part of this book, the main result of Marx's 'Critique' of the traditional theory of political economy consists in the discovery and description of these fundamental social relations of men – relations which, for a definite historical epoch, appear to the subjects concerned in the disguised and, as it were, perverted form of relations of things, viz., as 'value-relations' of the commodities co-operatively produced by them and mutually exchanged on the market.

'Value' then, in all its denominations, like other economic things or relations such as the 'commodity', 'money', 'labour-power', 'capital', etc. means to Marx a *socio-historical fact* or something which, though not described in physical terms, is still empirically given in a strictly verifiable manner.²⁷ 'We must always keep in mind in dealing with economic theory, as indeed with all other

27 See Marx's letter to Engels of 2 April 1858, in which he says that this concept of value, 'although an abstraction, is an *historical abstraction* which, therefore, could only be made on the basis of a determinate economic development of society' (Marx 1927–30b, p. 309).

socio-historical science, that the subject matter, here modern bourgeois society, is given in the mind of the observer just as it is in reality, and that its categories express, therefore, forms of being, modes of existence, and often only single aspects of this definite society or subject matter'.²⁸

We shall later study the far-reaching theoretical and practical implications of the difference between this Marxian principle of historical specification and the abstract concepts of classical political economy. We here confine ourselves to one most important result. The concept of the '*commodity*' in the specific form and context in which it appears under the conditions of the present system of 'capitalist commodity production', includes from the very beginning a commodity of a peculiar nature, incorporating the flesh and blood in the hands and heads of the wage-labourers – the commodity *labour-power*. 'These labourers who have to sell themselves piecemeal are a commodity like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market'.²⁹ Furthermore, the sellers of that peculiar commodity, under the very condition of its sale, are never in the position of free agents,³⁰ for they 'live only so long as they find work, and find work only so long as their labour increases capital'.³¹

Thus the term 'Commodity', as used by Marx, presupposes the transformation of labour-power into a commodity, and 'commodity-production' is equivalent to present-day *capitalist commodity-production*.³² Only by bearing this in mind can we understand the importance of that general analysis of the 'commodity' which in Marx's book precedes all further analysis and critique of the economic conditions prevailing in present society. It is only thus that the distinctive historical conditions of the present epoch of a fully developed capitalist mode of production can be brought out in full relief without cutting them off from their more general, but equally historical, background. The *commodity*, according to Marx, *means capital*; but capital, both historically and theoretically, means a lot more than a mere exchange of commodities. Marx is aware of the 'definite historical conditions' which are necessary that a product

28 See Marx 1857, p. 777. See also the preceding remark on p. 774 where Marx, opposing his own 'theoretical' method to that hitherto applied by the classical theorists, emphasised the same point: 'Even when applying a theoretical method we must bear in mind the subject, society, as our real pre-supposition'.

29 See Marx and Engels 1931–2a, p. 532.

30 See the 'Report of the Factory Inspectors' for the six months ending 30 April 1850, p. 45 – quoted by Marx in Marx 1932.

31 See Marx and Engels 1931–2a, p. 532.

32 See Marx 1932, p. 133, footnote 41; see also II, pp. 9, ii *et seq.*, 88, etc.

may become a 'commodity' and that, in the further development, 'money' may appear as the general commodity, for the purpose of exchange. 'The appearance of products as *commodities* presupposed such a development of the social division of labour, that the separation of use-value from exchange-value, a separation which first began with barter, must already have been completed'. Again, 'the particular functions of *money* which it performs, either as the mere equivalent of commodities, or as means of circulation, or means of payment, as hoard, or as universal money, point to very different stages in the process of social production'.³³ Yet we know by experience that a relatively primitive development of society suffices for the production of all these forms. *It is otherwise with capital.*

The historical conditions of its existence are by no means given with the mere circulation of money and commodities. It can spring into life only when the owner of the means of production and subsistence meets in the market with the free labourer selling his labour-power. And this one historical condition comprises a world's history. Capital, therefore, announces from its first appearance a new epoch in the process of social production.³⁴

Only at this stage are we able to grasp the full importance of *industrial capital* as the only form which adequately represents the nature of modern capitalist production. 'Industrial capital', according to an express assertion of Marx which we may safely take to be his final and most complete statement on this matter,

gives to production its capitalistic character. Its existence includes that of class antagonism between capitalists and labourers. To the extent that it assumes control over social production, the technique and social organization of the labour process are revolutionized and with them the economic and historical type of society. The other kinds of capital, which appear before the industrial capital amid past or declining conditions of social production, are not only subordinated to it and suffer changes in the mechanism of their functions corresponding with it, but move on it as a basis; they live and die, stand and fall, as this, their basis, lives and dies, stands and falls.³⁵

33 See Marx 1932, p. 32.

34 Ibid.; see also Marx 1932, II, p. 13.

35 See Marx 1885, p. 29.

The Principle of Historical Specification (*continued*)

The principle of historical specification, besides its theoretical significance as an improved method of sociological analysis and research, becomes of paramount importance as a polemical weapon in the practical struggle waged against the existing conditions of society. The manner in which Marxists wield this weapon appears most clearly in a section of the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, dealing with ‘the bourgeois objections to communism.’¹ One basic form of argument recurs in all the replies to the bourgeois indictment of communism. In response to the accusation that they want to abolish property, individuality, liberty, culture, law, the family, the ‘fatherland’, etc., the communists say that the point at issue is not the general conditions of all social life but only the specific historical form assumed by them in present-day bourgeois society. All economic, class-, and other characters constituting that specific historical form are discussed, with the result that the would-be defenders of the natural and necessary foundations of society are revealed to be the biased protagonists of the particular conditions of the existing bourgeois order and the particular needs of the bourgeois class.

The first objection raised by the bourgeoisie is that the communists want to abolish *property*. To this, the *Manifesto* replies:

The abolition of existing property relations is not a peculiar feature of Communism. All property relations in the past have been continually subject to historical change.

The French revolution, for example, abolished feudal property in favour of bourgeois property.

The distinguishing feature of Communism is not the abolition of all property, but the abolition of bourgeois property.

But modern bourgeois private property is the final and most complete expression of the system of producing and appropriating products that is based on class antagonisms, on the exploitation of the many by the few.

In this sense, the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: abolition of private property.

1 See Marx and Engels 1931–2a, pp. 538–44; also p. 528.

It is then further argued that this modern form of property can no longer be described as a 'hard-won, personally acquired property' forming 'the groundwork of all personal freedom, activity and independence'. A property answering that ideological concept of the theoretical spokesmen of the bourgeoisie was 'the property of the petty artisan and of the small peasant', a form of property that existed before the bourgeois form. The communists have no need to abolish that. 'The development of industry has abolished it and is abolishing it daily'. 'The present form of property moves in the antagonism of capital and wage-labour'. It has a specific and different significance for each of the two great classes confronting each other in modern bourgeois society. '*To be a capitalist is to have not only a personal, but a social, status in production*'. In the same way, wage-labour, the labour of the proletarian, does not create property for the labourer, it creates capital, i.e., the social power that exploits wage-labour. 'The abolition of property, therefore, does not mean the transformation of personal property into social property; it is only the social character of the property that undergoes a change, it loses its class character'.

The second objection of the bourgeoisie is that the communists want to destroy *individuality* and *freedom*. Communism replies that what is at stake here is only 'bourgeois individuality, independence and freedom':

By freedom is meant, under the present bourgeois conditions of production: free trade, free selling and free buying. But if haggling disappears, free haggling disappears also. This talk about free haggling, and all other braggadoccio of our bourgeoisie about freedom in general, has a meaning, if any, only in contrast with restricted haggling, with the fettered traders of the Middle Ages, but has no meaning when opposed to the Communist abolition of haggling, of the bourgeois conditions of production, and of the bourgeoisie itself.

When private property is abolished the bourgeois calls it the 'abolition of property'. But this property exists in the hands of his class only by being cut off from the vast majority of society. From the moment when labour can no more be transformed into capital, money and rent, in one word, into a social power capable of being monopolised, the bourgeois complains that 'individuality is being destroyed'. He confesses, therefore, that by 'individuality' he means none other than that of the bourgeois, i.e. the capitalist owner of property. 'This individuality must, indeed, be destroyed'.

In the same way, the bourgeoisie confuses the general concept of *work*, and *activity*, with the specific bourgeois form of wage-labour, the forced labour of the propertyless labourer for the benefit of the non-labouring owners of

capital. If the bourgeoisie is afraid lest 'with the abolition of private property all activity will cease and universal laziness overtake us', the *Manifesto* rejoins: 'According to this, bourgeois society ought long ago to have been wrecked through sheer idleness; for those of its members who work acquire nothing, and those who acquire anything do not work. The whole of this objection is but another expression of the tautology: There can no longer be any wage-labour where there is no longer any capital.'

Next, the bourgeoisie laments the threatened loss of *culture* through the advent of communism. To this complaint also, Marx has a specific reply: 'Just as to the bourgeois the disappearance of class property is the disappearance of production itself, so the disappearance of class culture is to him identical with the disappearance of all culture. That culture the loss of which he laments is, for the enormous majority, a mere training to act as a machine.'

The same lack of discernment is shown in the sweeping indictment brought against communism on account of its professed hostility to the *state* and the *law*. The so-called 'subversive tendencies' of the communists are, in fact, not directed against those general functions of unifying the elements of society into a living and developing whole, which, in the past, have been fulfilled, though in an increasingly defective manner, by state-compulsion and coercive law. The real target of the communist attack is *the present state* which has dropped those historical functions one after another until it has become a mere 'executive committee managing the common affairs of the bourgeois class as a whole' – and *the present law* which, by a similar process, has become nothing but 'the will of the bourgeoisie made into a law for all – a will whose contents are determined by the material conditions of existence of the bourgeois class'.

Abolition of the family! 'Even the most radical', says the *Communist Manifesto*, 'flare up at this infamous purpose of the Communists'. Once more the Marxist replies specifically:

On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form it exists only for the bourgeoisie. But it finds its complement in the forcible absence of the family among the proletarians and in public prostitution.

The communists admit that they want to 'abolish the exploitation of children by their parents'.

They retort to that ever-recurring, stupid assumption of the professional red-baiter that 'communists want to introduce a community of wives', that, on the contrary, 'the present system of bourgeois marriage is in reality a system

of wives in common'.² Besides, it is obvious that 'the abolition of the present system of production must involve the abolition of the community of women arising out of that system, that is, of prostitution both official and unofficial'.

To the further charge made by nationalists that communism is going to 'abolish the Fatherland', the *Manifesto* replies that, in present-day bourgeois society, 'the workers have no Fatherland'. 'One cannot take from them what they do not have'.³

The attitude of the proletariat of each country regarding so-called 'national interests' depends on the specific stage reached by the workers' movement in its historical development on a national and an international scale: 'To the extent that exploitation of one individual by another is abolished the exploitation of one nation by another is also abolished. With the disappearance of the antagonism between classes within the nation, the hostility of one nation to another will disappear'.

In reply to 'the indictment levelled against Communism from a religious, philosophical and from an ideological standpoint generally', the *Communist Manifesto* summarily points to the specific historical character of all human ideas:

What else does the history of ideas prove than that intellectual production changes its character as material production is changed? The ruling ideas of an age have ever been only the ideas of the ruling class.

2 This statement brings to mind Hume's report (in Hume 1779 XIX) of the remark a Turkish ambassador made to Voltaire: 'you Christians keep your seraglios without any further expense in the houses of your friends'. See also a similar statement made by the De Goncourts as to the system of marriage prevailing among the bourgeoisie at their time.

3 The conclusion that the general idea of the 'Fatherland' loses all meaning for the vast majority of the people because 'without property, they have no Fatherland, without Fatherland, everybody is against them, and themselves must be up in arms against everybody', had already been brought forward by Jacques Pierre Brissot in his *Observations d'un républicain sur les différents systèmes d'administration provinciales*, 1787 (See Marx's excerpts in Marx and Engels 1931–2, vol. 6, pp. 1, vi, pp. 616–17). Thus it was a bourgeois revolutionary who first enunciated that most 'odious' of all the socialist doctrines which later was expressed in the 'incendiary' statement of the *Communist Manifesto*: 'The workers have no Fatherland'. Yet it was precisely the bourgeois revolution represented by Brissot that finally destroyed the last historical remnants of what had been, according to a later statement of Engels, 'for all free men, a real fatherland, i.e., an inherited free communal property in land' (See Engels's article 'The Mark', first published as an Appendix to the first German edition of Engels 1880).

When the ancient world was in decline, the ancient religions were conquered by Christianity. When Christian ideas succumbed in the 18th century to the ideas of enlightenment, feudal society fought its death battle with the then revolutionary bourgeoisie. The ideas of religious liberty and freedom of conscience merely expressed the sway of free competition within the domain of knowledge.

This argument holds good also against that more enlightened fraction of the bourgeoisie who concede that religious, moral, philosophical, political, legal ideas, etc. have been modified in the course of historical development but, at the same time, reproach communism for abolishing the *eternal truths* common to all historical epochs, such as freedom, justice, etc.; or for *abolishing religion and morality altogether, instead of remoulding them on a new basis*. Marx replies that, even in this most absolute form, the so-called 'general ideas' must always have a specific historical element. While they do not depend on the definite form which class-antagonisms have assumed in any particular epoch of social development, they do depend on the historical fact, continuing through all those epochs, of the existence of class-antagonisms:

Whatever form they may have taken, one fact is common to all past ages, viz., the exploitation of one part of society by the other. No wonder, then, that the social consciousness of all past ages, despite the multiplicity and variety it displays, moves within certain common forms, or general ideas, which cannot completely vanish, except with the total disappearance of class antagonism.

The communistic revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional property relations. No wonder, then, that its development involves the most radical rupture with traditional ideas.

The Principle of Change

Traditional theory of society, spread over several hundred years and split into many schools and currents, does not present itself to the present-day observer as a homogeneous entity. This is true even if we disregard the fundamental divergence which has occurred within bourgeois thought since the beginning of the nineteenth century, when a new and predominantly *historical* current opposed itself – at first with a monopolistic claim, later only as a supplementary second form – to the hitherto prevailing *theoretical* approach.

The classical phase of bourgeois social theory, continuing into the first decades of the nineteenth century, is characterised by an unconscious generalisation of the new bourgeois principles. Later, in the hands of the ‘vulgar’ economists of the nineteenth century, that unsophisticated attitude became a more or less conscious tendency to represent the *economic* system of bourgeois society in contrast to its politics – or at least its basic part, i.e., *production* as distinguished from distribution – as a general and unchangeable form of all social life. Finally, the founders of modern ‘economics’, and the corresponding schools of ‘general’ or ‘formal’ sociology, have even raised the ‘unspecific’ treatment of their subject-matter to the very principle and criterion of their new and assumedly ‘disinterested’ scientism. A more detailed analysis will be necessary to point out the specific manner in which the *a priori* of definite premises evolving out of the historical and class-conditioned position of all bourgeois science, penetrates into the methods and results of each school, and into the concepts and propositions set up by the single investigator.

A further complication is added by the fact that, in dealing with contemporary bourgeois social theory, we can often no longer exactly determine how far it represents a reaction to the attack of the proletarian class. Not a few among the most important of its later developments can be directly traced to the Marxian theory. We mention particularly, from the last two generations of German sociologists, jurists, historians, and philosophers, *Ferdinand Tönnies* and *Rudolph Stammler*, *Max Weber* and *Ernst Troeltsch*, *Max Scheler* and *Karl Mannheim*; and among the economists, as not the most important but, perhaps, the most typical representative of this whole group – *Werner Sombart*. The manifold broken and distorted forms assumed by the controversy with Marxism under the particular conditions of German academic science, appear most strikingly in the last-named savant, whose many and extensive writings on modern capitalism and socialism testify by their contents, even more

clearly than by the apparent acknowledgment of the author, to the fact that 'all that is good in this work is due to the spirit of Marx'.¹

Werner Sombart began his career in the early 1890s as what he himself recently, at a conference of the Sociological Society in Zurich, called a 'convinced Marxist'; but later, with the changing political and social conditions leading up to the present regime of a so-called 'National Socialism' in Germany, he changed heart and from a disguised Marxist became an altogether undisguised and outright anti-Marxist.² Notwithstanding all these subsequent disfigurements, the irresistible influence originally exercised by Marx's theory on all present-day bourgeois social science is clearly evident even in the later career of Sombart. As late as 1928, at the aforementioned conference of the sociologists, he claimed to have been the first to enunciate the principle of the so-called 'non-evaluative character of a genuine sociological science' and, incidentally, traced back that well-known doctrine of contemporary social research to the 'contradiction' which forty years before had arisen within himself, that is, between his internal 'conviction', and his worldly position as a 'Royal Prussian University Professor'.³

For all these reasons, in confronting the general principles of the Marxian theory with bourgeois science we shall not so much refer to the more recent displays of contemporary social thought, in which their persisting difference has already been modified to some extent by their mutual interaction. We shall rather try to bring out the contrast in the pure form in which it originally appeared in the classical and post-classical bourgeois writers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries on the one hand, and in the writings of Marx and Engels on the other.

Classical bourgeois economists concern themselves with existing bourgeois society. They ingenuously regard society's basic relationships as having

1 See Sombart 1927, p. xix.

2 We mention from the writings of Sombart in which this development is reflected, the following: 1894 *et seq.* Review articles and books, Marxist in tendency; among them the first scientific appreciation of the third volume of *Capital* Volume III in *Archiv für soziale Bewegung* VII; the 1897 first edition of the book *Socialism and Social Movement in the Nineteenth Century* (Sombart 1897); the 1900 pamphlet *Nevertheless! Theoretical and Historical Notes on the Labour Trade Union Movement* (Sombart 1900); the 1924 tenth and 'entirely revised' edition of the book *Socialism and Social Movement* under the changed title *Proletarian Socialism (Marxism)* (Sombart 1924). Subsequent to Hitler's accession to power he wrote a new book, *German Socialism*, etc. Refer also to the article on Sombart's future career by Rosa Luxemburg (Luxemburg 1899–1900, pp. 740 *et seq.*), and Korsch 1931a.

3 See record of the proceedings of the conference of the 'Sociological Society', held in Zurich in 1928.

the immutable character of a genuine natural law, and are for just this reason unable to become aware of any other than this actually given form of society.

Even when bourgeois social theorists appear to speak of other social forms, their real subject matter is the particular form of bourgeois society, whose main characteristics they find duplicated in all other forms. When they speak of 'society' in general, we can still, with only slight variations, recognise in that so-called general society the well-known features of present-day bourgeois society. This is most evident in the writings of the great founders of bourgeois social science in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and their followers, the German idealistic philosophers from Kant to Hegel, who naively used not only the term 'society', but even the term 'civil society' as a timeless concept.⁴

Even when bourgeois investigators speak of an historical 'development' of society, they do not step beyond the magic circle of bourgeois society. They consider all the earlier forms to be 'preliminary stages' leading up to its present fully developed form. They constantly apply concepts drawn from today's social conditions to preceding historical epochs. Right into the nineteenth century they described those phases of primitive history which can by no means be represented by the categories of modern bourgeois society, such as property, the state, the family, etc. as not belonging to history proper – they were merely 'prehistoric'. Even Johann Gotfried Herder, who stood in a much closer relation to real history than most of his contemporaries, wrote in his 'Diary': 'How many ages may have passed by before we learned to know or think? The Phoenician? The Ethiopian? Or none of these? Are we then, with our Moses, in the right place?'⁵

Just as in their study of past conditions, , bourgeois social theorists remain tied to bourgeois categories in their conception of the future as well. They simply cannot conceive of any changes other than those set forth in due sequence by a further unfolding of the fundamental principles appearing in present-day bourgeois society. They regard all social revolutions as pathological interferences with 'normal' social development.⁶ They expect, after the revolutionary 'cycle' has run its full course, pre-revolutionary *social conditions* to be re-established as unchanged, as, according to a similar theory held by

4 See Marx and Engels 1931–2b, pp. 25–6.

5 See Herder 1900.

6 Thus Comte regarded revolutionary periods of society as an analogy to disease in the human body. He did not, for this reason, ignore them totally but rather, following the physician François-Joseph-Victor Broussais (who first subjected the phenomena of disease to the laws governing healthy bodies), proclaimed the study of that '*pathologie sociale*' as a possible substitute for the experimental method used by the physicians.

the politicians, the *political conditions* of the *ancient régime* are re-established in due course by the 'Restoration'. They hold all tendencies of revolutionary socialism and communism which aim at anything beyond this to be mere 'disturbances of healthy social progress' and theoretically 'unscientific' fantasies.

Marx's social science is opposed to all those traditional concepts of classical bourgeois theory. The contrast is, however, not so simple that it can be reduced to the biblical formula 'Let your speech be yea, yea – nay, nay'. It would be altogether wrong, for instance, to imagine that since the bourgeois theory is the doctrine of a 'bourgeois society', that Marx's socialist theory must of necessity be the doctrine of a 'socialist society'. As a matter of fact, scientific socialism is not at all concerned with the painting of a future state of society. Marx leaves that to the sectarians of the old and new utopias. According to his materialist principle, he deals with the real form of society which exists today, i.e. bourgeois society. As against the bourgeois 'theorists' who continually tend to generalise in one way or another the facts they 'discover', he more nearly approaches the method of the bourgeois 'historians', from which, however, he keeps himself all the more aloof in another direction through his insistence on a strictly theoretical form of scientific knowledge.

Nor is the bourgeois concept of developmental stages wholly repudiated by Marx. He distinguishes the historical forms of 'Asiatic', 'antique' and 'feudal' society, and groups them, together with modern 'bourgeois society', into a series of '*progressive epochs of socio-economic formation*'. Although he no longer regards, as the bourgeois theorists had done, all previous forms of society as mere preliminary steps to its present and final formation, still he indulges in the statement that bourgeois society is the last 'antagonistic' form of society and as such 'concludes the pre-history of a really human society'.⁷ While he objects to an arbitrary extension of concepts derived from the present bourgeois state of society, he sets forth the principle that bourgeois society, as the 'most developed and most complex historical organization of production', furnishes a key to the understanding of earlier epochs of social and economic formation.⁸ He even endorsed, in his early years, the 'correct idea' underlying that 'common fiction of the 18th century which regarded the primitive state of man as the true state of human nature'.⁹ As we shall see in our further investigation, Marx and Engels adopted a similar attitude in dealing with the fresh impetus

⁷ See Marx 1859.

⁸ See Marx 1857, p. 776.

⁹ See Marx 1927–30b, p. 251: 'The correct idea underlying all these eccentricities (of the Historical School) is that those primitive conditions are naive "Dutch pictures" of the true conditions'.

which that Rousseauian slogan of the eighteenth century had received through the discovery of so-called 'primitive communism'. From their socialistic point of view, they welcomed the assumption, supported by the leading investigators of the time, of a classless, communistic form preceding all hitherto known society. They did not, however, blindly accept the speculative implications of the new theory, but rather used the historical facts brought forth by Morgan and other explorers of ancient society as a further critical challenge to the 'eternal truths' of the more fundamental aspects of the existing class-dominated society.

There is, of course, a much greater difference between the Marxian and the traditional bourgeois approach to the future developments arising from the present state of society. While even the most progressive bourgeois thinkers of the nineteenth century set their hopes on the slow and gradual process of so-called 'evolution', Marx insisted on the inevitability, in a society based on class-struggle, of a *social revolution*. Yet in a broader sense the evolutionary concept is not completely wiped out in Marxian theory. Even the most violent and disruptive revolution remains, according to Marx, a mere step within an historical process through which the productive forces of man, and thus also the whole economic, political, and ideological structure of society, 'evolve' in a solemn and gigantic rhythm from revolution to revolution. Just as there is – in spite of all the intervening revolutions, and, in fact, realised by those revolutions – one progressive line of development leading up from the historic and 'prehistoric' past to the contemporary form of bourgeois society, so will the socialist and communist society springing from the revolutionary action of the proletarian class, in spite of its break with the established bourgeois order, still remain a further outgrowth of the whole past and present history of an identical 'subject' (mankind) acting upon and adapting itself to an identical 'object' (nature).¹⁰

Apart from the revolutionary contents of the Marxian concept of development, there is another fundamental difference between the materialist theory of the historical process and that metaphysical concept of 'evolution' which was later, chiefly under the influence of Spencer, blindly accepted by such orthodox Marxists as Karl Kautsky¹¹ and as blindly rejected by such heterodox Marxists as Georges Sorel, as a principle of scientific sociology.¹² Marx recognised from the outset the delusive character of that so-called 'historical evolution', according to which 'the last stage' regards the preceding stages as only

10 See Marx 1857, pp. 710 *et seq.*

11 See Korsch 1929, pp. 32 *et seq.*

12 See 'Avant-propos' to Sorel 1903 and Sorel 1903, pp. 239–44.

preliminary to itself and, therefore, can only look at them one-sidedly.¹³ While 'orthodox evolutionists' imagined, following Spencer, that they could explain the more complex organisation of the higher types both of animal-species and social forms by reference to the simpler organisation of the lower, Marx shattered that illusion by the paradoxical statement that '*the anatomy of man is a key to the anatomy of the ape*'.¹⁴

This critical consciousness breaks the magic spell of the metaphysical 'law' of evolution. From an *a priori* valid axiom, it is reduced to a working hypothesis which must be empirically verified in each case. Even though bourgeois society does provide a 'key' to earlier epochs, it does not follow that such categories as the commodity, money, the state, law, etc. must have the same meaning for ancient society and its mode of production as they have for modern capitalist production and for the bourgeois society based upon it. Thus, the path is made free for strictly empirical research. Bourgeois society may contain the conditions of earlier societies in a further developed form. It may contain them as well in degenerate, stunted, and travestied forms. Thus the communal property of primitive times, according to Marx, was revived in a travestied form in the Russian 'Mir'.¹⁵ The present system of society likewise contains within itself the germs of its future development, though by no means its complete determination. The false idealistic concept of evolution as applied by bourgeois social theorists, is *closed* on both sides, and in all past and future forms of society rediscovers only itself. The new, critical and materialist Marxian principle of development is, on the contrary, *open* on both sides. Marx does not deal with Asiatic, antique, or feudal society, and still less with those primitive societies which preceded all written history, merely as 'preliminary stages' of contemporary society. He regards them, in their totality, as so many independent historical formations which are to be understood within their own categories. In the same way he defines the socialist and communist societies arising out of the proletarian revolution not only as further developed forms of bourgeois society, but as a new type which is no longer to be basically explained under any of the bourgeois categories. Marx's quarrel with the *Utopian Socialists* is not, as many have imagined, inspired by their idea of a future commonwealth totally different from the present state of contemporary bourgeois society. On the contrary, the weakness of the *Utopian Socialists* lies in the fact that, in attempting to portray a socialist future, they at bottom only idealised the existing conditions of society, leaving out the shadows. All such utopian schemes

13 See Marx 1857, pp. 776–7.

14 See Marx 1857, p. 776.

15 Ibid.

will, when worked out in detail and put into practice, inevitably reproduce only the same old bourgeois form of society we know so well.¹⁶ On the other hand, Marxism, while carefully avoiding a detailed painting of future stages, nevertheless endeavours to find, within contemporary bourgeois society, the main tendencies of a further development leading up, first to that transitional stage opened by the proletarian revolution, and ultimately, to those further advanced stages which Marx called a *completely developed communist society*. Communist society in its 'first phase', just emerging from the womb of bourgeois society after protracted labour-pains, will still be determined in many ways in its economic, political, legal, intellectual, and moral structure by bourgeois principles. Communistic society in its 'second phase', where it has already developed on its own basis, will be as far removed from the principles of present-day bourgeois society as is, in the other direction, the classless and stateless 'primitive communism' of the earliest epochs of human society. Communist society, when it is fully developed, will have left narrow bourgeois horizons far behind and will ultimately realise the principle which, in an abstract manner, was first enunciated by the 'utopian' pioneers on the threshold of the nineteenth century: 'From each according to his abilities; to each according to his needs.'¹⁷

To the philosophical dialectic of Hegel, which he otherwise regarded as the perfected instrument of a developmental investigation of society, Marx raised the objection that, although steeped in deep insight into the historical past, it did not genuinely accept the reality of historical change. Hegel, who glorified existing institutions and moderate progress within the narrow confines of the contemporary Prussian state,¹⁸ carefully restricted the validity of his dialectical principle to the *past* developments of society and consigned future progress in a purposely irrational manner to the 'mole burrowing below the surface'.¹⁹ Even in criticising the so-called 'pre-formation hypothesis', according to which all future forms are already physically contained in those that precede them, he emphasised at the same time the correctness of its main idea that social development 'remains with itself in its process and that by such a development no new content is brought about, but only a change of form'. Development is, therefore, according to Hegel, 'only to be regarded as if

16 See the third of the articles contributed by Marx to Marx 1850.

17 See Marx 1875, p. 567.

18 See Hegel's 'Address to his Audience on the Occasion of his Opening Lecture in Berlin', 22 October 1818.

19 See the *Peroration of Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (Hegel 1817–30).

it were a play; the something else which is set by it, is in fact nothing else'.²⁰ It is evident that from this standpoint which, in its unyielding Hegelian formula, amounts almost to an involuntary criticism of the principle of evolution as used by the bourgeois social investigators, there is no room for the conscious human-social act, which shall radically transform and overthrow the present order of society. Hegel said, concerning the real 'purpose' of all historical action, that 'it is already fulfilled in truth, and need not wait for us'. Its actual performance, then, serves only 'to remove the semblance as if it were not yet performed'.²¹ Hence, in contrast to some of his followers, who later on actually tried to use his dialectical method as an instrument for revolution, Hegel considered the only purpose of his philosophy to be to 're-establish' the conviction from which 'every unsophisticated consciousness starts': '*What is rational is real, and what is real is rational*', and thus to bring about a final 'reconciliation' between 'reason as self-conscious mind' and 'reason as a given reality'.²²

It is here that we face the most important consequence of the total destruction of bourgeois evolutionary metaphysics which is implied in Marx's materialistic criticism of the Hegelian idealist dialectic. Marx's study of society is based upon a full recognition of the *reality of historical change*. Marx treats all conditions of existing bourgeois society as *changing* or, more exactly, as conditions *being changed* by human actions. At the same time, he regards all, even the most general categories of social science, as categories changeable and *to be changed*. He dismisses all the concepts applied by bourgeois social theorists and historians, in which the present form of society is in any way withdrawn from the constant flux of things, whether the writer deals with present-day bourgeois conditions as 'natural' and as having always existed; or whether, on the contrary, he erects an impassable barrier between past social conditions and the present-day bourgeois state of society; or whether, again, he recognises a real change only with respect to previous history and closes the whole development of human society with the bourgeois state reached in the present age. Bourgeois society, then, is no longer in any sense a general entity which can be justified by another than the historical title. It is a transitory stage which has been reached in the present time, and is valid temporarily for this particular epoch, yet to be replaced by another state in an historical movement. It is at the same time but the present result of an earlier phase, and the starting point of a new phase, of the social class-struggle leading to a social revolution.

20 See Hegel 1830, I, § 161 (Hegel 1830).

21 See Hegel 1830, I, addition to § 212.

22 See Hegel 1920, Preface.

The Principle of Criticism

The description of existing bourgeois conditions as *specific* conditions of a *transitory phase* in a historical process assumes a further importance as a theoretical basis for a critical examination of the structure of present society as a particular historical type of socio-economic formation.

Just as in actual history every revolutionary movement of the bourgeoisie bred, as an undercurrent, independent stirrings of that class which was more or less the undeveloped predecessor of the modern proletariat, there have been even in the infancy of bourgeois thought some isolated thinkers who anticipated the criticism of the bourgeois principles which had not as yet been put into practice. Apart from these exceptional cases, a real theoretical understanding of the historical process and the self-criticism bound up with it did not arise in bourgeois thought until the very end of its classical epoch, when the revolutionary fight of the bourgeoisie against feudal society had come to its end and a new divergence of classes had begun to manifest itself within the hitherto united industrial society.

It was not a criticism, but in fact a glorification when, in the middle of the seventeenth century, Hobbes described the existing state of bourgeois society (or, as he imagined in conformity with the prevailing delusion of contemporary thinkers, of 'society' in general) as a '*bellum omnium contra omnes*' or 'a war of every man against every man', which is only effectively and finally brought to a close by 'a common Power to keep them all in awe', i.e., by the iron dictatorship of the state. Again, it was a glorification of bourgeois society when, 50 years later, Mandeville spoke of its peculiar construction, purposely devised by an 'all-cunning' providence, in his paradoxical equation 'Private vices – public benefits'. Once more, it was a glorification when, at the close of the eighteenth century, Kant discovered the 'antagonism of unsocial sociality' by which eventually 'the first true steps from uncouthness to culture, and the agreement to live in a society, are pathologically thrust upon man'. 'All culture and art which adorn mankind, the most beautiful social order, are fruits of that unsociality which by its own nature is compelled to discipline itself and thus fully to develop the germs of nature through an art forced upon it from without'.¹

While the Darwinian formula of a '*struggle for existence*' along with the older formula of Thomas Hobbes, had been misapplied by the eulogists of

1 See Hobbes 1651; Mandeville 1962 [1706]; Kant 1784.

capitalism as a cosmic substructure of a so-called universal law of 'free competition', Darwin himself had conversely borrowed his general concept from contemporary bourgeois economics. In the Introduction to the second edition of his famous work he said: 'This is the doctrine of Malthus as applied to the whole realm of animal and plant life'.² Indeed, the specific historical form of the division of labour which results from the competition of the isolated commodity-producers within present bourgeois society is so far from being an unchangeable law of human nature that it can be best understood as a brute unconscious form of social self-preservation in contrast to the conscious organisation of the division of labour within a really co-operative society. In that sense 'civil society' had already been characteristically described by Hegel as a '*geistiges Tierreich*' ('the animal world reproduced in the world of the mind').³ The analogy was further developed by Marx in *Capital* when he described the division of labour prevailing within present capitalist society, as an organisation which 'confronts independent commodity producers one with another, who recognize no authority other than that of competition, that is, the coercion exercised upon them by the pressure of their reciprocal interests, just as in the animal kingdom the "war of all against all" maintains, more or less, the conditions of existence of all species'.⁴ It would be preferable, perhaps, in strictly socio-economic research, to avoid altogether such parallels which never quite fit. However, the manner in which Darwin projects into nature, as an absolute law, the *competitive struggle* waged in bourgeois society, and in which Kropotkin equally unwarrantably transforms the opposite principle of co-operation prevailing in communist society into an absolute *Law of Mutual Help in the Animal and Human World*, are both quite different in calibre from the recent attempt by a former orthodox Marxist to project a self-invented pacifistic and evolutionary principle of a so-called *Natural Equilibrium* from present-day society, where it does not apply, to the whole animal and plant world, where it likewise does not apply.⁵

The fundamental weakness of all the more significant interpretations of society in this epoch (including Rousseau's teaching, the bourgeois novel *Robinson Crusoe*, and the whole of the new bourgeois science of political economy) consists in the unhistorical manner in which they deal with the specific conditions of bourgeois society, its mode of production, its state, and its law, as

2 See Darwin 1860. See also Marx 1905b, i, p. 315.

3 See Hegel 1832, pp. 295–314.

4 See Marx 1932, p. 321.

5 See Engels's letter to Friedrich Albert Lange, 11 March 1865 (Engels 1927–30e), and Marx's letter to Ludwig Kugelmann, 27 June 1870 (Marx 1927–30d); see also the author's critical examination of the work of Karl Kautsky (Korsch 1929, pp. 40 *et seq.*).

final; regarding them as a natural and rational society at last attained and now in its main features unchangeable or, what practically amounts to the same thing, as being capable of unlimited perfection. When Marx (in the 'Seventh and last Observation' of his *Anti-Proudhon*) denounced this thoughtless procedure as applied by the economists, he hit the whole school in the shrewd sentence, 'Thus there was history, but there is no more'.⁶

Thus bourgeois theorists have dealt with all earlier forms of society as barbaric preliminary stages leading up to their own, ultimately established civil society. This truly 'barbaric' procedure was, according to Marx, unavoidable so long as their principal task consisted in fighting out their historical struggle with feudalism under the conditions of a bourgeois society not yet finally constituted. It served as a weapon in the battle for progress and did not need, as long as it still had a revolutionary spark in it, any further justification. It appears, from a historical viewpoint, as a last faint echo of those stronger, if more naive, forms in which during the Peasant War and the English Revolution the 'pre-history of humanity' pictured in the Bible and during the French Revolution the *natural state of man*, were opposed as a true civil state of society to the feudal and corrupted order of the Middle Ages. Those were revolutionary slogans of the new bourgeois class against feudalism.

When Adam delved and Eve span
Where was then the gentleman?

There was no such excuse for the further preservation of that antiquated method at a time when the victory of the bourgeois principle over feudalism had been finally won and the theorists of the triumphant bourgeoisie awoke to find themselves transformed unawares from revolutionary pioneers into the tedious panegyrists of an established order of society. Compare, for instance, the characteristic phraseology of the scientific founder of bourgeois '*Ideology*', Destutt de Tracy, who boasted that among the 'Ancients' (i.e. in all epochs before the present 'French Era') 'social art' had not been sufficiently perfected 'to give their empire that state of higher civilization and that strong organization which are necessary to secure the existence of nations effectively policed'.⁷ Or compare those bourgeois historians of the French restoration-period in the nineteenth century who, like François Guizot, Adolphe Thiers, and Augustin Thierry, expressly set themselves the task of rewriting world-history as the *history of the bourgeois class*.

⁶ See Marx 1931–2d p. 188.

⁷ See *Eléments d'idéologie* (De Tracy 1800–5), Vol. 2, 'Introduction', p. 6.

In this phase, the real progress of social science no longer consisted in the further development of bourgeois principles, but in their critique. The genuine self-criticism now for the first time arising within bourgeois science originated with the growth of classical political economy from *Adam Smith* to *Ricardo* and found its complete expression in the last phase of the development of classical German philosophy from *Kant* to *Hegel*.

Hegel's philosophical system is, as the last system of classical German philosophy, the sum and recapitulation not only of all the earlier phases of bourgeois social theory, but also of its inherent contradictions. Like Ricardo, the last classical writer in the field of economics, so Hegel in his philosophy brought into sharper relief the striking contrasts within the structure of civil society which had already been revealed to a certain extent by Bernard Mandeville, Adam Ferguson, Smith, Kant, etc., but which with them had been ultimately harmonised in some 'higher' or 'deeper' unity. Even Hegel, in dealing with the material conditions of existing society, nowhere passed beyond the range of bourgeois thought. Still this new world of the bourgeoisie, with its internal oppositions ranging themselves like so many unbridgeable chasms philosophically exposed by Hegel under the direct influence of Ricardo, stood in a striking contrast to that 'best of all possible worlds' into which even the most daring among the bourgeois thinkers of the preceding generation had ideologically transfigured the hard facts of existing social life.

In Ricardo's economic system and in Hegel's philosophy, bourgeois society reached the highest grade of critical self-consciousness of which it was capable without violating its own principles. This happened at a time when, in the most developed capitalist countries such as England and France, a 'criticism from without' had opposed itself to bourgeois society in the growing revolt of the proletarian class. Just as the last classical economist (Ricardo) had already been faced by a consciously socialist critic of all bourgeois economic science (Jean Charles Léonard de Sismondi), so Hegel reflected the tremors set up in his philosophical exposition of 'civil society' under the foundations of bourgeois society by the new class of hired labourers. He had realistically described this new 'class' which had been brought into being by the bourgeoisie itself, as one 'bound to the particular work of modern industry' and as living 'in need and dependence' and 'excluded from all the advantages of bourgeois society'; as a 'great mass' submerged below that 'mode of subsistence' which is a necessary premise to the enjoyment of social rights, and sinking, by an inevitable law of bourgeois society itself, in the same proportion as the 'excess of wealth' is increased into an increasing 'excess of poverty'.⁸

8 See Hegel 1920, §§ 243–5.

He furthermore accurately indicated that it is not a question here of 'misery' alone, such as had inevitably arisen in earlier times through the parsimony of nature. It is a 'social question' in the real sense of the term, pertinent to modern society, and one which must be solved by society. 'No one can assert a right against nature, but, in the state of society, the defect takes at once the form of an injustice inflicted on one or the other class. The important question as to how poverty is to be relieved is one which particularly agitates and annoys society'.⁹ He described in characteristic language the 'temper' of the great mass of industrial workers which is inseparably bound up with the socially inflicted poverty in which they are forced to live. 'It is', he says, 'an inner revolt against the rich, against society, against the government, etc'.¹⁰

The impassable limit for Hegel, as for all other social scientists of the bourgeoisie, consisted in the fact that he saw the new social class only negatively as the 'mob', and did not realise at the same time its positive revolutionary imputations.¹¹

Even more distinctly than in its contents, the critical element inherent in Hegel's philosophy manifests itself in his *method*. Hegel, unlike Ricardo, had not contented himself with stating the fundamental 'principles' and letting the most glaring theoretical discordances stand as so-called 'modifications'. He endeavoured to confine within one philosophical system both the given condition of the existing bourgeois state and what he called its 'idea'. The 'dialectical method' is the great instrument by which Hegel in his philosophy, complying with the needs of a class pressing toward the termination of the revolutionary movement and to a political and social 'restoration', performed the remarkable task of reconciling within a so-called 'unity of contradictions', the most irreconcilable oppositions resulting from the historical development of bourgeois society itself, and from its later confrontation with the rising class of the proletarian wage-labourers. Whilst his basic description of the existing conditions of 'civil society', though suffering from vagueness, abruptness, and arbitrary judgments, still contains the deep insight of a genius fully aware of bourgeois reality, the cloven foot of his philosophy unequivocally reveals itself

9 Ibid., addition to § 244.

10 See Hegel 1920, addition to § 244.

11 See Marx and Engels 1931-2, pp. 204-8. While here Marx, quite correctly, confronted the restricted viewpoint of his former companions of the road among the 'left' Hegelians, who had not gone beyond Hegel's bourgeois suggestions, with the revolutionary implications of the proletarian class-struggle set forth by such contemporary writers as Proudhon, some years later he, less appropriately, raised the same point against Proudhon himself in Marx 1931-2d, p. 191.

in the 'speculative' superstructure of Hegel's system, which, in an apparent endeavour to establish a new idealist creed corresponding to the needs of the present time, actually restores the whole bulk of old mediaeval metaphysics – inclusive of the Christian dogma – which had been so utterly refuted by the spokesmen of early bourgeois materialism in the intervening centuries of progressive bourgeois thought.¹²

This Hegelian method, which had proved so efficient in swallowing the most powerful contradictions, offered no small temptation to the generation of radical thinkers which arose in the period immediately following Hegel's death, when the unchallenged sway of Hegelian philosophy preceded, during the 1830s and 1840s, the final decline of the Hegelian and, indeed, of all bourgeois philosophy.¹³ They thought that the mighty instrument, forged by the last great philosopher of the bourgeois class, could easily be made available for the more advanced criticism raised against the very principle of the bourgeois *status quo* in the name of the new revolutionary class. All that was needed was to consider the 'premature' termination of Hegel's philosophy in the glorification of bourgeois society, its state, its philosophy, its religion and art, to be only an 'inconsistency' on the part of the conservative 'systematizer' in the application of his own revolutionary 'method'. In fact Ferdinand Lassalle – and Proudhon for a time – did assign this new historical task to Hegel's dialectical method.

Marx and Engels saw clearly that the old bottle could no longer hold the new wine. It is true that they too, in the formation of their new proletarian and materialistic criticism of bourgeois society, took their departure from Hegel's idealistic philosophy and even preserved the term 'dialectic' as a comprehensive name for the several new principles which they worked out and applied in the process of their scientific investigation. But, as will be shown in the third part of this book, all that apparent 'Hegelianism' did not amount, in Marx, to more than what he at one time most appropriately called an 'occasional flirtation with Hegel's peculiar mode of expression'.¹⁴ In actual fact he completely broke with the whole of Hegel's speculative philosophy. He transplanted the dialectical method of Hegel from an idealist to a materialist basis, and in the process of that materialist 'reversal' stripped from it all those elements which he had already thoroughly exposed in an earlier phase of his philosophical

12 See Korsch 1931b, published on the 100th anniversary of Hegel's death (1931) in German and French periodicals.

13 For a more detailed description of this period see the author's *Marxism and Philosophy* (Korsch 1930).

14 See Marx 1931–2e.

development as its underlying ‘mystification.’¹⁵ The theory of the new revolutionary movement of the nineteenth century no longer needed to exercise itself in the art of moving forward and backward at the same time, and to represent its new aims as the ‘restoration’ of the old. It ‘left the dead to bury their dead’ in order to come to its own content.¹⁶

The principles of the Marxian critique of existing society, being proletarian and no longer bourgeois, are opposed to the philosophical system of Hegel not only in content, subject-matter, and aim, but quite as much in theoretical form. If Marx, indeed, took his start from a critical and revolutionary reversal of the principles inherent in Hegel’s method, he certainly went on to develop, in a strictly empirical manner, the specific methods of his own materialistic criticism and research.

There is, aside from the theoretical self-criticism of bourgeois society represented by the later classical writers, another, and entirely different, criticism which flows from the latter of the two above-mentioned currents of nineteenth-century bourgeois thought¹⁷ and which, this time, is directed against the very principle of theoretical analysis itself. Marx, from his new standpoint, saw at once the real character of the *historico-romantic school* which after the close of the great French Revolution had joined, and even in part preceded, the socialists in the attack upon the victorious bourgeois principles. He disclosed in his article on *The Philosophical Manifesto of the Historical School of Law*,¹⁸ and in the analysis of ‘Reactionary Socialism’ embodied in the *Communist Manifesto*, the essentially reactionary trend of that apparently ‘anti-bourgeois’ and ‘anti-capitalistic’ current which – like reactionary Fascism and Hitlerism today – ‘upbraided the bourgeoisie more for having produced a *revolutionary* proletariat than for having produced a proletariat at all.’¹⁹ He has also seen the theoretical loss bound up with this sentimental regression from the only present and real form of social life to mediaeval feudality and even further back to archaic conditions of society – the so-called ‘origins’ of culture, art, economics, etc. ‘The Historical School’, jests Marx, ‘has so emphasized its affection for “sources”, that it requires the sailor to sail, not on the stream but on its source.’²⁰

15 See Marx’s ‘critical revision’ of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Law*, 1843, (Marx 1927–30e, 1, 1, pp. 401–53, and the reference to that earlier analysis in 1931–2e.

16 See Marx 1852.

17 See above, p. 45.

18 See Marx 1927–30c, pp. 251 *et seq.*

19 Marx 1932, vi, p. 547.

20 Marx 1932, 1, i, p. 251.

While thus refuting the entire theoretical and practical ‘philosophy’ of the historical school, in agreement with all progressive minds of the age,²¹ Marx was at the same time aware of the actual progress which had been made by this new school of social research from a purely scientific point of view. Moreover, he discovered the critical and progressive tendency inherent in the apparently backward turn. Writing to Engels on 25 March 1868, he said:

The first reaction against the French Revolution and the enlightenment bound up with it was, naturally, to see everything as mediaeval and romantic. Even such writers as Grimm are not free from this. The second reaction is to see beyond the Middle Ages back into the primitive history of each people. That corresponds to the socialist view, although the scholars have no idea of the connection. Thus they are surprised to find the newest in the oldest, and even ‘Egalitarians,’ to a degree which would scandalize Proudhon.²²

From this sentence, to which a hundred similar ones might be added from Marx’s and Engels’s writings, can be seen the main significance that the study of primaevial society, then passing through its first great period of discovery, had at that time acquired for the revolutionary science of Marx.²³ The very fact that now, for the first time, those social forms of existence which hitherto had been so far removed from present-day conditions and had been accessible to the modern world at best in legend and poetry were opened up to sober scientific research, was for Marx and Engels a sign that bourgeois society in its present stage of development already contained within itself the tendencies toward a change more radical than any achieved by previous historical revolutions. The basic importance of primitive history rests on this general assumption rather than on the analogy which Marx, half joking, draws between the

21 See the report in Ryazanov 1927–30, pp. XLIX–L on the four essays by which the young Marx in 1842 intended to refute the several aspects of the historico-romantic school. See also the vigorous indictment, in Marx and Engels 1931–2b, p. 325, of such forerunners of that school as the first French theorists of the counterrevolution, Bonald, de Maistre, etc., and their followers during the French Restoration – the real founders of all later ‘Tory-Socialism’. The same people are referred to in the *Communist Manifesto* as a section of the French Legitimists and of ‘Young England’ who ‘waved the proletarian alms-bag in front for a banner but carried the old feudal coat-of-arms on their hindquarters’. (Marx and Engels 1931–2a, p. 547).

22 See Marx and Engels 1931–2b, p. 33.

23 See Marx and Engels 1931–2, p. 50.

'egalitarian' conditions of primitive society and the communist society of the future.

While the term of 'primaeval communism', created by the first discoverers, has since been rather indiscriminately applied to the various types of early society, there still remains a striking, and even somewhat paradoxical, difference between the bourgeois and the Marxian use of the underlying concept. The idea of an historical past repeating itself in the future fits in very well with the bourgeois concept of development, with its glorification of existing bourgeois conditions, and with its rejection of 'communism' as implying a general loss of culture and an eventual relapse from the present 'all time high' of human achievement to primitive barbarism and decay. On the other hand, the assumption that Marx and Engels should have seen in the conditions prevailing in a distant past an actual anticipation of conditions to be reached in an equally distant future, and thus reduced the communist programme to a mere restoration of that long bygone past, utterly contradicts the materialist principle underlying the whole of Marxian theory. Marx presents human society as an historical development progressing from a lower to a higher organisation of the material productive forces. He sees in the modern capitalist mode of production, with its immense development of productive powers far exceeding all earlier epochs, an indispensable material foundation for that more highly developed form of communal life which will be inaugurated by the social revolution of the modern working class.

Nevertheless, many bourgeois writers up to the present day, after a perfunctory recital of the well-known theoretical unsoundness of the assumption of a 'primaeval communism', and after a scholarly refutation of the historical mistakes allegedly committed in this respect by the Marxists, quite naively go on to make use of the term and its underlying assumption. On the contrary, the idea of a primitive 'communism' preceding the various systems based on private property is openly accepted from the outset by the Marxists, but at the same time is nowhere used by them as an argument for a positive historical statement. It serves them rather as a starting point for a more thorough and more critical investigation of the given conditions of existing society, including even its most far-reaching and, from a less comprehensive viewpoint, remote developmental tendencies.

There is then, from the very principle of Marxian materialist research, a great significance in the investigation of the primitive conditions prevailing in the early history of mankind. Yet this investigation is made by the Marxists not for the purpose of acquiring a direct knowledge of the really communist forms and contents of a future, post-capitalist society, but rather with the indirect aim of a more comprehensive approach to the study of historical change.

Marx and Engels saw in the scientific unfolding of primaevial history a necessary premise for their materialist investigation of present-day society, whose basic forms can only be fully elucidated by an exact study of primitive society, its development and dissolution, and the different forms of its transition to the later systems based on private property and class-opposition. For example, in order to explain scientifically the surviving remains of communal property and the various original types of private property in the Greek, Roman, Germanic, Celtic, and Slavonic social systems, it is necessary to go back to the various forms of primitive communal property and the corresponding different forms of their dissolution.

Besides this main interest, there are some other advantages to be gained from that source for a critical and revolutionary science. The critical science of the proletarian class was the first to break loose from the accepted single-track idea of progress, and to show that those apparently 'wild' and 'barbaric' conditions of the primaevial past, in spite of their material deficiencies, uncouthness, and benightedness, still contained many qualities which compare most favourably with present-day 'civilised' conditions. Marx and Engels in that respect only continued, and in a more highly developed form, the 'criticism of civilisation' which had been initiated before them by the first great Utopian Socialists, above all by Charles Fourier in his vital attack on the self-complacent assurance of the bourgeois conception of the world.²⁴ It is only with a knowledge of the totally non-bourgeois forms of a primitive society that it becomes possible for the social revolutionary to imagine a further development which will go beyond the bourgeois conditions of present-day society, not only by a gradual readjustment of its existing pattern but by a fundamental change in the whole system. The communist societies of the future will, in proportion to their increasing distance from the present-day bourgeois status, 'correspond', no longer merely to Mediaeval and Antique society, but to a still further distant and entirely non-bourgeois past. They will not conform, however, to those early conditions commonly referred to as primitive communism in any other way than in their analogous position 'equally aloof from present-day society'. There need be, in fact, as little structural likeness between those primaevial conditions of humanity (or for that matter the equally 'primitive' conditions of the so-called 'savage' tribes today) and the future conditions of a fully developed communist society, as there is at the present time between

24 See Engels 1884, where Fourier's profound discernment of the contrast between civilised society and the primitive forms is recapitulated in a footnote to the penultimate paragraph. The theme is further elaborated in Engels's *Anti-Dühring* (Engels 1878), and in his *Preface* to the fourth edition of *Origin*, etc., in Engels 1891.

the 'unconscious' elements of the mental structure of modern bourgeois man as recently disclosed by the psychoanalysts on the one hand, and the 'corresponding' states of either primaeval man or the free individuals of a society of the future that is no longer bourgeois.

The occurrence of a genuine critical impulse in the history of bourgeois social thought, then, is restricted to a short and clearly defined period. It emerged from the last phase of the revolutionary epoch of the bourgeoisie, and it ended with the expiration of this, the 'classical' epoch of bourgeois social science. As we shall show in detail in the second part of this book, none of the post-classical schools of bourgeois economists has even approximated the critical detachment which, for a strictly limited time, had been reached by such thinkers as Ricardo. The same applies to the post-Hegelian developments of bourgeois philosophy and, indeed, to all other branches of post-classical bourgeois thought, even though more recently its hitherto prevailing tendency to accept unconditionally or to defend and glorify existing conditions has been overshadowed, in some cases, by the apparent counteraction of a directly opposite tendency.

The vehement protests raised from time to time by otherwise well-disposed critics against some particularly disgraceful aspects of the existing social order, the occasional lapses of an exceptionally impressionable literatus into an entire negation of present society, and the equivalent pessimistic, ironic, or sceptical currents in contemporary bourgeois philosophy do not initiate a new phase in the development of modern social thought. All these apparent expressions of an enhanced bourgeois 'self-criticism', varying from the Freudian scientific analysis of *Civilisation and its Discontents*, to the inflation of such minor 'discontents' into a *Decline of the West*, or a final *Breakdown: The Collapse of Modern Civilisation*,²⁵ rather serve the purpose of opening an illusory outlet to the feelings aroused in the lower strata of the bourgeoisie by their increasingly oppressed condition, or to the temporary hangovers befalling the entire class under the impact of a defeat in war or of a major economic depression.

Such ideological phenomena, while purporting to express an increasing critical self-consciousness of bourgeois society, indicate only an increasing unwillingness on the part of the hitherto ruling class to understand its own social mode of existence as a specific entity.

The essential futility of every attempt of contemporary bourgeois self-criticism appears most strikingly in the ideological repercussions, resulting from the periodic cycle through which modern industry runs. The alternate

25 Titles of books by Sigmund Freud, Oswald Spengler and Robert Briffault published around the time when Korsch was completing this volume.

occurrence of an absolute denial and an equally absolute acceptance of the *universal crisis*, periodically repeating itself in the theory of bourgeois economists, along with the periodical recurrence of prosperity and depression, can best be regarded as being itself a secondary phenomenon of a given phase of the industrial cycle. The fact that bourgeois economists have not yet arrived at a 'theory of the crisis' independently of the momentary fluctuations of the industrial process, only emphasises once more *a definite incapacity of present-day bourgeois society to grasp 'specifically' the process of its own destruction.*

A critical investigation of the existing conditions of mankind which conceives of the imminent breakdown of existing bourgeois conditions not as an absolute disintegration but as a *transition from the present historical phase to a higher form of society* can only be attempted and carried through in an unbiased and consistent manner by the *new social class produced by the bourgeoisie itself.*

A New Type of Generalisation

Before we deal with the practical implications of Marx's critical investigation of existing bourgeois society, we shall discuss a strictly theoretical problem arising from the statements made in the preceding chapters regarding the main methodological principles of Marxian science. How does that emphasis on 'specification', which we have shown to be the very foundation of Marx's materialistic criticism and research, conform to the equally fundamental demand for some degree of generalisation which is necessarily bound up with every attempt at a truly scientific statement? This question is certainly recognized by Marx.

As shown in the second and third chapters, Marx scornfully dismissed the superficial and arbitrary procedure of the bourgeois social scientists who described the various conditions of different historical stages in the terms of the same general concepts and thus 'by a sleight of hand represented bourgeois conditions as unchangeable natural laws pertaining to society *in abstracto*'.¹ He was equally critical of that complete abstention from all theoretical generalisation which is the idea vaguely aimed at by the historical school and other irrationalists. As against both, he worked out a new type of generalisation.

Here again, Marx took his departure from the work of the idealist philosopher Hegel. The latter had also rejected the abstractual procedure commonly applied by the social theorists as well as what he called the 'conceptlessness' underlying the historical trends of the early nineteenth century. In opposition to both, he had posed another principle: that of the 'truly general'.² The 'general' as it appears in the most developed forms of philosophical thought is, according to Hegel's terminology, dialectically identical with the 'particular' and, indeed, with 'individual existence'. Or, as this Hegelian principle has been most succinctly recapitulated in a single sentence: '*Truth is concrete*'.

Of course, with the idealist philosopher Hegel this highly paradoxical formula had not yet acquired that unequivocally realistic connotation which it was to assume later with Marx and such other dialectical materialists as Engels, Antonio Labriola, Georgi Plekhanov, and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. The new emphasis laid by Hegel on the subject-matter of human thought as against its mere form was not meant as a materialistic adherence to the given external

1 See Marx and Engels 1931–2b, pp. 24 *et seq.*

2 See Hegel 1830, I, § 163, and Hegel 1832 § 24.

facts, but rather served as a starting point for a new and more refined form of the most daring philosophical abstraction. Philosophical thought, according to Hegel, is no more to be regarded as being a mere reflection, in the mind of the philosopher, of the concrete facts of an external world. It is, on the contrary, understood to be the most concrete existence itself, and to comprise within itself both the abstract concepts formed as a first approach to truth in ordinary practical and theoretical human thought, and the equally 'abstract' forms of externally given 'concrete' realities.

Hegel's 'concrete', then, by no means coincides with the sensually concrete of given experience and practical action. Factual knowledge was for him a means rather than an end. A faithful acceptance of the empirical data of nature and history was to prepare the ground for an idealist reconstruction of the universe and thus to testify once more to the absolute precedence of the conceptual form over all external existence.

Thus the real meaning of the Hegelian 'concrete' was somewhat one-sidedly interpreted by that remarkable series of theoretical and practical leaders of the revolutionary proletarian movement beginning with Lassalle and ending with Lenin who looked at Hegel's philosophy as an essentially empirical method of thought. The irremovable ambiguity pervading the whole of Hegelian philosophy affects also his apparently realistic approach to 'the concrete'. If on the one hand he conceived of the philosophical idea as something other than an empty form and defined it as 'that which is the concrete itself', he was equally ready to explain that he did not understand by the concrete 'what is commonly understood by this term', but merely the speculative 'concrete' resulting from idealist philosophical thought.

The theorists of abstraction proceeded to the formation of their general concepts by starting from the concrete of common experience and getting rid of its particular qualities by a method of successive elimination. The *irrationalists* believed that they could get hold of the concrete in an immediate manner. *Hegel* fancied that in his philosophy he had reached the concrete truth of the idea by starting from a first general concept and supplying the details by a successive adoption of the particular results of scientific research and historical development. *Marx* was the first to work out a rational type of generalisation, different from the traditional conceptual procedures hitherto applied by the various schools of social, historical and philosophical thought, and more akin to the constructive procedures recently invented by the experimental scientists. With him, as shown by the examples discussed in the second and third chapters of this book, the 'general' of the concept is no longer set up against concrete reality as another realm; but every 'general', even in its conceptual

form, necessarily remains a specific aspect or a mentally dissected part of the historical concrete of existing bourgeois society.³

Thus the unconscious and half-hearted self-criticism of bourgeois social science which had previously made its appearance in the historical school and in Hegel was finally transformed, by Marx, into an attack against both the ideas and the existence of the bourgeois order. The fixed abstractions of bourgeois science, which had long since ceased to serve as tools of a truly progressive thought and had degenerated into fetters upon the further advance of social knowledge, were now confronted with their present *concrete* existence. Hence, the previously established status of modern 'civilised' society was deprived of its false halo; and its underlying prose, the real conditions of life under capitalist rule, could be freely contrasted with the germs of a new proletarian mode of existence. The 'concrete', i.e., the real, social, economic, and class-*contents* of existing society were confronted with their abstract conceptual *form*, and the as yet *unformed* substance of a new proletarian socialist and communist 'becoming' was opposed to the *fully determined* forms of existing bourgeois 'being'. This is *one* of the 'materialist' tendencies of the new, revolutionary science of society.

While bourgeois science defines the *wealth* of society as the 'wealth of nations'⁴ or a 'general property',⁵ and the *state* as a form of unity necessary for society, Marx does not deny the 'abstract' truth of such statements. He simply adds that, under the prevailing 'concrete' conditions, the wealth of a nation is the *capital* of the ruling bourgeois class and that, in the same way, the present bourgeois state is the *political form of the rule of the bourgeoisie over the proletarian class*. In the same way, Marx does not question the 'abstract' proposition that 'all combined labour on a large scale, both in capitalist and socialist production, requires a *directing authority*, in order to secure the necessary harmony among the individual activities and to perform the general functions arising from the movement of the whole productive body as distinguished from the movements of its independent organs'.⁶ He merely calls attention to the exploitation and despotism which the *capitalist direction of the social labour-process* inflicts upon the wage-labourers subordinated to it, under the prevailing social conditions. While the bourgeois apologists compare the

3 See Hegel 1832, p. 29 *et seq.*

4 See the title of Adam Smith's economic work: *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the 'Wealth of Nations'* (Smith 1937).

5 See Hegel 1830, III, § 524, and Hegel 1920, § 199–200.

6 Marx 1932, I p. 295.

function of modern capitalist management with that of the conductor of an orchestra, Marx compares the concrete forms in which, under fully developed capitalist conditions, the command over the mass of workmen collaborating in a workshop is exercised in the name of the absentee-owner through a whole hierarchy of managers, foremen, overlookers, etc., with the command of an army through its commissioned and non-commissioned officers. In spite of the apparent 'freedom' of the labour-contract there is, from a social point of view, no voluntary self-subordination of the army of workers to a supreme leadership necessary for the common good.

The capitalist is not a capitalist because he is a leader of industry. He becomes a commander of industry because he is a capitalist. Supreme command in industry is an attribute of capital, just as, in feudal times, supreme command in war and in the courts of justice was an attribute of the landed proprietor.⁷

Moreover, such uniformity of command exists in bourgeois society only for the single workshop within a system of social production which as a whole is neither planned nor directed, and barely balanced subsequently only by the competitive struggle of individual commodity-producers. As a general rule, there is even an inverse relation between the authority exercised within the single workshop and the existence of a planned co-operation within the whole of a given capitalist society. It is precisely the people most loudly extolling the wholesome results of an unconditional subordination of individual workers to the capitalist 'organisation of labour', who denounce equally loudly every kind of deliberate control and regulation of the social process of production as an invasion of the individual capitalist's inviolable property-rights, liberty, and self-determining 'genius.' 'It is characteristic that the enthusiastic apologists of the factory system can find nothing worse to say against every general organization of co-operative work, than that it would transform the whole of society into a factory'.⁸ This whole process of confronting the abstract bourgeois concepts of state and authority with the actual facts of the master-and-servant relationship growing directly out of the present-day form of capitalist production, ultimately resolves itself into a transition to the new form of socialist production just struggling into being. While in bourgeois society the dead accumulated labour of the past rules as 'capital' over present living labour, in communist society conversely, the accumulated labour of past gen-

7 Marx 1932, I, p. 297.

8 See Marx 1932, p. 321.

erations will be but a means to widen, to enrich, and to further the existence of the workers.⁹

While the bourgeois social theorists, with so-called 'general' concepts framed according to their usual abstract procedure, ended by not grasping any real historical stage of social development at all, Marx – by his rational use of a new theoretical procedure conceived on the model of the dialectical principle of Hegelian philosophy – arrived at the unique form of *generalisation*, which is in keeping with the most fully developed methods of modern experimental science. Bourgeois 'sociologists', who apparently are concerned with society in general, remain entwined in the particular categories of bourgeois society. Marx, by analysing the specific historical form of bourgeois society, attains a general knowledge of a social development far transcending that particular form. While the bourgeois theorists endeavour to proceed to an abstract general concept of 'society' by a successive elimination of more and more empirically- (i.e. historically-) given data of bourgeois society, and thus often unconsciously retain just those features which happen to be the most singular ones, Marx is aware of the fact that the only possible way of comprehending the general concept, or the 'law' of a particular historical form of society is through its actual historical change. Modern natural science no longer employs the old scholastic Aristotelian method. It no longer bases its generalisations upon an arbitrarily chosen common feature of a given number of objects which is thus constituted as a class of such objects. For instance, it does not proceed from the observation of falling stones to a general law of the fall of stones. It proceeds from the analysis of a single case observed in all its particularity, or rather from a single experiment carried out under exactly determined conditions, to formulate the general law of gravity which now, under varying conditions with correspondingly varying results, applies alike to falling stones, to stones at rest, and also to such other things as balloons, planets and comets. In the same manner, an exact social science cannot form its *general concepts* by the simple abstraction of certain more or less arbitrarily chosen traits of the given historical form of bourgeois society. It must secure the knowledge of the general contained in that particular form of society by exactly investigating all the historical conditions underlying its emergence

9 See Marx and Engels 1931–2a, p. 540. On the whole question of authority see Marx 1931–2d, pp. 198 *et seq.*; Marx 1932, pp. 294 *et seq.*, 321 *et seq.*; Marx 1894, ii, pp. 324–5, 418; Engels 1878 and his Engels 1873. See further Lenin's *State and Revolution* (Lenin 1931 [1917]) and his report 'Next Tasks of the Soviet Power', delivered at the session of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Workmen's, Soldiers', Peasants' and Cossacks' Delegates on 29 April 1918 (Lenin 1920 [1918]).

from another state of society and by the actual modification of its present form under exactly established conditions. Only thus can social research be transformed into an exact science based upon observation and experiment.

Just as in modern natural science the general law has no independent existence outside the collection of the particular cases covered by its application, so the social law exists only in historical development through which a particular form of society proceeds from its particular state in the past to its particular state in the present and from that to the social forms brought about by its further change. Thus the only genuine laws in social science are the laws of historical change. The Russian reviewer of *Capital*,¹⁰ whose statements are quoted in part and adopted by Marx in the *Postscript* to the second edition, has most aptly brought out this realistic principle of the new Marxian science. He shows that Marx, in spite of the outward form of his presentation which, according to the reviewer, is 'idealistic' in the German, i.e. the bad, sense of the term, 'is in actual fact enormously more of a realist than any of his predecessors in the realm of economic criticism'. Whereas in idealist philosophical thought as well as in the ordinary abstract way of scientific thinking, the facts of a particular social state are compared with some 'idea', Marx's criticism confronts a given fact 'not with the idea, but only with another fact', and so, by the most exact possible study of each fact, represents the facts themselves as 'different moments of a development' confronting one another. While the old economists set up abstract general laws of economic life which were expected to apply equally to the past, the present, and the future, no such general laws of economic life are conformable to the principle of historical change, as established by Marx.

In his opinion, on the contrary, every historical period has laws peculiar to itself. . . . As soon as life has gone through a given period of development and is passing over from one given stage to another, it begins also to be controlled by other laws. . . . Nay, more, one and the same phenomenon is subject to entirely different laws as a result of the difference in the general structure of the social organisms replacing each other in the historical process, of the variation of their various organs, of the difference in the conditions under which they function, etc. Marx denies, for example, that the law of population is one and the same for all periods and all places. He contends, on the contrary, that every stage of development has its own law of population. . . . As productive powers move on in their development, so do social conditions and the laws governing them

10 See I.I. Kaufmann 1872.

change. While Marx sets himself the task of investigating and explaining the capitalistic economic order from this standpoint, he merely outlines in strictly scientific terms the aim that every exact investigator of economic conditions must have in view . . . The scientific value of such research lies in the disclosure of the particular laws which control the origin, existence, development, and death of a given social organism and its replacement by another and higher one. Such, indeed, is the value of Marx's book.

Practical Implications

Its connection to a practical social movement is not unique to Marxist theory. Bourgeois theory of society as well, in all its phases, has served a definite practical purpose. In its classical period it served the aims of the rising industrial class struggling for the theoretical and practical supremacy of the new bourgeois principles over the obsolete forms of feudal society. Later, after the victory of bourgeois principles, bourgeois social thought split into parts. Its main current took to defending the established rule of the bourgeois class against the now rising proletarian class, and for this purpose posed as a 'pure' and assumedly 'unbiased' science. Another current, following a tendency already visible in Comte, elaborated a more or less consciously counterrevolutionary set of ideas, foreshadowing the political programmes which were later to be adopted and put into practice by such movements as Italian Fascism and German National Socialism.

The only point which distinguishes Marxist theory is that it represents the interests of *another* class and that it is *conscious* of its class-character in a rational way, and not only in the delusive manner of a fascist or National Socialist 'mythology'. 'The theoretical propositions of the Communists express merely, in general terms, actual conditions of an existing class struggle, or of an historical movement going on under our very eyes'. The representatives of liberal and democratic bourgeois science who naively assumed that this statement of the *Communist Manifesto*¹ implied the Marxists surrendering the claim to the theoretical truth of their ideas, resemble the theologians who regard every religion but theirs as the invention of men and only their own as a divine revelation. Materialist criticism, which defines all theoretical truths as mere historical 'forms of social consciousness', in no way abandons the quest for theoretical truth, but only replaces the traditional concept of an absolute truth by a less ambitious and much more practical idea. Every truth, according to the Marxists, applies only to a definite set of conditions; it is therefore not absolute but relative, not independent and complete in itself, but contingent upon external facts. Today's truth, then, depends upon the existing mode of material production and the class-struggle arising therefrom. But this new definition of truth in no way lessens, nay, it enhances, the strictness of the formal demands

1 See 1931–2a, p. 538.

which must be fulfilled by a 'true' proposition from the standpoint of materialist science.

What goes on here is only a repetition of the same process by which in the beginnings of bourgeois society, at first in the struggle of lay-thought against the theological and metaphysical system of the Middle Ages, then in that of empiricism against all metaphysics, present-day 'bourgeois' science was created. On the very threshold of the new age, Francis Bacon, in his *Novum Organum*, which was to assist the emerging bourgeois science in the assertion of its new methods of empirical research, proclaimed the historical character of every science: '*Recte enim veritas temporis filia dicitur non auctoritatis*'.² On that authority of all authorities, time, he based the superiority of the finally emancipated new science as against the dogmatic tenets of mediaeval authorities.

This time, however, the proposed change in the traditional historical form of consciousness reaches further, and by an apparently reversionary movement the very 'freedom' and 'independence' of which bourgeois philosophy and science boasted during the intervening epoch of its almost unchallenged supremacy, is now called into question again. Not only are the theological and metaphysical creeds which had been re-accepted by the bourgeoisie in a remodelled form now utterly 'debunked', but also the new philosophy of the bourgeois era, and the whole body of its new historical and social truths, are finally stripped of their imaginary independence and drawn into the flux of things and the torment of the battle. Unconditional 'this-sidedness', and a distinct historical and class-character, become essential attributes not only of the *content*, but also of the *form* of knowledge. This applies even to the revolutionary theory itself. Marxian theory, which deals with all ideas as being connected with a definite historical epoch and the specific form of society pertaining to that epoch, recognises itself as being just as much an historical product as any other theory pertaining to a definite stage of social development and to a definite social class. Thus the new science of the proletariat breaks with the last 'ideological' limitations which had still hampered the critical self-consciousness of social science, and by reason of which the bourgeois investigators had imagined that, because their science had been freed from the specific fetters of mediaeval dogma and metaphysics, it had become, once and for all, a 'free science', standing 'above' the antagonisms of the new social order and of the pressure of vested interests.

The materialist theory of the historical development of society is a particular form of the social consciousness of the present epoch and thus is itself a part of that historical development. The materialist theory of the class-struggle

² See Bacon 1620, Book I, p. 84.

is itself class-struggle. The materialist theory of the proletariat's social revolution is at the same time a powerful lever in that same social revolution.

Thus amplified, all examples we have hitherto given to illustrate the critical and revolutionary functions of the materialist theory gain a new and enhanced significance.

If the materialist science of society treats such subjects of social investigation as the *state* and *law* (seemingly 'above class'), in their specific historical character, i.e. as a state for the bourgeoisie and a law against the proletariat, it does not enunciate a pure theoretical proposition which may incidentally furnish a suitable argument for the practical attacks of the proletariat against existing bourgeois institutions. There is a much closer connection between the theoretical content and the practical implications of the Marxian statement, for the two are, in fact, but related aspects of one single whole. The same applies to Marx's specific description of social *wealth* as 'bourgeois wealth', i.e., as a collection of 'commodities', which are not produced because they are useful, but because of the value and surplus-value they contain; or again, as the wealth of the capitalist class from which the proletariat is excluded; or as capitalist plenty and proletarian poverty; or, finally, as the capitalist's own property ('*Eigentum*') which for the proletariat (to use an apt expression of Lassalle's) is forever but 'the other man's property' ('*Fremd-tum*'). It also applies to *material production*, now considered in its specific character as 'capitalistic commodity-production', i.e., as an apparent activity of capital 'breeding surplus-value', behind which is hidden the real exploitation of the actual producers by the monopolistic owners of the social means of production: and so on, through the whole series of economic, political, legal, cultural, and other bourgeois categories.

It is also much more than mere progress in theoretical knowledge when the materialistic theory, by its consistent application of the *principle of change*, immerses each and every social entity in the flux of an historical transition and thus reinterprets all static concepts of things in terms of so many dynamic processes, and of an historical struggle between the social classes.

By this process of specifying all bourgeois institutions historically, and by insisting on the constant working of change, materialist science achieves in a theoretical way what is achieved in practice by the real historical movement of the proletariat. Thus Marx's materialist social research, while not for a moment abandoning its character of a strictly theoretical science, yet consciously assumes its particular function within the whole of a movement striving to transform existing society, and thus constitutes itself as a necessary part of the revolutionary action of the modern working class.

The ruling classes deny the scientific character of Marxism because of their class-limitations. Marxism bases the wider and deeper truth of its propositions on its proletarian class-character.

Marxian theory, viewed in its general character, is a new science of bourgeois society. It appears at a time when within bourgeois society itself, an independent movement of a new social class is opposing the ruling bourgeois class. In opposition to bourgeois principles, it represents the new views and claims of the class oppressed in bourgeois society. It is, so far, not a positive but a critical science. It 'specifies' bourgeois society and investigates the tendencies visible in the present development of society, and the way to its imminent practical transformation. Thus it is not only a theory of bourgeois society but, at the same time, a theory of the proletarian revolution.

PART 2

Political Economy



Marxism and Political Economy

From the outset, Marx's materialist investigation of bourgeois society is based on a recognition of the cardinal importance of political economy. Whereas only a few weeks before he had written to his bourgeois-democratic friend Ruge the characteristic words that the critic of modern society may start from 'any given form of theoretical and practical consciousness' and that more especially the 'political State' expresses within its form all social struggles, needs, and truths *sub specie rei publicae*,¹ he now definitely transcended that intermediate stage of his materialist moulding-process by concluding that 'the anatomy of civil society must be sought for in Political Economy'.² Nor was this merely an advance toward a better method of scientific investigation. The theoretical transition to political economy coincided with a practical transition from the Jacobin bourgeois revolution, which had aimed at solving the social problems and needs of the working classes *sub specie rei publicae*, to the independent action of the modern proletariat, which is resolved to seek the specific roots of its oppression and the specific path to its emancipation in political economy. 'The economic emancipation of the working class', say the rules of the Working Men's International Association drawn up twenty years later by Marx, 'is the great end to which every political movement is subordinated as a means'.³

The theoretical programme of the youthful Marx, to 'seek for the anatomy of civil society in Political Economy', does not, however, mean a simple acceptance of the accomplished results of the preceding period of economic science. Political economy was, historically, the new science of the bourgeoisie, brought forth by the rising industrial class in its revolutionary fight against feudalism. Now, in a new historical epoch, that revolutionary struggle has come to an end. The bourgeois class rules, both politically and economically,

1 See Marx's letter to Arnold Ruge, dated 'September 1843', as reproduced in the *Correspondence of 1843*, published in *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbuecher*, 1844 (Marx 1931–2f, p. 574).

2 See above, p. 20. For the first expression of this new materialist knowledge, still philosophical in form, refer to the concluding paragraphs of Marx's 'Introduction' to *A Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (Marx 1927–30f, pp. 619 *et seq.*), and for its further development to Marx's Marginal Notes to Ruge's article 'The King of Prussia and Social Reform', 1844, in which he finally confronted the political idealism of the most advanced wing of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, as represented by Ruge, with the economic and materialist viewpoint of the proletarian class (Marx 1927–30e, pp. 5 *et seq.*)

3 See Working Men's International Association 1864.

in present-day society. Thus, political economy, dealing with the material foundation of the existing bourgeois state, is for the proletariat first and foremost an enemy territory. Nor does it lose this character by the fact that parts of the ground held by its outposts are being occupied by the theoretical vanguard of the proletariat. The first task for the representatives of the new revolutionary class in this field is, therefore, to reconnoitre the enemy's position.

In striking contrast to the illusions cherished by many socialists in their time and up to the present day, Marx and Engels never accepted the idea that this same economic science which the proletarian class inherited from the bourgeoisie, could now, by merely eliminating its inherent bourgeois bias and consistently working out its own premises, be transformed into a theoretical weapon of the proletarian revolution. Wherever such an opinion was expressed by the first socialist Ricardians of 1820–30, by the Owenists, or by Proudhon, Rodbertus, and Lassalle, they declared it an 'economically false theory', an idealist application of morality to economics, and thus in its practical consequence a reactionary *utopia*.⁴ They pointed out that the equality-idea resulting from the epoch of bourgeois 'commodity-production' and expressed in the economic 'law of value' is still bourgeois in character. It is therefore only ideologically incompatible with the exploitation of the working class through capital, but not in actual practice. The socialist Ricardians imagined that they could attack the economists on their own ground and with their own weapons. On the basis of the *economic* principle that 'it is labour alone which bestows value', they wanted to transform all men into actual workers exchanging equal quantities of labour. To one of the best of them, John Francis Bray, Marx replied that 'ce rapport égalitaire, cet idéal correctif qu'il voudrait appliquer au monde, n'est lui-même que le reflet du monde actuel, et qu'il est par conséquent totalement impossible de reconstituer la société sur une base qui n'en est qu'une ombre embellie. A mesure que l'ombre redevient corps, on s'aperçoit que ce corps, loin d'en être la transfiguration rêvée, est le corps actuel de la société'.⁵ Instead of deriving the demands of socialism and communism from the laws of bourgeois economics, in an idealist and utopian manner, Marx and Engels formulated the materialist conclusion that 'according to the laws of bourgeois economics, the larger part of the product does *not* belong to the workers who have produced it'.⁶ In order to obviate this state of affairs, one must not apply a different interpretation to bourgeois economics but rather, through a real change in society, bring about a practical situation in which those economic

4 See Engels 1884a, pp. vi, ff., and Marx 1903, III, Part 3.

5 See Marx 1931–2d, p. 157.

6 See Engels 1884a.

laws will cease to hold good and thus the science of economics will become void of content and ultimately vanish altogether.

For Marx, then, political economy is a bourgeois science. This applies even to his own contributions to the further development of its main doctrines. Marx fought to the end against the mistaken idea that his economic analysis of *value* applied to any other than bourgeois conditions.⁷ Even the Marxian doctrine of *value and surplus-value* is only the final outgrowth of a conceptual process which, in content, had been almost completed by the classical bourgeois economists.⁸ Friedrich Engels, immediately after Marx's death, made it quite clear,⁹ and the posthumous publications from Marx's papers¹⁰ exhaustively proved, that Marx at no time in his life countenanced the opinion that the new contents of his socialist and communist theory could be derived, as a mere logical consequence, from the utterly bourgeois theories of Quesnay, Smith, and Ricardo.

How then are we to understand the leading part which, in spite of all this, political economy played in the genesis of Marx's theory of society, and maintained through all its subsequent developments? This in itself shows again the superiority of the *materialist* standpoint. Marx kept aloof from that superficiality by which many revolutionary theorists in his time, and today, imagined that by a mere theoretical effort, wishful thinking, or a simple 'change of heart' they could ignore such objective facts as those investigated by economic science – the very fundamentals of all existing social relations. The modern working class in its independent social movement inevitably starts from the historical results of the bourgeois revolutionary movement. At the same time, this bourgeoisie and the new mode of production it brought forth, its state and all its other institutions and ideas, are the very antagonist from whom the proletariat must completely separate its own action and whom it must ultimately conquer in a decisive battle. So must the proletariat, in evolving its own revolutionary thought, start from the results achieved by bourgeois economic investigation. In its own materialist theory, the proletariat cannot skip over the definite forms of economic science existing historically in the present epoch any more than it can neglect, in its revolutionary practice, the existence of the modern capitalist mode of production. Only by means of practical and theoretical action

7 See among other references: Marx 1931–2d, pp. 149–57; Marx 1859; and the 'Appendix' to Marx 1932, pp. 841 ff.

8 See *Capital*, III, ii, p. 366. See further, Marx's letters to Engels of 24 August 1867, and 8 January 1868 (Marx 1927–30f, p. 410 and Marx 1931–2g, p. 6).

9 See Engels 1884a and Engels 1885.

10 See Marx 1903.

persistently carried out for a considerable time through several intermediate phases can the proletariat bring about the necessary change in the existing conditions of material production and thereby ultimately surpass the social forms of consciousness which are at present bound up with those conditions.

Long before he applied this consequence of his materialist principle to economic science, Marx had applied it to philosophical thought in the battles waged in the 1840s between the various groups of young Hegelians, on the question of the impact of 'philosophy' (i.e., Hegelian philosophy) on the imminent political revolution. He had opposed the attitude of the philosophical party which derived the revolution immediately from the principles of philosophy just as much as he had opposed that of the anti-philosophical party which turned its back on it. Just as he had done in his previous criticism of philosophy, so now in his criticism of political economy, Marx seemed to call out to the socialistic Ricardians and others who wished to derive socialism from bourgeois economics: '*You cannot realize Political Economy (in practice) without doing away with it (by theoretical action)*'; and to the 'pure' historians, 'pure' sociologists and the 'pure' revolutionary activists who ignored all economics: '*You cannot do away with Political Economy (by practical action) without realizing it (in theory)*'.¹¹

11 See Marx 1927–30, p. 613 and Korsch 1930, p. 93.

From Political Economy to ‘Economics’

Classical political economy, as distinct from the adulterations of the ‘vulgar’ economists of the nineteenth century and from the more recent attempts at an entirely new start, originated historically as an integral part of the *new science of civil society*, created by the bourgeoisie in its revolutionary struggle to establish this very society. It formed a realistic complement to the great philosophical, political, juridical, moral, aesthetic and psychological upheaval, through which during the period of the so-called ‘Enlightenment’ the ideological representatives of the rising bourgeois class first expressed the new bourgeois consciousness which corresponded to the change in real social conditions. Even in its purely theoretical form, the new science of political economy during this early period, as well as in the first great systems of the Physiocrats, was bound up with the whole of the new bourgeois social science in a natural and ingenuous unity.¹ It is true that Adam Smith separated his economic *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*² from the ‘general principles of law and government, and of the different revolutions they have undergone in the different ages and periods of society’, as discussed in his academic lectures,³ just as he had already split another part from that bulky whole in his earlier *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.⁴ Yet in his economic work he once again embraced, along with the fundamental economic relations, the whole of the new political and social conditions arising from the development of industry, the exchange of commodities, and the division of labour within the new bourgeois societal order. Even in the work of Ricardo, in which the classical epoch of political economy reaches its close, this ‘organic’ connection between political economy and the whole of society is preserved. At the same time, it can be said that Ricardo’s system, which as a true ‘anatomy’ of civil society, formally restricts itself to an ingenious dissection of the material foundations – the skeleton, as it were, of the social body – shows the first symptoms of an impending disintegration. Still more does the subsequent theoretical development of bourgeois economics reveal the inevitable results of the change which, during the

1 See, e.g., Quesnay 1846, summed up from this point of view by Marx in Marx 1931–2h, pp. 612–13.

2 Smith 1937.

3 See the editor’s ‘Introduction’ to Smith 1937.

4 Smith 1792.

ensuing period, was to strip bourgeois 'production-relations' more and more of their original positive functions as incomparable stimulators and encouragers of the productive forces inherent in the new, industrial society.

This historical process, through which the hitherto progressive forms of bourgeois production-relations were finally transformed into so many fetters, has since, in spite of temporary interruptions, asserted itself with ever increasing strength. It finds its economic expression in those periodically recurring dislocations of all existing proportions of capitalist production which, since their earliest characteristic occurrence in the first modern economic crisis of 1825, have assumed ever greater dimensions and ever more acute forms during the whole of the following century, challenging at their culminating points the whole existence of bourgeois society. In this connection there is no need to deal with the manner in which the curve of 'social unrest' during the last hundred years continuously reflected the course of economic development, if not exactly at each point yet in its entire movement. The only point to be discussed here is the difference which prevails between the periodic business-cycle's repercussions for the labour-movement, and those more permanent alterations within the whole economic system of modern society, which recent investigators have described as a 'structural change'. While the recurring phases of the 'normal' industrial cycle are followed by corresponding ups and downs in class-warfare, there is no such 'cyclical' rhythm discoverable in the underlying secular movement. In spite of the intervening longer periods of an apparently undisturbed upswing and prosperity brought about by the temporary defeats, iron-handed oppression, and the effective crushing of all existing workers' organisations, the proletarian struggle against the existing capitalist societal order has grown from its first elementary beginnings to embrace ever greater numbers, and to assume ever more efficient, more conscious, and more threatening forms. This struggle has become a veritable war between the oppressing and the oppressed classes, a war conducted on many fronts simultaneously, which sometimes breaks out in open revolts. The First World War, 1914–18, and the first wave of the proletarian world-revolution it unleashed, challenged the very premises on which, during the 'restful' intervals of this restless development, the bourgeois economists, and in their wake the moderate socialists, had based their 'historical refutation of the Marxian prognoses'. The first shock was followed by even stronger charges. The protracted economic crisis and the new series of wars and civil wars that brought to an end the short-lived momentous upswing which had resulted from the first apparent recovery of post-war capitalist equilibrium during the 1920s, reflected once more the utter absence of cohesive forces within the present economic system. Finally it refuted the illusions which the economic optimists

had conjured up for themselves in a complete abolition of crises in 'organised capitalism', and of all class-antagonisms and class-struggles in the 'democratic' or, more recently, in the 'totalitarian state'. Even such things as *machinery* and *money*, formerly so undoubtedly good and useful, have been robbed of their virtue as forces productive of social wealth and turned into forces destructive of social existence. The political and intellectual superstructure of society follows the change in its material conditions. The democratic forms of the state, the liberal ideas of the ascendant phase of capitalist commodity-production, have everywhere begun to totter. The safety-valves of the economic and political system are suspended one after another. Emergency and martial law are the rule of common law. War and civil war on a worldwide scale have become the 'normal' form of existence of present-day society.

A minor consequence of this universal destruction of the positive social function of bourgeois production-relations manifests itself in the gradual decay of the encyclopaedic spirit which had been so conspicuous during that earlier period when political economy embraced the whole of the social progress of the community. It is only from a formal point of view that Ricardo's economic system can be regarded as an advance on that of Adam Smith. While Smith had worked out his ideas on an epic scale and, little troubled by logical contradictions, developed the subject-matter of political economy into a vast totality, Ricardo logically subordinated the whole of the bourgeois system to a unique principle, tracing all of its economic laws back to the definition of value in terms of labour-time. The theoretical satisfaction offered in Ricardo's *Principles* (and more especially in its first two chapters which, as demonstrated by Marx, virtually contain the whole book) by their originality, unity of the basic view, simplicity, concentration, profundity, novelty, and pithiness,⁵ is purchased at the expense of a loss of substance foreshadowing an impending emaciation. The generality that Ricardo aims at is only the generality of scientific form; nowhere in his work is there, as there had been in that of Smith, the urge of a wider political aim. Its historical function consisted in summing up the great positive achievements of the classical period of bourgeois economic science and in the formal conclusion of an actually completed epoch.

While thus in Ricardo the turn to formalism was historically necessary and, thereby, theoretically justified, the progressive formalistic anaemia of the later period brought none of the great theoretical advantages of which the sceptics and the cynics of present-day 'pure' economics are so proud. They are so convinced of their superiority over the 'unscientific' methods applied by the classical economists that they even accept without demur the reproach that their

⁵ See Marx 1905b, II, p. 8.

new theoretical science has become a mere plaything, purged of any political significance and of any possibility of being applied. Following the example of some modern mathematicians, logicians, and physicists, but without in any other respect keeping pace with the achievements of those real sciences, they want to carry on, in a field which cannot otherwise boast of any particular purity, the business of 'pure' science, not for any useful purpose but merely 'for the greater glory of God'.

The actual outcome of this later development of political economy was gradual decay. In line with the impact of the changed conditions of bourgeois production, bourgeois economic theory abandoned its original comprehensive social tendency. It abandoned also its formal scientific qualities, its impartiality, its logic, and fecundity. 'From the year 1830 dates the finally decisive crisis'.⁶ Henceforth any genuine development of political economy was precluded by the real historic development of bourgeois society.

Marxism restored, consciously and on a higher level, the connection between political economy and social science which had spontaneously and unconsciously evolved with the bourgeois classicists at an earlier stage. Only for this reason did the science of political economy have any interest, only thus did it assume its important place in the whole of the Marxian social research. For this reason alone, it appears absurd that so many people should rack their brains to find out why Marx never paid the slightest attention to that 'new departure' which, since the middle of the nineteenth century, is assumed to have been made by an altogether new economic science based on subjective value and the theory of so-called 'marginal' utility. Marx did take cognisance of every new word, true or false, which was written on any economic question during his lifetime, even by the least important epigone of classical political economy. His adherence to the classicists did not make him neglect the work of another school which, to a certain extent, preceded the theorists of 'marginal value' in an attempt to reconstruct economic research by stressing 'subjective' value (value in use) rather than classical 'objective' value (value in exchange). Although he sighed under the burden, he did not shrink from the task of refuting the many inconsistencies of the leaders of the so-called 'Kathedersozialisten',⁷ from Johann Karl Rodbertus to Adolf Wagner. His apparent neglect of the new questions raised by the theorists of marginal utility sprang from an entirely different source. By the very principle of his

6 See Marx 1873.

7 Literally, 'socialists of the chair' – a disparaging term for German professors of the 'Historical School' of economics, many of whom took interest in the social questions arising from Germany's rapid industrial development.

socio-economic research, Marx was not interested in the thoughts of people who, though still calling their science 'Economics', did not have anything in common with that research into the material foundations of society which had formed the theme of classical political economy, any more than he would have been interested in some other auxiliary inquiry into a group of natural and technical facts that are not particularly important for the historical change of society. An economic doctrine indifferent to its social implications aroused the attention of Marx only when, in spite of its purely 'theoretical' concern, it afterwards served to draw practical application from its purely theoretical contents, and thus, like Dühring's 'socialist' doctrine in the 1870s, found supporters within the ranks of the workers' movement. This, however, did not take place with the theory of marginal utility until some years after Marx's death when, to use Engels's phrase, George Bernard Shaw and his followers endeavoured to base a plausible kind of 'vulgar' socialism upon 'Jevons' and Menger's use-value and marginal-utility theory', in order 'to build on this rock the Fabian church of the future'. That is why Marx, for all his comprehensive criticism of traditional economic theories, never considered the theory of marginal utility while, on the other hand, Friedrich Engels, when editing *Capital* Volume III, bestowed a critical after-thought upon this newest theoretical attempt, if only in that somewhat curt and deprecatory remark.⁸

8 See Engels 1975–2004c.

From Political Economy to the Marxian Critique of Political Economy

As the revolutionary bourgeoisie had enlightened itself as to the principles of the new industrial society in the new science of *political economy*, so did the proletarian class assert its revolutionary aims in the *critique of political economy*. This is not a critique of single results of bourgeois economics from within. It is, fundamentally, a critique of the very premises of political economy based upon the new standpoint of a social class which, theoretically as well as practically, goes beyond bourgeois economy. It investigates the tendencies inherent in capitalist commodity-production which in the course of their further development produce the necessary basis for the economic, political, and ideological struggle of the proletarian class, and which will ultimately overthrow the bourgeois mode of production and advance to the higher production-relations of a socialist and communist society.

The Marxian 'critique' is not the first appearance of a genuine principle of criticism as a driving force in the development of economic science. Already in the earlier phases of political economy the mercantile system had been criticised by the Physiocrats, the Physiocrats by Adam Smith, and Smith by Ricardo. Nor was that earlier economic criticism a matter of pure theory. Each new phase of the theoretical development implied a new phase in the real historical development of the capitalist mode of production. There was no clear distinction; in fact, every historical phase was in itself a criticism of the preceding phase. For all that, the actual historical and theoretical 'subject' of economic science remained unchanged through all these stages. The bourgeois class in its revolutionary struggle against the obsolete forms of feudal production could not, and did not, distinguish its particular interests as a class from its general interest in the whole of historical progress. Even after the defeat of feudalism, for a considerable time it could still quite honestly regard itself as promoting the general welfare of society. During this phase, political economy was even striving to cooperate, with the utmost impartiality, in solving the new economic problems emerging from the increasingly unsatisfactory conditions of the real people, that is, the section that was actually working in the as yet undivided industrial society.

That state of things was profoundly changed by the new historical development which set in with the economic crisis of 1825 and the great political

changes of 1830. Henceforth, the new conditions established within bourgeois society no longer permitted an impartial analysis of the economic principles underlying those conditions. A strictly scientific investigation of social development was possible only from the standpoint of that class whose task in history is to transcend the narrow bourgeois horizons and, ultimately, to do away with classes altogether.¹ The theoretical system of Ricardo marks the turning point.

The complete impartiality of the genuine scientific investigator which appears everywhere in the work of Ricardo, had seemed miraculous already to his contemporaries. 'Mr. Ricardo seemed to have dropped from another planet', said Lord Brougham. With faultless clarity, this English banker of the beginning of the nineteenth century, who nowhere goes beyond the boundaries of the bourgeoisie,² presented in his system the inherent disharmonies as well as the harmonious and progressive features of the bourgeois mode of production; more particularly he revealed the inevitable opposition arising between the two industrial classes. He declared from the outset that the principal problem in political economy is to state the proportions in which the whole produce of society is allotted to each of the three social classes: the proprietors of land, the owners of capital, and the propertyless labourers.³ Thus 'the contrast of class interests, of wages and profits, of profit and rent', became indeed, as was later stated by Marx, the very 'pivot' of Ricardo's economic investigation.⁴

Ricardo's position in the history of economic science is precisely analogous to Hegel's in philosophical thought, just as in a preceding phase the economics of Adam Smith had corresponded to the philosophy of Kant. This analogous historical position appears most clearly in Ricardo's important contribution to what we have described in an earlier chapter as 'bourgeois self-criticism'. The scientific criticism of the existing capitalist system, which pervades Ricardo's economic system, surpasses the earlier economists' occasional comments on the unpleasant sides of the new bourgeois conditions even more than the earlier philosophical critics had been surpassed by Hegel. While in dealing with Hegel we had to disregard the mystifying form of his statements in order to establish his realistic advance on his predecessors, the superiority of Ricardo's criticism over that of his forerunners is clear as day. His critical statements not only surpass all previous criticism in their sweeping power of generalisation

1 See Marx 1873.

2 'The "parallelograms of Mr. Owen" appear to be the only form of society which he knew outside the bourgeois one' (Marx 1859).

3 See the 'Preface' to Ricardo 1817.

4 See Marx 1873; see also Marx letter to Weydemeyer, 5 March 1852 (Marx 1975–2004).

and in the irresistible logic of their reasoning. A more decisive difference appears in their very premises, namely, in the fact that they rest no longer on that naive faith in the fundamental perfection or the unlimited perfectibility of the new world-order, which had prevailed among the economists of the preceding period quite as much as among the philosophers.

Political economy in its first period had been optimistic and confident to the extent that along with the blessings of the new bourgeois mode of production it could afford to acknowledge their purchase-price. 'Not for a single moment did it deceive itself as to the birth pains of wealth, but what is the use of crying over historical necessity?'⁵ In his great inquiry into the best possible ways to raise the general wealth of society, even for Adam Smith it had still been fairly easy to regard the interests of the 'inferior order' of the wage-labourers as well as those of the two 'superior orders' (profit and rent). He had even endeavoured to oppose the tendency of the newly arrived bourgeoisie to monopolise for itself the advantages won in a common battle and to definitely foreground the neglected interests of the common man. He did not thereby endanger, but rather tightened the apparent unity of the two industrial classes which were at that time still busy conquering the last surviving prerogatives of the landed aristocracy. A different situation was faced by Ricardo when, in a supplementary chapter added to the third edition of his *Principles*, he did not uphold the favourable view on the effects of machinery which he had expressed in the preceding chapters of his work but which in the meantime Sismondi had shown to be erroneous both in fact and theory. While he had then emphasised the 'general good' which must of necessity be brought about by 'these mute agents which are always the produce of much less labour than that which they displace',⁶ he now carefully re-examined his earlier position. A more realistic consideration of the 'influence of machinery on the interests of the different classes of society' led him to the conclusion that: 'the opinion entertained by the labouring class, that the employment of machinery is frequently detrimental to their interests, is not founded on prejudice and error, but is conformable to the correct principles of Political Economy'.⁷

No wonder that the later pseudo-scientific apologists of capitalism should denounce him on this count as the father of communism. In 1848 a leading American economist said: 'The system of Mr. Ricardo is one of discord... it tends to foster enmity between classes and nations... His book is the right

5 See Marx 1932, p. 558.

6 See Ricardo 1817, chapter I, § 5.

7 Ibid. chapter xxxi.

textbook for the demagogue who aims at power through agrarianism, war, and plunder'.⁸

All the post-Ricardian developments in political economy testify to the fact that the historical struggle waged between the progressive industrial class and the obstructive forces of feudal oppression had now been finally superseded by a new revolutionary conflict arising within bourgeois society between the two hitherto united classes produced by modern industry itself – the bourgeoisie and proletariat.

The first of the various schools to work out the scientific results of classical political economy under the changed historical conditions of the nineteenth century sprang up immediately after Ricardo's death. From this school began the attempt, with which we have dealt above, to use Ricardian theory as a weapon against the existing economic system of society and thus to derive anti-bourgeois conclusions from bourgeois principles.⁹ But in the main the spokesmen of this new school contented themselves with celebrating the victory of Ricardian principles over all pre-Ricardian economics in a series of splendid tournaments which were for the most part displayed in scattered review-articles, occasional papers, and pamphlets and were, after a long period in oblivion, rediscovered and recognised in their historical importance, mainly by the endeavours of Marx.¹⁰ This last polemical intermezzo preceded the final collapse of the fighting spirit in bourgeois economic theory – a skirmish resembling, as Marx said, the '*Sturm und Drang*' period of economic science that had raged in France after Dr. Quesnay's death, but not more than 'Indian summer reminds us of the spring'¹¹ – roughly covered the decade from 1820 to 1830. After that, it dragged on in ever weaker manifestations through to the 1846 repeal of the Corn Laws in England and to the outbreak of a new revolution on the Continent in 1848–49.

Another tendency of post-Ricardian economics is represented by a school of pseudo-scientific writers who flattened, diluted, and gradually dispersed altogether the theoretical results reaped from the work of the classical economists. The theoretical contents of the prolific writings of this school are most aptly, if somewhat cruelly, described by Marx as a mere 'vulgarisation' of the scientific achievements of political economy. The 'vulgar' successors of the great

8 See Carey 1848. H, 1848. See also the belated abuse of 'Ricardo, Jew and Marxist' by the German Minister of Propaganda, Goebbels, at the Congress of the National Socialist Party in Nuremberg, 1936.

9 See Carey 1848, p. 90 *et seq.*

10 See the detailed discussion of this whole school in Marx 1905c.

11 See Marx 1873.

classical economists have, indeed, not added any new contribution to that genuine work of discovery by which their scientific predecessors had discerned the inner relations of the modern bourgeois mode of production and thus brought forward the necessary premises for its genetic presentation. Scientific analysis was everywhere replaced by mere conceptual reflection. That simple reproduction of the given external conditions, which for the classicists had been merely one of the constituents of their theory – its ‘vulgar’ element – was now finally set up as a separate existence. Yet this was not the lowest point reached in the gradual decay of a formerly vigorous and vital science. A still more complete loss of scientific character was seen when later, along with the further development of the real oppositions inherent in the life of bourgeois society, economic science itself split into mutually opposing parts. When no longer confronted with their own internal dissensions, but with a group of socialist dissenters opposing them from without, the bourgeois economists promptly threw overboard any semblance of unbiased theoretical research. From a mere neglect of the progressive tasks of true science, they turned to a conscious defence of existing bourgeois conditions against the impending socialist menace embodied in the writings of Sismondi, Owen, Fourier and Saint-Simon. The more the stern outlines of class-strife asserted themselves in the actual development of capitalist society, the more the economists applied themselves to a misrepresentation and, ultimately, to an entire negation of these new historical tendencies. At each further step in the unavoidable development of ‘class’ and ‘class-discord’ within reality, they strengthened their desperate efforts to keep these embarrassing topics entirely out of their theoretical picture. They even endeavoured to purge the classical concepts of any such impurities wherever they had already been introduced into economic theory by their great scientific predecessors. Thus bourgeois economists became even incapable of a faithful registration of external facts. By the combined effect of all these self-established obstructions, the ‘vulgarised’ economic theory of the nineteenth century became poorer and poorer in theoretical content. There is, however, a difference between the earlier stage when, for instance, Say had ‘vulgarised’ Adam Smith, and the later stage when John Ramsey McCulloch, Frédéric Bastiat and others ‘vulgarised’ Ricardo. In the earlier phase the ‘vulgarisers’ had found their material as yet unfinished, and thus had been compelled to contribute, albeit to a diminishing degree, to solving real economic problems. In the later phase they dropped all independent theoretical effort and occupied themselves merely with plagiarising Ricardo’s doctrines and arguing away the unpleasant aspects of these doctrines.¹²

12 See Marx 1905c, pp. 281 *et seq.*

The deductions which the socialist Ricardians had been unable to draw, and which the 'vulgar' economists had deliberately dodged, were formulated fifty years later by a new school of economic research. The true conclusions of classical political economy were drawn by Marx. The 'critical' tradition of the classical epoch of political economy was revived by the Marxian 'critique' of political economy in *Capital*. This new criticism, however, was more than a transition from a given phase of economic science to a further developed one. It implied a change of the class which henceforth was to be the historical as well as the theoretical 'subject' of all political economy. While previous criticisms had as their practical aim a further 'development' of the bourgeois mode of production, the Marxian criticism aims at its complete overthrow.¹³ The 'critique' of political economy, then, is the theory of an impending revolution.

Not only Marx and Engels, but all revolutionary Hegelians of the 1840s and 1850s had used the word 'critique' in this grand historical sense.¹⁴ The terminology fell into complete oblivion during the sad period of decline which set in after the collapse of the Chartist movement and the triumph of the counter-revolution in the whole of Europe following the defeat of the Parisian proletariat in June, 1848. Thus a complete abandonment of all revolutionary 'critical' tendencies in theory coincided with the abandonment of the last residues of a practical revolutionary tendency. Marx and Engels were the only ones who rescued from oblivion both the practical and the theoretical aspects of a truly revolutionary 'critique'.¹⁵

13 For a most succinct statement of the matter discussed in this Chapter see Luxemburg 1899–1900, p. 182: 'Classical Political Economy, with invincible logic, finally resulted everywhere in a form of self-criticism, namely, the criticism of the bourgeois order. Ricardo, in England, provided the direct starting-point for a whole school of English socialists (Thompson, Gray, Bray, and others); in France, the first "flattener" of the classical economists, Say, was immediately followed by Sismondi; in Germany, we find socialist sympathies already in Rau, who was followed by Rodbertus and Thuenen. Marx completed the transformation of Political Economy into its opposite, a socialist analysis of capitalism'.

14 See the writings of Ruge, Bruno Bauer, Feuerbach and other left Hegelians who already use the term 'critique' generally in their titles, one improving upon the other in ever new variations. From among the earlier writings of Marx and Engels we note: Marx 1927–30i; Engels 1975–2004a, Marx 1930–2, pp. 31 *et seq.* Marx and Engels 1931–2c; and Marx and Engels 1931–2b, v.

15 See Marx 1859 and Marx 1932.

Scientific versus Philosophical Criticism of Political Economy

Marx's approach to political economy was from the outset that of a critical and revolutionary student of society rather than that of an economist. Yet a long period was still required before, from the first discovery of political economy as an 'anatomy of civil society' through a series of intermediate phases, he arrived at his final scientific and materialist investigation and critique of the whole complex of ideas and facts constituting the historical existence of 'political economy'.

Marx was already an outspoken revolutionary and even a proletarian socialist at the time when he regarded a really developed 'political economy', as it existed in England and France, as being in itself revolutionary progress, and practically identified the aims of political economy with the aims of socialism. He contrasted this modern form of relating industry to the state, or the 'world of wealth' to the 'world of politics', with the reactionary form in which that 'main problem of modern times' had then begun to occupy the attention of the Germans. 'While the problem in France and England is worded Political Economy, or wealth controlled by society, in Germany it is termed, National Economy, or nationality controlled by private property'.¹ If we apply to Marx the terms which he, but a short time later, was to apply to a similar standpoint, we may say that during this short first period Marx had criticised politics only from the standpoint of economics, but had not yet extended his revolutionary criticism to the economic base itself; or that up to now he had merely 'criticised political economy from the standpoint of political economy'.

By the time when he had raised this objection to his first socialist antagonist, Proudhon, Marx himself had adopted an altogether different standpoint which utterly transcended all economic science in an apparently final manner. His *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* dating from this second period,² and the economic fragments inserted in a mainly philosophical work written at the same time,³ anticipated all the critical and revolutionary conclusions

1 See Marx 1927–30i, p. 612. For an early anticipation of the later critical standpoint, see Engels 1975–2004a, pp. 377–404.

2 See Marx 1931–2i, pp. 33–172.

3 See Marx and Engels 1931–2c, pp. 173–388.

which were later embodied in *Capital*. Yet this new critical insight was couched in highly philosophical language and appeared much more as a materialist continuation of the old philosophical struggles among the different Hegelian schools than as a scientific criticism of the contents and premises of political economy. Instead of dealing directly with the theories and concepts of the great classical economists, Marx dealt rather with the idealistic, i.e., the insufficient reconstruction and criticism which these concepts had in the meantime found in the philosophy of Hegel and of the right and left Hegelians of the 1830s and 1840s. For example, he disposed of the socioeconomic phenomenon which he was later to solve in a rational way in his critical exposure of the 'fetishism of commodities', by a reference to the then most fashionable Hegelian term of 'human self-alienation'. He summed up his criticism of Proudhon in the sentence: 'Proudhon conquers economic alienation only within the bounds of economic alienation'.⁴ In the same manner, his criticism of other fundamental economic phenomena started from the assumption that 'Hegel takes the position of modern Political Economy'⁵ and that, therefore, a materialist exposure of the idealist shortcomings of Hegel's philosophical criticism of the economic terms is equivalent to a final refutation of political economy itself.

Marx began to free himself from the remaining vestiges of his former philosophical creed by a comprehensive criticism of all post-Hegelian philosophy. In this he was joined by Engels. As a first result of their lifelong cooperation, which after some more or less frustrated earlier attempts was now really beginning, Marx and Engels during the next two years worked out in detail the contrast prevailing between their own materialist and scientific views and the various ideological standpoints represented by their former friends among the left Hegelians (Ludwig Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer, Max Stirner) and by the philosophical *belles-lettres* of the 'German' or 'true' socialists.⁶ Thus, they finally broke with what Marx later called their 'former philosophical conscience'.⁷ From this thoroughly changed standpoint, Marx now cruelly criticised the somewhat bewildering manner in which his former philosophical criticism of political economy in the meantime had been further worked out by Proudhon.⁸ He showed that Proudhon did not treat the economic categories as theoretical expressions of historical conditions, corresponding to a definite stage in

4 Marx and Engels 1931–2c, p. 213.

5 Marx and Engels 1931–2c, p. 157.

6 See Marx and Engels 1931–2b, pp. 1–544.

7 See Marx 1859.

8 See Marx 1931–2d. See also Proudhon 1847; see further the letter dealing with the same question written by Marx to Annenkov, 28 December 1846 (Marx 1931).

the development of material production, but as 'pre-existing eternal ideas', and thus ultimately fell back on the standpoint of bourgeois economics.⁹ Such criticism of Proudhon's philosophical mystification of economic concepts was undoubtedly justified. But Marx's new anti-philosophical tendency was now so strong that, instead of supplanting Proudhon's bad philosophy by a better and more scientific criticism of political economy, he rather confronted Proudhon's unscientific criticism with the science of political economy itself, i.e. with Ricardo's theory of value.¹⁰ Thus he no longer reproached Proudhon for not having passed critically beyond the narrow bounds of economic science. He now reproached him for sharing, as an economist, the 'illusions of speculative philosophy' and for not yet having entered the realm of a really scientific political economy.

Only with the next stage of this long and somewhat circuitous development do we reach the period during which Marx finally worked out his own *critical economic theory* which is, at the same time, the basic part of his materialist theory of the historical development of society and of the proletarian revolution. The first mature fruit of this new stage is contained in the masterly lectures which Marx delivered to the German Workers' Educational Association in Brussels in 1847 and later published, in a revised form, in his own revolutionary paper during the 1848 revolution.¹¹ Their outline and contents reveal that we find here the first fragmentary statement of that comprehensive exposition of the 'economic conditions underlying all present-day class wars and national struggles', which, later, after being further worked out and many times entirely recast, was to appear as *Capital*.¹² The most conspicuous difference is that in the earlier work Marx does not yet start from the analysis of 'commodities' in general but from a particular kind of commodity – *wage-labour*, and from the opposition between the two main classes of modern capitalist society which directly springs from the appearance of that commodity. We find, moreover, in this first scientific exposition the striking description (pivotal for all subsequent developments and unsurpassed, in trenchant power, even by Marx's

9 See Marx's letter to the editor of the *Sozialdemokrat* (Marx 1865).

10 See note by Riasanov on the German translation of Marx's letter to Annenkov (Riasanov xxxi, p. 822).

11 See *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* 5 April 1849.

12 See the *Leading Article* of *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, 4 April 1849, in which Marx outlined the topics to be discussed in the subsequent articles and thus, at the same time, the general scope of his planned economic work. This article was added as a general introduction to the pamphlet, in which Engels re-edited the Marxian articles under the title of *Wage-Labor and Capital* (Marx 1931–2j).

own later formulae of 'capital' itself, which is defined as not being a relation between *men and nature*, but as *a relation between man and men based on a relation between man and nature* – a specific historic form of a social relation arising and decaying with the rise and decay of modern industrial or 'capitalist society'.¹³

The working out of this first scientific exposition of Marx's revolutionary criticism of political economy was interrupted by the outbreak of the February Revolution,¹⁴ just as in a later period of world-history, Lenin's presentation of 'The Marxian Doctrine of the State and the Task of the Proletariat in the Revolution' was interrupted by a situation calling for the performance of that very task.¹⁵

After the final defeat of the abortive European revolution of 1848–49, Marx made the most of the long years of involuntary leisure which were forced upon him as an exile in London by making 'an entirely fresh start' in his economic studies.¹⁶ The ultimate form of his materialist theory, which resulted from that new and prolonged period of economic and social research, is simultaneously political economy and a criticism of political economy. It works out the classical system of bourgeois economy and ultimately transcends all phases and forms of bourgeois economy. It shows the most general ideas and principles of political economy to be mere fetishes disguising the actual social relations prevailing between individuals and classes within a definite historical epoch of the socioeconomic formation.

13 See Marx 1931–2, pp. 482 *et seq.*

14 See Marx 1859.

15 See Lenin, *Postscript to State and Revolution* (Lenin 1931 [1917]), with the concluding remark equally characteristic of both authors – that 'it is more agreeable and useful to experience the revolution than to write about it'.

16 See Marx 1859.

Two Aspects of Revolutionary Materialism in Marx's Economic Theory

In the successive phases of Marx's theory, besides the main line of a continuous growth of the critical revolutionary standpoint, there appears another line of development which, to a certain extent, runs contrary to the first. Hand in hand with increasing stress on a strictly materialist and scientific approach goes a greater emphasis on economic theory itself, as against a mere critical attack on its philosophical, historical, and practical premises. It seems as though during the further study of the vast exhaustive material accumulated during the classical epoch of political economy that he found heaped up in the vaults of the British Museum, he was more and more strongly impressed by the lasting significance which the scientific results of classical political economy were bound to have for the new revolutionary class, for a really materialistic theory of bourgeois society, and for a practicable way to its revolutionary overthrow. Just as the tremendous depression and stagnation following the defeat of the Paris workers in 1848 had imposed upon the materialist investigator a long period of leisure for his ever-expanding, ever-deepening economic studies,¹ so at the same time many revolutionary impulses within the actual workers' movement were forcibly repressed in their genuine practical function. A new stage of development seemed to have opened for capitalism with the discoveries of gold in California and Australia – discoveries which attracted the most active members of the working class and thus further paralysed even the faintest attempts at recovery within the European revolutionary movement. All those historical changes were reflected in the later development of Marx's revolutionary theory. The social revolution of the proletariat was now mainly represented as a necessary development in society, during which capitalist production, by the working of an inevitable economic law, brings forth its negation with the inexorability of a natural process.² He did not

1 See the reminiscence of this quiet period, during which the echo of the Taiping revolt and the new spiritualistic fad of table-tipping provided the only diversion, in a footnote to *Capital*: 'One will remember how China and the tables began to dance when the rest of the world appeared to stand still *pour encourager les autres*' (Marx 1932).

2 See the sub-section on the 'Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation' in Marx 1932, xxiv.

for this reason commit himself to the so-called fatalist tendency 'discovered' over and over again in some of Marx's phrases by the later bourgeois critics and their supporters within the labour-movement. A closer investigation reveals that even in that gloomiest period of both the proletarian movement³ and his own career, Marx kept himself far away from any fatalism. Still, it is a definitely changed pattern of revolutionary action which the materialist theory henceforth sketched out for the historical movement of the workers' class. The question as to whether that change resulted in a strengthening or a weakening of the revolutionary movement can only be answered by taking into account the historical circumstances prevailing at the time, or rather, through the entire historical period. We merely note that the new phase of Marx's revolutionary science, and the increased importance which was now assigned to economic theory within its frame,⁴ arose from a particular historical situation and suggested a form of behaviour adapted to that particular situation. Marx's materialist theory, based on firm economic foundations, seemed to point out a new way to the workers, who had now passed the period of their initial utopian enthusiasm and spontaneous aggressive activity. While this new way might not ensure a quick and easy advance to victory, nor even a direct approach to decisive battles, in comparison with the meagre chances of the earlier period, it afforded a distinctly better opportunity, nay even a practical certainty of success.

The historical conditions of the 1850s produced this element of disillusionment and dearly-bought sobriety which is inherent in the later phases of Marx's 'materialism', and which is largely responsible for the tremendous effect which Marxism was to exert upon the workers' movement during the ensuing historical period. It is, at the same time, both historically and theoretically connected with another and much more general chain of historical events. The proletarian revolution of the nineteenth century, which so far had found its most powerful and most conspicuous theoretical expression in the revolutionary materialism of Marx, appears, under a secular aspect, as being itself a mere *second phase* within the whole of the modern revolutionary movement.⁵ Thus

3 See the impressive description of these conditions in Working Men's International Association 1864.

4 See the interesting remark made by Engels in his review of Marx's book, *Critique of Political Economy*, in the London emigrants-newspaper, *Das Volk*: 'The whole theoretical existence of the German proletarian party emanated from the study of Political Economy...' (Engels 1859).

5 See the first paragraphs of Marx's pamphlet, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Marx 1852).

it shares, to a certain extent, that more general 'disenchantment' which after the conclusion of the great French Revolution was first proclaimed by the early French theorists of the counterrevolution and the German Romanticists. This idea of disenchantment has, in fact, exerted a considerable influence upon Marx mainly through Hegel, and has thus directly entered into the 'materialist' Marxian theory of the modern workers' movement. Nay, more, we may go still further back and find within the materialist theory of the proletarian revolution some traces of the revolutionary tradition of the Jacobin Convention of 1792–94. This particular phase of the French Revolution, which was afterwards exalted over and over again by Marx, Engels, and Lenin as a model of the highest political sagacity and energy, had, likewise, been a 'second' and sobered phase in contrast to the first exuberant and illusionary phase of 1789–92.

On all these grounds, the Marxian materialist and economic theory bears the specific characteristics of a *theory of the second phase of the proletarian revolution*, and has actually made its first appearance in all countries where it became the dominant revolutionary theory at the very time of an analogous historical situation had arisen in that particular country. Even in *Russia*, where revolutionary Marxism was to make world-history by a first great victory of its principle, similar historical circumstances accompanied its reception. The revolutionary social democratic, i.e. 'Marxist' principle was inaugurated in Russia in 1883, according to the testimony of the best authority on the subject,⁶ mainly by a pamphlet by Georgi Plekhanov which, under the heading *Socialism and Political Struggle*, endeavoured to 'open up a new way for the *defeated* revolutionary movement through which it could secure for its cause *a certain, if not immediate, victory*'. Instead of following the model of conscious and violent action set by the preceding generation of Russian revolutionaries, it was to rely on the socioeconomic process of development which would 'slowly but unavoidably undermine the old régime' and through which the Russian working class 'in an historical development proceeding just as inexorably as the development of capitalism itself', would finally 'deal the death blow to Russian absolutism' and would then 'join, as an equal member, the ranks of the international proletarian army'.⁷

In a similar way, on several occasions Marx and Engels themselves expressed the idea that the different degrees of 'maturity', or the preparedness of the workers' movement in various capitalist countries to accept Marxian

6 See David Riazanov's statement in his *Preface* to the German edition of Plekhanov's book, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* (Plekhanov 1929).

7 See Plekhanov's pamphlet of 1883, as quoted in the text, and similar remarks in the works of all later Russian Marxists (Plekhanov 1883).

materialist theory, more or less depended upon the experience gained by each section of the workers concerned during a preceding phase of utopian illusions and immediate revolutionary attempts. This assumption of two definite phases, one 'utopian', the other 'scientific', through which every modern labour-movement must pass in its historical development, was finally stated by Friedrich Engels in his well-known pamphlet *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*.⁸ Since its first appearance in France, in 1880, this pamphlet was spread under this and under various other titles in large editions throughout the world and became as significant for the various *social-democratic movements* preceding the World War, as *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848,⁹ Marx's *Address and Rules of the Working Men's International Association* of 1864,¹⁰ and Lenin's pamphlet *State and Revolution* of 1917¹¹ were in other historical phases of the modern workers' movement.

Whatever the reasons, there is no doubt that during his later development, Marx linked himself more and more closely with the scientific results of classical political economy. The Marxian 'critique' as contained in *Capital* Volume II and Volume III (which after his death were edited by Engels), and even in the first book edited by Marx himself, not infrequently gives the unwary reader the impression of being no longer directed against the whole of preceding bourgeois economic science, but only against those superficial and apologetic forms into which the truly scientific statements and concepts of the great classical thinkers had degenerated in the hands of the post-classical or 'vulgar' economists. Yet this is by no means the real significance of Marx's economic and social theory. It is easy to clear up some ambiguous statements¹² by reference to those sections of the first chapter of *Capital* in which Marx stated with utmost precision the difference between his critical economic theory and the doctrines presented by even the greatest and most advanced thinkers of the classical epoch of bourgeois political economy.¹³

8 Engels 1880.

9 Marx and Engels 1931-2a.

10 Working Men's International Association 1864.

11 Lenin 1971a.

12 See, for example, Marx 1894, ii, p. 366, and Marx 1905c, pp. 71-2.

13 See Marx 1932, pp. 46 *et seq.*, footnotes 31-3.

The Economic Theory of *Capital*

In our presentation of the economic theory of *Capital*, we shall confine ourselves to one or two results of the Marxian teaching, extremely abstract in appearance, which include, in our opinion, the revolutionary kernel of the Marxian theory and thus constitute its fundamental and epoch-making importance. It is this, in fact, which explains why the teaching of Marx has gained and retained, for almost a century, the active support of millions of revolutionary workers in all parts of the world, and which even today forces from the most bitter opponents of the proletarian class movement an unwilling tribute, in that they announce as the aim of their reactionary and counter-revolutionary endeavours – *war against Marxism*.

Marx himself, in a letter written to Engels soon after the appearance of *Capital*, described the following ‘three fundamentally new elements’ of his book:

- (1) that in contrast to *all* earlier economics which from the outset had dealt with the detached fragments of surplus-value in their fixed forms of rent, profit and interest, as given entities, he first treated the general form of surplus-value, in which all those elements are still grasped in an undivided unity like the uncrystallised components in a chemical solution;
- (2) that, without exception, economists had missed the simple fact that if a commodity is the sum of the ‘value in use’ and the ‘value in exchange’, the labour entailed in the production of the commodity must possess the same two-fold character, while the mere analysis for ‘labour *sans phrase*’, as in Smith, Ricardo, etc., must inevitably stumble upon something inexplicable. *This is indeed the whole secret of the critical conception*;
- (3) that for the first time wages are shown to be an irrational manifestation of some other relation hidden behind them.¹

All these innovations are of decisive importance with regard to the ultimate aim of Marxist theory, the critical transformation of economics into a direct historical and social science dealing with the development of material production and of the class-struggle. That goal, however, is not reached by an immediate disintegration of economics as a particular form of knowledge,

¹ See Marx’s letter to Engels of 8 January 1868 (Marx 1931–21, p. 6).

but by a further theoretical development which brings into relief the inherent contradiction between the economic categories and principles and the actual facts which had hitherto been presented in their guise. While Marx seems merely to proceed with the work begun by the great bourgeois economists, his further development of their theories is guided in every case by a definite critical purpose. A more refined, more comprehensive, more thorough, and more consistent analysis serves to advance the traditional economic concepts and theorems to that point where the practical reality behind them, i.e. their historical and social contents, become tangible and subject to a critical attack.

Thus the Marxian definition of value in terms of labour differs from the classical definition not by its conceptual form but rather by a closer connection with the underlying social conditions. Similarly, the advance made by the famous Marxian doctrine of surplus-value, as stated by Marx himself, is new only because of the more comprehensive synthesis, by which he reduced to a common denominator the various phenomena of profit, interest, and rent as described by the classical economists. Nor does the new Marxian definition of wages, not as the 'price of labour' but as the price of labour-power, amount to a major scientific discovery since the best classical writers, and, indeed, Marx himself in his earlier period, had already applied the former term in exactly the same sense which was later more fully expressed by the more elaborate description.² Both these apparent technicalities and, in fact, all of the Marxian improvements upon classical economic theory are important, not for their purely formal advance over the classical concepts, but for their definite transfer of economic thought from the field of the exchange of commodities and of the legal and moral conceptions of 'right' and 'wrong' originating therein to the field of material production taken in its full social significance. For example, the economic concept of a *surplus-value* existing in the form of goods and money and competed for by its rival claimants is now transformed into the concept of a *surplus-labour* performed by the real workers in the workshop under the social domination exerted upon them by the capitalist owner of the workshop. Furthermore, the 'free-labour contract' of the modern wage-labourer is, by an apparent change of terminology only, now revealed as a real sale of the labour-power of the wage-labourer to the capitalist in return for wages, and thus as a social oppression and exploitation of the labouring class persisting within an supposedly 'free' and democratically ruled society.

2 See Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital* (Marx 1931–2j) The full equivalence of the terms used by Marx in his earlier and later period is clearly demonstrated by the fact that Engels in his later editions was able to substitute the new term 'price of labour power' in all cases where Marx had originally used the term 'price of labour' without any change in the real argument.

Marx begins the further theoretical development of the economic categories at the point where classical political economists had stopped, i.e. with an analysis of 'value' based on the distinction of a 'value in use' and 'value in exchange', and with the reduction of 'value' to 'labour'. These two scientific discoveries of the last stage of bourgeois classical economics, of which, as they were then represented, the one was bound to remain entirely sterile, and the other led only to a one-sided and formalistic further development, were used by Marx to work out his new concept of '*commodity-producing labour*' which was henceforth to serve as a pivot for a new understanding of the whole conceptual system of political economy.

The distinction between use-value and exchange-value, in the abstract form in which it had been made by the bourgeois economists (and had, in fact, already been applied by Aristotle to the commodity-production of Antique Society), did not provide any useful starting point for a materialist investigation of bourgeois commodity-production as a particular social form. It was insufficient also for theoretical reasons. The concept of use-value was only perfunctorily mentioned by them as a presupposition of exchange-value, and exchange-value alone was treated as a real economic category.³

With Marx, as we have seen in a previous chapter, use-value is not defined as use-value in general, but as the *use-value of a commodity*. This use-value inherent in the commodities produced in modern capitalist society is, however, not merely an extra-economic presupposition of their 'value'. It is an element of the value, and itself is an economic category. The mere fact that a thing has utility for any human being, say for its producer, does not yet give us the economic definition of use-value. Not until the thing has social utility (i.e., utility 'for other persons') does the economic definition of use-value apply.⁴

Just as the use value of the commodity is economically defined as a '*social use-value*' (use-value 'for others'), so is the specifically useful labour which goes into the production of this commodity defined economically as a '*social labour*' (labour 'for others'). Thus, Marx's '*commodity-producing labour*' appears as

3 See the first three paragraphs of Ricardo's *Principles*; the first introduces the distinction between use-value and exchange-value by way of a quotation from Smith; the second emphasises use-value as an absolutely essential presupposition of exchange-value; while in the third it is definitely dismissed from all further investigation.

4 See Marx 1932, p. 7. See further, for the most detailed presentation of Marx's view on this question, his polemics against Rodbertus and Adolf Wagner in the manuscripts of 1881–2 grouped under the heading *Ökonomisches en général (x)* in Marx's papers (published as an Appendix to the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute's edition of *Capital* (Marx 1932, pp. 841 *et seq.*, particularly pp. 846–53). This was Marx's last word on economics.

social labour in a twofold sense.⁵ It has, in common with labour in other stages of the historical development of production, the *general social character* of being a 'specifically useful labour', which goes to the production of a definite kind of social use-value. It has, on the other hand, the *specific historical character* of being a 'generally social labour', which goes to the production of a definite quantity of exchange-value. The capacity of social labour to produce definite things useful to human beings (a general condition of the metabolic interaction between man and nature) appears in the *use-value* of its product. Its capacity for the production of a value and a surplus-value for the capitalist (a particular characteristic of labour which derives from the particular form of the social organisation of the labour-process under the conditions of the capitalist mode of production within the present historical epoch) appears in the *exchange-value* of its product. The fusion of the two social characteristics of commodity-producing labour appears in the 'value-form' of the product of labour, or the '*form of commodity*'.

Only thus critically modified, is the *labour-theory of value* a suitable starting point for an economic theory in which labour is considered not merely formally, in one of its aspects, but in its full material realisation. When speaking of labour as a source of wealth, the earlier bourgeois economists had likewise thought of 'labour' in terms of the various forms of real work, though they did so only for the reason that their economic categories were as yet undeveloped, and still in the process of separation from their original material contents, vague and indeterminate. Thus, the Mercantilists, the Physiocrats, etc., successfully declared the true source of wealth to lie in the labour expended in the export-industries, in trade and shipping, in agricultural labour, etc. Even with Adam Smith, who from the different branches of labour definitely advanced to the general form of commodity-producing labour, we find that concrete aspect retained, along with the new and more formalistic definition which is also expressed in his system and which was later to become the exclusive definition of value in the work of Ricardo, and by which labour is defined as an abstract and merely quantitative entity. He correctly defined this same abstract form of labour as exchange-value producing labour. Irrationally enough, however, he simultaneously declared it to be the only source of both value (exchange-value) and also of the material wealth of the community, or use-value.

This doctrine, which still obstinately persists in 'vulgar' socialism, and which is unjustly imputed to scientific socialism by its bourgeois critics, is, according to Marx, economically false. In so far as 'labour' is regarded in its specific character as useful labour, and, in the same way, 'wealth' in its material

⁵ See Marx 1932, I, i, § 2, 'The Two-fold Character of Commodity-Producing Labour'.

form as an object of utility, labour is *not* the only source of wealth. (If this were so, it would be difficult to explain why, in present-day capitalist society, it is precisely those people who are poor who hitherto have had that unique source of all wealth at their exclusive disposal, and even more difficult to account for the fact that they remain unemployed and poor, instead of producing wealth by their labour). But it is just here, in the very inconsistency of his economic theory, that a memory of the concrete reality of human labour lingers in Adam Smith's mind. In praising the creative power of 'labour' he was not thinking so much of the forced labour of the modern wage-labourer, which appears in the value of the commodities and produces capitalistic profit, as he was of the general natural necessity of human labour, which produces things useful and beautiful. Likewise, his naive glorification of the 'division of labour' achieved in these 'great manufactures', by which he understood the whole of modern capitalist production, does not so much refer to the extremely imperfect form of the present-day capitalist division of labour (arising through commodity-production and -exchange) as to the general form of human labour vaguely fused with it in his theoretical exposition.⁶ 'Adam Smith's contradictions', said Marx later, 'are significant in so far as they contain problems which he indeed does not solve, but which he reveals just by contradicting himself.'⁷

In the further development from Smith to Ricardo, political economy becomes more consistent – and one-sided. Even now, bourgeois economists do not deny that there are two characters inherent in the commodity, use-value and exchange-value. But they deal only with 'value of exchange' as the true economic value. While immersed in their 'economic' definition of 'value' in terms of labour, they appear to have quite lost sight of the other aspect of labour which had, at least unconsciously, been taken into consideration by the older economists, that is, of labour as a specifically useful activity, which brings forth as its product a definitely useful object (a use-value). 'Political economy', said Marx, 'nowhere explicitly and consciously distinguishes between labour represented in value and the same labour so far as it is represented in the use value of its product'.⁸

Marx has reintroduced in a new form real, concrete labour into political economy. He deals with 'labour' not in the indefinite, ambiguous, and vacillating form as it had appeared in the writings of the older bourgeois economists; not as the labour of the commodity-producer, or as the materially and

6 See Marx 1931–2d, II, § 2 and Marx 1932 I, xii, sects. 4–5, particularly footnotes 57 and 70, and the passages there quoted from Smith's and Ferguson's works.

7 See Marx 1905, I, p. 171.

8 See Marx 1932, pp. 46–7, footnote 31.

formally free labour of the independent master-craftsman, who had control over his own material means of production, and who exchanged the product of his labour in the form of a commodity for another kind of commodity, or the product of another form of an equally free and independent labour. Marx deals with labour in its present unambiguous, and definite, form of *labour producing a commodity for another person*, i.e., of labour formally paid to its full value but actually exploited; formally free, actually enslaved; formally the independent labour of an isolated worker, actually collective labour performed by proletarian wage-labourers who are separated from the material means of production and to whom their own tools and the *social character of their own labour* – that is, the productive power of what would be under otherwise similar conditions the produce of an isolated worker, now increased a thousandfold by the social division of labour – stand opposed to the worker in the form of *capital*.⁹ Political economy is now no longer a science of commodities. It is only indirectly a science of labour and an abstract and one-sided one. By the revolutionary action of the proletarian class it becomes a direct science of social labour, of the productive forces of that labour, of their development and afterwards their enslavement by the fixed forms of the production-relations prevailing in present-day bourgeois society and, finally, of the emancipation of the productive forces inherent in present society. A glance at Marx's *Capital* Volume I will suffice to convince us of the completely changed character of this science of economics.

From the very beginning the meticulous analysis of the most general economic categories ('commodity', 'money' and the 'transformation of money into capital') in the first chapters of Marx's work, adheres only in appearance to 'that turbulent sphere of the exchange of commodities which is taking place on the surface of commodity-producing society, open and visible to all'. In truth, from the opening sentence to the final conclusion, the Marxian analysis serves to make us look through those highly abstract and sophisticated categories of the bourgeois economists, to disclose their 'fetish-character', and to demonstrate the specific social character of bourgeois commodity-production lying behind them. It becomes highly transparent in the later parts of the book, where Marx deals with the sale and purchase of a commodity of a very special composition, labour-power. It finally passes from the realm of commodity-exchange into another sphere entirely, the 'hidden haunts of production, on whose threshold we are faced with the inscription: No admittance except on business'.¹⁰ From now on the *labour-process*, or what is according to Marx but

9 See Marx 1905c, p. 308.

10 See Marx 1905c, pp. 177–8.

another name for the same thing, the *process of material production*, both in its material and historical aspects, constitutes the subject-matter of the economic theory of *Capital*. That applies not only to chapters 5, 8, 11, 12, 13, etc., which are especially devoted to the analysis of labour and, which, quantitatively, make up half of Volume I but, upon closer examination, to the whole book.¹¹ Just as *Leviathan* is but the nominal title of Hobbes's political work, so *Capital* is only nominally the subject of Marx's new economic theory. Its real theme is *labour* both in its present-day economic form of subjugation by capital and in its development, through the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat, to a new directly social and socialist condition.

11 See Marx 1894, ii, pp. 366–7.

The Fetishism of Commodities

Political economy, which considered bourgeois commodity-production as the final achievement, valid for all time, of a rational and natural system of economic order, had reduced all economic concepts to *value*, and all economic laws to the *law of value*. It had defined the exchange-value of commodities, which appears in the purchase and sale of the products of labour as a given '*quantity of value*', independent of the particular kind of utility or 'use-value' of the several commodities, and dependent only on the labour-time expended on their production. Notwithstanding an often conflicting outside appearance, it adhered to the essential truth of this definition.

Bourgeois economics did not, however, get beyond that formal concept. Even the best and most consistent among its exponents who were fully aware of its objective economic contents and had not mistaken 'value' for an arbitrary term (as superficial thinkers had done even then), had taken the circumstance that relative quantities of labour are represented in the value-relations of its products, and thus labour in value, as an evident fact not requiring any further investigation.

A further generalisation of the categories which had been regarded by bourgeois economists as the ultimate generalisation of their science became possible only when the narrow horizon of bourgeois economic science was left behind by a new scientific advance, which was based on the changed viewpoint of the revolutionary proletarian class. According to Marx, the most general category within the realm of economics is no longer 'value' or the 'quantity of value', but the *value-form of the product of labour* or the *form of commodity* itself.

Even this fundamental form of the bourgeois mode of production is a 'general form' only from the standpoint of a merely 'economic' science (and it represents, indeed, an extreme limit of the generalisation which is possible from that restricted standpoint). It is at the same time, from the more advanced viewpoint of the Marxian critique of political economy, on the contrary, a *specific mark* by which the bourgeois mode of production is distinguished from other historical forms as a particular form of social production. The transition from the one concept to the other, which is implied in the whole of Marx's economic work, is explicitly made in that final paragraph of the first chapter of *Capital* Volume 1, such an important one for the stand taken by Marx against

all bourgeois economics, which bears the rather mysterious title of ‘The Fetish-Character of the Commodity and its Secret’.¹

The ‘fetish-character’ of the commodity, reduced to its simplest form, consists in the fact that man’s handiwork assumes a peculiar quality which influences in a fundamental way the actual behaviour of the persons concerned. It does not wield that remarkable power (as the earlier economists had believed) of an eternal law of nature, yet it is endowed with such power under the particular social conditions prevailing in the present epoch of society. Whence arises this mysterious character of external things which is described by political economists as their ‘value’, and which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are no longer produced directly for use but for sale as ‘commodities?’ The value of a commodity does not arise either from its physical qualities or from its specific utility, nor even from any specific qualities belonging to the labour involved in its production. The value-relations appearing in the exchange of the products of labour as ‘commodities’ are essentially not relations between things, but merely an imaginary expression of an underlying

1 See Marx 1932, i, sect. 4. The final standpoint of Marx in this matter is only imperfectly expressed in the other two passages which might be referred to in the existing text of *Capital* (111, xlvi) and in the *Theories of Surplus Value* (111, 7, sub-section 1, under the heading ‘The Capital Fetish’). It is best here, as in many other cases, to take only *Capital* Volume I (Marx 1932), which was prepared for press by Marx himself and, in addition, Volume II (Marx 1885), as edited from later Marxian manuscripts by Engels, as an absolutely authentic presentation of the Marxian standpoint. The other works which figure as the continuation of *Capital* (i.e. *Capital* Volume III (Marx 1895) edited by Engels and the *Theories of Surplus Value* (Marx 1905) edited by Kautsky) should be regarded only as what they actually are, viz., older presentations of the Marxian thought which in no case can be taken to supersede the statements contained in *Capital* Volume I and II and, in fact, are all drawn from *earlier* manuscripts. Moreover, these older manuscripts, used by Engels and Kautsky, being first drafts and preliminary notes, often do not contain those important statements showing the practical impact of the preceding theoretical analyses, which Marx used to reserve for the final revision. (See Engels’s communications in Engels 1975–2004c, pp. ix–x). A careful distinction between the earlier and later, the final and preliminary statements of Marx, has a particular importance for the subject under discussion, as just here the further development of the Marxian thought has continuously remained in a state of flux. Thus, in the *Critique of Political Economy* (Marx 1859), the first chapter on ‘Commodity’, which presents the earliest version of the later first chapter of *Capital*, was only in the last moment added to the rough draft, which, instead, had only contained a section on ‘Value’ (see Marx 1859, pp. 349 and 308–12). Again, the sparse references in the *Critique* of 1859, to the ‘mystification of the commodity’, which appears in ‘exchange-value’, were only enlarged in the last revision of the text of *Capital* to form the independent examination of ‘The Fetish-Character of the Commodity and its Secret’, which now forms the concluding section of the first chapter of *Capital* Volume I (Marx 1932).

social relation between the human beings who cooperate in their production. Bourgeois society is just that particular form of the social life of man in which the most basic relations established between human beings in the social production of their lives become known to them only after the event, and even then only in the reversed form of relations between things. By depending in their conscious actions upon such imaginary concepts, the members of modern 'civilised' society are really, like the savage by his fetish, controlled by the work of their hands. *Commodities* and, in a still more conspicuous form, the particular kind of capitalist commodity which serves as a general medium of exchange, namely, *money*, and all further forms of commodity-production derived from those basic forms, such as capital, wage-labour, etc., are examples of that fetish-form assumed by the social production-relations in the present epoch. What Marx here terms the *fetishism of the world of commodities* is only a scientific expression for the same thing that he had described earlier, in his Hegel-Feuerbach period, as 'human self-alienation'² and which had, indeed, formed the real foundation for this particular calamity which befalls the Hegelian 'idea' at a definite stage of its speculative development.³

2 See Marx 1932, pp. 111 *et seq.* The first definite application of the philosophical concept of 'alienation' to the economic concepts of money, value, credit, etc., was made by Marx in his unpublished *Notes* of 1844, on reading a work of the elder Mill (Marx 1931–2h, pp. 531 *et seq.*), and in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* written in the same period (Marx 1931–2i, p. 29 *et seq.* esp. pp. 81 *et seq.*). Among the most striking statements in those early papers we find the far-reaching discovery that the estrangement, the alienation of the labourer, does not only arise from his relationship to the products of his labour, but exists also within the productive activity itself (pp. 85 *et seq.*). On the other hand, Marx was already fully aware of the fact that even such apparently higher developed forms of capitalist organisation as the credit- and bank-systems, which the followers of St. Simon and other Utopian Socialists had idealised as being 'a gradual undoing of man's separation from matter, of capital from work, of private property from money, of money from man', amount in truth to an even more infamous and extreme self-alienation in that their element is no longer a commodity, metal, paper, etc., but indeed is the very moral existence, the social existence, the inmost heart of man himself; in the disguise of trust and confidence of man to man – the highest degree of distrust and a 'complete estrangement' (pp. 533–5). Around the same time, Marx noted for future use an interesting term employed by the Utopian Socialist Pecqueur – of the *vertu magique* of fertility which is conveyed to the dead element of matter by labour, that is, by living man. That early reference to the particular form which the general fetishism attached to all commodities assumes in the particular commodity, known as 'labour power', is the first indication of the specific connection between what Marx later called the 'fetish-character of the commodity' and his doctrine of 'surplus-value'.

3 See Hegel *Phenomenology of the Mind* (Hegel 1832, p. 594) and its critical analysis by Marx (Marx 1931–2i, pp. 153–72).

As far back as this, however, Marx had emphasised this, the real economic and social facts underlying that Hegelian philosophical term. Much more clearly than Feuerbach and the other philosophising Hegelians, he had recognised that the various forms in which that philosophical category enters into present-day society – as ‘property, capital, money, wage-labour, etc.’, are by no means a kind of self-created ‘idealistic figment of our imagination’. On the contrary, all those ‘alienated forms’ actually exist in present society as ‘very practical, very material things’.⁴ For example, the fact that one of the worst cases of that ‘self-alienation of humanity’ appears in present-day bourgeois society as the contrast of the *haves* and the *have-nots* is by no means the outcome of a mere conceptual or spiritual process. ‘*Not having* is the most desperate *spiritualism*, an entire negation of the reality of the human being, a very positive *having*, a having of hunger, of cold, of sickness, of crimes, of debasement, of imbecility, of all forms of inhumanity and abnormality’.⁵ And in striking contrast to the ‘idealistic’ dialectics of Hegel, who had endeavoured to annihilate the existing self-alienation of man in society merely by an imaginary philosophical annihilation of the objective form, in which it is reflected within the human mind,⁶ Marx denounced the utter insufficiency of a mere effort of thought to handle the real forms of that self-alienation which exist in the present-day bourgeois order of society and of which the ‘alienated’ concepts of the bourgeois economists are only an outward expression. It is, for this purpose, above all necessary to abolish, by the practical effort of a social act, its underlying real conditions.⁷ Marx had also called by name the social force which was to perform that revolutionary act: ‘the communist workers in the workshops of Manchester and Lyons’ and the ‘associations’ they had founded.⁸

The later Marxian criticism of the ‘fetish-character’ inherent in the commodity ‘labour-power’ and, indeed, in all ‘economic’ categories, differs from that earlier criticism of the economic ‘self-alienation’ mainly by its scientific and (no longer philosophical) form.

Modern capitalist production both historically and theoretically rests on the separation of the real producers from their material means of production.

4 See Marx and Engels 1931–2c, p. 224.

5 Marx and Engels 1931–2c, p. 212.

6 See Marx 1931–2i, pp. 156 *et seq.*, esp. p. 162.

7 The 1844 writings of Marx quoted in this chapter anticipate, with regard to the economic use of the term ‘self-alienation’, that more general criticism which Marx and Engels two years later in their critical exposure of ‘*The German Ideology*’ directed against every conceivable application of the term.

8 See Marx and Engels 1931–2c, pp. 211 *et seq.*, 222 *et seq.*

Thus it is but a juridical illusion that the workers either as individuals or as members of an amalgamated group of labour-power owners freely dispose of their property. The common assumptions underlying the 'fetishistic' concept of an individual, and even of a collective, 'bargaining' with regard to the commodity 'labour power' are still derived entirely from the dreamland of the free and equal individuals united within a self-governed society. The propertyless wage-labourers selling their individual labour-power for a certain time to a capitalist '*entrepreneur*' through a 'free-labour contract' are, as a class, from the outset, and for ever, a common property of the possessing class which alone has the real means of labour at its disposal.

It is, therefore, only one part of the truth that was revealed by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto* when he said that the bourgeoisie had 'resolved personal worth into exchange-value', and thus replaced the veiled forms of exploitation applied by the 'pious, chivalrous, ecstatic, and sentimental Middle Ages' by an altogether *unveiled exploitation*.⁹ The bourgeoisie replaced an exploitation embroidered with religious and political illusions by a new and more refined system of concealed exploitation. Whereas, in Mediaeval society even the utterly material tasks of production were performed under the spiritual disguise of 'faith' and of an 'allegiance' due by the 'servant' to his 'master', in the new era of 'free trade', conversely, the continuing exploitation and oppression of the labourers is hidden under the pretext of the 'economic necessities of production'.¹⁰ The scientific method of concealing this state of affairs is called *political economy*.

From the critical exposure of the fetishism inherent in the commodity 'labour-power', there was but one step to the discovery of the most general form of the 'economic' delusion appearing in the 'commodity' itself. Just as the classical economists had derived all other terms of their science from the 'value' appearing in the exchange of commodities, so Marx now traced back the delusive character of all other economic categories to the fetish-character of the 'commodity'. Although even now that most obvious and direct form of the 'self-alienation of the human being' which occurs in the relation between wage-labour and capital keeps its decisive importance for the practical attack on the existing order of society, the fetishism of the *commodity labour-power* is at this stage for theoretical purposes regarded as a mere derivative form of the more general fetishism which is contained in the *commodity* itself.

Thus the Marxian criticism of the existing order is transformed from a particular attack on the class-character into a universal attack on the fundamental

9 See Marx and Engels 1931–2a, p. 528.

10 See Marx 1932, pp. 680–2 and Marx 1894, ii, p. 367.

deficiency of the capitalist mode of production and the structure of society based upon it. By revealing *all* economic categories to be mere fragments of one great fetish, Marx ultimately transcended all preceding forms and phases of economic and social theory. Political economy itself had in its later development rectified such primitive misconceptions as that by which the adherents of the so-called 'monetary system' had regarded *money*, in the form of gold and silver, as a product of nature, endowed with some peculiar social qualities, or the physiocratic illusion that *rent* grows out of the earth, not out of society. It had at its highest point of development theoretically interpreted '*interest*' and '*rent*' as mere fractions of the industrial 'profit'.¹¹ However, even the most advanced classical economists remained under the spell of that same fetish which they had already practically dissolved by their own theoretical analysis, or fell back into it, because they had never succeeded in extending their critical analysis to that general fundamental form which appears in the *value-form* of the labour-products and in the *form of the commodity* itself. The great theoretical art of classical political economy here met its historical barrier. 'The value form of the labour product is the most abstract but also the most general form of the bourgeois mode of production which is thereby historically characterized as a particular kind of social production. By misconceiving it as an eternal and natural form, he will overlook the particular character of the value form and thus also that of the commodity form, which appears further developed as money form, capital form, etc'.¹² Marx was the first to represent that fundamental character of the bourgeois mode of production as the particular historical stage of material production, whose characteristic social form is reflected reversely, in a 'fetishistic' manner, both in the practical concepts of the ordinary man of business and in the scientific reflection of that 'normal' bourgeois consciousness – political economy. Thus the theoretical exposure of 'the fetish-character of the commodity and its secret' is not only the kernel of the Marxian *critique of political economy*, but, at the same time, the quintessence of the economic theory of *Capital* and the most explicit and most exact definition of the theoretical and historical standpoint of the whole materialistic science of society.

The theoretical disclosure of the fetishistic appearance of commodity-production has a tremendous importance for the practical struggle carried on by those who are oppressed in present-day society and who as a class are rebelling against this oppression. In view of the 'good intentions' and scrap-of-paper proclamations constantly repeated by the official spokesmen of present-day

11 See Marx 1895, ii, p. 366, and Marx 1905c, pp. 571–2.

12 See Marx 1932, pp. 47–8, footnote 32.

economics and politics that '*the worker shall no more be regarded as being a mere article of commerce*,'¹³ the very statement of the existing fact that under present conditions *the worker is and remains an article of commerce*, becomes an open rebellion against the paramount interest of the ruling class in keeping intact both the fetishistic disguise and the underlying actual conditions. It forcibly re-establishes the responsibility of the ruling bourgeois class for all the waste and hideousness which by the 'fetishistic' device of bourgeois economics had been shifted from the realm of human action to the sphere of so-called immutable, nature-ordained relations between things. For this reason alone, any theoretical tendency aiming at an unbiased criticism of the prevailing economic categories, and the corresponding practical tendency to change the social system of which they are an ideological expression, is opposed from the outset by the overwhelming power of the classes privileged by the present social order and interested in its maintenance. The ultimate destruction of capitalist commodity-fetishism by a direct social organisation of labour becomes the task of the revolutionary proletarian class-struggle. A theoretical expression of this class-struggle and, at the same time, one of its tools, is the revolutionary *critique of political economy*.

13 See, for example, article 427 of the Treaty of Versailles, where at the instigation of the American Federation of Labour this principle was formally accepted as the first of the '*Eight principles for the regulation of the conditions of labour*' embodied in the 'Rules' of the then constituted League of Nations.

The ‘Social Contract’

Marx’s criticism of the fetish-character of commodity-production inaugurates a new epoch in the development of social science. First and foremost, the concept of ‘civil society’, that is, of the sum and aggregate of the *material conditions prevailing in the new commodity-producing society*, could not be worked out in its full social significance by the ideological protagonists of the revolutionary bourgeoisie as long as the fundamental economic relations of the new form of society were disguised as mere relations of things. Moreover, the concept of ‘civil society’ which had been initiated at an earlier time by such forerunners as Ibn Khaldoun, the Arab,¹ in the fourteenth century, and after a temporary eclipse was revived by Vico, the Italian,² and the ‘English and French of the eighteenth century’, had suffered from a considerable vagueness and ambiguity as to the limits between the newly discovered sphere of ‘civil society’ on the one hand, and the traditional sphere of ‘political society’ or the state on the other. While the bourgeois theorists were quite able to distinguish their ‘civil society’ from the old feudal form of the state, they confused and identified it with the new political institutions and ideas of the bourgeois state. Instead of limiting the term civil society to the basic relations springing immediately from the (old or new) economic conditions,³ they used both terms rather indiscriminately as one comprehensive name for *the whole of the new social relationships* which had now at last been agreed upon by the human individuals through the conclusion of the ‘social contract’, be it that this contract was reached in full harmony and complete freedom (as the more superficial exponents of the new theory had it) or that, according to the more realistic concepts of Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Hegel, it was forced upon an unwilling opposite party after a mortal struggle according to the right of the strongest.

Marx’s materialistic description of the social nature of the relations which are ‘reversely’ expressed in the categories of political economy as relations

1 See Khaldoun 1862, p. 86.

2 See Vico 1725.

3 See Marx and Engels 1931–2b, p. 26: ‘Civil society as such develops with the bourgeoisie; however, the social organization springing directly from production and commerce which formed in all times the basis of the State and of other phenomena of the idealistic superstructure, has been continually called by the same name’.

between things, has a similar significance for the proletarian movement of the present epoch as Rousseau's theory of the 'social contract' had for the bourgeois revolution of the preceding historical epoch. The unmasking of the fetish-character of the commodity contains the rational and empirical solution to a problem which the social theorists of the eighteenth century had not even set themselves and which such later bourgeois schools as the Romanticists, the Historical School, the adepts of the 'organic' theory of the state and Hegel had approached in a more or less mystical way. At first sight, there seems to be no great difference between Marx's demonstration of the 'secret' contained in the 'form of commodity' and the manner in which Hegel had dealt with the apparent mystery of the fact that history, made by men, follows a plan not conceived by men. Just as Hegel said that 'in world history out of the actions of men comes something quite different from what they intend and directly know and will; they realize their interests, but something further is achieved thereby which is internally comprised in it, but of which they were not conscious nor did they aim at it',⁴ so Marx dwells on the contradiction that men in exchanging the products of their labour as commodities, and in ultimately producing them for no other purpose than that of such exchange, just thereby achieve that qualitative and quantitative social division of labour which afterwards appears to them as an external thing in the definite value-relations of the commodities exchanged or in the value-form of the commodity. 'They don't know it, but they do it'.⁵ He emphasises the paradox still more by the often repeated statement that the utter absurdity pertaining to the fetish-categories of political economy is only an unavoidable outward appearance of an equally fundamental absurdity underlying the real capitalist mode of production and that thus, in the economic value-relations of the commodities, the social relations of isolated commodity-producers appear to them as 'what they really are'.⁶

However, all these paradoxes are for Marx, otherwise than for Hegel, only a means by which he compels the reader, who is still under the spell of the traditional bourgeois concepts, to look at such a palpable and everyday thing as a commodity as containing anything like a 'secret' at all. The uncovering of this 'secret' is not reached by Hegelian wizardry but by a rational and empirical analysis of a historically existing phenomenon and of the real social facts underlying its appearance. For the prophets of the eighteenth century, Quesnay, Smith, and Ricardo, the 'natural' starting point of all social life was the free *individual* as he just emerged from the feudal bonds of the Middle

4 See Hegel 1817–30, I, ii, under the heading 'Individuality'.

5 See Marx 1932, p. 40.

6 Marx 1932, p. 39.

Ages and from the close connection with physical and geographical conditions by which he had been hampered in the earlier epochs of his development. The new concept of society starts from the specific *social connection* which for the single individual living and acting in this society is given from the outset as a quasi-external fact independent from his knowledge and purpose. From the bourgeois point of view, the individual citizen thinks of the 'economic' things and forces as of something entering into his private life from without. He uses them as instruments for his subjective ends and, on the other hand, is restrained by them to a certain extent, in his otherwise free-willed actions. According to the new concept, individual men with all their actions and sufferings move, from the outset, in definite social circumstances arising from a given stage in the development of material production.⁷ These social circumstances and their historical developments, while set by human beings themselves in their united action, are nevertheless for the individuals concerned given just as irrevocably and as 'objectively', as is, according to Hegel, the philosophical 'idea' appearing in history or, according to a still more ancient and respectable theory, God the Almighty appearing in the flesh. Yet they are no longer regarded by Marx as a superhuman authority like the absolute reason which, according to Hegel's description, is 'as cunning as it is powerful', and which lets men 'wear one another out in the pursuit of their own ends' and thus, without direct interference, nevertheless 'attains her own purpose only'.⁸ This concept of Hegel's was, after all, nothing else than an idealisation of the bourgeois concept of the benefits derived from free competition. According to Marx's critical principle, the contradiction in question results, on the contrary, from a deficiency in the present capitalist regulation of social production compared with that higher form which is today no more a mere matter of imagination, but an objective historical development and a real goal gradually approached by the workers in their revolutionary class-struggle. It is writ large on the face of the formulae of political economy that they 'belong to a type of social organization in which the production process controls men, not yet men the production process'.⁹

Such high ideals of bourgeois society as that of the free, self-determining individual, freedom and equality of all citizens in the exercise of their political rights, and equality of all in the eyes of the law, are now seen to be nothing but correlative concepts to the *fetishism of the commodity*, drawn from the existing system of exchange. All these far-flung additions to the basic form of the

7 This point is best presented by Marx in Marx 1857, pp. 710 *et seq.*

8 See Hegel 1830, § 209.

9 See Marx 1932, p. 48.

commodity-fetish which for a time had served as stimulators of material progress are today but ideological expressions of particular types of production-relations that have degenerated into mere fetters on the further development of the productive forces of society. The great illusion of our epoch that capitalist society is a society consisting of free and self-determining individuals can only be maintained by keeping the people unconscious of the real contents of those basic relations of the existing social order, which by the fetishistic device of the economists had been disguised as objective and unchangeable conditions of all social life. Only by representing the real social relations between the classes of the capitalists and the wage-labourers as an inevitable result of the free and unhampered 'sale' of the commodity 'labour power' to the owner of the capital, is it possible in this society to speak of freedom and equality. 'Bourgeois law', said Anatole France, 'forbids with the same majesty both the rich and the poor to sleep under the bridge'.¹⁰

10 France 1917, chapter seven.

The Law of Value

The social organisation of labour which is hidden under the apparent value-relations of commodities is achieved in the bourgeois mode of production without the will and knowledge of the individual commodity-producers. Bourgeois commodity-production is, therefore, at the same time private and social, regulated and unregulated ('anarchic') production. It seems as if by an undisclosed decree of 'God' or 'providence', 'fortune' or 'conjunction', it were laid down beforehand what kinds and what quantities of socially useful things should be produced in every branch of production. But the individual capitalist 'producer' learns only subsequently – through the saleable or unsaleable quality of his commodity, through the price-vacillations of the market, through bankruptcy and crisis – if and how far he has acted in accordance with that unknown rule, the economic 'plan' of capitalist reason. Bourgeois economists have over and over again referred in poetical metaphors to this inscrutable mystery of their own social existence. Just as Adam Smith spoke of an '*invisible hand*' which leads the individual trader to promote an end which was no part of his intention,¹ so other economists before and after him referred to the 'play of free competition', to the 'automatism of the market', or to a 'law of value', which would apply to the movements of production and the circulation of commodities in the same way as the law of gravity applies to the movements of physical bodies. In fact, the concept of an entirely automatic regulation of the whole of industrial production brought about by the mere exchange of commodities among entirely isolated commodity-producers on a national and a cosmopolitan scale was not more than an '*ideal type*' even in those earlier periods when it first struck the eyes of the bourgeois classical economists. It was never fully realised in actual capitalist production.

Nevertheless, in bourgeois commodity-production there is an unwritten law which rules the production and exchange of labour-products as commodities. But this is by no means an unchangeable law of nature; it is a '*social law*' which resembles a genuine physical law only in its apparent independence from our conscious volition and purpose. Like any other social rule, it holds good only under definite circumstances and for a definite historical period. In dealing with the 'So-Called Primitive Accumulation of Capital', Marx showed what enormous effort was needed to give birth to this fundamental law of the modern

1 See Smith 1937, Book IV, ii.

bourgeois mode of production and the other 'eternal' laws connected with it. He exposed the series of more or less forgotten sanguinary and violent acts by which in real history the actual foundations of those so-called natural laws came into existence. (The expropriation of the workers from their material means of production forms the basis of the whole process.) Marx has likewise shown in detail that even in completely developed commodity-production the law of value does not apply in the sure and efficient manner of a genuine natural law or of a generally accepted providence, but is realised only by a succession of frictions, vacillations, losses, crises, and breakdowns. He says that 'in the haphazard and continually fluctuating relations of exchange between the various products of labour, the labour time socially necessary for their production forcibly asserts itself as a regulating natural *law just as the law of gravity does when the house collapses over our heads*'.²

With all these deficiencies, the *law of value* is the only form of the social organisation of production which exists today and is, indeed, the only kind of 'social planning' which conforms to the principles of modern competitive or commodity-producing society. It belongs to the ironical whims of history that precisely that self-contradictory belief in a 'consciously planned commodity production' which lies at the bottom of the first utopian schemes of a 'National Bank', at which 'any member of the community might lodge any kind of produce and take out of it an equal value of whatever it may contain',³ and which was afterwards voiced in various forms by the successive schools of 'social reformers', has been adopted today by the official spokesmen of the bourgeois class. But although this illusion is as old as capitalism itself, and obstinately persists in spite of theoretical arguments and in spite of the breakdown of all projects brought forward for its realisation, it is unsound both from the orthodox principle of bourgeois economic science and from the materialist viewpoint of Marxism. It is interesting only as an ideological reflex of the deep-rooted contradictions inherent in the very principle of capitalist commodity-production.

As much difference as there is between the earlier epoch when the progressive free traders regarded every 'interference' of a state – not yet entirely their own – as an oppressive disturbance, and the present phase when even some of the most 'orthodox' economists have turned from self-help to state-subvention, this in no way indicates a gradual conquest of the animal-like 'struggle for existence' prevailing among the isolated commodity-producers of early bourgeois society, by the growing collective reason of all capitalists grouped together and organised in the 'state' and in the more or less authentic institutions of

2 See Marx 1932, p. 4.

3 See Gray 1831 and, for a critical refutation, Marx 1859.

so-called 'public opinion'. There is thus only a difference of degree between the more or less numerous 'interventions' of the early bourgeois state into the 'free play of competition', and the increasingly rapid succession of ever more intrusive measures, by which today everywhere in the old and in the 'new', in the fascist and in the still democratically governed capitalist countries, an apparently new attempt is made to 'control' to 'correct' or to 'steer' the existing economic system. At the very most, such measures serve to temporarily weaken or even merely to disguise some of the most obstructive results of capitalist production. Instead of ousting the planlessness resulting from the fetish-form of commodity-production, they merely stampede the unique form in which production had hitherto been 'planned' within capitalist society, and utterly destroy the only 'organisation of labour' possible under capitalism.

This increasing *destruction* of its own foundations is forced upon present-day capitalism by an objective development of its inherent tendencies. It is produced by the ever-increasing accumulation and concentration of capital; by the growing monopolist tendencies of the big industrial and financial combines; by the increasing appeal to the state to rescue 'the community at large' from the dangers brought about by the impending collapses of hitherto proud and tax-evading private enterprises; and by the hyper-ultra-super-dreadnought demands for subsidy raised by the various direct and indirect producers of armaments encroaching ever more on the field formerly occupied by the activities of the industries less directly involved in war-production. In trying to escape from the periodical crises which increasingly threaten the existence of bourgeois society, and in a desperate attempt to overcome the existing acute crisis of the whole capitalist system, the bourgeoisie is compelled, by continually fresh and deeper 'interferences' in the inner laws of its own mode of production, and continually greater changes in its own social and political organisation, to prepare more violent and more universal crises and at the same time, to diminish the means of overcoming future crises. In organising peace it prepares for war.

The futility of any attempt to deal with 'competition's waste' within the existing forms of production and distribution becomes even more evident when we proceed from the elementary form of the 'commodity' to the further developed form of 'the worker transformed into a commodity', or from the general historical character of bourgeois production to its inherent *class-character*.

Just as the utopian exchange-banks, labour-certificates and other endeavours to organise commodity-production are repeated in the half-hearted 'planning schemes' of the frightened economists and 'socially minded' big capitalists today, so the first unwieldy attempts of the insurrectionary workers of Paris to wrest from the 'revolutionary' government of 1848 some form of realisation

of the workers' 'right to work' are echoed in the various measures by which the democratic and fascist countries try to dispose of the increasing menace of *unemployment* by a more or less compulsory organisation of the labour-market. And just as in the first case Marxism answered the capitalist 'planners' by pointing out that the only organisation of production that can conform with commodity-production is the law of value, so sober materialist criticism of the schemes to supplant the glaring insufficiency of the free 'labour-market' by some form of public regulation must start from the premise that the transformation of the workers into a saleable commodity is but a necessary complement of that other 'transformation' on which all modern capitalist production rests both historically and in its actual existence – the transformation of the workers' tools and products into the non-workers' 'capital'. In fact, the most 'benevolent' attempts to deal with the modern plague of mass-unemployment have hitherto invariably led to an utter failure. There is more an apparent than real progress in the new deals offered to the growing numbers of the unemployed by their capitalist rulers today, as against those now almost forgotten times when the only cure foreseen by the most 'philanthropic' spokesmen of the bourgeoisie was the workhouse. Now as then, the final result of the endeavours to exterminate both the old form in which unemployment periodically recurred in the industrial cycle, and the new 'structural', 'technological', 'chronic' form in which it has come to stay, is one or another disguised form of that compulsory service whose real character is revealed in the labour-camps and concentration-camps of National Socialist Germany.⁴ Behind these 'normal' remedies offered in times of peace there stands, as *ultima ratio*, the mass-employment offered by a new war, and already partially anticipated by a hitherto unheard of extension of the direct and indirect armament-industries both in the fascist countries, democratic Britain and pacifist USA. The best form of 'Public Works' under capitalist conditions, as was most aptly remarked by a critic of Roosevelt's New Deal, is always war itself, which in comparison to all other measures to 'create work', has the incomparable advantage that it will never cause an undesirable glut of the market because it destroys the commodities it produces simultaneously with their production and, incidentally, destroys a considerable portion of the 'excessive' workers themselves.⁵

4 See the remarks of Engels in a letter to Bernstein of 23 May 1884 (Engels 1975–2004a) which appear today as a prophetic anticipation of the ultimate capitalist realisation of the 'right to work' in Nazi prisons, labour-camps and other forms of unpaid compulsory work.

5 See Stolberg and Vinton 1935.

The positive importance of all attempts made on the basis of the existing capitalist conditions to create a so-called (*lucus a non lucendo!*) ‘organised capitalism’ lies in another field entirely from that presumed by its ideological promoters – the ‘planning school’ of modern capitalist economics. The feverish endeavours to supplement the defects of ‘free’ capitalist commodity-production confirm the gravity of those defects and thus inadvertently reveal the fetter-character of the existing capitalist production-relations. They put into sharper relief the incongruence between an ever more efficient organisation of production within the single workshop or private capitalist trust, and the ‘organic disorganisation’ prevailing throughout capitalist production. The futile schemes to restrict the increasing mass of unemployment and pauperism to ‘normal’ proportions illustrate once more the capitalist ‘law of population’ first enunciated by Fourier and later scientifically demonstrated by Marx, that within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productivity of labour coincide with an extension of the relative surplus-population, or the industrial reserve-army kept at the disposal of capitalist industry as a potential supply of labour-power for the rapid increases in production in times of prosperity and for the full utilisation of the existing capacities of production in war.⁶

There is, furthermore, a considerable difference between the same measures when offered by the capitalists in distress and when thrust upon them by the conscious action of the workers themselves. That difference may, at first, not be a difference purely in economic content. Yet it is a difference of social significance. ‘The right to work taken in its bourgeois sense’, said Marx with reference to the struggles of the Parisian workers in 1848, ‘is a contradiction in terms, an impotent pious intention; but behind the right to work there stands the control of capital, and behind the control of capital the appropriation of the means of production by the associated working class, that is, the abolition of wage labour, of capital, and their mutual dependence. Behind the “right to work” stood the insurrection of June.’⁷ Finally, a few of the new developments which are today featured as achievements of the ‘planning idea’ may serve to work out within the narrow bounds of the capitalist production-relations some of the formal elements which, after the overthrow of the existing mode of production, will be totally stripped of the residues of their capitalist origin and thus usefully applied in building up a really cooperative and socialist commonwealth.

6 See Marx 1932, pp. 610–11.

7 See Marx 1848–50.

For the time being there remains, along with the imperfect social organisation of material production in the structure of present bourgeois society, also the 'reversed' form in which the social relations of men are now reflected as mere relations of things. These remain unchanged, even in the newest 'as good as Socialism' models of a planned and steered state-capitalism, and as long as the products of labour are produced as commodities there will remain all the fetish-categories of bourgeois economics: the commodity, money, capital, wage-labour, increasing and decreasing total value of production and of export, profit-making capacity of industries, credits, etc., in short, all that which Marx, in his philosophical phase, called 'human self-alienation', and in his scientific phase, the 'fetishism of commodity-production'. In spite of appearances, such a system of production is not in the last analysis governed by a collective will of the associated workers but by the blind necessities of a fetishistic 'law of value'.

The apparent *fetish-character of the commodity*, and with it the apparent validity of a fetishistic *law of value*, will not disappear – nor will the economic crises and depressions and the various forms of periodical and chronic mass-unemployment, wars and civil wars cease to plague the modern 'civilised world' until the present mode of commodity-production is entirely destroyed and human labour organised in a direct socialist mode of production. 'For this, however, a material groundwork is required, or a set of material conditions which are themselves the spontaneous outgrowth of a long and painful process of development'.⁸

8 See Marx 1932, p. 46.

Common Misunderstandings of the Marxian Doctrine of Value and Surplus-Value

The idea that there can be an *equality* inherent in all kinds of labour, by which economists are entitled to regard *qualitatively different kinds* of labour such as the labour performed by the spinner, the weaver, the blacksmith, or the farm-hand, as *quantitatively different portions* of a total quantity of general 'labour', is so little the discovery of a natural condition underlying the production and exchange of commodities, that this 'equality' is, on the contrary, brought into existence by the social fact that under the conditions prevailing in present-day capitalist 'commodity-production', all labour-products are produced as commodities for such exchange. In fact, *this 'equality' appears nowhere else than in the 'value' of the commodities so produced and exchanged.* The full development of the economic labour-theory of value coincided with a stage of historical development when human labour had long ceased to be, as it were, 'organically' connected with either the individual or with small productive communities. Henceforth, under the new bourgeois banner of 'freedom of trade', every particular kind of labour was treated as equivalent to every other particular kind of labour. It was just the advent of those particular historical conditions that was expressed by the classical economists when they traced back in an ever more consistent manner the 'value' appearing in the exchange of commodities to the quantities of labour incorporated therein, though most of them actually believed that they had thus disclosed a truly 'natural' law applying to every reasonable productive society formed by human beings when they have reached their age of maturity and enlightenment. There is, in spite of this vague idea of a 'natural' equality lingering in the minds of some early bourgeois economists, no validity whatever in the naive objection which now for almost a century has been raised against the objective theory of value by those who point out the real inequality of the various kinds of labour. Those well-meaning defenders of Marxism who, on the other hand, attempt to correct the apparent 'flaw' in the Marxian doctrine of labour-value by actually trying to represent the useful labour in every particular labour-product as a strictly measurable quantity, merely present the sad picture of one who holds a sieve beneath the billy-goat, while another keeps busy to milk him. According to Marx's critical teaching, the natural difference of the various kinds of productive human labour is by no means wiped out by the fact (unquestionable in itself) that a major part of

the differences in rank, presumably existing between many kinds of labour in present-day bourgeois society, rest on 'mere illusions, or, to say the least, on differences, which have long ceased to be real and continue only by a social tradition'.¹ The particular kinds of labour performed in the production of the various useful things are, according to Marx, *by their very nature different*, and just this difference is a necessary premise for the exchange of the labour-products and the social division of labour it brings about. Only on the basis of a qualitative division of labour arising spontaneously from the variety of social needs and the variety of kinds of useful labour performed to meet those needs, arises, by a further development, the possibility that this qualitative difference, for the purpose of an ever wider exchange, may gradually yield its place to the merely quantitative differences which the various kinds of labour possess as so many portions of the total quantity of the social labour expended in the production of all products consumed (or otherwise disposed of) at a given time within a given society. It is just this condition which has been first expressed theoretically by the 'law of value' as formulated by the classical economists.² Those minor followers in the wake of the great scientific founders of political economy, no longer accustomed to such audacity of scientific thought, who have later pathetically bewailed the 'violent abstraction' by which the classical economists and Marxism, in tracing back the value-relations of commodities to the amounts of labour incorporated therein, have 'equated the unequal', must be reminded of the fact that this 'violent abstraction' does not result from the theoretical definitions of economic science, but from the real character of capitalist commodity-production. *The commodity is a born leveller*. As against this, it appears as a relatively unimportant fault in the construction of existing capitalist society that the theoretical principle of the exchange of equal quantities of labour is no longer strictly realised in each single case but only, perhaps, on a rough average.

Contrary to all adverse opinions prevailing in one or the other camp, it was never the intention of Marx to descend, from the general idea of value as expounded in *Capital* Volume I, by means of ever closer determinants to that direct determination of the price of commodities, for which at a later time Walras and Pareto set up their delusive systems of n millions of equations into which we need only introduce the required n millions of constants, to calculate with mathematical accuracy the price of a definite individual commodity at a given time. It was a catastrophic misunderstanding of Marx's economic theory when, after the appearance of *Capital* Volume II and III, the whole dogmatic

1 See Marx 1932, pp. 160–1, footnote 18.

2 Marx 1932, pp. 39–40.

dispute between the bourgeois critics of Marx and the Orthodox Marxists centred on the question of whether, and in what sense, the transformation of the 'values' of the commodities into 'production-prices', by means of the intermediary concept of an 'average rate of profits', is consistent with the general definition of 'value' in Volume I. As shown by the manuscripts, and by the correspondence which was later published, it was long before the appearance of Volume I that Marx finally established/set out the principle that the 'production-prices' of commodities produced by capitals of various organic compositions can no longer be identical with their 'values' as determined by the 'law of value', either in individual cases or on average, but are only a compound result of that main factor along with a series of other factors.³ The particular importance of the law of value within Marx's theory, then, has nothing to do with a direct fixation of the prices of commodities by their value. It would be nearer the truth to say that the working of this law appears in the general *development* of the prices of commodities, in which the continuous depreciation in the value of the commodities, affected by the ever-increasing productivity of social labour as a result of the continued accumulation of capital, constitutes the decisive factor. The ultimate meaning of this law, as shown in its operation by Marx in all three volumes of *Capital*, does not however consist of supplying a theoretical basis for the practical calculations of the businessman seeking his private advantage, or for the economic and political measures taken by the bourgeois statesman concerned with the general maintenance and furtherance of the capitalist surplus-making machinery. The final scientific purpose of the Marxian theory is rather to reveal '*the economic law of motion of modern society*', and that means at the same time *the law of its historical development*.⁴ This was expressed even more clearly by Lenin the Marxist when he said that 'the direct purpose of a Marxist investigation consists in the disclosure of all forms of the antagonism and exploitation existing in present-day capitalist society in order to aid the proletariat to do away with them'.⁵

Similarly, the *doctrine of surplus-value* which is usually regarded as the more particularly socialist section of Marx's economic theory is neither a simple economic exercise in calculation which serves to check a fraudulent statement of value received and expended by capital in its dealing with the workers, nor is it a moral lesson drawn from economics for the purpose of reclaiming from capital the diverted portion of the 'full product of the worker's labour'. The Marxian doctrine, as an economic theory, starts rather from the opposite

3 See Marx's letter to Engels, 27 July 1867 (Marx 1927–30g, pp. 403–4).

4 See the 'Preface' to Marx 1932.

5 See Lenin 1938 [1894].

principle that, under 'normal' conditions, the industrial capitalist acquires the labour-power of the wage-labourers by means of a respectable and business-like bargain, whereby the labourer receives the full equivalent of the 'commodity' sold by him, that is, of the 'labour-power' incorporated in himself. The advantage gained by the capitalist in this business derives not from economics but from his privileged social position as the monopolist-owner of the material means of production which permits him to exploit for the production of commodities in his workshop the specific *use-value* of a labour-power which he has purchased at its economic '*value*' (exchange-value). Between the value of the new commodities produced by the use of the labour-power in the workshop and the prices paid for this labour to its sellers, there is, according to Marx, no economic or other rationally determinable relation whatever. The measure of value produced by the workers in the shape of their labour-products over and above the equivalent of their wages, i.e., the *mass of 'surplus-labour'* expended by them in producing this 'surplus-value'; and the quantitative relation between this surplus-labour and the necessary labour, i.e., the '*rate of surplus value*' or the '*rate of exploitation*' holding good for a particular time and a particular country do not result from any exact economic calculation. They result from a battle between social classes which assumes sharper and sharper forms just because no objective limits are set for the increase of the rate and the mass of surplus-value under the conditions of an ever-increasing accumulation of capital at one pole, and the simultaneous accumulation of misery at the opposite pole of society.

The Ultimate Aims of Marx's Critique of Political Economy

Through Marxian criticism, political economy is deprived of its extravagant claims and referred back to its historical and social context. It is transformed (and this is the 'Copernican turn' of the Marxian *critique of political economy*) from an absolute and timeless science into one which is historically and socially conditioned. According to Marx, political economy is a bourgeois science which springs from the particular historical form of the bourgeois mode of production and is its ideological supplement. From this critical conception of political economy results a thorough change in the mode of validity of all its categories and propositions. On the one hand, because of the fetish-character which attaches itself to all economic categories beginning with the fundamental categories of commodity and of money, these categories do not apply to any real and directly given object; the presumed 'objects' of economics are themselves nothing but materially disguised expressions for the definite relations into which men enter among themselves, in the social production of their means of existence. On the other hand, the economic categories, in spite of their fetish-character, or perhaps precisely because of it, represent the necessary form in which that particular historical and historically transitory state of an 'imperfect sociality', which is characteristic of the bourgeois production-relations, is reflected in the social consciousness of this epoch. They are, as Marx said, 'socially valid and, therefore, objective thought-forms which apply to the production-relations peculiar to this one historically determined mode of social production, to wit, commodity production'.¹ They are, as will be further shown in the third part of this book, inseparably connected with the real existence of the bourgeois mode of production and the 'social laws' which hold good for this particular epoch of society. As long as that material foundation of existing bourgeois society is only attacked and shaken, but not completely overthrown, through the revolutionary proletarian struggle, also the socially entrenched thought-forms of the bourgeois epoch can only be criticised and not definitely superseded by the revolutionary theory of the proletariat. The critique of political economy, which Marx began in *Capital*, can therefore only be completed by the proletarian revolution, i.e., by a real change of the present

1 See Marx 1932, p. 42.

bourgeois mode of production and of the forms of consciousness pertaining to it. It is only after the full accomplishment of this revolution that, in the further development of communist society, all 'fetishism of commodity-production' and the whole 'fetishistic' science of political economy will be finally merged into a direct social theory and practice of the associated producers.²

Until that time, the terms and propositions by which political economy had expressed the scientific results of its investigation into the material foundations of the present order of society, in a manner befitting its period in spite of their fetish form, remain valid even for that materialist science by which Marx and his followers have criticised the standpoint of bourgeois economy from the new historical and theoretical standpoint of a new social class. Notwithstanding his revolutionary criticism of all preceding political economy, Marx remained, in his theoretical work, first and foremost, an *economic investigator*. He did not dissipate economics in history, sociology, and in the utopias but, on the contrary, he condensed the general and indefinite form of the traditional historical and social studies into a materialist investigation of their economic foundations. The farther he went in his exact scientific analysis of the bourgeois mode of production, the less and less he was disposed to leave aside that exceedingly important material, available in the results of classic bourgeois economy, which only needs further logical development and critical utilisation. Nor did he want to leave it to the minor disciples of the great classical economists, who misinterpreted it for the purpose of a social apology for the existing capitalist system.

This positive attitude of Marx towards economic science is evident in his relation to all other standpoints which were represented within bourgeois and, to a certain extent, within socialist science during his time too.

Marx stood, in spite of his historical criticism of the 'eternal laws of nature' of traditional political economy, in much sharper contrast to the so-called 'Historical School' which, by its dispersal of all definite economic concepts, represented nothing but a self-destruction and abdication of economics as a science.

Similarly, as far back as his first philosophical period, he had opposed the ideological manner in which such writers as Bruno Bauer, Stirner and Feuerbach had considered all human 'self-alienation' as a mere philosophical category. He had emphasised the fact that the actual 'self-alienation' of the wage-labourer who sells his own labour-power to the capitalist owner of the means of production cannot be abolished by a mere process of thought, but only by social action. In the same realistic mood, in his later period he contemptuously dismissed

2 See Marx 1875, pp. 566-7.

that superficial 'sociological' theory which, in contrast to the 'economic realism' of the Classicists, 'regarded value as nothing more than a conventional form, or, rather, as the ghost of such a form'.³ (We may add in passing that this brief remark which Marx seventy years ago bestowed on the views held at that time by a few remaining supporters of a 'restored Mercantile system' is still very pertinent, and perhaps particularly so today, as a criticism of the theoretical suggestions and practical schemes disseminated by the modern 'money-theorists' and 'credit-reformers', who likewise look upon commodity-prices and more particularly upon 'money' as arbitrary, conventional, and manageable forms.) While Marx and Engels had no quarrel with such practical exponents of revolutionary force as Blanqui, they pointed at every possible opportunity to the scientific emptiness of so-called sociological 'theories of violence'.⁴ They were not deceived by the clamorous ways of those would-be 'progressive' and even half 'socialistically-minded' people who, candidly unconscious of the real motive force of historical development and deliberately ignoring all economics with the possible exception of a few general and unchangeable economic 'laws of nature', endeavoured to trace the existing forms of production, class-relationship and other disagreeable facts to pure force, politics, etc. in order to appeal to the organising power of reason, justice, humanity, or similar classless immaterialities, as opposed to such 'brute' forms of violence. Marx and Engels, as against such 'sociological' despisers of economics, always affirmed their allegiance to the deeper and richer historical knowledge of bourgeois society which is contained in the economic concept of 'value' and in the analyses based on it by the bourgeois classicists.

Finally, Marx, whose 'materialist' and scientific socialism arose in direct contrast to the 'doctrinaire' and 'Utopian' socialism of the preceding phase of the workers' movement, remained throughout his life a sworn enemy of all merely 'imaginary' *constructions* to a degree that already on this ground the tenets of economic science which, in spite of their formal deficiencies are at least based on definite historical and social facts, were for him of an incomparably greater significance than any future type existing as yet only in the thought of an individual reformer.

This holds good even for the rare cases where Marx himself, in the course of his exposition, endeavoured to elucidate his theoretical standpoint by confronting present-day capitalist commodity-production with some other, past historical or possible future forms of social production. It applies above all to four short paragraphs of the section dealing with the '*Fetish-Character of*

3 See Marx 1932, pp. 47–8, footnote 32.

4 See, for example, the three fulminating sections under this heading in Engels 1878.

*the Commodity and its Secret*⁵ in which Marx, to dispel 'all the mystery of the world of commodities, all the enchantment and bewitchment which befog the products of labour in a system based on commodity production', calls up successively four different social modes of production: that of Robinson Crusoe (the lonely islander), the feudal mode of production of the Middle Ages, the patriarchal management of a peasant-family working on the land, and, finally, 'for a change', an association of free men who work with common means of production and consciously expend their many individual labour-powers as a combined social labour-power. Similarly, the detailed description of one of those ancient small Indian communities in which 'there is a social division of labour, but the products of labour do not become commodities',⁶ is not of any particular significance for the economic theory of *Capital*, though it is more important with regard to the broader aspects of the materialist theory of history and society. In the particular context in which it appears within the exposition of Marx's fundamental economic concepts in *Capital*, it serves only as a supplementary historical illustration of the theoretical contrast between the *division of labour inside the workshop and the division of labour in society as a whole*.⁷

The main theoretical purpose of all such 'quasi-historical' comparisons is the same which is served, in another way, by Marx's favourite comparison of the economic 'fetishism of the commodity' with the 'reflection of the real world in religion'.⁸ Just as a real criticism of religion must not content itself with finding out, through scientific analysis, the earthly kernel of the foggy forms of the religious phantasms, so a criticism of the economic categories is imperfect as long as it restricts itself to a disclosure of the actual material conditions underlying their apparent 'fetishistic' form. *Materialist criticism of religion* is aware of the fact that the ideological reflection of the real world in religion cannot be totally dissolved until the practical conditions of every day offer to the human beings concerned a continuous display of perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations both between man and nature and between men and men. Similarly, the life-process of society, i.e., material production, does not strip off its mystical veil until it is transformed into the result of the conscious and self-controlled activities of freely associated men.⁹ Until then a *scientific critique of political economy* must supplement its theoretical analysis

5 See Marx 1932, pp. 43–51.

6 Marx 1932, pp. 8 and 322 *et seq.*

7 Marx 1932, pp. 8 and 315–24.

8 See, for example, Marx 1932, pp. 39 and 45–6.

9 See Marx 1932, p. 46.

of the fetish-form of the economic categories by a positive understanding of their transitory historical necessity and rationality, and must utilise the real knowledge contained therein for a materialist investigation of the social development going on within the present historical epoch.

Only in some passages of *Capital* did Marx replace the economic categories hitherto applied in the presentation of his theory by a direct historical description of the bourgeois mode of production and the real conflict of the social classes concealed behind the two economic categories 'capital' and 'wage-labour'.¹⁰ Here belong, for instance, two passages in the eighth chapter of the Volume I where Marx winds up a detailed discussion of the economically undetermined and indeterminable limits of the working day by the statement that 'the regulation of the working day is, in real history, the outcome of a protracted civil war between the capitalist class and the working class', and calls upon the workers 'to put their heads together for protection against the worm gnawing at their vitals and, by united action as a class, to compel the passing of a law which will put in place of the pompous catalogue of the "inalienable rights of man" the modest Magna Charta of a legally limited working day that shall at length make it clear when the time which the worker sells is ended, and when his own begins'.¹¹

Here belong many other not very bulky, but significant passages leading up to the famous investigation of 'So-Called Primitive Accumulation' which, together with the immediately following analysis of 'Modern Colonisation', finally concludes the case of socialism against capitalism as presented by Marx in his theory.¹²

In the preceding chapters, Marx fully described the economic nature of the existing mode of production. He went through the economic analysis of value and labour, of surplus-value and surplus-labour, of reproduction, of the accumulation both of the individual capital and of the sum total of the capitals available in a given society. When thus all has been said that can be said about the origin of capital in terms of economic science, there still remains an unsolved residue in the form of the question, 'Whence came the first capital?'¹³ Whence arose, before all capitalist production, the first capitalist relation between an exploiting capitalist and the exploited wage-labourers? Whence descended the vampire that preys upon the toiling masses of modern society and will not loose its hold 'so long as there is a muscle, a nerve, a drop of

10 See the 'Introduction' to Marx 1932, pp. 19 *et seq.*

11 See Korsch 1932, pp. 196 and 262–6.

12 Marx 1932, xxiv and xxv.

13 Marx 1932, pp. 679 *et seq.*

blood to be exploited?'¹⁴ This question – unanswered by the bourgeois economists and, indeed, unanswerable economically – has already been repeatedly examined by Marx in the foregoing exposition.¹⁵ It is now taken up again to be treated no longer as an economic question at all. Instead, the problem is grimly and thoroughly cleared up in a direct historical investigation and solved by a practical rather than a theoretical conclusion. The 'Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation', as illustrated by the classic example of capitalist production in England, leads to a result which, although it emanates with 'the inevitability of a process of nature' from the objective development of capitalism itself, it requires a practical social act to set it free. 'The last hour of capitalistic private property strikes. The expropriators are expropriated'.¹⁶ A similar line of argument prevails throughout the remaining parts of Marx's work. Just as the first book of *Capital* actually leads up to the outbreak of the proletarian revolution, so the whole of the Marxian theory as presented in the three books of *Capital* was meant to result in the historical event of the revolutionary class-war.¹⁷

But even at these extreme points where the revolutionary principle is definitely laid open in *Capital*, Marx did not entirely abandon economic theory. He merely revealed in a more outspoken manner the historical and social barrier which was already reflected in the 'fetish-character' of the economic categories and on account of which an uncritical adoption of those categories was excluded from the new socialist theory from the outset. Some final and marginal problems of political economy which were now first discovered from the new standpoint of the proletarian class, transcended the horizon of the bourgeois economists to such an extent that they could no longer be approached, much less solved, within the realm of the economic science. The categories by which the classical economists had elucidated the material foundations of bourgeois society then coming into existence, were scientifically sufficient for the time. With certain critical amendments, they represent even now, within limited fields and for short periods of time, a valuable instrument for the scientific analysis of definite sections of the bourgeois mode of production. However, they prove to be unsuitable for a more extensive investigation which

14 Marx 1932, pp. 265–6 and the 1850 essay by Engels, quoted there.

15 See Marx 1932, pp. 531, 545, 588.

16 See Marx 1932, pp. 726 *et seq.*

17 See Marx's letter to Engels of 30 April 1868 (Marx 1868, p. 49) and the outlines for the intended continuation of the final chapter on 'Classes', of which only a few pages were worked out in the Marxian manuscripts, as sketched by Engels in Engels 1975–2004c, pp. ix–x.

embraces the total historical development of bourgeois commodity-production, including its origin and decay, and its revolutionary transition to a direct social organisation of production. They are, as Marx and Engels emphasised in their later period, even more unsuitable for a comprehensive materialist history of human society, looking backwards to primaeval times and forwards to the fully developed communist society.

PART 3

History



The Materialist Conception of History

Marx and Engels never considered their new principle of economic and social research as more than a new scientific approach to a strictly empirical investigation of the historical development of the modern capitalist mode of production. Marx referred to it in 1859 as a ‘general result’ at which he had arrived during the first period of his economic research and which, once gained, served as a ‘guiding principle’ to his subsequent studies.¹ Twenty years later he refuted the erroneous conclusion of the Russian sociologist Nikolai Konstantinovich Michaelovsky, who had misinterpreted the general description of the ‘Historical Tendency of Capital Accumulation’ in Marx’s *Capital* as a ‘supra-historic’ principle, that could be applied to any other period, and indeed to the whole history of human society, without a previous investigation of the actual historical facts. He pointed out that this description, despite its general form, was merely a ‘résumé’ of the materials which had already been examined in detail in the previous chapters and thus was nothing more than a *historical sketch of the rise of capitalism in Western Europe*.² His attitude was fully shared by Friedrich Engels, who about the same time opposed the old traditional conception of the historical process which ‘knew nothing of the class struggles based upon material interests, in fact, of no material interests at all’, and dealt with such topics as production and all economic conditions only accessorially, as ‘subordinate elements of the history of culture’. He confronted that old ‘*idealistic conception of history*’ with the new principle of proletarian science and, incidentally, gave the ‘materialist conception of history’³ its later and universally accepted name. This name, by the way, was never applied to it by Marx himself, who was quite content to describe it as a ‘materialist and thus scientific method’.⁴

Just as any other experimental natural and social science, the Marxian theory of society cannot take its departure from a preconceived and dogmatic

1 See Marx 1859.

2 See Marx’s letter to the editor of *Otetchestvennyye Sapiski*, written at the end of 1877 – first published in Russian in the *Viestnik Narodnoj Voli*, 1886, and retranslated into German for the New York *Volkszeitung* in 1887; this translation has since taken the place of the lost original manuscript (Marx 1877).

3 See Engels 1878.

4 See Marx 1932, pp. 335–6, footnote 89.

principle; even less so because the science of Marx is a 'critical' rather than a positive one. He subjects to theoretical criticism the doctrines of bourgeois social science which are no longer tenable, just as during the same period the existing forms of bourgeois society which have become untenable at the present stage of historical development are practically criticised and transformed by the revolutionary action of the working class.

Even where Marx departs from that purely critical position, he does not lay down any general propositions as to the essential nature of all society, but merely describes the particular conditions and developmental tendencies inherent in the historical form of contemporary bourgeois society.

The critical principle of Marx's *social science* was during the subsequent development of Marxism converted into a general *social philosophy*. From this first misconception, it was only one step further to the idea that the historical and economic science of Marx must be based on the broader foundation of not only a social philosophy, but even of an all-comprehensive 'materialist philosophy' embracing both nature and society, or a general philosophical interpretation of the universe. Thus the definitely scientific forms which the real kernel of the philosophical materialism of the eighteenth century had assumed in the historical materialism of Marx were ultimately carried back to what Marx himself had once unmistakably repudiated as 'the philosophical phrases of the materialists about matter'.⁵

Marx's materialist science, being a strictly empirical investigation into definite historical forms of society, does not need a philosophical support. This most important point made in Marx's historical materialism was later missed even by those 'orthodox' Marx-interpreters who themselves combated with the utmost energy all attempts made by the later critics, within and without the Marxist camp, to 'revise Marxism' by basing it on some or other contemporary non-materialist philosophy. In their painstaking efforts to protect the true Marxist materialism from what they quite correctly regarded as an undesirable dilution of genuine Marxian thought, they overlooked the fact that that most highly developed form of materialist science embodied in Marx's empirical investigation of society is not only far ahead of all idealist philosophy, but of all philosophical thought whatever. They wanted to strengthen the materialist character of Marxian science by giving it a philosophical interpretation. They have, in fact, only superfluously reintroduced their own backward philosophical attitudes into a theory which Marx had previously transformed from a philosophy into a veritable science. It was the historical fate of the Marx-orthodoxy that its proponents, while rejecting the attacks of the 'revisionists'

⁵ See 1931–2b, p. 83.

ultimately arrived, on all important issues, at the same standpoint as that taken by their adversaries. For example, the leading representative of this school, the philosophical materialist and Orthodox Marxist Plekhanov, while eagerly searching for that 'materialistic philosophy' which might be the true foundation of Marxism, finally hit upon the idea of presenting Marxism as 'a form of Spinoza's philosophy, freed by Feuerbach from its theological additions'.⁶

While both schools of the philosophical interpreters of Marxism ultimately coupled Marx's materialist theory with a philosophical, that is, an idealistic form of thought, there is still a considerable difference between them historically and theoretically. The association of Marx with Spinoza connects him with an early bourgeois philosophy, which, while in form idealistic, comprised also the germ of the future materialist mode of thought. On the other hand, those modern philosophical improvisators who wanted to fill a presumed gap in Marx's system with Kant's, Ernst Mach's, Joseph Dietzgen's, or any other kind of non-materialist philosophy, utterly ignore the whole historical and theoretical situation.⁷ The only reason why, from a certain point in their development, the materialist philosophers Marx and Engels turned their backs on every philosophy, even materialist philosophy (leaving far behind such less consistent anti-philosophical gospels as those of Feuerbach and Moses Hess who for a time had preceded them in this tendency) is the fact that they wanted to go one step further and to outbid the materialism of philosophy by a directly materialist science and practice.⁸ This did not prevent them from opposing, in their own scientific work, every *non-materialist* standpoint, no matter in what disguise it appeared. They expressly included in these 'non-materialistic' or 'not univocally materialistic' standpoints, also the whole of modern positivism (as represented by Comte and others) which seems on the surface to be closely related to their anti-philosophical materialism, and that 'agnostic' attitude which is derived by modern scientists from Hume's philosophy, and which in Marx's lifetime was represented in England by Thomas Huxley.⁹ The fight against all shades of philosophical idealism became even more important

6 See Plekhanov 1929 and, against that wrong conception of Marxism, Marx's and Engels's own statements in *The Holy Family* (Marx and Engels 1931–2c, pp. 308 *et seq.*, 313 *et seq.*) and Marx and Engels 1931–2b, pp. 76 *et seq.*)

7 See Korsch 1930, pp. 21 and 53, and footnote 8.

8 See Marx and Engels 1931–2b, v; particularly pp. 8 *et seq.* 24, 76 *et seq.*, 215–16. See also Marx's later statement in Marx 1859, that he and Engels, in that earlier work, 'worked out together the contrast between their view and the ideology of German philosophy and, in fact, settled accounts with their former philosophical conscience'. For a more detailed discussion see Korsch 1930, pp. 67 *et seq.* and pp. 8 *et seq.*

9 See Marx's letter to Engels of 12 December 1866 (Marx and Engels 1927–30h, p. 368).

when, in the period immediately after Marx's death, 'classical German philosophy underwent a kind of revival mainly in England and Scandinavia, but also in Germany'.¹⁰ That is why even an altogether scientifically and empirically-minded Marxist like Friedrich Engels, rehearsed the philosophical materialism of his youth and set himself to work out once more, against the new obscurantist tendencies which were rapidly gaining ground among the various schools of contemporary bourgeois philosophy, the persisting affinity between the materialist science of Marxism and a general, and therefore in a certain sense 'philosophical', materialist view of the universe. The same reason applies in a later historical period to the philosophical battles waged against so-called 'empirio-criticism' and other idealist philosophies by the militant materialist Lenin.¹¹

There is then, no reasonable doubt as to the affiliation of Marxism to the most definitely materialist creed to be found in present-day philosophy and science. But the position is different in regard to the often recurring statement that Marx's *historical materialism* sprang directly from, and is still now theoretically dependent upon, one or another form of *philosophical materialism*, as for example the revolutionary bourgeois materialism of the eighteenth century, or the materialist criticism of religion from Strauss to Feuerbach.

10 See Engels's 'Introduction' in Engels 1888.

11 See Korsch 1930, pp. 27 *et seq.*

The Genesis of Historical Materialism

There is no doubt that, for a time, Marx fully shared the tremendous enthusiasm felt during the 1840s by the whole school of Left Hegelians for Feuerbach's materialist message.¹ The influence exerted upon his theory by this experience may, perhaps, be best compared with that of Hume on Kant as summed up by the latter in the formula that 'Hume aroused me from the dogmatic slumber'. Yet there is an important difference in the degree to which Marx on the one hand, and the other Hegelians including Engels, were impressed by the particular form of materialism represented by Feuerbach. It is no wonder that Friedrich Engels, who had suffered much in his childhood under the pietistic cant of the Wupper valley and had received his first lesson in philosophical materialism from the gospel-criticism of the Hegelian David Friedrich Strauss, and then passed from the disciple to the master discovering behind Hegel's idealistic formulae the germs of an altogether different atheist and materialist creed, was later decisively influenced by the outspoken materialism, the germs of which were developed by Feuerbach.² It was certainly different with Marx. He was brought up in a freethinking family and reached his ultimate materialist standpoint by a much longer road, through a study of Democritus and Epicurus, of the materialists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and finally through a detailed critical revision of the whole idealist philosophy of Hegel. His progress toward materialism was indeed, from the beginning and through all its phases, a progress to revolutionary materialist politics.³ Although he was still using the language of Hegel's idealism, he was already a revolutionary materialist in this political sense when he raved against the '*reprobate materialism*' of the *Prussian State Gazette* which 'in considering a Statute on the stealing of wood thought only of wood and did not solve that single and material task *politically*, i.e., not in connection with the reason and

1 See Engels's later testimony in Engels 1888.

2 See the detailed references in Mayer 1933. See further the recent study by Reinhart Seeger (Seeger 1935).

3 See Marx's thesis on *The Difference between the Democritean and the Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* (Marx 1841, and the detailed report on the progress of his philosophical studies given by the young Marx to his father in a letter of 10 November 1837 (Marx 1927–30i, pp. 1–144, and Marx 1927–30j, pp. 213–21).

ethics of the State as a whole'.⁴ He was already a materialist critic of all existing realisations of the state-idea when he reproached Hegel for 'proceeding from the state to make man a subjective form of the state' instead of, 'in the sense of modern democracy', proceeding from man to make the state an objective form of man. He described as early as this 'democracy' as being 'the general form of the State in which the formal principle is at the same time the *material* principle', and added the far-reaching remark that 'the modern French have understood this to mean that in true democracy the political state must disappear'.⁵

For all these reasons, the materialist rupture with all theological and philosophical idealism which was affected by Feuerbach in his 1841 book *The Essence of Christianity*, 1841, and, even more powerfully, in his 1842 *Preliminary Theses on the Reform of Philosophy*, did not have that sweeping effect upon Marx that it had upon Engels and, even more persistently, upon David Strauss, Bruno Bauer, etc., who, all through their lives, did not emerge from the phase of religious criticism. Thus becomes evident the real meaning of the sentence by which Marx in 1843 described the criticism of religion as 'the premise of all criticism'.⁶ At the time when it was formulated by Marx under the conditions prevailing in Prussia after the change of government, this oft-quoted phrase had, besides its general theoretical significance, a definite political one too. Marx proclaimed the attack of the bourgeois freethinkers against the reactionary religious policy of the new *régime* to be the first phase of that 'political movement' which, beginning in 1840, was to lead up to the 1848 revolution. For the same reason, a criticism restricted to religion lost the positive significance it had borne for a time as soon as that first phase was brought to a close by the 'socialist ideas circulating in Germany since 1843'. While in the first phase the 'critique of religion' had served as a veil concealing the political aims of the speedily growing revolutionary movement of the early 1840s, that movement had now reached a point at which, according to Marx, even a political struggle had become a mere transparent veil concealing the social struggle beneath.⁷ Marx had already declared before and, in fact, in the very sentence in which he spoke of the criticism of religion as being 'the premise of all criticism', that 'the criticism of religion, for all practical purposes, has been concluded in Germany'.⁸ It is true that both he and Engels, one year later, reaffirmed their

4 See Marx's article *On the Debates of the 6th Rhineland Diet* (Marx 1927–30k, p. 304).

5 See 1927–30i, p. 435.

6 See Marx 1927–30i, p. 607.

7 See Marx and Engels 1931–2c, p. 287.

8 Marx 1927–30i, p. 607.

allegiance to the 'real humanism' of Feuerbach;⁹ they did so with a view to retain an ally indispensable in the impending revolutionary fight. They did not, for that matter, retract their criticism of that 'merely naturalistic, not historical and economic materialism' which was represented by Feuerbach then and at all later times.¹⁰ Nor, a year later, did they exempt Feuerbach from the final attack they directed against the whole of the Left Hegelians who still remained rooted in the soil of philosophy. Marx was by now definitely tired of 'any criticism of religion which does not go beyond its proper sphere'.¹¹ That is to say, he had left religious criticism far behind and had progressed from the 'premise' to its political and social consequences, from 'criticism of heaven' to 'criticism of earth', from 'criticism of religion' to 'criticism of law', from 'criticism of theology' to 'criticism of politics',¹² and from there, in a subsequent stage, to a criticism of the still more earthly forms which the religious reflection of the real world assumes in the economic sphere, i.e., of the 'fetish-character of the commodity-world' and of the categories of political economy derived from it.¹³

A materialist criticism of the prevailing *social and political conditions* could not be built upon the mainly naturalist materialism professed by Feuerbach.¹⁴ Feuerbach had conceived of the human being as 'an abstract entity inherent in the single individual'. He had not, as Marx did, described it as 'the ensemble of the social conditions'.¹⁵ He understood the world 'only in the form of an *object* or of contemplation'. It was, however, of decisive importance for historical materialism to understand the given reality and its development also from a subjective viewpoint as 'a human sensual activity, i.e., practice', and thus to conceive of human action itself as an 'objective activity'.¹⁶ The naturalist materialism of Feuerbach, which 'excluded the historical process', was not capable of fulfilling that most important task even in its own peculiar and limited sphere, the criticism of religion. Only 'historical materialism', which on an economic,

9 See Marx and Engels 1931–2c, pp. 179, 316. See also the further acknowledgments to Feuerbach (not quite so unrestricted) in the draft 'Preface' and text of Engels 1927–30a, pp. 35, 123, 151 *et seq.*

10 See 1931–2c, p. 327.

11 See Marx and Engels 1931–2b, p. 214.

12 See 1927–30i, p. 608.

13 See above pp. 131 *et seq.*

14 See Marx's letter to Ruge of 13 April 1843 (Marx 1843): 'Feuerbach's aphorisms are unsatisfactory in my opinion only in this respect that he refers too much to nature and too little to politics'.

15 See the sixth of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* (Marx 1845), posthumously published by Engels as an Appendix to Engels 1888.

16 Marx 1845, p. 533, first thesis.

historical, and social (not only natural and biological) basis 'explains the active behaviour of man towards nature, the direct production of his life, and thus also of his social conditions and of the ideas arising from them', provides a truly materialist development of the religious ideas. 'All history of religion which ignores this material basis is uncritical'.¹⁷ It was in this context that Marx added the statement quoted in a previous chapter that 'it is, in fact, much easier to find by analysis the secular kernel of the religious mysteries than, conversely, to derive their exalted forms from the prevailing real conditions. The latter is the unique materialistic and therefore the scientific method'.¹⁸

While the 'Feuerbach cult' which Marx had shared with the other young Hegelians for an extremely short time, did on the whole not leave a deep mark on his materialist theory,¹⁹ he was much more impressed by that earlier form of bourgeois materialism which had been inaugurated by 'the English and French' in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The attitude of Marx and Engels to the different phases of bourgeois social theory and economics which we have dealt with in the first and second parts of this book exactly repeats itself in their attitude towards the different historical phases of bourgeois materialism. They dismissed with utter contempt that 'shallow and vulgarized form in which 18th century materialism continues today in the minds of the natural scientists and physicians, and which was preached on their lecture tours in the 50's by Büchner, Vogt, and Moleschott'.²⁰ On the other hand, they always regarded their new proletarian and revolutionary materialism as a continuation, and a more highly developed stage of that classical bourgeois materialism which had formed the driving force of the bourgeoisie in its revolutionary epoch and had then already temporarily begun to branch off directly into socialism and communism.²¹ This relation, however, is more of a general affiliation than a definite adoption of methods and results. On the entirely new field now opened by the extension of the materialist principle to

17 See Marx 1932 pp. 335–6, footnote 89.

18 See above, pp. 160–1.

19 See Marx's remarks on this subject in 1931–2b, p. 85 and in his letter to Engels of 24 April 1867 (Marx 1927–30m, p. 383). Further, see Engels's letters to Marx of 19.11.1844, 19.8.1846, and of the middle of October 1846 (Engels 1927–30b, p. 7, Engels 1927–30b, pp. 27–8, Engels 1927–30b, pp. 44–7) and Marx's final judgment on Feuerbach in his letter to the editor of the *Sozialdemokrat* of 24.1.1865: 'Compared with Hegel, Feuerbach is poor. Nevertheless he was epoch-making *after* Hegel because he emphasized certain points unpleasant to the Christian conscience and important for the progress of criticism, which Hegel had left in a mystical chiaroscuro' (Marx 1865).

20 See Engels 1888.

21 See Marx and Engels 1931–2c, pp. 300–10.

the historical and social sciences, and under the changed historical conditions of the nineteenth century, Marx and Engels could no longer utilise the primitive forms of those early forerunners for their own research, although they went on to admire and to praise the bourgeois materialism of the eighteenth century for its militant revolutionary tendency.

The bourgeois materialists had not developed any adequate principles for the historical and social studies. They had, indeed, boldly proclaimed their materialist principle as fundamental for all fields of existence and knowledge. They did not dream of the half-heartedness of present-day natural scientists who actually apply materialist principles within the limited branch in which they happen to do their professional scientific work, but carefully avoid any further extension of that materialism and cheerfully regard themselves (to use an expression applied to Feuerbach by Engels) as 'materialists underneath and idealists on top'. Yet even the early bourgeois materialists had in fact directed their attention mainly to the field which of necessity attracted them because of its importance for modern industry, the very basis of bourgeois society. Thus they had worked out primarily a materialist science of nature, and dealt with 'society' only in passing as a secondary part of the natural world. The more definite and more threatening the forms of the proletarian class-movement became in the further development of bourgeois society, the more was bourgeois materialism driven back from the thorny ground of 'society' to 'nature' as a field of scientific research. Forgetting its revolutionary character generally, bourgeois social science of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also forgot the materialism of its youthful phase and was able to reproduce it, if at all, only in the spasmodic and counter-revolutionary form in which it appears for instance in Vilfredo Pareto's 'materialist' doctrine of ideologies.

Bourgeois materialism has revolutionised the natural sciences. The proletarian materialism of Marx and Engels proposed from the outset to subject the historical and social world to the same materialist principle. Just as the materialism of natural science had built up its theoretical form in a critical fight against the surviving remainders of the theological metaphysics of the Middle Ages, so did historical and social materialism work out its new theoretical form by opposing that new metaphysics which in the meantime had settled on the field neglected by the old materialism, i.e., of historical and social phenomena, and had found its temporary conclusion in the German idealistic philosophy from Kant to Hegel.²²

Marx found hidden beneath the idealist speculative forms of Hegel's philosophy of law, history, aesthetics, religion, etc., of logic and the history of

22 See the first of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* (Marx 1845 p. 533).

philosophy, just that which he had not been able to find anywhere else in the whole of past and contemporary philosophy and science: namely, a methodical starting point for an empirical investigation of the so-called 'spiritual nature of man', i.e. the realm of *history* or *society* as opposed to *nature*. The primary importance of Hegel's philosophy for Marx's materialist science derives from the fact that here the sphere of 'nature' had been confronted for the first time with the new sphere of the social relations of men as an equally comprehensive universe of research, both to be ultimately subordinated to one and the same supreme principle of knowledge. There is, of course, the difference that for Hegel that ultimate principle had been spiritual, while for Marx it was material. Hegel started from the 'idea'. Marx, on the contrary, in all his philosophical, juridical, and political studies, started from a strictly empirical principle. He approached the historical, social, and practical world of man with the firm decision to investigate this so-called 'world of the mind' which until then had been treated as something essentially different from physical and material nature, with the same 'precision' which had been applied for several centuries by the great scientists to their study of physical nature. In so doing he carried out the programme which he had first formulated as a student, aged nineteen, when he was still inspired by the 'idealism of Kant and Fichte', but was just on the verge of succumbing to the lure of the great Hegelian philosophy. It was at that time that a young Karl Marx confessed to his alarmed father that he had now resolved 'to plunge into the sea once more', but this time 'with a definite intention of finding the nature of mind to be just as necessary, concrete, and tightly rounded as the nature of physics'.²³ Hegel had indeed introduced into the investigation of the history of society and of the so-called 'mind' somewhat more of the empirical attitude of the scientist who aims at a precise description and definition of really existing and verifiable connections than up to that time had been the case with the idealistic philosophers, adherents of the 'organic' theory of the State, and the whole of the so-called 'Historical School'. It was precisely this fact which definitely won over the young Marx to the Hegelian philosophy, and held him under its spell for a considerable period of his life. In truth, from the very beginning he only adhered to the 'natural scientist' of society whom he had discovered beneath the mystifying disguise of the philosophical explorer of the human mind. He immediately left Hegel when he felt able to represent in a direct and rational way those material connections between men and things, and between men and men, which formed the real contents hidden under an apparent speculative connection of ideas. Hegel's real contribution to a materialist investigation of society was that he

23 See Marx's letter to his father of 10 November 1837 (Marx 1927–30j, pp. 218–19).

had seen this material connection, in an idealist form, and made it the subject of a philosophico-scientific exposition.

Hegel's philosophical system, the latest and most complete elaboration of that 'natural system of the sciences of the mind' by which the theologico-metaphysical system of the Middle Ages had been replaced during the practical and theoretical struggles of the previous centuries, can be traced everywhere in the materialist scheme of society. Albeit in an idealist, and not materialist sense, Hegel had already distinguished between the two realms of reality in an equally comprehensive manner, i.e. between the 'world of the mind' or 'history' on the one hand, and the external world, or 'nature', on the other in an equally comprehensive manner (thereby translating into his 'profound philosophical slang the empirical discoveries of the English and French of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). He had also subdivided that historical world into definite strata. Above the world of the 'objective mind' (the family, civil society, the state) there came the world of the 'absolute mind' (religion, philosophy, art).²⁴ He also had regarded this world, at variance with itself, as a world in a process of development. There was only the characteristic difference that Hegel had superimposed on the *real* dependence of the 'higher' strata of society upon the 'lower', and on the *real* process of an historical development going on in time, of which he was fully aware, another reversed, and 'idealist' order of the universe in the shape of an imagined, *timeless development* and a similarly imagined *dependence of the lower forms of reality from the higher and more 'spiritual' forms*. Hegel, too, had 'dialectically' presented this development as being a 'contradictory' process, in which the driving force is the negation of each position, the conflict resulting from that contradiction to be ultimately readjusted through the negation of the negation in a higher 'synthesis'. This order of the historico-social world, which in Hegel's philosophy 'stood on its head', was put on its feet again by Marx through his 'materialist reversal of Hegelian idealism'.

Marx struck out of Hegel's scheme the *idea of the state* which Hegel had presented as the crowning conclusion and consummation of the mind standing in the world and consciously realising itself within it. One must not confound the Hegelian 'idea of the State' with that ordinary earthly phenomenon which with him is merely 'the State as a civil society'.²⁵ 'One must not think of particular States, or particular institutions, one must consider rather the real God, the idea'.²⁶

24 See Hegel 1830, Part III, §§ 2 and 3.

25 See 1830, § 523.

26 See Hegel 1920, Addition to § 258.

When the real God was dethroned the whole kingdom fell. Just as the 'State' and the 'law', so all the 'higher' forms of the mind – religion, art, philosophy – were now ousted from their superhuman position and degraded to the rank of simple 'forms of social consciousness', dependent upon the material conditions of existence. Marx had 'materialistically' criticised those 'higher' ideological manifestations of the social consciousness even before he extended his materialist criticism to the phenomena of the legal and political spheres. He began his attack on the existing world with a materialist criticism of religion, art, and philosophy. Thus he first criticised religion philosophically, and afterwards he criticised religion and philosophy politically.²⁷ Since he had now discovered the real basis of law and the state in material production, it was only obvious that he would also trace to the same real basis those 'higher' ideologies, which he had already previously traced to law and politics.

Marx completely 'reversed' the Hegelian idea of 'development' in the same way. He replaced the timeless development of the 'idea' with the real historical development of society on the basis of the development of its material mode of production. The Hegelian 'contradiction' was replaced by the struggle of the social classes; the dialectical 'negation' by the proletariat, and the dialectical 'synthesis' by the proletarian revolution and the transition to a higher stage of society.

²⁷ See Korsch 1930, pp. 102 *et seq.*

The Materialist Scheme of Society

As early as 1843, it became clear to Marx that political economy was the keystone of all social science. In the following years as a political exile in Paris and Brussels, and during a first visit to London and Manchester from July to August 1845, he completed the first important portion of that Herculean task to which, after a short interruption between 1848 and 1850, he was to devote his energies throughout his life. This was not merely an investigation of particular economic topics resulting in a solution of particular economic problems. It was the initiation of a hitherto mainly politically interested philosopher into the newly discovered field of a really 'materialistic' science. In the retrospective account given in the 'Preface' to his *Critique of Political Economy*, 1859, he sums up the general result:

In the social production of their means of existence human beings enter into definite and necessary relations which are independent of their will – production-relations which correspond to a definite stage in the development of their material forces of production. The aggregate of these production-relations constitutes the economic structure of society, the real basis on which a juridical and political superstructure arises, and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of the material life conditions the whole process of the social, political, and intellectual life. It is not men's consciousness that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.

At a certain stage of their development the material productive forces of society come into contradiction with the existing production-relations, or what is only a legal expression for them with the property-relations within which they hitherto moved. From being forms of development, those relations turn into fetters upon the forces of production. Then a period of social revolution sets in. With the change in the economic foundation, the whole of the vast superstructure is more or less rapidly overturned.

In considering such revolutionary processes one must always distinguish between the economic conditions of production whose material changes can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic, or philosophical, in short, ideological

forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. As one cannot judge an individual by what he thinks of himself, just as little can he judge such a revolutionary epoch by its own consciousness; he must, on the contrary, explain that consciousness by the contradictions of its material life, by the existing conflict between the social forces of production and the production-relations.

A formation of society never perishes until all the forces of production for which it is wide enough have been developed; new and higher production-relations never come into being until the material conditions for their existence have ripened within the womb of the old society itself. Therefore mankind always sets itself such tasks only as it can solve; for looking closer, we shall always find that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already existent or, at least, in process of formation.

In broad outline the Asiatic, the Antique, the Feudal, and the modern Bourgeois modes of production can be designated as epochs in progress of the economic formation of society. The bourgeois production-relations are the final antagonistic form of the social production-process – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism, but as growing out of the social conditions determining the life of the individuals. The forces of production developing within the womb of bourgeois society create at the same time the material conditions for the solution of that antagonism. That is why with that formation of society the pre-history of human society comes to an end.

The foregoing propositions which Marx, after fifteen years of labours presented as the carefully tested principles of his materialist research of society, give a clear insight into the connection established by the materialist conception of history between the social conditions of life, their historical development, and their practical overthrow.

The connection appears at first as a

static connection

linking together the different strata lying, as it were, above each other in a given socio-economico formation. That connection is alternately described as a similarity of 'structure', a relation of 'base' and 'superstructure', or a 'correspondence' between those forms of social organisation which directly spring from the process of material production and such other phenomena as arise

from various other social, political and intellectual activities in any particular historical period.

This apparently static connection is, however, simply a particular case of the

dynamic connection

through which all sections and cross-sections of social life are bound together in their development. In the various phases of the origin, rise, and fall of a given socio-economic formation and its revolutionary replacement by the new and higher production-relations of a further developed social formation, that particular connection between all social conditions which, at first, from a static approach, appeared as a 'consensus',¹ undergoes a change of form. From a harmonious 'consensus' it is at a certain point transformed into a 'dissensus'. (To use the Hegelian formula: the 'correspondence' already contains within itself the 'contradiction' through whose further development the production-relations and, even more, the legal relations, forms of state, and ideologies based upon them, are in due course turned from forms of development of the forces of production into fetters restraining the further development of such forces of production.)

But this dynamic connection is not yet the final and definite form of the materialist connection which forms the subject matter of Marxian research. With all its apparent comprehensiveness the Marxian formula hitherto discussed in this chapter does not aim at a complete description of the materialist principle. It was inserted into the 'Preface' of his main theoretical work (*Critique of Political Economy* or, as it was to be renamed later: *Capital*) for the definite purpose of disclosing to his readers the theoretical principles underlying his investigation of political economy as the 'anatomy of bourgeois society'. The historical development of society is, accordingly, represented here mainly as an objective process. History is explained as an objective development of the material forces of production at first corresponding to, and then contradicting, the existing production-relations, which thus are turned from being forms of development into fetters. The historical 'subject' of that development is not mentioned in the formula. The production-relations of all hitherto existing economic forms of society are shown to be 'antagonistic' forms of the social process of production, but the closer definition of this social antagonism as a class-opposition and a class-war is not given. The violent overthrow of the existing order of society by the oppressed class appears in the formula as an

¹ It is thus described, e.g., by Spencer 1876.

‘epoch of social revolution’ in which the superstructure of society is transformed with the change taking place in the economic foundation. And in striking contrast to the severe criticism previously raised by Marx and Engels against such metaphysical language,² we read here that ‘mankind’ sets itself certain tasks, and even that the ‘epoch of transformation’ itself possesses a consciousness. The aim of the whole development is not concretely defined as a transition to socialist and communist society, but is only implied in the description of present bourgeois society as being the conclusion of the ‘prehistory of human society’.

The full sense of the materialist investigation of society results from the statements by which Marx and Engels, at other times and in other contexts, opposed their materialist principle to the various conflicting opinions with which they had to deal.

The objective formula in the Preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*: ‘The history of society is the history of the material production and of the contradictions between the material forces of production and the production-relations which arise and are solved in the course of development’, is supplemented by the subjective formula in the *Communist Manifesto*: ‘The history of all hitherto existing society is a history of class struggles’.

The subjective formula clarifies the objective formula. It calls by its proper name the class which brings about the objective development by a practical action. The same production-relations which fetter the forces of production (at the present stage, capital and wage-labour), are also the bonds of the labouring masses. The oppressed workers, who in the revolutionary class-struggle burst their own fetters, liberate production at the same time. The acting subject of history at its present stage is the proletariat.

Only by taking into account this

practical connection

can the theoretical statements of the materialist investigation of society be put to their fullest use. The *theoretical fact* that according to the materialist principle of Marx legal conditions and forms of state no longer form an independent subject-matter which is to be understood by virtue of its inherent qualities

² See, for example, Marx and Engels 1931–2c, p. 265: ‘History does *nothing*, it possesses *no* immense wealth, it fights *no* battles! It is rather *man*, real living *man* – who does everything, who possesses and fights; it is not history which uses men, as a means to carry out its ends as if it were a separate person, but it is *nothing* besides the activity of *man* in the pursuit of his ends’.

or derived from a higher immaterial principle but which, on the contrary, are rooted in the material conditions of existing bourgeois society, coincides with the *practical fact* that in modern bourgeois society, after the abolition of all the privileges of the superior orders of feudal society, the inequalities destroyed in the political and legal sphere are preserved in the opposition of social classes arising from the material conditions of life. Through a radical elucidation of this state of affairs, Marx breaks through the ideological confusion with which the panegyrists of the modern democratic state distract the attention of the proletariat from its real position, as an economically oppressed and exploited class, and from the measures to be taken for a practical change of that basic condition. Furthermore, the materialist exposure of the illusions of the state and the law, and of all other high-pitched ideologies of modern bourgeois society, serves as a caution for the revolutionary proletarian class to keep itself free, as far as possible, from those new illusions, with which, in earlier epochs, revolutionary parties concealed from themselves the real content of the conflicts they were engaged in. For this reason Marx instilled into the minds of the workers the materialist lesson that their emancipation from the particular form of oppression and exploitation under which they suffer in the present epoch cannot result from any change of the existing political, legal, and cultural conditions, but they themselves must bring it about through a social revolution penetrating the economic basis of existing bourgeois society.

Nature and Society

In his materialist investigation of society, Marx encompassed all the phenomena of a comprehensive field of experience which until then had been dealt with by a number of altogether different sciences, old and new. On the one hand he recognised no 'higher' spheres of a so-called 'spiritual' life which would be exempted from the crude material necessities of the historical and social spheres. All juridical, political, religious, philosophical and artistic conceptions, the whole of the so-called 'consciousness' of man and all its philosophical disguises like, for example, the Hegelian terms of an '*objektiver*' and '*absoluter Geist*' (an objective and absolute spirit), the Kantian concepts of '*Gattungsvernunft*', and '*Bewusstsein überhaupt*' (human reason and consciousness in general), the philosophical 'idea' generally, and all other, even the most 'universal' categories of thought exist only as given forms of a '*social consciousness*', temporary products of a continuous development, attributes of a definite historical epoch and of a definite economic order of society. To all 'legal conditions and forms of the state' there applies the materialist principle that they can neither be understood (as the exponents of dogmatic jurisprudence and political science believe) 'out of themselves' nor (as the philosophers had believed) 'out of the so-called general development of the human mind', but are rooted in the material conditions of present-day bourgeois society. To all forms of social consciousness there applies the two-fold antithesis formulated by Marx in contrast to both the philosophical idealism of Kant, Fichte and Hegel, and to the naturalist materialism of Feuerbach: 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence but, on the contrary, their *social existence* which determines their consciousness'.¹

On the other hand, in his materialist formula Marx also encompassed the natural foundation of all historical and social phenomena and, for this purpose, conceived and represented even nature itself in the terms of a strictly historical and social science as 'industry', 'economy', or 'material production'. In spite of a genuine recognition of the 'priority of external nature'² he does not derive the historical development of society from any kind of extra-historical

1 The words emphasised above show the difference between the social approach of Marx and the naturalist formula contained in Feuerbach's 'Preliminary Theses for the Reform of Philosophy' (Feuerbach 1950 [1842]): 'Thought comes from being, but being does not come from thought'.

2 See Marx and Engels 1931–2, p. 33.

and extra-social natural factors like climate, race, the struggle for existence, man's physical and mental powers, etc., but from a 'nature' which has itself been already 'modified' by an historical and social process or, more distinctly, from the historically and socially conditioned developments of material production. The materialist philosopher Plekhanov, in supporting his contrary opinion, reminds us that 'Hegel had already noted in his *Philosophy of History* the important part played by the geographical foundations of the world history'.³ He did not see that the scientific advances made by Marx's historical and social materialism over the idealism of Hegel and the materialism of Feuerbach consists just in this difference: that Marx conceived of 'matter' itself in historical terms, while all his philosophical predecessors, both the idealist and the materialist varieties, had conceived of 'matter' as a dumb, dead or, at best, mere biologically animated nature.

While, according to Hegel, 'physical nature, indeed, exerts a direct effect upon world history',⁴ Marx started from an altogether different viewpoint from the outset. According to him, physical nature does not directly enter into history. It does so indirectly, i.e. as a process of material production which occurs not only between man and nature, but at the same time between man and men.⁵ Or, to use phraseology which will be clear even to the philosophers, in the strictly social research of Marxian materialism, that 'pure' nature which is presupposed to all human activity (the economic *natura naturans*) is replaced everywhere by a 'nature' mediated and modified through human social activity, and thus at the same time capable of a further change and modification by our own present and future activity, i.e., by nature as *material production* (or the economic *natura naturata*).⁶

Being 'social', nature has a specifically historical character varying in the different epochs. As an historical and social nature it has, above all, a distinct class-character. For example, as emphasised by Marx in his controversy with Feuerbach, that cherry-tree before the philosopher's window, whose ancestors were 'artificially' transplanted to Europe a few hundred years ago, is thereby for the modern European no nature-given growth;⁷ just as, on the same grounds, the potato is no 'nature-given' food for the modern European poor, or, at most,

3 See Plekhanov 1929, vi.

4 See Hegel 1817–30, 'General Introduction', II, i (a); and 'Special Introduction', II, 'The natural connection or the geographical basis of world history'.

5 See Marx and Engels 1931–2c, p. 19, and Marx 1931–2j.

6 For a more detailed discussion, see Marx 1931–2i, pp. 121–3, and Marx and Engels 1931–2b, pp. 10–11, 32 *et seq.*

7 See 1931–2b, pp. 32–3.

only in the same sense as the adulterated bread and the 'sophisticated' wine sold in the back streets are 'nature-given' products of the modern capitalist mode of production.⁸ The den of the modern poor is even less than the lair of the wild beast a 'nature-given' shelter in which he can move at ease like the fish in the water. It is not a house where he can feel at home, but it is the house of his landlord who will evict him when he cannot afford to pay his rent.⁹ 'My house is my castle', originating from the world of simple commodity-production, holds good for the slum-barracks of our big cities no more than it did for the cots of the English farm-labourers of 1860, as described in *Capital*.¹⁰ Modern 'hunger', which satisfies itself with cooked meat, eaten with knife and fork, is quite another thing than that hunger which 'swallowed raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth'.¹¹ So do those 'normal' periods of hunger natural to primitive hordes, that have been artificially reintroduced in modern capitalist society for those sections of the unemployed who, for some reason or another, have been taken off the dole, represent a vastly different thing from the hunger, be it ever so great, that may occasionally, by the accident of a temporary stoppage of their regular food-supplies, cause a 'thrilling' sensation to the idle rich.

None of those things, in the definite forms in which they appear in present bourgeois society or for that matter in any earlier or later epochs, comes from 'nature' alone. They depend upon the existing historical conditions of material production and can be changed with a change in those conditions. This happens through an historical development, which may take a shorter or longer time, but which is nowhere stopped by any absolute barrier, through an objective process which is at the same time a struggle between social classes.

This viewpoint of a strictly *social*, i.e. of an *historical* and practical science, dominated the entire novel system of concepts which Marx and Engels built up in their controversy with the then existing idealist and materialist currents of thought from the very beginning. The existence of physical man, the external world in which he moves, and the natural objective development of those natural conditions in large periods of 'cosmological time', independent of that altogether different development of the social forms which is accomplished by man's action in 'historical time', all these 'real presuppositions' of history and society are, of course, real presuppositions also for Marx's materialist research. They do not, however, appear as theoretical premises within the system of the

8 See Marx 1932, pp. 137, 210–13, 565.

9 See Marx 1931–2i, pp. 135–6.

10 See Marx 1932, pp. 648–58.

11 See Marx 1857, p. 717.

new social science which starts from its own materialist principles defined in historical and social terms.

This is no way contradicted but, on the contrary, even more clearly demonstrated by the terms of so-called 'naturally grown forms of society' and of so-called 'social laws of nature' which are continually used by Marx in the presentation of his theory. The concept of '*natural growth*', as applied to historical forms, has with Marx an altogether different meaning than it had with the historians, poets, and philosophers of the 'Romanticist School' who, in conscious opposition to the preceding period of Enlightenment and revolution, glorified everything 'naturally grown'. Marx, on the contrary, used the term in a negative sense for the description of such conditions, relations and connections which have not as yet been subjected to conscious human action. In this sense, Marx speaks in his critique of the *German Ideology* and twenty years later, in *Capital*, of the 'primordial' ('*naturwüchsige*') forms of the division of labour,¹² of a worldwide historical connection between individuals,¹³ of the state,¹⁴ of legal conditions,¹⁵ of language,¹⁶ and of such apparently immutable differences as the variations of race.¹⁷ In all these cases the '*naturwüchsige*' form of a social relation comes in contrast to those other forms which this relation assumes in the course of social development when it is either consciously maintained and further worked out, or changed to a greater or lesser extent by a conscious human action. The '*naturwüchsige*' forms are thus described as social forms which have arisen historically just as all other, more or less consciously created forms and are therefore capable of a further change both in the present and the future. Thus they are not eternal forms of all social life but can be overthrown by the united individuals in a deliberate action, which will finally strip them of their present crude and oppressive 'primordial' character. One sees at first glance the positive bearing of this thought not only on the theoretical extension of the realm of social knowledge, but also on the practical socialist and communist tendencies which are necessarily bound up with this knowledge.¹⁸

The same holds good for the other apparently nature-bound term of the new Marxian science, which we have already discussed when dealing with

12 See Marx and Engels 1931–2b, pp. 12, 20–2, 41–2, 49–50, 55 *et seq.*, and Marx 1932, pp. 316, 321, 329, etc.

13 See Marx and Engels 1931–2b, pp. 26–7.

14 Marx and Engels 1931–2b, p. 325.

15 Marx and Engels 1931–2b, p. 342.

16 Marx and Engels 1931–2b, pp. 404–5.

17 Marx and Engels 1931–2b, p. 403.

18 See Marx and Engels 1931–2b, p. 60.

the economic law of value, i.e., the so-called '*social laws of nature*'. Here again we have to deal with a term which is at first defined in a negative manner only.¹⁹ The economic laws prevailing in the capitalist mode of production do not have within the new materialist science of society that positive and final meaning which the real 'laws of nature' do for the physicist,²⁰ and which, according to their first discoverers and inventors, pertained also to those 'natural' laws which would in future govern the new 'civil' mode of existence emerging from the artificial fetters of mediaeval feudalism. They are even less what Marx and Engels in their earlier, philosophical, period called a 'law of the mind' as opposed to a 'mere law of nature'²¹ and what recurs in their later writings when they speak of a 'leap from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom'²² and of the 'true realm of freedom blossoming out of the realm of necessity in the fully developed Communist Society of the future'.²³

However, just from the negative definition that the so-called 'laws of nature' of the bourgeois economists are, in fact, not laws of nature at all, there derives the positive significance which the term 'social' laws of nature assumes in the revolutionary science of Marx. The fact that the general conditions of bourgeois society which had been proclaimed as laws by the bourgeois economists, are restricted to a definite historical epoch, implies that in the further development of society all those apparent laws can be abrogated through the conscious social act of the class which is at present oppressed by them, to be replaced by another, a willed and planned form of the social activities of man.

Thus neither of the two Marxian terms conforms with the perpetuation of the so-called economic laws asserted by the classical economists; even less with that further extension of the realm of 'natural growth in society' which had been the dream of the early counterrevolutionary theorists in France and of the German and English Romanticists. Marx, on the contrary, applies both terms for the purpose of extending the realm of history and society, i.e., of a conscious social action as against the so-called eternal necessities of an altogether inaccessible 'realm of nature'. Far behind the 'immutable laws' invented

19 See the definition given by Engels in Engels 1975–2004a, p. 394 and quoted with approval by Marx in Marx 1932, pp. 41–2, footnote 28: 'What are we to think of a law that can only establish itself through periodical revolutions? Well, it is a law of nature resulting from the unconsciousness of the people concerned.'

20 See Marx's letter to Kugelmann of 11 July 1868, Marx and Engels 1975–2004, vol. 42, pp. 67–70.

21 See Engels 1975–2004a.

22 See Engels 1878.

23 See Marx 1894, ii, p. 355.

and maintained by the bourgeois economists for the preservation of an order of production that is allegedly 'natural' and 'rational', but in fact ever more artificial, more arbitrary, and ever more dependent on force, and at the same time more hampering to the further development of society and more destructive of human life, stand those real necessities of nature which condition the whole life of man and which are also recognised by the Marxists as unchangeable facts and as natural presuppositions of all social development. Even this recognition applies to a given time only. There is, from the historical and social principle of Marxian science, no absolute and predetermined limit beyond which an apparently 'primordial' foundation of all social life might not in future be discovered to be no more than an historical and historically changeable form, and thus a form which can be modified and overthrown by conscious action. 'Even the naturally-grown variations of the human species such as differences of race, etc., can and must be abolished in the historical process'.²⁴

As with all other innovations embodied in the new materialist theory, Marx's methodical extension of society at the expense of nature is proved mainly in the field of economic science. The Marxian critique of the fetish-character of the commodity and of all other economic categories refutes once and for all those mystical ideas by which the earlier economists had attributed economic phenomena to an immediate physical cause, be it some external force of nature, the physical constitution of man or, finally, his so-called 'innate' psychological qualities. There is, above all, no such thing as an immediate 'natural basis of the surplus value'. The only significance which can be claimed for physical conditions in the genesis of the socio-historical phenomenon of the exploitation of propertyless wage-labourers by property-owning capitalists is that of a natural limit or barrier fixing the points at which the labour-time necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of the labourer ceases and thus 'labour for others can begin'. '*In proportion as industry advances, those natural limits recede*'.²⁵

The same applies to the so-called 'natural basis of the state' which is asserted by a whole school of modern bourgeois sociologists. The political phenomenon of the state results, in fact, as little from unchangeable physical conditions as the economic phenomenon of the surplus-value upon which it depends as a secondary and derived form. Just as things useful for human needs and produced by human labour are 'commodities', and gold and silver are 'money', under definite social conditions only and not by any inherent physical qualities, so is the physically weaker individual or race the slave of

24 See Marx and Engels 1931–2b, p. 403.

25 See Marx 1932, pp. 475–9.

the physically stronger not by any eternal necessity but through the accident of temporary circumstances. By a definite historical process, the class which under the social conditions prevailing in the present epoch produces all social wealth, has been separated from the material means of production and is now ruled and exploited by the class which through the same historical process has monopolised for itself the means of social production as 'capital'. The apparently 'naturalist' theory which assigns such existing social and political facts to the command of nature is but a secularised form of those older theories which derived the same facts from the command of God or, for that matter, from such intermediate agencies as the philosophical unfolding of an eternal idea, reason, or humanity itself.

Productive Forces and Production-Relations

According to Marx, the driving forces of the revolutionary development of society are the potential powers of production inherent in a given epoch of the socio-economic formation. Like all other terms of the new social science, the concept of the 'productive forces' is defined by Marx not *a priori* but empirically. It is described in terms of economics and history and in reference to a specific mode of production, not in terms of a general sociology; not dogmatically, but critically; not from the viewpoint of a pre-established harmony, but from that of class-antagonism; not for the purpose of theoretical knowledge and contemplation, but with a view to social action or 'revolutionary practice'. Thus, as conceived by Marx, the productive forces are much more than a mere philosophical concept of 'matter' resulting from the 'materialist reversal' of the Hegelian 'idea' and, like its predecessor, presupposed to all empirical knowledge. They form, together with the 'production-relations' in which they function and develop, the real whole of the given 'mode of material production', which can be determined 'with the precision of a natural science'.

There is in this Marxian term nothing mystical and nothing metaphysical. A 'productive force' is, at first, nothing else than the real labour-power of working men; the force incorporated in these living human beings by which, with definite material means of production and within a definite form of social cooperation conditioned by those material means of production, they produce through their labour the material means of satisfying the social needs of their existence, that is – under capitalist conditions, 'commodities'. In a second and even more important sense, everything that increases the productive effect of human labour-power (and thereby, under capitalist conditions, inevitably increases at the same time the profit of its exploiters) is said by Marx to be a 'productive force'. To the productive forces in that dynamic sense belongs the progress of technique and science; there belongs above all the social organisation itself, or the immediately 'social' forces created by co-operation and the division of labour. In this sense, in his economic work Adam Smith had emphasised the *'proportionable increase of the productive powers of labour'* occasioned by the division of labour under the conditions of modern industry,¹ and we may say without exaggeration that the basic term of Marx's revolutionary theory, the concept of the 'social' productive forces, originated precisely

¹ See Smith 1937, I, i.

from that Smithian thought² though the implications of the new term were but partially and one-sidedly described by Smith and were brought out in their full economic and social significance only by the new materialist theory of the proletarian revolution.

‘The production of the human life’, as stated by Marx in an early exposition of his new principle:

appears from the outset as a two-fold relation. It is, on the one hand, a natural relation and on the other hand a social relation, social in the sense of a co-operation between several individuals no matter under what conditions, in what way, and for what purpose. It follows that a definite mode of production or industrial stage always concurs with a definite mode of co-operation or social stage, and *this mode of co-operation is itself a productive force*.³

So does the real point in all later developments of Marx’s revolutionary theory consist of the emphasis laid on that ‘*new potential of productive force*’ which, increasing continually in the course of the development of human society, inexhaustibly flows from the many single forces melted together into one united force. Under capitalist conditions this new force seems to spring from the productivity of ‘capital’. In truth it springs from the growing productivity of social labour.⁴

From this derives a third and final sense in which the Marxian term is applied to the workers themselves, who by revolutionary action as a class set free the forces potentially existing in social labour today. That potential power will be fully actualised by the proletarian revolution which will break the restraints placed on the productivity of society by the present capitalist form of commodity-production and unite the hitherto incompletely coordinated forces of the single labourers into an organised collective labour-force. It is partially realised today wherever, in the various forms of the proletarian class-struggle – the strike, the stay-in strike, and the general strike – the united workers stand up against the oppressive forces of capital. Thus it may be said that under the present conditions of an ever-increasing sabotage of the powerful capacities of modern industry by the existing capitalist production-relations, the new potential of productivity inherent in the working class

² See Marx’s extracts from Smith on first reading his work in Marx 1931–2h, pp. 457 *et seq.*

³ See Marx and Engels 1931–2b, p. 19.

⁴ See Marx 1931–2j, pp. 482 *et seq.* and, for an exhaustive discussion of this point, Marx 1932, I, xi, under the heading ‘Co-operation’.

reveals itself most clearly in those cases when, according to the isolating and static concepts of the bourgeois ideologists, the labourers cease to function as a 'productive force' at all, but in fact only cease to function as a 'productive force of capital' and stand ready to realise that incomparably greater power of productivity which is potentially existent in the material means of production and in the hands and brains of the toiling masses today. *'De tous les instruments de production, le plus grand pouvoir productif, c'est la classe révolutionnaire elle-même.'*⁵

It follows from the foregoing discussion that those recent Marx interpreters are quite mistaken who, by a direct inversion of the order in which theory and practice were blended by Marx into a dynamic whole, wanted to degrade the opposition between the social classes to a temporary appearance of the underlying 'economic' contradiction between the productive forces and production-relations as a larger and assumedly more 'material' entity. They inflate the scientific principle of Marx's economic research to a universal and eternal dialectic pervading the whole development of nature and man and thus fall back not only far behind historical materialism, but behind the historical idealism of Hegel and his equally idealist philosophical predecessors.⁶

On the other hand, the Marxian 'contradiction of productive forces and production-relations' means much more than a lack of adjustment between technical results and their social application. The Marxian concept of 'social' productive forces has nothing in common with the idealist abstractions of the old and new 'technocrats' who imagine that they can define and measure the productive powers of society apart from all social conditions in terms of natural science and technology. There is no doubt that the productive forces include, along with the social nature of the labour engaged in material production, also the 'improvements on the field of intellectual production, especially in natural science and its practical application'.⁷ The 'fettering character' of the existing capitalist production-relations appears also in the frustration of intellectual labour, which results from the fact that the ruling class of present capitalist society is only indirectly interested in technical progress, i.e., only in so far as it can thereby increase its profits. A scientific investigation into the definite forms of the growing repression of technical progress by the so-called necessities of capitalist production is a powerful indictment of the existing capitalist system. But the conflict of technical and social possibilities is by no means the only form in which the struggle between the progressive tendency of the

5 See Marx 1931-2d, p. 227.

6 See Korsch 1935.

7 See Marx 1932, pp. 350-1, and Marx 1894, i, pp. 55-6.

material productive forces and the stagnation resulting from the fixed form of the social relations of production manifests itself in present society. Technical knowledge and ‘technocratic’ prescriptions are not sufficient in themselves to remove the material obstacles which oppose any important change in present-day capitalist society, and these can, indeed, not be removed by intellectual weapons alone. There is more power of resistance in the mute force of economic conditions and in the economically and politically organised forces of the class interested in the maintenance of those conditions than well-meaning technocrats have ever dreamt of. ‘Technocracy’, said Leon Trotsky in a bold forecast of *The Future of Socialism in America*,⁸ ‘can only be realized in a soviet régime when the barriers of private property have fallen’.

Even before Marx had discovered in the so-called ‘economic law’ of the *accumulation of capital*, the ultimate material reason for the characteristic historical fact that capitalist production cannot exist without continuous progress,⁹ he had been aware of this fundamental law of modern society. The revolutionary role of the bourgeoisie determined by it is described in the *Communist Manifesto*:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. A constant overthrow of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois from all earlier epochs. All stable, rust-fixed relations, with their train of ancient and venerable views and opinions, are swept away, those which are newly formed, become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is established and has a status, evaporates, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real position in life and his actual conditions.¹⁰

In the first ascending phase of the bourgeois epoch, this law of a society based on the capitalist mode of production was naively and candidly formulated by

8 See Trotsky 1935, p. 522.

9 See Marx 1932, xxi *et seq.*, especially pp. 587 *et seq.* The theory of accumulation is further developed in Marx 1885, Part III.

10 Marx and Engels 1931–2a.

its ideological supporters as a 'law of progress'.¹¹ When afterwards, especially since Darwin, the simple concept of 'progress' was supplanted by the more elaborate concept of 'evolution', that change initially resulted only in a further development and wider application of the same fundamental principle. The concept of a permanent 'progressive evolution' was raised to a fundamental principle of sociological science. In this sense, Herbert Spencer endeavoured to represent the study of sociology as 'the study of Evolution in its most complex form'.¹²

From the standpoint of its higher learning, later bourgeois sociology smiled at the unsophisticated belief in progress which had been characteristic of its own beginnings. Although still adhering to the idea of a general progress involving as its inevitable consequence a higher moral development, Herbert Spencer himself formulated at the same time the far more neutral definition of development as 'a progress from a simple to a complex form'.¹³ Thomas Henry Huxley emphasised the ethical indifference of the idea of evolution by pointing to the lack of a necessary connection, and even partial contradiction, between socio-economic and ethical progress.¹⁴ That 'pluralist' approach was, during the further development of bourgeois sociology, transformed into a complete scepticism of progress, and finally into social pessimism, glorification of reaction and the '*decline of the West*'.

As the original idea of progress expressed the ascendant phase of capitalist production, its declining phase is manifested in the gradual transformation of that idea into the 'neutral' and 'non-evaluative' concept of development current among the modern bourgeois sociologists. With the further development of capitalist production, with the increase of accumulated capital and wealth, the capitalist ceased to be a mere incarnation of that uninterrupted and uninterruptedly accelerated accumulation of capital which in the earlier phase had been reflected as a 'fanaticism of progress' in the social consciousness of the time. A long hangover followed upon the previous state of rapture and intoxication with progress.

The idea of progress abandoned by bourgeois science was kept alive by the class which represented the progressive tendency within the practical development of the new epoch. The criticism directed by the Utopian Socialism of St. Simon and Fourier and by the materialist communism of Owen and Marx

11 See Perrault 1688–97. For a modern discussion of the question first raised in that book, see Sorel 1908.

12 See Spencer 1876, pp. 384–5; see also Ginsberg 1930 and Rumney 1934.

13 See Rumney 1932, especially pp. 242 *et seq.*, and pp. 272 *et seq.*

14 See Huxley 1893, pp. 31 *et seq.*

against the bourgeois concept of 'progress' is, in part, a restoration and further development of the rational kernel of that same early bourgeois idea. Socialism achieves in a changed form, and in an enormously increased measure, once more that unfettering of the material forces of production which capitalism had endeavoured to achieve in a form adapted to the time, and in which ultimately it had more or less failed. The working class must adhere to the bourgeois principle of progress through all the phases of the long struggle in which it is still striving to work out its own emancipation, and with it a new and higher form of society. Not until that phase of the communist society of the future, when the enslaving subordination of man under the existing system of division of labour and the resulting antagonism between intellectual and physical labour will have been finally conquered; when labour will have developed from being a means of living to a spontaneous activity of man and, along with a development of all creative powers of the human individual the productive forces of society will also have increased; not until all springs of cooperative wealth are in full flow – not until then will the inhuman sacrifice of the present for the future of society become superfluous and the single-track idea of 'progress' branch out into the *universal development of free individuals in a free society*.¹⁵ Not until then will the modern working class, by its conscious action, realise the old dream of the oppressed classes of all times which, as far back as Aristotle,¹⁶ had been a mythical expression for the real goal of the revolutionary self-emancipation of the helot-class.

Until then, the proletariat reproaches the ruling classes much less for realising the productive forces only in a capitalist fashion and thus burdening the working class with the enormous costs and sufferings of this capitalist form of progress than it reproaches them for carrying out that progress less and less efficiently, for adhering, in an ever increasing degree, to their own narrow class-interests, which become more and more irreconcilable with the further development of the social productive powers, and, for a direct and conscious sabotage of all social progress. The first result of the proletarian class-struggle is to force upon the bourgeoisie, against its own will, the continuation of its historical vocation as a capitalist class.

Long before the proletariat will overthrow the ruling bourgeoisie, and constitute itself a ruling class and the official bearer of social development, it anticipates this great change by its own development into an independent

15 See Marx 1875, pp. 563–75 and the concluding sentence of the second section of Marx and Engels 1931–2a, p. 546, on the ultimate goal of an 'association in which the free development of each member is the condition for the free development of all'.

16 Aristotle 1995, I, iv.

revolutionary class, by the gradual growth of its class-consciousness and by the multiple forms of a veritable class-war waged against the existing capitalist production-relations and their political superstructure. Even the progress thus imposed upon the bourgeoisie is, from the viewpoint of the proletariat, no longer bourgeois progress, but the workers' own affair. The progressive development of the social productive forces becomes the action of the proletarian class.¹⁷

The bourgeoisie had become conscious of the economic law of its own development in a mystified form only; it had expanded the accumulation of capital into a cosmic law of progress. The proletariat puts in place of that ideological mystification a clear and scientific orientation of its own social theory and practice to a further progressive development of the hitherto evolved productive forces.

In order to fulfil that progressive task, the proletariat will first find it necessary to tear asunder, in a social revolution, those strongest fetters of the productive forces which are formed by the capitalist mode of production. '*The real historical barrier of capitalist production is capital itself*'.¹⁸

Even the bourgeois revolution of the preceding epoch which was described one-sidedly by its ideological supporters as a change of civil constitution, the laws, and the state – in short, as a 'political' revolution only – was in fact an overthrow of the whole socio-economic formation. The historical blindness of the bourgeois revolutionaries which persists in the bourgeois conception of the revolutionary process today lies, above all, in the fact that they considered the change in the economic conditions of life not yet as a direct task, but as a 'natural' consequence resulting, as it were, spontaneously from the essential achievement of the political revolution.

The proletarian criticism of the traditional bourgeois concepts of progress, evolution, and of a merely political revolution, is based on the materialist discovery that the social 'production-relations' corresponding to each stage of the development of the material productive forces do not develop either in an independent economic 'evolution' or as a 'natural result' of a merely political revolution. They have to be changed by man. Nay more, the new political and ideological conditions temporarily achieved by a mere political revolution can only be upheld against the powers of reaction by a radical social revolution reaching down to the very roots of the existing order of society, that is, right down to material production.

17 See 1931–2d, ii, § 5, pp. 221–8 and Marx and Engels 1931–2a, pp. 533–7. See also Korsch 1922, pp. 46 *et seq.*

18 See Marx 1894, p. 231.

The only 'evolution' that is possible, and actually takes place within the framework of the existing production-relations of an historical epoch, i.e., the only process of development which leaves the basic structure of a given society 'on the whole' or 'essentially' unchanged is the intrinsic development of the social 'productive forces'. The material conditions of the new and higher production-relations which are to be substituted for the existing production-relations by a social revolution are brought to maturity within the womb of the old society. Thus the production-relations, unable to develop by themselves, nevertheless fulfil for a certain time, and up to a certain point, a positive function in the development of material production. Within them there proceeds the further development of the old, and the growth of the new productive forces.

The latent, potential, dynamic further development of material production unfolding within a fundamentally unchanged system of production-relations occupies the first phase of every historical epoch. As soon as the harmonious development, or rather an externally 'harmonious' development only, which contains the hidden germs of a future conflict, has reached a certain point, it loses even that outwardly harmonious aspect. 'At a certain stage of their development', said Marx:

the material productive forces of society come into contradiction with the existing production-relations within which they hitherto moved. From being forms of development they turn into fetters of the productive forces. Then an epoch of social revolution sets in. With the change in the economic foundation the whole of the vast superstructure is more or less rapidly overturned.¹⁹

This dynamic conception of *material production* itself distinguishes the Marxian theory of the social revolution from all other revolutionary theories. Although revelling in 'dynamics' and 'development', the bourgeois sociologists remain the slaves of a fundamentally 'static' concept at the most important point; they are not able to extend their 'dynamic' terms to the very foundation of society. The material mode of production in a given epoch of society forms for them a closed system which is determined throughout. In it, production is carried on in definite forms. The whole of the existing productive forces of society is actualised in these forms. There is no room in this conception for any surplus or unutilised fund of productive powers that might possibly be added to those really active productive powers. They take seriously what was

19 See 'Preface', Marx 1859.

presented as a terrific indictment of the existing capitalist system by the late German socialist leader, August Bebel: 'Without profits, no chimney smokes'. According to this view, capitalist production-relations, together with the corresponding relations of distribution, are just as indispensable to the productive process as is the land, the raw materials, machines, and labouring 'hands'. From this static viewpoint it amounts almost to a miracle that production has been able to develop at all and thus to get from its past to its present stage. This miracle is either explained by a pseudo-scientific disintegration of real change into smaller and smaller steps of a gradual and imperceptible evolution,²⁰ or else it is disposed of by reference to the supernatural creative forces of the 'great bourgeois revolution' of the past, which exploded once and for all the obsolete feudal order, which was in itself no longer capable of any further development, and created the modern industrial system capable of unlimited evolution.

The apparently undivided whole of a given material production is split by Marx into fixed production-relations and elastic productive forces. Thus material production is stripped of its closed character, its immovability, and unchangeability. The production-relations are now no longer asked whether production can go on within them. They are asked, above all, whether a further development of production can go on within them. They are the forms that either advance or block the development of the productive forces. Conversely, the existence and extent of the potential productive forces inherent in the present mode of production cannot be tested by a technological calculation so long as they cannot be tested in their actual working within a given social process of production, and as the way for the real test has not been cleared by the revolutionary destruction of the capitalist barrier. Like the mutations of animals and plants which have replaced the older evolutionary concepts in modern biology, the '*social mutations*' occurring in the material mode of production²¹ are not completely determined and determinable in advance. Just as the mutation is a 'leap of nature', in spite of Aristotle, so is the social revolution in its actual process, with all materialist determination of its premises and forms, a 'leap',

20 This logical fallacy was critically exposed by Hegel in Hegel 1812–16, pp. 383–4. Marx illustrated the equation between a real change and an infinity of alterations 'so minute that they can be ignored' by a reference to the foolish maid who excused her mistake by saying that 'the baby was at first so very little'.

21 The term 'mutation', which today is mainly used in natural science, was first applied to those historical and social events which today would be called a revolution. The term 'revolution' was only recently transferred from the field where it was most impressively used by Copernicus in 1543, to its present principal application. It was not applied in this sense until the end of the seventeenth century and obtained its full present significance with the French Revolution of 1789.

not from an absolute 'realm of necessity' into an absolute 'realm of freedom', but from a rigid system of long-established and repressive social relations to a flexible system of new and more plastic forms of social life as yet in the process of formation, with plenty of room for a further development of the productive forces and for new forms of human activity.²²

The social revolution of the proletariat is an action of men united in a definite social class and engaged in a war against other social classes, with all the chances and all the risks attached to such a real practical effort. This is in no way contradicted by Marx's 1859 statement that 'a formation of society never perishes before all the forces of production for which it is wide enough have developed'; and that 'new and higher production-relations never come into being before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the womb of the old society itself'. There is no reason to suspect, as some bourgeois and reformist opponents of Marx's revolutionary theory have done, that Marx had by this time abandoned the practical materialist standpoint of his earlier writings (*The Theses on Feuerbach*, *The German Ideology*, *The Poverty of Philosophy* and *The Communist Manifesto*) and had adopted a 'fatalistic' conception of the revolutionary process as a purely economic development brought about by the working of an inevitable law. Marx had formed his materialist opinion that '*l'organisation des éléments révolutionnaires comme classe suppose l'existence de toutes les forces productives qui pouvaient s'engendrer dans le sein de la société ancienne*', long before the failure of the bourgeois revolution of 1848 and the ensuing reaction and despair could have turned him from a 'militant propagandist of the revolutionary class struggle' into a 'detached scientific observer of the real historical development'. Such difference as there is between the earlier and later formulations of the materialist principle, this reflects a shift of emphasis from the subjective factor of revolutionary class-war to its connection with the underlying objective development. This shift of emphasis appears for the first time in a document from the Autumn of 1850 in which Marx and Engels drew attention to the restored prosperity and the temporary end of the revolutionary movement as a result. 'Under the conditions of this general prosperity, when the productive forces of bourgeois society develop as abundantly as is at all possible within existing bourgeois conditions, there can be no question of a real revolution. Such a revolution is only possible in those periods when the two factors, the modern productive forces and the bourgeois forms of production, come to contradict one another.'²³ By this sober, materialist statement, they disowned 'the illusions

22 See the sentences quoted above, p. 94, from Engels 1878, and from Marx 1894. See further Marx and Engels 1931–2a and Marx 1875.

23 See *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* 1850, pp. 5–6.

of the vulgar democracy grouped around the would-be provisional governments in *partibus*²⁴ and thus separated themselves once and for all from the leaders of the revolutionary bourgeois emigration of 1848, 'who later, almost without exception, have made their peace with Bismarck – so far as Bismarck found them worth the trouble'.²⁵ More importantly, by the same act they broke with the so-called 'partisans of action' who at that time under the leadership of August Willich and Karl Schapper had swept up the majority of the reconstituted Communist League of 1850 in their illusionary hopes of a speedy new outbreak of the defeated revolutionary movement. So bitter was the ensuing fight that it led to a formal split within the then most advanced proletarian party,²⁶ and to an eventual dissolution of the whole organisation.

As we have seen in discussing the successive phases of Marx's economic theory, the new form of Marx's revolutionary materialism was due to the changed conditions which were henceforth given for the practical development of the proletarian class-struggle. The stronger emphasis now lay on the objective presuppositions of a victorious proletarian revolution which cannot be replaced by good will, by the right theory, or by the most efficient organisation of revolutionaries, appears from this point of view in the main as a lesson drawn from the experiences of the European revolution and counterrevolution of 1848 for the benefit of the new phase of the revolutionary labour-movement which began in 1850. In a similar manner, the revolutionary Marxist, Lenin, on a closely analogous occasion, summed up for the benefit of the Russian and international militant party the tactical experiences of the three Russian revolutions of the twentieth century. In what he now called the 'fundamental law of revolution', he stated the indispensable objective conditions of a 'direct, open, really revolutionary struggle of the working class'. Just as, after the final defeat of the 1848 revolution, Marx and Engels had confronted the subjective and emotional hopes of the leftists of 1850 with the cruel materialist analysis of the objective economic position and the sober perspective resulting from this, so Lenin came to grips with the activist-revolutionary tendencies of the left communists of 1920 who, in an objectively changed situation, adhered to the slogans of the direct revolutionary situation unleashed by World War I.²⁷

24 See Engels, Introduction to his 1895 edition of the articles contributed by Marx and himself to the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, 1850, (reprinted in Marx 1850–2).

25 Ibid.

26 See the reasons offered by Marx for his motion as embodied in the record of the proceedings of the last meeting of the London Central Executive Committee of the Communist League, 15 September 1850, later published by Marx in Marx 1852a.

27 See Lenin 1966 [1920].

While thus warning the vanguard of the working class not to stick too conservatively to the direct revolutionary tactics which were no longer justified by objective conditions, both Marx and Lenin did not think for a moment of supplanting the real revolutionary action of the working class by a passive belief in a mere economic process of development which would, after a considerable amount of waiting, finally achieve the revolutionary change with the inevitability of a natural process. The class which stands in the midstream of historical development, and by its own movement determines that development, must by its conscious activity finally prove the maturity reached by the productive forces within the existing production-relations. With their own hands they must break the fetters that obstruct the development of the productive forces and establish the higher production-relations of a new progressive epoch of society.

Base and Superstructure

What are the particular relations between the ‘economic structure of society’ and its political and juridical ‘superstructure’, between ‘social existence’ and ‘social consciousness’? In what definite forms is the material connection between the various fields of social life realised? What is their significance for a materialist investigation of the different spheres of a given economic order of society?

We know already that all these apparently separated and widely different spheres together form a universe of society in which, just as in a living organism, every part is connected with every other part. This ‘just as’, by the way, is to be read to mean ‘just as much and just as *little*’. In either case, the author does not want to be seen as adhering to that mystic and unscientific theory of ‘whole-ism’ according to which this connection is previously given and only needs to be discovered in detail by the endeavours of the investigator. He would rather, with old Kant, regard the idea of whole-ism as a working principle which guides our strictly empirical research and may or may not hold good even in a given instance. The position today is different from that which prevailed at the time when Marx had first to establish the materialist principle against a host of deep-rooted idealist prejudices. Marx himself nowhere discussed the question in a general way.¹ But it follows from his criticism of the equally metaphysical bourgeois concept of evolution,² from the principles of specification and change underlying his whole work and, even more, from the methods he actually applied in the investigation of the economic sphere in *Capital*, that he would have ruled out the words ‘all’ and ‘every’ just as well from that broader universe of a strictly empirical and critical research which he alternately called alternately ‘history’, ‘society’ or the realm of ‘practical action’. He would have replaced those vague and meaningless generalities by a specific description of a given state of society, its historical genesis and its inherent developmental tendencies from the practical viewpoint of the working class.

Marx had not passed in vain through the school of Hegel which had been the great school of philosophical thought for the whole generation of the revolutionaries of the 1830s and 1840s. He brought to his materialist research a

1 For a discussion of Marx’s attitude towards the ‘whole-ism’ of Hegel, see Cooper 1925, pp. 178 *et seq.*, and Hook 1936, pp. 62 *et seq.*

2 See above, pp. 51 *et seq.*

method of inquiry ranging from the most exact theoretical to the most direct practical knowledge. Unfortunately, that broadness and subtlety of Marx's thought has been less and less understood by its later exponents and opponents. Thus one group fell into the error that, according to the materialist theory, full material reality pertained only to economic phenomena, while all other social phenomena – the state, law and forms of consciousness possessed a lesser and lesser degree of 'reality' and ultimately were lost in pure 'ideology'.³ According to this first misconception, which we will henceforth call the 'economistic' tendency, it is only the economic struggle of the workers and the forms of social struggle springing directly from it which are recognised as directly proletarian and revolutionary action, whereas all other forms of struggle, and more especially 'political action', are regarded as an undesirable deviation from the real revolutionary aims. This economistic tendency was represented during Marx's lifetime, within the Working Men's International Association, by the adherents of Proudhon, Bakunin and other 'anti-authoritarian', 'anti-political', and 'anti-party' groups of the day. The violent battle waged by Marx and his followers against that heterodoxy led to the formal expulsion of the dissident groups from the 'International' and, finally, to the dissolution of the whole organisation. A direct descendant of this earliest form of an economistic and anti-political tendency is that second current of socialist thought which was represented by revolutionary syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism, and is actually responsible for that second great rallying of proletarian forces after the Russian Revolution of October 1917, which in the last seven years formed the real driving force of the revolutionary movement in Spain.⁴ The same revolutionary economistic tendency was represented, in a weaker form, within the Marxist movement itself.

We do not mean here that pseudo-economistic school of the German and other European Social Democratic parties and trade unions which, under the pretext of an 'economistic' principle, actually contested all forms of the workers' movement going beyond the mere 'economic' wage-struggle within the framework of bourgeois production and of the bourgeois state. On the basis of that pseudo-economistic principle, in the period before World War I they opposed, among other political activities of the workers, the Social Democratic campaign for the abolition of the property-qualification for the franchise in Prussia, the militant Liebknecht campaign against militarism, and the so-called '*révolution Dreyfusienne*' in France. They did so not out of any particular dislike of the very moderate political aims of those campaigns, but on the

3 For a more detailed discussion, see Korsch 1930.

4 See Korsch 1931c.

ground of the 'revolutionary' weapons (general strikes, street-demonstrations etc.) employed in those campaigns. Thus they did not oppose politics, but only the alliance of the workers with a radical bourgeois politics. They opposed on the same grounds, during the war, even the slightest attempts of the socialist workers in Germany to endanger the '*Burgfrieden*' [civil peace] thrust upon them in the interest of the ruling class.

While this group emphasised the 'materialist' importance of so-called 'economic action' only for the purpose of avoiding the revolutionary implications of an unrestricted political fight, the real importance of *economic* action in a social struggle for power was worked out, both against the pseudo-economism of the reformists and against the merely political radicalism of the party-leadership, by that small revolutionary group of the German Social Democratic Party which then centred on Rosa Luxemburg. That left-wing radicalism of the pre-war period developed during the war, and the ensuing phase of a direct revolutionary struggle, into the anti-parliamentary and anti-trade-union tendency of the left communists, who with several directly anarchistic and syndicalistic currents, played a considerable part in founding the new international organisation of the revolutionary working class, only to be later shoved into the background again by the increasing stabilisation of the old capitalist conditions. Following a vehement internal struggle, they were then finally expelled from the ranks of the communist Third International in a process begun by Lenin himself,⁵ and followed out to the bitter end by the '*queue de Lenin*' after his death.

As shown by this brief historical outline, the 'economistic tendency' of Marxism has played, on the whole, an important part in the revolutionary development of the European labour-movement, one comparable to the contribution which during the same period was made by the Industrial Workers of the World to the revolutionary development of the class-war in the U.S.A. This was recognised even by such an arch-political Marxist as Lenin when, on looking back over his own battles against the reformist and centrist deformation of revolutionary Marxism within German Social Democracy, he made the characteristic statement: 'Anarchism is the punishment for the sins of opportunism'.⁶ Even from a merely theoretical viewpoint, the connection of Marxist theory with the whole of the revolutionary proletarian class-war was preserved most efficiently by this 'economistic' group, although the original Marxian idea of a continuous struggle waged simultaneously on all fronts of social life was only kept alive by them in the 'abstract' and almost mystical form of a direct

⁵ See Lenin 1966 [1920].

⁶ See Lenin 1966 [1920].

identification of the objective economic development with the active revolutionary movement of the proletarian class.

In opposition to that first extreme stands another, and apparently much more comprehensive interpretation of revolutionary Marxism, which will hereafter be called the 'sociological tendency'. While the former school over-emphasised the importance of economics and more or less 'one-sidedly' reduced all social relations and developments to the unique 'reality' of material production, this other school of Marxian thought, in an equally one-sided manner, strove to supplant the basic importance of the production-relations for all political, legal, ideological phenomena occurring in a given socio-economic formation by a 'co-ordination' of the 'interactions' going to and fro between the various departments of social life and, ultimately, by the 'universal interdependence of all social spheres'. The materialist conception of history, then, no longer appears as the principle of a materialist science, investigating all facts of history from the point of view of their specific relation to *material production*. At best, it appears as a *general empirical and positivist method* which represents all facts in their own context and not in connection with any preconceived 'idea' at all. Thus the materialist *Critique of Political Economy* is no longer regarded as the foundation of the whole materialist investigation of society, but is transformed into a mere application of the general principles formulated by the materialist conception of history to one particular section of historical data. Besides the system of materialist economics, which has been represented in detailed form by Marx in *Capital*, there are, according to this second school, other partial systems which have not yet been fully carried out, but which are theoretically equally important parts of the whole of an all-comprehensive materialist system. There are, for example, the 'materialist' systems of politics, law, philosophy, culture, etc.⁷

Thus the economic materialism of Marx is disintegrated into a series of separate and co-ordinated 'sociological' sciences and thereby stripped of all definite historical content as well as of its distinct revolutionary character. From a radical attack upon the whole of the present-day capitalist mode of production it is transformed into a theoretical criticism of various aspects of the existing capitalist system as its economic organisation, its state, its educational system, its religion, art, science; a criticism which no longer necessarily leads towards revolutionary practice, but may just as well spend itself (and actually has already spent itself) in all kinds of reforms, which nowhere surpass the bounds of the existing bourgeois society and its state.⁸

7 For a more detailed discussion of this conception of Marxism see Korsch 1922, pp. 11 *et seq.*

8 See Korsch 1930, p. 83.

In order to restore the full theoretical and practical meaning of Marx's critical materialist principle, we begin with the statement that Marx's materialist principle does not need any such completion of its propositions as was offered by the theory of the so-called 'interactions'. When Marx and Engels formulated their materialist principle, they were fully aware of the fact that 'the same economic basis by innumerable different empirical circumstances, natural conditions, race differences, external historical influences, etc., may appear in an unlimited range of variations and graduations which can only be understood by an analysis of those given empirical circumstances'.⁹ In their investigation of the effects of the economic basis upon the superstructure, and of the social existence upon the consciousness, they encompassed, as a matter of course, the concrete forms in which, for example, the master- and servant-relation that naturally grows from the given mode of production, afterwards reacts upon the mode of production itself. Nor have they treated so-called 'intellectual production' as a simple reflex of material production, but rather they have represented, along with the existing historical forms of material production, 'the definite forms of the intellectual production corresponding to that material production and their mutual connection' as well.¹⁰

To gain a clearer insight into the manner in which Marx and Engels dealt with the links between the economic base and the superstructure of a given society, it is advisable to first study the manner in which they dealt with the same connection appearing within the economic structure itself. While they described the more general aspects of their materialist method in a half-philosophical form when historical materialism was still in the making,¹¹ they applied it in detail to the economic sphere in the scientific writings of their later period. It is here that they finally proved the superiority of their method of dealing with historical and social connections over that 'crude and conceptless manner' in which the bourgeois economists first arbitrarily tore asunder the existing links between production, distribution, circulation, consumption, and then, as an afterthought, reunited them as though they were really independent existences and had not been arbitrarily separated by theoretical reflection. They likewise opposed the insufficient form in which some philosophers, historians, and 'social belletrists' had treated those various fields as directly 'identical'.¹²

9 See Marx 1894, ii, p. 325.

10 See Marx 1905a, pp. 381 *et seq.*

11 See especially the extensive manuscripts of the *German Ideology* (Marx and Engels 1931–2b, pp. 1–672).

12 See Marx 1857, pp. 714 *et seq.*

The positive standpoint of historical materialism appears from a statement in which Marx summed up a thorough analysis of the various ways in which the different spheres of production, distribution, etc., can be said to condition each other:

The result is not that production, distribution, exchange, consumption, etc., are identical, but that they all are 'moments' of a totality, differences within a unity. *Production encroaches over the other 'moments'*. From it the whole process begins always anew... It follows that a definite form of production conditions definite forms of consumption, distribution, exchange, and the definite relations prevailing between those different 'moments' themselves. It is true that *production in its narrower definition is in turn determined by other 'moments'*; for instance, when the market expands, i.e., when the sphere of exchange enlarges, production grows in extent and subdivides within itself. Again production is affected by a change in the distribution, e.g., by a concentration of capital, by a change in the distribution of the population between town and country, etc. Finally, the needs of consumption determine production. There is an interaction between the various 'moments'. Such is the case with every organic unity.¹³

There was then, as against the manner in which the materialist principle had been applied by its initiators themselves, no need of that violent criticism which was at a later time directed by Friedrich Engels against the so-called 'one-sidedness' of the materialist principle.

This apparent 'self-criticism', which is embodied in a series of letters written by Engels in the 1890s to several younger adherents of Marxian theory,¹⁴ and which since then has been the main source of inspiration to all revisionist and bourgeois 'improvers' of Marx's revolutionary materialist principle, was in truth directed against a too dogmatic and abstract interpretation of historical

13 Marx 1857, p. 744.

14 See Engels 1903–5. For an English translation see Hook 1933, Appendix 1–3. The addressees were either people who, like Walter Borgius (Heinz Starkenburg), the student of Sombart, had never really endorsed the revolutionary implications of Marxism or, like Conrad Schmidt and Joseph Bloch, from apparently hopeful pupils of Marxism developed in a very short time to theoretical exponents of the revisionist wing of the German SPD. The historical function performed by these letters in the later development was foreshadowed by the fact that they were first published in 1903, amidst the famous debate on the 'revisionist' issue and, in fact, by the leading initiator of revisionism, Eduard Bernstein, himself.

materialism, which had then arisen in the writings of some of the younger of its most ardent supporters, for example in the *Lessing Legend* of Franz Mehring.¹⁵

There is no doubt that here, as in many other cases, Engels overstated his own and Marx's responsibility for the mistakes committed by their followers, when he declared that 'at first we all have neglected the formal aspect too much in favour of the contents'.¹⁶ He thus unintentionally supported that other school of the younger generation of Marxists who, under the cover of an attack on a too simple and 'vulgar' interpretation of Marx's materialism, really aimed at depriving the new doctrine of its revolutionary implications in order to make it acceptable to the bourgeoisie. It was precisely the struggle waged by that new Marxist school in the theoretical arena against Mehring's somewhat abstract presentation of Marx's materialism that opened the way for the new 'revisionist' tendency which was later to get the upper hand in the German Marxist party and trade-union movement and to lead it through the events of 1914 to 1918, and to its complete annihilation in 1933.

The assumed one-sidedness of the Marxian materialist conception of history exists in truth only in its abstract formulation. A theoretical statement of the connections between the economic, political, juridical, and intellectual structure of a given society unavoidably generalises, to a certain extent, the definite historical facts, from which it is derived and to which it is to be applied as a working principle by the scientific investigator and by the practical politician. They are indeed 'one-sided' as compared with the imaginary 'completeness' of the actual historical 'experience' or, for that matter, with the mere copying of reality which is the aim of a purely descriptive historical science, or with that 'concrete' reproduction of the real which may be achieved by an artistic representation. But that 'one-sidedness' is only another name for the generality of the scientific form. One might as well complain of the 'one-sidedness' of the physicists who subject the many different kinds of movement of inanimate and animate bodies to the law of gravity, without taking into account the 'modifications' brought about by secondary conditions. Just as with the laws of physics and technology, the apparent 'one-sidedness' of adhering to the 'laws' of social being, historical development and practical action as formulated by Marx in no way interferes with their practical and theoretical utility, nay more, that utility depends upon the 'one-sidedness' of their theoretical formulation.

The 'watering-down' process applied to the materialist scheme by the Marxist 'sociologists' therefore does not so much correct a faulty 'one-sidedness' as it impairs the scientific utility of the scheme itself. The doctrine

15 See Mehring 1892, pp. 540 *et seq.*

16 See the section of Engels's letter of 14 July 1893 in Hook 1993, Appendix 4.

of an indifferent play of 'actions' and 'interactions', or of the general 'interdependence of the social spheres' does not give us the slightest hint whether we should seek for the cause of a change occurring in any definite sector of social life – and thus also for the practical means of bringing about a change of the conditions existing in that sector – in the 'action' of the base on the superstructure or in the 'reaction' of the superstructure on the base. Nor is that want of definiteness supplanted by describing in unprecise terms the economic base as a 'primary', and the superstructure as a 'secondary' factor in historical development, or by referring to the economic conditions as the 'finally decisive moment'. No scientist can be content with the answer given by Engels to one of his correspondents, in which he said that, of all the conditions that form the given 'environment' for human actions, 'the economic conditions, however much they may be influenced themselves by conditions of a political and ideological order, are still in the last instance the decisive ones, forming the red thread which runs through the whole and alone leads to a real understanding'.¹⁷

All these phrases are but useless attempts to adhere to the 'dialectical' unity of substance, causality, and interaction in the Hegelian philosophical 'idea',¹⁸ as against an altogether changed mode of thought prevailing during the second half of the nineteenth century. When that first generation of Marxist theorists who had been through the school of Hegel, or that new generation of Marxist Hegelians who have arisen in Russia since the 1890s, were confronted with the question originating from quite a different general attitude and tradition of thought: 'In what sense are economic conditions *causal* (as sufficient reason? occasion? permanent condition, etc.?) to development?';¹⁹ their first reaction was a flood of protest against this new generation which had fallen so low that it no longer understood anything about that *ars magna* – dialectics. Engels said:

What all these gentlemen lack, is dialectics. They never see anything but here cause and there effect. That this is an empty abstraction, that such metaphysical polar opposites exist in the real world only in time of crisis, while the whole vast process moves in the form of interactions, although of very unequal forces among which the economic movement is by far the strongest, the most original, and the most decisive; that here nothing

17 See Engels 1975–2004d.

18 See Hegel 1830, §§ 142–59.

19 This was the first of the two questions addressed to Engels by Borgius (Starkenburg), the pupil of Sombart, and answered in Engels 1975–2004d.

is absolute and everything is relative, this they never begin to see; for them there has been no Hegel.²⁰

In all that semi-defence of Hegelian philosophy, they were nevertheless unable to save from Hegel's dialectical 'idea' more than that one meagre concept of 'interaction' which for Hegel had been closely connected with other concepts in the unity of a truly philosophical thought. Thus they succeeded only in adding to the abstract scientific form of causality another equally abstract scientific term, though not at all equally well-defined.²¹ This was not Hegel's philosophical concept, but merely that 'abstract' concept which had been contemptuously described by him as a mere 'refuge of reflection', and a 'poor category' which was no longer sufficient for the 'observation of nature and of the living organism', let alone for 'historical observation'. 'If we consider, e.g., the customs of the Spartans as the effect of their constitution and thus, contrarywise, the latter as the effect of their customs, no matter how correct such a statement otherwise may be, yet this view will never give us final satisfaction because in truth neither the constitution nor the customs of that people are grasped in it.'²²

Hence those 'interactions' which were supposed to preserve within the materialist scheme of Marxism the philosophical dialectics of Hegel are neither fish nor fowl nor good red herring, they are neither Hegelian philosophy, mystically vague yet full of matter, nor are they scientific terms precisely defined on the model of modern physics. As long as there is no sufficiently exact determination of the quantitative amount of action and reaction and of the precise conditions under which at a given time the one or the other will take place, the original statement of the materialist principle will be in no way clarified or improved by the further addition of so-called 'interactions' which are deemed to be at one and the same time coordinate with and subordinate to the original 'causes'. It is, on the contrary, deprived of all precise meaning by that utterly meaningless addition and thus transformed into a scientifically useless phrase.

20 See Engels 1975–2004b. A similar attitude was adopted as late as 1914 by Lenin when he put into his notebook the following *Aphorism*: 'One cannot fully understand Marx's *Capital*, and particularly the first chapter unless one has thoroughly studied and grasped the whole of Hegel's Logic. Thus it is that after half a century none of the Marxists have understood Marx!' See Lenin 1932 [1914–15], p. 99.

21 See Korsch 1930, p. 98, footnote 56.

22 See Hegel 1830, addition to § 156.

There is much more to be said about the peculiar quality of 'one-sidedness' attached to every great revolutionary epoch-making theory. Already the earlier form of the 'milieu-' theory advanced by bourgeois materialists and worked out more consistently by Robert Owen in his system of communism, owed its progressive importance to that very one-sidedness which of the manifold factors in historical development stressed just the one – and the one only – which until then had been entirely neglected. It loses all importance and even the semblance of originality and depth which gives a certain flashy appearance even to the caricatured form which it subsequently assumed in Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's belated indictment of the bourgeois revolution of the eighteenth century, if it is enlarged to the 'impartial' statement that man is, indeed, on the one hand a product of his conditions but on the other hand is, conversely, also the cause, or the 'producer', of his own conditions of existence. Even more superfluous and damaging are such 'supplements' to the historical and social materialism which has been developed from the 'milieu-' theory of early bourgeois materialism by Marx. His statement that 'property-relations are a juridical expression of existing production-relations' was transformed into a hackneyed commonplace by that modern German philosopher who concluded that, while on the one hand all law is to be considered as a mere form of the economic content, on the other hand economic phenomena must themselves be understood as merely 'mass-phenomena of legal relations' and thus both are to be interchangeably explained by each other.²³

Neither 'dialectical causality' in its philosophical definition, nor scientific 'causality' supplemented by 'interactions' is sufficient to determine the particular kinds of connections and relations existing between the economic 'base' and the juridical, political, and ideological 'superstructure' of a given socio-economic formation. Twentieth-century natural science is aware that the 'causal' relations occurring in a particular field of knowledge are not to be defined by a general concept or 'law' of causality, but must be determined specifically for each separate sphere.²⁴ The most important pioneer-work for the establishment of the same scientific principle in the sphere of the historical, social, and practical life of man was carried out in a philosophical form by the dialectics of Hegel and continued in a form, no longer philosophical and yet not entirely separated from Hegelian philosophy, by the materialist dialectics of Marx and Engels. The greater part of the results thus obtained do not consist in theoretical formulae, but in the specific application of the new principle to a number of questions which are either of fundamental practical importance

23 See Stammler 1896.

24 See Frank 1932.

or of an extremely subtle nature theoretically, and which had not, up to that time, been so much as touched by other investigators.²⁵ Even in the future the main task of scientific research in this field will not lie in the theoretical statement of any new formulae. To a great extent, the new results will come from a further application and testing of the principles implicit in Marx. Nor should we adhere too strictly to the words of Marx, who often used his terms only figuratively like, for instance, when he described the connections here considered as a relationship between the 'base' and 'superstructure', as a 'correspondence', etc. He presented the history of society at one time as a development of material productive powers and production-relations; at another time, as a history of the class-struggle. In the same broad way, he used the terms 'base' and 'superstructure,' applying them on one occasion to production-relations and such institutional phenomena as 'the state' and 'law' and, on another occasion, to the proletariat and the 'higher' strata of official society borne by that lower stratum and to be rent asunder by its upheaval.²⁶ There is no need to smooth over such apparent contradictions by a scholastic interpretation; to say, for example, that the organisation of the workers as a social class rests on the economic conditions of a given epoch but that, at the same time, the further historical development of the economic conditions is influenced by the class-struggle or, conversely, that the class-struggle develops under the stimulus of the productive forces but determines, within a given period, the existing economic conditions. By the former interpretation, the term of 'productive forces', by the latter, the concept of the 'class-struggle' is deprived of what was with Marx their main content. While these terms may be applied also to a mere description of a given historical state of society, they both attain their full and true significance only when applied to the genetic and revolutionary process by which each given form is transformed into a new and higher form of development.

As a matter of fact, the 'objective' description of the historical process as a development of the productive forces and the 'subjective' description of history

25 Here belong, for example, the questions dealing with the 'uneven development' of various spheres of social life, enumerated by Marx 1857, pp. 779 *et seq.*: the uneven development of material and artistic production (and of the various forms of art among themselves); the formation-process of the USA as compared with that of Europe; the uneven development of production-relations in the form of legal relations, etc. Here belong, furthermore, Lenin's law of the 'uneven development of capitalism in different countries'; the 'law of combined development' discussed by Trotsky in the first chapter of Trotsky 1957 [1932]; the law of the 'lag of the ideological development' as formulated by Eugen Varga and other Marxist writers, etc.

26 See Marx 1859 and Marx and Engels 1931-2a, p. 536.

as a class struggle are two independent forms of Marxian thought, equally original and not derived one from the other, which are worked out in an objective and simultaneously subjective materialist theory for the use of the investigator and which, at the same time, are meant to be applied by the proletarian class in its practical struggle. In either case, they are to be applied singly or together, according to the conditions of each given position, as an instrument for the most precise solution of the task in hand. The Marxian concepts (as among the later Marxists was most clearly realised by Georges Sorel and Lenin²⁷) are not new dogmatic fetters or pre-established points which must be gone through in a particular order in any 'materialist' investigation. They are an undogmatic guide for scientific research and revolutionary action. 'The proof of the pudding is in the eating'.

27 See Sorel 1920. For the earliest form of Lenin's criticism of 'objective' Marxism see Lenin 1932 [1895]; for his last years, the critical comments on Nikolai Sukhanov in Lenin 1966 [1923].

Conclusions

Marx's most important contributions to social research are that he:

- (1) related all phenomena of the life-process of society to economics;
- (2) conceived of economics itself as a social science;
- (3) defined all social phenomena historically and, indeed, as a revolutionary process which results from the development of the material forces of production and is realised by the struggle of the social classes.

These three general results of the Marxian science of society include as particularly important partial results:

- (4) an exact definition of the relation between economics and politics;
- (5) a reduction of all phenomena of the so-called 'mind' to definite forms of social consciousness pertaining to a definite historical epoch.

A detailed analysis of topics (4) and (5) is beyond the scope of this work.

To arrive at these results, Marx used a conceptual framework of his own, which he composed largely of philosophical elements reshaped from Hegel, but into which he absorbed as well all the new tendencies of the social knowledge of his time. In conscious opposition to Hegel's idealistic system, he called this new set of ideas his *materialism*. As against the various other materialist tenets, he described it more precisely by the addition of one or more such adjectives as historical, dialectical, critical, revolutionary, scientific, or proletarian.

Historical materialism is in its main tendency no longer a philosophical, but rather an empirical and scientific, method. It contains the premises for a real solution of the task which naturalist materialism and positivism had only apparently solved by eclectically applying highly specialised methods to the science of society, which, through centuries of study, the natural scientists had invented and meticulously adapted to their particular fields of investigation. Instead of transferring those scientific methods ready-made to the new sphere of society, Marx developed specific methods of social research, a *Novum Organum* which would permit the investigator in this newly opened field to penetrate the '*eidola*' standing in the way of unbiased research, and to determine 'with the precision of natural science' the real subject-matter

hidden behind an interminable confusion of 'ideological' disguises. This is the kernel of Marxian materialism.

Just as positivism could not move with freedom in the new field of social science, but remained tied to the specific concepts and methods of natural science, so Marx's historical materialism has not entirely freed itself from the spell of Hegel's philosophical method which in its day overshadowed all contemporary thought. This was not a materialist science of society which had developed on its own basis. Rather it was a materialist theory that had just emerged from idealist philosophy; a theory, therefore, which still showed in its contents, its methods, and its terminology the birth-marks of the old Hegelian philosophy from whose womb it sprang. All these imperfections were unavoidable under the circumstances from which Marx's materialist social research arose. With all these faults, it was far and away in advance of the other contemporary schools of social thought. It remains superior to all other social theories even now, in spite of the comparatively negligible progress which Marxists have, in the meantime, made in the formal development of the methods discovered by Marx and Engels. In a partly philosophical form, it has yet achieved a great number of important scientific results which hold good to this day.

Through Hegel, the new proletarian materialism linked itself to the sum of bourgeois social thought of the preceding historical period. It did so in the same antagonistic manner in which, during the same period, the historical movement of the bourgeoisie was continued by the new revolutionary movement of the proletarian class.

The philosophical idealism of Hegel corresponded to a more advanced stage of the material development of society than did the old bourgeois materialism. Hegel had embodied in his 'idealist' system a greater number of elements that could be used by the new historical materialism. He had also presented them in a more highly developed form than any of the eighteenth-century materialists had.¹ We have seen in a previous chapter how loosely Hegel's doctrine of 'civil society' was connected with the whole of his idealist system. Similarly, many other sections of Hegel's system can without difficulty be read materialistically instead of idealistically.

The fact that the new proletarian theory had incorporated in its methods and contents some important results of Hegel's philosophy did not in any way entail any obligation. Marx and Engels disrupted the elements which in Hegel

1 In the same sense, Lenin noted in 1914: 'Intelligent idealism is nearer intelligent materialism than is unintelligent materialism'. The 'unintelligent' materialism is the undeveloped early bourgeois materialism in contrast to the 'intelligent' idealism of Hegel and the intelligent materialism of Marx (see Lenin 1932 [1914–15], p. 212).

had been bound up in an idealist system. They welded together the parts which they found suitable for their purpose, with elements taken from other sources into the new whole of a materialist science.

In his time, Hegel had been an encyclopaedic thinker, a genius at annexation, a 'philosopher' hungry both for theory and reality, who brought within the scope of his system an incomparably greater field of experience than anyone since Aristotle. The mass of thought-material stored up in Hegel's philosophy is, nevertheless, only one of the tributaries which Marx and Engels directed into the broad stream of their new materialist doctrine of society. They took from all sides. From the bourgeois historians of the French Restoration they took the historical importance of class and class-struggle; from Ricardo, the conflicting economic interests of the social classes; from Proudhon, the description of the modern proletariat as the only revolutionary class; from the feudal and Christian assailants of the new political order born of the eighteenth-century revolution, the ruthless unmasking of the liberal ideas of the bourgeoisie, the piercing invective full of hatred. Their ingenuous dissection of the unsolvable antagonisms of the modern mode of production they took from the petty-bourgeois socialism of Sismondi; the accents of humanism perceptible even in their later materialist writings from earlier companions among the left Hegelians, especially from Feuerbach; the relevance of politics to the struggle of the working class from the contemporary labour-parties, French Social Democrats and English Chartists; the doctrine of the revolutionary dictatorship from the French Convention, and from Blanqui and his followers.² Finally, they took from St. Simon, Fourier, and Owen the ultimate goal of all socialism and communism, the complete overthrow of existing capitalist society, the abolition of all classes and class-antagonisms, and the transformation of the political state into a mere manager of production. These were the annexations

2 See the first article of the 'Statement of Principles' issued in 1850 by the *Société universelle des communistes révolutionnaires* (signed by the Blanquists, J. Vidil and Adam; by the communists, August Willich, Marx, and Engels, by the Chartist, George Julian Harney) which binds the associated groups, among them Marx's 'Bund der Kommunisten' [Communist League], to the Blanquist slogans of the 'permanent revolution' and the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. The documents dealing with this shortlived rally of the militant extremists of the defeated 1848 Revolution in a new international organisation, which was soon afterwards entirely abandoned by Marx and Engels, were first published in Russian by Riazanov (ed.) 1928 and in German in *Unter dem Banner des Marxismus* 1928. For a reflection on this secret deal with the Blanquists in Marx's published writings of the same period, see Marx's article in *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* 1850–3, reprinted in Engels 1975–2004e and the circular letter to its members from the Central Committee of the reconstituted Communist League, June 1850 (printed as an Appendix to Marx 1852).

they had made from the beginning. During the further development of their theory, they made others, adopting, for instance, at one stroke the results of that first age of discovery in research of ancient societies, which began early in the nineteenth century and concluded with Morgan.

Just as Marx's new science is, in its form, above all a strictly empirical investigation and critique of society, so in its content it is, above all, economic research. Marx, who had begun his materialist investigation of society as a critic of religion, of philosophy, of politics, and of law, later concentrated more and more upon economics. He did not thereby narrow the realm of his all-comprehensive social science. The critique of political economy as embodied in *Capital* deals with the state and the law, and with such 'higher', i.e., still more ideological, social phenomena as philosophy, art, and religion only in occasional remarks which light up, in sudden flashes, extensive fields of social activity; yet it remains a materialist investigation into *the whole of existing bourgeois society*. It proceeds methodically from the view that when we have examined the bourgeois mode of production and its historical changes we have thereby examined everything of the structure and development of present-day society which can be the subject-matter of a strictly empirical science. In this sense, Marx's materialist social science is not sociology, but economics.

For the other branches of the so-called social science there remains then, according to the materialist principle of Marxism, a scale of phenomena which become in proportion to their increasing distance from the economic foundation, less and less accessible to a strictly scientific investigation, less and less 'material', more and more 'ideological', and which, finally, cannot be treated in a theoretical manner at all, but only critically and in the closest connection with the practical tasks of the revolutionary class-war.

The last foundation of the new Marxian science is neither Hegel nor Ricardo, neither bourgeois philosophy nor bourgeois economy. Marx's materialist investigation into the movement of modern bourgeois society received its decisive impulses from the reality of historical development, that is, from the great bourgeois revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and from the historical movement of the nineteenth century, the revolutionary rise of the proletarian class. A genetic presentation would show with what precision and, at the same time, with what weight every new phase of the real history of society, every new experience of the proletarian class-struggle is reflected in each new turn of the theoretical development of Marx's doctrine. This close connection between the real history of society and Marx's materialist science does not rest upon a mere passive reflection of reality in theory. What Marx and Engels gained in theoretical views and concepts from their study of the real history of the proletarian movement, they gave back immediately in the

form of direct participation in the class-conflicts of their time and of powerful impulses which historically continue to enlarge and stimulate the proletarian movement up to the present day.

To be instrumental in the historical movement of our time is the great purpose of Marx. In his earliest youth he formulated this revolutionary principle which shapes all his later theoretical work, when he concluded his violent criticism of Feuerbach's politically insufficient materialist philosophy with a last mighty hammer-stroke: 'Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world differently; the important thing, however, is *to change it*'.

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