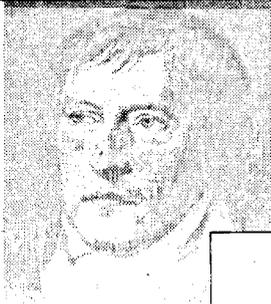


# Enlightenment Rationalism AND THE Origins of Marxism

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# Introduction

As V.I. Lenin, the leader of the October 1917 Revolution in Russia, wrote in his March 1913 article "The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism":

"The genius of Marx consists precisely in his having furnished answers to questions already raised by the foremost minds of mankind. His doctrine emerged as the direct and immediate *continuation* of the teachings of the greatest representatives of philosophy, political economy and socialism.

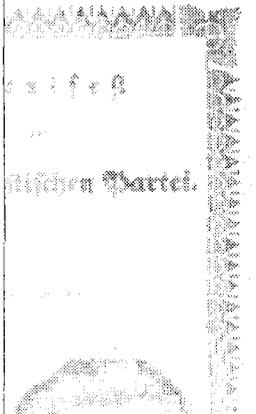
"The Marxist doctrine is omnipotent because it is true. It is comprehensive and harmonious, and provides men with an integral world outlook irreconcilable with any form of superstition, reaction, or defence of bourgeois oppression. It is the legitimate successor to the best that man produced in the nineteenth century, as represented by German philosophy, English political economy and French socialism."

In this pamphlet we reproduce presentations given by Spartacist League/U.S. Central Committee member Joseph Seymour on the origins of Marxism in the French Enlightenment and in left Hegelianism. Also included are a presentation on "150 Years of the Communist Manifesto" by SL/U.S. Central Committee member George Foster and a presentation by a Spartacus Youth Club member on the struggle to assert the Marxist materialist worldview as against a revival of religious obscurantism, spiritualism and other forms of idealism. All of these presentations were originally published in *Workers Vanguard*, newspaper of the SL/U.S.

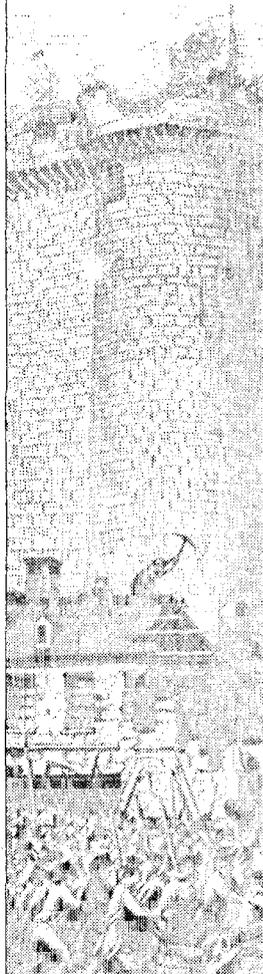
Having succeeded—aided and abetted by the betrayals of the Stalinists—in destroying the gains of the Russian Revolution that remained in the former Soviet Union, the imperialist rulers want the world to believe that there is no need for new October Revolutions. That is the meaning of the bourgeois triumphalism over the "death of communism." This ideological offensive against Marxism has been extended back to attacking the rational humanism of the Enlightenment. Thus, to justify their increasingly brutal class rule, the bourgeoisie repudiates the most progressive aspects of its own origins.

Enlightenment rationalism was the highest intellectual expression of the struggle of the nascent, and then-revolutionary capitalist class to destroy the feudal barriers to capitalist development. Similarly, Marxism—scientific socialism—is the expression of the historic interests of the proletariat, the only revolutionary class in modern capitalism, to break the fetters of the outmoded and decaying capitalist system and replace it with an international, planned socialist economy. In the retrograde climate of post-Soviet reaction, the struggle to reassert the validity of the program and purpose of revolutionary Marxism is crucial to the fight for new October Revolutions. It is in that spirit that we publish this pamphlet.

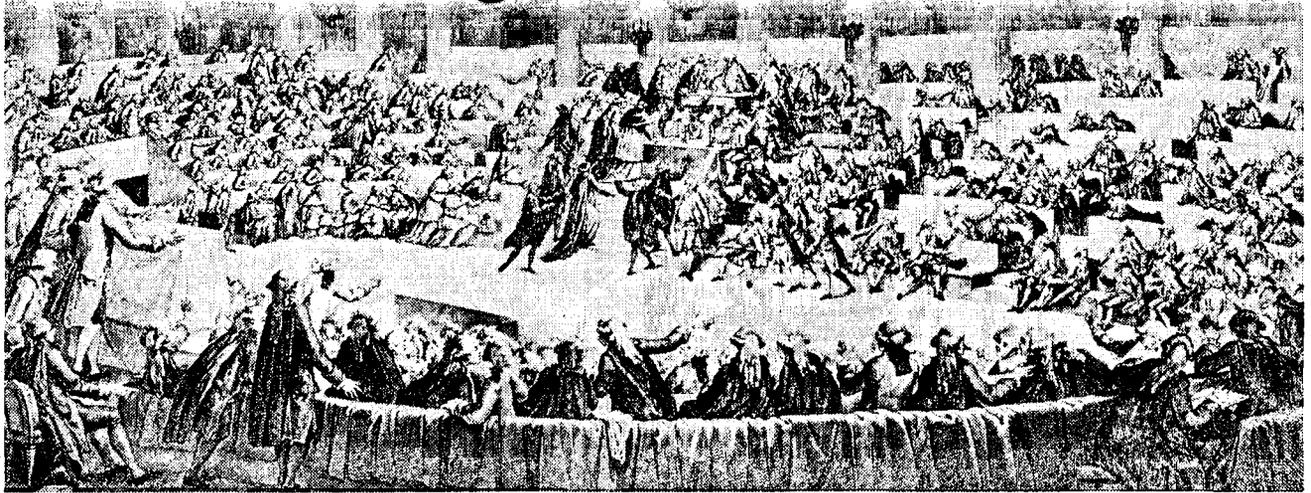
—16 March 1998



1789



# Enlightenment Rationalism and the Origins of Marxism



Musée Carnavalet

Meeting of the Constituent Assembly established during the French Revolution which swept away the old feudal order.

The great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy was raised as a nobleman on a country estate. To stave off the boredom of this rustic existence, the young Tolstoy and his brother devised a series of physical and mental challenges. One of these was to stand in a corner and *not* think of a white bear. It can't be done. Under those circumstances, you have to think of a white bear.

In studying and discussing Marxism today, we face a similar kind of mental impossibility. We cannot *not* think of the recent major developments in the world which have radically altered and affected popular conceptions about communism. Capitalist counterrevolution has triumphed in the former Soviet Union and East Europe. Capitalism is making deep inroads in what used to be called "Red China." Stalinism, which for decades was popularly identified with communism, has disappeared as a significant political current in the world. The overwhelming majority of ex-Stalinists, whether or not they still call themselves communists, have become social democrats or in some cases, as in Russia, bourgeois nationalists.

We now operate in an ideological climate in which the "death of communism," that is, of the program and principles of Marxism and Leninism, is widely accepted. We've seen the recent emergence of significant leftist tendencies which do not claim the Marxist tradition in any sense—anarchists and Greens in Europe, nationalist-populists like the Mexican Zapatistas in Third World countries.

What passes for the left in this country these days is even more remote from scientific socialism or scientific anything. It's all too common to encounter a college or high-school student at a defense rally for Mumia Abu-Jamal or at a labor rally, such as that for the Watsonville farm workers last month, who talks about the importance of spirituality, who

## PART ONE

argues that modern industrial technology threatens the future of the human race and all higher life forms on earth.

We thus find ourselves defending the very idea of historical progress.

The bourgeois ideological offensive around the theme of the "death of communism" has been extended back, and logically so, to the rational humanism of the 18th-century Enlightenment. The most prominent liberal intellectual who was centrally involved in the capitalist counterrevolution in East Europe was the Czech Vaclav Havel. He is now president of the Czech Republic. Addressing a prestigious international economic conference a few years ago, Havel stated:

"The modern era has been dominated by the culminating belief, expressed in different forms, that the world—and Being as such—is a wholly knowable system governed by a finite number of universal laws that man can grasp and rationally direct for his own benefit. This era, beginning in the Renaissance and developing from the Enlightenment to socialism... was characterized by rapid advances in rational, cognitive thinking....

"It was an era of ideologies, doctrines, interpretations of reality, an era in which the goal was to find a universal theory of the world, and thus a universal key to unlock its prosperity....

"The fall of Communism can be regarded as a sign that modern thought—based on the premise that the world is objectively knowable, and that the knowledge so obtained can be absolutely generalized—has come to a final crisis. This era has created the first global, or planetary, technical civilization, but it has reached the limit of its potential, the point beyond which the abyss begins. The end of Communism is a serious warning to all mankind. It is a signal that the era of arrogant, absolutist reason is drawing to a close."

— *New York Times*, 1 March 1992

Havel is quite right that socialism, including the scientific socialism of Marx and Engels, is at the intellectual level a



V. Deni and M. Cherevnykh

logical culmination of the rational humanism of the Enlightenment. For example, we refer to the Marxist or Leninist theory of the state, that the state is an instrument by which the propertied classes hold down the exploited classes. Three-quarters of a century before the *Communist Manifesto* and a century and a half before Lenin's *State and Revolution*, Holbach, a leading Enlightenment thinker—they were called *philosophes* in France—wrote:

“By a vice common to all governments, the most numerous part of nations is usually the most neglected; it would seem that societies were formed only for the Princes, the Rich, and the Powerful; you would swear that the people enter into association only to spare those who are already the most fortunate the trouble of working.”

— quoted in Harry C. Payne, *The Philosophes and the People* (1976)

We consider ourselves internationalists. That is, we reject and oppose the concept of national interest and instead fight for the interests of the working people throughout the world and ultimately for the future of humanity. The underlying attitude that was later called internationalism originated in the Enlightenment. The very first of the *philosophes*, Pierre Bayle, set the tone: “I am a citizen of the world, I am not in the service of the emperor or the king of France, I am in the service of the truth.” Similarly, the radical German poet and dramatist Friedrich Schiller declared in the late 18th century: “I write as a citizen of the world who serves no prince. I lost my fatherland at an early age and exchanged it for the wide world.”

In preparing for this educational I've read a fair amount of Enlightenment literature, most of it for the first time. And the thought which kept recurring to me was being transported back to the old neighborhoods in which I lived as a child. You're aware that the world has changed a lot and that you've changed a lot. Yet there is a deep feeling of familiarity, a sense that the changes you've undergone have been organic.

So I approach this educational, and the next one on the Hegelian left, like a trip in a time machine back to the world before Marx, then on to the world in which he was born and

**Revolution vs. counterrevolution: 1920 Soviet poster shows Lenin sweeping away kings, capitalists and priests; Russian Orthodox priest on Yeltsin's barricades, August 1991.**

Der Spiegel



raised, which conditioned his thoughts and which he changed so radically and profoundly that it is difficult for us to recapture the previous eras.

### Marx and “Natural Rights” Leftism

As soon as Marx entered the political stage in the 1840s, it was recognized by his fellow leftists that he had something *new* and important to say. While still a young man in his twenties, Marx became the principal figure in the German communist movement. He and Engels also became influential figures in the left wing of the British Chartist movement, the first mass working-class party in history. The *Communist Manifesto* was first published in English in 1850 on the front page of the *Red Republican*, the newspaper of the Chartist left.

Seasoned revolutionaries much older than Marx, veterans of numerous insurrections and other mass struggles as well as sundry adventures, recognized Marx's superiority in the field of social and political theory. What accounted for the immediate and profound impact of Marx's ideas on the communists, socialists and other radical leftists of his time? An answer to that question was given by Moses Hess, a leading German communist, in a letter written to a colleague:

“You can prepare yourself to meet the greatest philosopher now living, perhaps the only one.... Dr. Marx (for that is the name of my idol) is still quite a young man, about 24 years of age at the most, and he is about to deal the finishing stroke to medieval religion and politics. He combines the most profound philosophical seriousness with a cutting wit. Imagine for yourself Rousseau, Voltaire, Holbach, Lessing, Heine and Hegel, united in one person—and I say *united*, not just thrown together—then you've got Dr. Marx.”

— quoted in Werner Blumenberg, *Karl Marx* (1972)

For leftists in the late 20th century, however, this appreciation of Marx raises more questions than it answers. Exactly *how* did Marx combine the ideas of Voltaire, Rousseau and Hegel, thinkers who were not only very different from one another but contradictory in their basic premises and views? And why was a new theoretical doctrine which synthesized

the different tendencies of the Enlightenment with the philosophy of Hegel considered to be of prime importance for the communist movement and radical left of that time?

The terms "left" and "right," like much else in the modern world, originated in the French Revolution. They referred to the seating arrangements in the Convention, the revolutionary parliament which governed the country after the overthrow of the monarchy. Those groups and factions which sat farther to the left were further to the left. Makes sense. Nonetheless it is logical and useful to extend the terms "left" and "right" back to earlier historical eras. Thus one can speak of left-wing groups such as the Levellers and the Diggers in the English Revolution and Civil War of the mid-1600s.

For roughly two centuries, from the English Revolution until the Revolutions of 1848, the difference between right and left at the theoretical level centered on what was considered by both sides to be the original, fundamental and immutable nature of man. The right maintained that man was inherently evil and in the absence of a strong repressive state, backed by the church, society would degenerate into murderous anarchy, a war of all against all. The left maintained that man was naturally good but had been deprived by certain social institutions, above all religion and property. Thus Rousseau, the dominant intellectual influence on the left before Marx, stated: "Man is naturally good and that it is by institutions alone that men become evil."

Polemics between left and right in the age of the Enlightenment centered on demonstrating that proposition on the one side or, on the other, that the inherent evil in man was only held in check by social institutions. For example, right-wing ideologists pointed to the fact that large numbers of people attended public executions, often involving horrible

torture and mutilation, as proof of the innate cruelty of men, especially the men of the common people. The left, represented by Rousseau and Diderot, responded that the common people much preferred to attend fairs and plays, to engage in games and sports than to watch their fellow men being killed and tortured.

The right maintained that only fear of eternal punishment in hell prevented men from murdering, raping and pillaging at will if they thought they could escape punishment in this life. The left countered that it was religious fanaticism that was the greatest cause of mass murder throughout history. Voltaire, who was a quite competent historian by the standards of the day, estimated that since the time of Jesus Christ almost 10 million Christians had been massacred by other Christians in the name of Christianity. Small wonder he declared: "Every sensible man, every honorable man, must hold the Christian sect in horror."

Incidentally, there's a nice anecdote about Voltaire as he lay dying. A Catholic priest thought that at last the world-famous heretic would repent of his sins and embrace the true faith. He came up to Voltaire's deathbed and said, "Will you finally renounce the devil?" Voltaire looked up at him and replied: "Father, now is not the time to make new enemies."

## The Development of Scientific Socialism

The principal Enlightenment work advocating and expounding a system of communism was *The Code of Nature* by Morrelly, who asserted:

"While natural law is fully operative, crime is unthinkable. If man is free of the tyranny of private property, it is quite impossible for him to be a wrongdoer, a thief, a murderer, or a marauder. Abolish private property and its attendant evils and men will not need to arm themselves for attack or defense. There will be an end to savage passions and savage deeds."

This was the basic theoretical premise underlying the communist and socialist movements prior to Marx and was expressed in different ways by Robert Owen and his followers, the Saint-Simonians, the Fourierists and the like.

The doctrine of natural law and natural right by its very nature, so to speak, posits that all men of all social classes, as members of the human species, have the same basic values and common interests. The task of the communist movement, so conceived, was to enlighten men as to their true nature and interests. The principal organization of German communism in the 1840s was the League of the Just, which changed its name to the Communist League around the time Marx joined it in 1847. Its main slogan was "All men are brothers."

Thus the early communist and socialist movements were marked by a fundamental contradiction between their actual social character and their theoretical doctrines. These movements were *in fact* movements of the artisan proletariat and in England also of the early industrial proletariat. They were *in fact* movements of class struggle against the new bourgeois order. But they espoused a trans-class doctrine, inherited from the Enlightenment, of universal moral regeneration through a return to natural law and natural right.

Marx resolved this contradiction. When he joined the Communist League he objected to its slogan, "All men are brothers," saying there were some men whose brother he was not and had no desire to be. Instead he proposed the slogan: "Workers of all countries unite."



National Portrait Gallery, London

**Beheading of Charles I in 1649 during the English Revolution led by Oliver Cromwell.**



Jean Huber



Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris

**Left: Engraving depicts Enlightenment *philosophes*, including Voltaire, Condorcet and Diderot. Right: Dedication to the contributors to Diderot's monumental *Encyclopaedia*, featuring Diderot and d'Alembert.**

Fundamentally, Marx changed the theoretical basis of communism from natural right to the historical development of society, centrally the interaction between the development of productive forces and the class struggle. Society is not governed by natural law but is the self-creation of mankind. Thus society has its own laws which cannot be reduced to biology and instinct, such as the instinct of self-preservation. All societies which have ever existed, from old Stone Age hunter-gatherers to the Europe of early industrial capitalism, are compatible with the biological make-up and instinctual needs of *homo sapiens*. Otherwise they couldn't exist. One is reminded here of Gore Vidal's response to religious bigots who claimed that sex between males was "unnatural." If it were unnatural, he said, you couldn't do it.

The social nature of man—and that is what people mean

when they speak of human nature—*changes* over the course of history and is, moreover, class differentiated. An infant born into a family of bankers and an infant born into a family of weavers have similar biological constitutions and needs. But they soon acquire different social natures appropriate to their antagonistic class roles. The five-year-old son or daughter of a banker thinks and acts differently from the five-year-old son or daughter of a weaver.

Existing societies can neither be justified nor condemned by appealing to universal natural rights which supposedly stand higher and are more powerful than existing social institutions and attitudes. As Marx later wrote: "Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development which this determines" ("Critique of the Gotha Programme" [1875]).

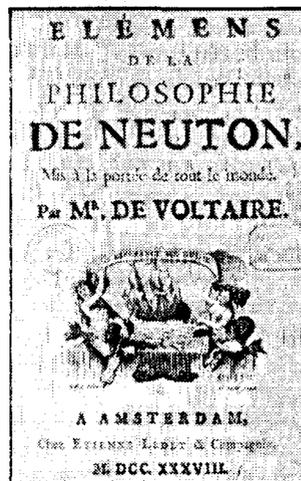
To understand the complex relationship of Marxism to the rational humanism of the Enlightenment one has first to consider the Enlightenment, itself a complex movement with different and contradictory tendencies and its own course of historical development.

### The Enlightenment and the Revolution in Science

The Enlightenment was an expression at the intellectual level of the three basic factors which transformed Europe from a feudal social order ruled by a landed nobility to a capitalist, though not yet industrial, economy in which the dominant class was the mercantile bourgeoisie. First and foremost in this transformation was the rapid and continual development of science and technology. Secondly, there was the global extension of European power and influence through colonial conquest and commerce. The third major factor was the bourgeois revolution at the political level—the overthrow of the absolutist monarchies, the last political form of the rule of feudal nobility—and their replacement by governments representing ascendant mercantile capitalism. The Enlightenment was the link at the intellectual level



James Macardel



**Seventeenth-century English scientist and mathematician Isaac Newton, whose ideas were introduced in France by Voltaire.**

between the English bourgeois-democratic revolution in the mid-17th century and the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century.

The Enlightenment was in its original and central axis a defense of science against religious obscurantism and religious-sanctioned dogmatism. In the late Middle Ages the writings of the ancient Greek philosophers, above all Aristotle, on the natural world acquired a status almost on a par with the writings of the early church fathers. And while some of Aristotle's ideas about the natural world were right, many were wrong, such as the notion that the sun revolved around the earth. Thus scientific progress required a critical attitude toward the so-called wisdom of the ancients.

The birthplace of modern science was northern Italy during the Renaissance of the 16th and early 17th centuries. The cities of this region—Florence, Milan, Genoa, Venice—were the first major European polities to be ruled by the mercantile bourgeoisie. It was, as they say, no accident that the age in which the Florentine banking house of the Medici dominated the financial life of Europe was also the age of Galileo and Leonardo da Vinci.

However, the scientific revolution which began in Renaissance Italy was crushed under the weight of the Catholic Counterreformation. Thus the scientist and radical humanist philosopher Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake in Rome as a heretic. Galileo, the greatest physicist of the day, was threatened with torture by the Inquisition, unless he recanted his view that the earth revolved around the sun rather than the reverse, which he did. At the social level, the Counterreformation represented a counter-offensive by the feudal nobility of Spain, France and Italy against the bourgeois-dominated cities of northern Italy, a region which then fell into political, economic and cultural decline.

The center of capitalist economic dynamism and the new bourgeois culture then passed to the Protestant countries of northern Europe, especially England. The grandfather of the Enlightenment was not a dissident and persecuted intellectual but a one-time lord chancellor of England, Sir Francis Bacon. Writing in the early 17th century, Bacon maintained that observation and experiment were the only means to acquire knowledge of the natural world:

"Man, being the servant and interpreter of Nature, can do and understand so much and so much only as he has observed in fact or in thought of the course of nature: beyond this he neither knows anything nor can do anything.

"Neither the naked hand nor the understanding left to itself can effect much. It is by instruments and helps that the work is done, which are as much wanted for the understanding as for the hand. And as the instruments of the hand either give motion or guide it, so the instruments of the mind supply either suggestions for the understanding or cautions.

"Human knowledge and human power meet in one, for where the cause is not known the effect cannot be produced. Nature to be commanded must be obeyed....

"It is idle to expect any great advancement in science from the superinducing and engrafting of new things upon old."

This is an attack on Aristotelian dogmatism.

"We must begin anew from the very foundations, unless we would revolve forever in a circle with mean and contemptible progress."

— *Novum Organum* (1620), excerpted in Isaac Kramnick, ed., *The Portable Enlightenment Reader* (1995)

Bacon's work was one of the first and certainly the most influential to project the possibility of *unlimited* progress

in scientific discovery and technological innovation, and by implication in the development of society in general. It is precisely here that the term "progress" became a central concept of European intellectual life.

At the same time it is important to emphasize that the Enlightenment represented a *transition* to a thoroughgoing materialism; it was not an expression of it. The most influential Enlightenment figures rather sought to reconcile scientific empiricism and a belief in god. Thus the great English physicist, Isaac Newton, used his immense intellectual authority to prop up the authority of the Anglican church, the



Cabasson

Galileo faces the Inquisition, forced on pain of torture to recant his heretical view that the earth revolved around the sun.

state church of England. He argued "that the Motions which the Planets now have could not spring from any natural Cause alone, but were impressed by an intelligent Agent."

## Religion and the Enlightenment

While Newton sought to reconcile science with an established Christian church, the mainstream of the Enlightenment developed a new quasi-religious doctrine which was later called deism. The role of god was limited to creating the world and setting the laws of nature, including human nature. The standard analogy for the deist conception of god is that of a "divine watchmaker." For a watch to exist it has to be made by a skilled craftsman. But once a watch is made, its mechanisms are permanently fixed. The hands cannot suddenly revolve in the opposite direction. Similarly, the laws of gravity cannot suddenly be reversed and bodies repel rather than attract one another. Scientific investigation was thus presented and justified as a kind of natural theology, the study of god's work and god's laws in nature.

All of the big names of the Enlightenment—Newton, John Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau, Thomas Jefferson—not only rejected atheism but were positively hostile to it. The



Library of Decorative Arts, Paris

**Eighteenth-century English explorers in Tahiti. Left-wing Enlightenment thinkers like Diderot and Condorcet opposed European colonialism.**

explanation for this lies not so much on the plane of philosophy as on the plane of politics. A belief in the existence of a god-given natural order was regarded as necessary to uphold the authority of the existing social order. If the common people ceased to believe in god, it was argued, they would feel free to rearrange social and economic relations at the expense of the propertied classes. A modern historian, Margaret Jacob, explains quite well why the founding fathers of the Enlightenment, Newton and Locke, were so insistent that the laws of nature must also be the laws of god:

“In general the adherents of the Newtonian Enlightenment can be identified as proponents of the new science and natural philosophy who insisted on the existence of a supernatural being separate from nature, and who also held the concomitant social assumption that the deity imposes order in nature and society, his function resembling that of a strong, but not arbitrary, monarch.... Without the postulate of a deity—however remote—it seemed that there could be no order in nature or society, and that inevitably, therefore, strong yet enlightened monarchy offered the only viable form of political organisation in the various nation-states of Europe.”

— *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (1981)

However, the attempt of Enlightenment thinkers to reconcile science and religion was a failure in social and historical terms. Obviously, deism did not replace Christianity as the religion of the masses. It was the doctrine of an intellectual elite and is today known only through historical scholarship. Deism with its concept of a watchmaker god could not fulfill the *social function* of religion which Marx later described as “the opiate of the people.”

Religious opiate works at two levels. First is the promise of an afterlife. No matter how unhappy, miserable and tragic one’s life, one could hope for eternal happiness through piety, faith and obedience to god’s laws. Religion also offers the prospect of divine, that is, supernatural, intervention on behalf of the devout this side of the grave. A religion without a heaven and hell, a god that is indifferent to the individual fate of believers is not a religion many people will choose to practice or a god many people will choose to worship. As my old Jewish grandmother would have put it: “Who needs it?”

French peasants and English yeoman farmers in the age of Voltaire and Locke went to church, prayed to god in the belief that this would bring them good harvests, that when their children became sick, they would get well and not die. If a French peasant or English farmer came to understand that better harvests required improved agricultural techniques, that curing their sick children required medical science, they would regard belief in god as superfluous.

The attraction of religion lies precisely in its *supernatural* character. The concept of a natural religion, as it was sometimes called, is socially irrelevant. In historical retrospect, the deism of the Enlightenment served as a transition from traditional Christianity to atheism and thoroughgoing materialism. In this sense Vaclav Havel is quite right: the effective message of the Enlightenment was the power of the scientific method to unlock universal prosperity. And here I want to emphasize universal.

### **On Non-European Peoples and Cultures**

It was standard for adherents of the Enlightenment to declare themselves citizens of the world. But to regard oneself as a citizen of the world, one has to know the world or at least know about the world. The global extension of European power and influence through colonial conquest and trade confronted educated men with a wide diversity of non-Christian cultures from primitive, pre-class peoples such as North American Indians to ancient civilizations like Persia and China.

Those thinkers who were critical or hostile toward Christian orthodoxy, the privileges of the feudal nobility and political and economic inequality found a powerful reinforcement for their views in non-European cultures. Thus the North American Indian tribes were manifestly egalitarian and democratic in comparison with Europe. All men carried arms and went to war on an equal footing. Chiefs were chosen on the basis of personal capacity, not hereditary right. There was no aristocracy or class of serfs among the Huron Indians of French Canada in the age of Voltaire and Rousseau.

Enlightenment thought was also reinforced by certain aspects of advanced non-European civilizations. For exam-

ple, many different religions were practiced in China and were tolerated by that state. The first major European account of China, Marco Polo's *Travels*, published in the 14th century, emphasized the accepted diversity of religion there precisely because it was unknown and unthinkable in the states of Christian Europe.

A major component of Enlightenment literature—by Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot and others—was a savagely critical view of European society as seen through the eyes of non-Europeans. Montaigne, a 16th-century forerunner of the Enlightenment, wrote a famous essay on cannibals. In it he recounts how a cannibal in Brazil was captured and taken to France, where he learned the French language and became acquainted with French society. When someone asked him what he thought of France, he replied that there he had seen many admirable and wonderful things, but one thing he didn't understand. He sees rich people bloated with fat, jeweled rings on their pudgy fingers, and at the same time he sees starving beggars in the streets. How come the starving poor people didn't kill and eat the fat rich people? A very primitive conception of communism, but not a bad impulse.

Diderot wrote a tale about Tahiti in order to attack the sexual repressiveness of Christian, especially Catholic, Europe. He has a Tahitian elder denounce French Catholic colonialism for perverting the healthy sexuality of his people:

"But a little while ago, the young Tahitian girl blissfully abandoned herself to the embraces of a Tahitian youth and awaited impatiently the day when her mother, authorized to do so by her having reached the age of puberty, would remove her veil and uncover her breasts. She was proud of her ability to excite men's desires, to attract the amorous looks of strangers, of her own relatives, of her own brothers. In our presence, without shame, in the center of a throng of innocent Tahitians who danced and played the flute, she accepted the caresses of the young man whom her young heart and the secret promptings of her senses had marked out for her. The notion of crime and the fear of disease have come among us only with your coming. Now our enjoyments, formerly so sweet, are attended with guilt and terror. That man in black [that is, a Catholic priest], who stands near to you and listens to me, has spoken to our young men, and I know not what he has said to our young girls, but our youths are hesitant and our girls blush. Creep away into the dark forest, if you wish, with the perverse companion of your pleasures, but allow the good, simple Tahitians to reproduce themselves without shame under the open sky and in broad daylight."

— "Supplement to Bougainville's 'Voyage'," (1772) in Denis Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew and Other Works* (1964)

As you may surmise, Diderot was big into sex. In fact, he wrote a pornographic novel which is one of his few works available in English translation and still in print. You can buy it at Barnes & Noble.

It's become common to attribute to Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire and Rousseau the concept of the "noble savage." This is a distortion of Enlightenment thought, usually hostile in intent. Neither the term "noble savage" nor the underlying concept was employed by major Enlightenment thinkers. They did not idealize primitive peoples nor consider them in general morally superior to contemporary Europeans. Thus in the very work in which Diderot exalts the sexual permissiveness of Tahitians he condemns the barbaric practices of other primitive peoples, such as female genital mutilation and human sacrifice. More fundamentally, Enlightenment thought regarded advances in science and technology as the key to human progress. Thus it did not

and could not hold up technologically backward cultures, however attractive in many ways, as a social ideal.

The best representatives of the Enlightenment—Diderot, Condorcet, Tom Paine—were categorically opposed to European colonial subjugation or other forms of domination over non-European peoples, such as the enslavement of black Africans. Diderot has his Tahitian elder voice a passionate indictment of French colonial conquest in the name of natural rights:

"You are neither a god nor a devil—by what right, then, do you enslave people?... You are not slaves; you would suffer death rather than be enslaved, yet you want to make slaves of us! Do you believe, then, that the Tahitian does not know how to die in defense of his liberty? This Tahitian, whom you want to treat as a chattel, as a dumb animal—this Tahitian is your brother. You are both children of Nature—what right do you have over him that he does not have over you?"

The concept of natural law and natural right logically leads to the idea of the equality of all peoples, that there are no superior and inferior peoples, no progressive and reactionary peoples; no people who should dominate or who



Library of Congress

**Black Africans aboard a slave ship bound for the American colonies.**

should be dominated. The real world, however, is *not* governed by ideas and logic but by class interests and class conflict. Thus important figures in the Enlightenment such as the Englishman David Hume, a Tory and political rightist, and Thomas Jefferson held that blacks were inherently inferior to whites. Jefferson wrote of blacks:

"Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous."

— *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), excerpted in *The Enlightenment Reader*

Jefferson had to believe something like this to justify his role not merely as an individual slaveowner but as a political



Radio Times Hulton

Oliver Cromwell confronts Parliament in 1653, during short-lived English republic following execution of King Charles I.

leader of a class of slaveowners. Jefferson took over from Enlightenment thinkers such as Montesquieu, who had opposed slavery, only those doctrines compatible with the interests of the American Southern slaveowners and he rejected those doctrines which were not. The case of Jefferson underscores the basic fallacy of Enlightenment rationalism: the belief that reason and respect for scientific knowledge can transcend class interest.

While right-wing elements in the Enlightenment like Hume and Jefferson pointed to the superiority of European civilization in the field of science and technology to justify the subjugation of non-European peoples, the left wing of the Enlightenment not only opposed colonialism but held that Europeans had a responsibility to share their scientific and technical knowledge *in an entirely benevolent manner* with other peoples. Thus Condorcet wrote:

"Survey the history of our settlements and commercial undertakings in Africa or in Asia, and you will see how our trade monopolies, our treachery, our murderous contempt for men of another color or creed, the insolence of our usurpations, the intrigues or the exaggerated proselytic zeal of our priests, have destroyed the respect and goodwill that the superiority of our knowledge and the benefits of our commerce at first won us in the eyes of the inhabitants. But doubtless the moment approaches when, no longer presenting ourselves as always either tyrants or corrupters, we shall become for them the beneficent instruments of their freedom."

— *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Human Mind* (1793-94), excerpted in *The Enlightenment Reader*

It is no accident that this vision of universal prosperity and enlightenment was written during and under the impact of the French Revolution.

## The English Revolution

As I noted previously, the Enlightenment was an intellectual link between the English and French bourgeois-democratic revolutions. In the mid-17th century, England underwent a full-blooded revolution—the king was executed, the reactionaries driven into exile and a short-lived republic established under Oliver Cromwell. Toward the end of the 17th century, England had a semi-revolution. The existing king, who appeared to be moving toward absolutism and its

ideological handmaiden, the Roman Catholic church, was deposed under threat of civil war and replaced by a Protestant king. When the dust settled around 1700, England had a bourgeois political order which proved quite stable. The main locus of political power shifted over time from the king's court to a parliament elected by wealthy property owners. Two bourgeois parties emerged, the Whigs and Tories, which would subsequently alternate holding governmental power.

The Enlightenment originated in England at this time—its principal figures being Isaac Newton and John Locke—as an ideological justification for the new bourgeois order. It can be characterized as liberal in that it was self-defined as occupying a middle ground between right and left. The right was represented by the absolutist monarchies of continental Europe—backed by the Roman Catholic church—which were seen as a powerful threat to the new English bourgeois state.

At the same time, the early English Enlightenment saw potential enemies on the left as well. During the English Revolution and Civil War, radical democratic tendencies had emerged among the working class which appeared threatening to the propertied classes, even to the most radical elements of the bourgeoisie represented by Cromwell. There's a good book on this subject, *Left-Wing Democracy in the English Civil War*, by David Petegorsky. So English bourgeois intellectuals in the post-revolutionary era of Newton and Locke were acutely aware of and afraid of social leveling from below. Locke was the first major thinker to declare that property was a natural right.

The basic principle of the early English Enlightenment was the promotion of advances in science and technology. This entailed a wide tolerance of intellectual discourse. Closely related was religious tolerance, especially since the English propertied classes—landlords, merchants, bankers—belonged to several different Christian sects and more than a few were privately nonbelievers. Voltaire, who visited England in the 1720s, reported in his usual wise-ass style:

"Enter the London stock exchange, that place more respectable than many a court. You will see the deputies of all nations gathered there for the service of mankind. There the Jew, the

Mohammedan, and the Christian deal with each other as if they were of the same religion, and give the name of infidel only to those who go bankrupt.”

— quoted in Peter Gay, *Voltaire's Politics: The Poet as Realist* (1959)

The second phase of the Enlightenment took place when a current of French intellectuals, the most important being Montesquieu and the young Voltaire, sought to import, so to speak, the institutions and ideological climate of England into their own country. After his visit to England, Voltaire wrote a book, *Lettres Philosophiques*, presenting a highly favorable picture of England with its constitutional monarchy, religious toleration and public respect for scientists and philosophers. Here is what happened to Voltaire and his book:

“The government issued a *lettre de cachet* for Voltaire's arrest...arrested the printer, and confiscated copies of the book. And on 10 June 1734, on orders of the parlement of Paris, the common hangman solemnly lacerated and burned the *Lettres philosophiques* in the courtyard of the *Palais de justice* as ‘scandalous, contrary to religion, good morals, and the respect due to authority’.”

— *Voltaire's Politics: The Poet as Realist*

This incident reveals why the Enlightenment in France had quite a different nature and radical political effect than in England. Newton and Locke were the intellectual representatives of an *already completed* bourgeois-democratic revolution. Voltaire, Montesquieu and Diderot were confronting a social and political order still dominated by the feudal nobility. The French nobility successfully resisted paying any significant level of taxation right down to the storming of the Bastille in 1789.

The England of Newton and Locke was possible only because there had previously been an England of Cromwell based on the revolutionary mobilization of the lower classes against monarchical absolutism and the old feudal order. Of course, the French *philosophes* did not understand this. They wanted to eat the cake of the bourgeois-democratic revolution without having to bake it. They wanted an intellectual climate which promoted scientific knowledge and technological innovation. They wanted religious toleration. They wanted a prosperous, dynamic economy. They wanted

a more humane and just legal system. They wanted a government responsive to the interests of the productive classes.

But they didn't get any of these things. The efforts of the *philosophes* to reform France along English lines was continually frustrated and so resulted in a radicalization of this movement. Contrary to the usual pattern, the old Voltaire was more radical than the young Voltaire. The older he got, the more strongly he denounced the existing social and political order in France and the rest of continental Europe.

Thus the direction of motion of the Enlightenment in its central country, France, was steadily and strongly *to the left* at both the philosophical and political levels. Newton and Locke sought to reconcile scientific empiricism with Protestant Christianity. Half a century later, French *philosophes* such as Holbach openly advocated atheism and a thoroughgoing materialism. Locke declared property to be a natural right. Half a century later, Rousseau argued that property was a great perversion of natural right and the root of all evil in the modern world. In this way, Enlightenment thought helped prepare the ground for the French Revolution and the birth of the communist movement.

### The Challenge of Thomas Hobbes

The great British naturalist, Charles Darwin, observed that you always learn more from the exception than from the norm. The norm in the age of the Enlightenment was for philosophical and political radicalism to go together. All countries in Europe, even the most liberal (England and Holland) had state churches. So anyone who advocated radical changes at the political level necessarily had to attack the authority and legitimacy of the state churches, if not the Christian religion in general. Atheism was conventionally associated with republicanism and social leveling. The notion of “godless communism,” if not yet the term, was current in the 17th and 18th centuries.

There was, however, a significant exception: Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes was a materialist, effectively an atheist and an advocate of royal absolutism of the most absolute sort. It is difficult to convey to you how utterly aberrant and



Brutal slave trade was key to development of English capitalism and thriving ports such as Liverpool (above). The most progressive Enlightenment thinkers opposed slavery.

contradictory Hobbes was in the framework of the late 17th century. It's hard to think of a present-day analogy, even hypothetically. The best I can come up with is to imagine a big-time corporate operator like Donald Trump or Michael Milken who says he's a Marxist and what he's doing is making capitalism more efficient to ease the transition to communism. Hobbes represented that magnitude of contradiction in his time.

As a young man Hobbes served as assistant to Francis Bacon, the leading materialist philosopher of the era. But the shaping, indeed a traumatic, experience of his life was the English Revolution and Civil War. This was not like the American Civil War in which there were two well-organized sides, each with recognized governments. The English Civil War involved several political factions, including the Scottish nobility, each with its own armed force. And on occasion they shifted sides so that yesterday's ally became today's enemy. Many people saw England beset by murderous anarchy, with men fighting only to acquire wealth and power without regard for any professed religious and political principles.

The condition of revolutionary turmoil also allowed the emergence of left-wing groups based on the working classes, which were well represented for a time in Cromwell's New Model Army, the main revolutionary force. There was a famous debate in the New Model Army about allowing the lower classes to vote for parliament. Cromwell's son-in-law, Henry Ireton, spoke against this, arguing:

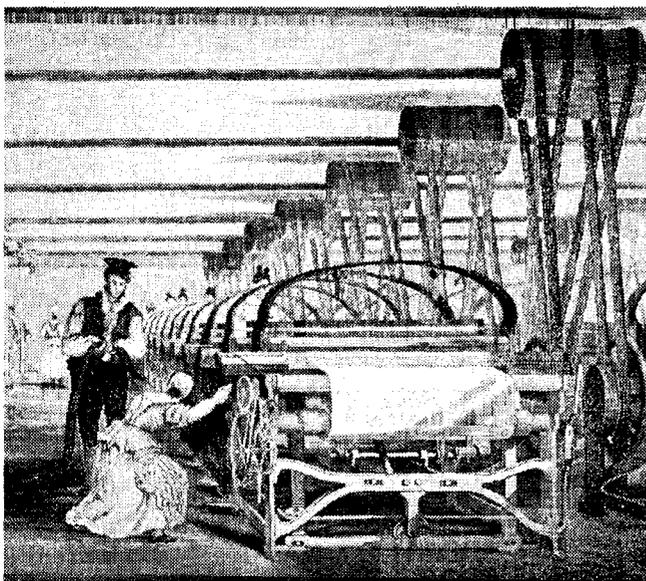
"All the main thing I speak for, is because I would have an eye to property...."

"You may have such men chosen or at least the major part of them (as have no local or permanent interest) why may not these men vote against all property?"

— quoted in Petegorsky, *Left-Wing Democracy in the English Civil War* (1940)

Hence the propertied classes felt themselves threatened by what would later be called "Red Republicanism."

Hobbes, who was a member of a well-to-do capitalist family—they manufactured and merchandised gloves—shared



T. Allom

Richard Arkwright's textile factories utilizing the power loom exemplified the technological dynamism of early English capitalism.

the fears of his class in this regard. His political doctrines represented a bourgeois, not an aristocratic, reaction against the threat of social revolution from below. He maintained that men were by nature murderously selfish with an unlimited appetite for wealth and power. Here is his famous description of the so-called "state of nature": "No arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (*Leviathan* [1651]). To prevent a reversion to the state of nature so described, Hobbes advocated a government exercising total and undivided political power which would suppress all political factionalism lest this engender civil war.

Hobbes constituted a far more formidable intellectual challenge to Enlightenment political thought than did the adherents of the divine right of kings, since from thoroughly materialist premises he reached the same reactionary conclusion. The Enlightenment had to confront the proposition that the innate selfishness of man was an insuperable barrier to a benevolent society with a wide latitude of individual freedom. There were three basic answers to Hobbes among Enlightenment thinkers: that given by Holbach, that given by Adam Smith and that given by Rousseau.

### Social Morality Versus Egoism

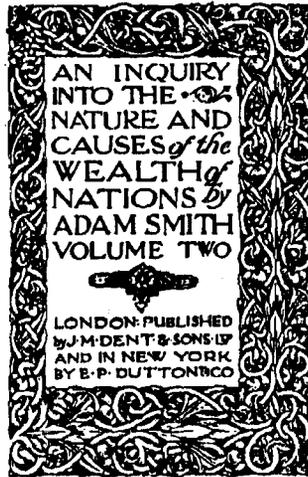
Holbach argued that man is a social animal; he does not and cannot exist in individual isolation. Hence men have a vital interest in behaving so as to gain the respect and approval of other members of society and avoid their disrespect and hostility: "Does not everyone see, that he has the greatest interest in meriting the approbation, esteem, and benevolence of the beings who surround him, and in abstaining from everything, by which he may incur the censure, contempt, and resentment of society?" (*Common Sense, or Natural Ideas Opposed to the Supernatural* [1772], excerpted in Isaac Kramnick, ed., *The Portable Enlightenment Reader* [1995]).

Holbach's reasoning, however, contains an obvious fallacy which deprived it of much influence both at the time and subsequently. True, man does live in society, but society also divides men into different classes, castes, nations, religions, etc. Men are thus surrounded, to use Holbach's phrase, by members of their own class, nation, religion, etc. A French merchant, for example, may have an interest in gaining the esteem of his fellow merchants but he does so by going partners with them in the slave trade. He has no interest in gaining the esteem or avoiding the resentment of the black Africans he is enslaving. Quite the contrary.

The fundamental problem facing Enlightenment political thought was: Why should a man respect the natural rights of *all* other men even when it is not in his individual material interests to do so? This question was posed in the clearest and sharpest way in one of the most interesting and unusual works of the Enlightenment, *Rameau's Nephew* by Diderot. It takes the form of a fictitious dialogue between Rousseau and a cynical, amoral con man. The latter, Rameau's nephew, more than holds his own in the argument; nothing Diderot says fazes him. He sums up his personal philosophy thus: "I say hurrah for wisdom and philosophy—the wisdom of Solomon: to drink good wines, gorge on choice food, tumble pretty women, sleep in downy beds—outside of that, all is vanity." To the extent that Rameau's nephew



Der Spiegel



**Adam Smith maintained that a competitive, capitalist market economy would maximize labor productivity and the “wealth of nations.”**

feels the need to justify his behavior in terms of general philosophical principles, which isn't very much, these principles are strictly Hobbesian: “In Nature all species live off one another; in society all classes do the same.”

The genius and intellectual honesty of Diderot was such that he recognized the fundamental contradiction of Enlightenment rationalism though he could not resolve it. A materialist understanding of the world does not necessarily lead to a benevolent attitude toward humanity. In the language of the day, reason and virtue do not always go together. Diderot once wrote to his friend and lover, Sophie Volland: “To do good, to know the true—that's what distinguishes one man from another. The rest is nothing.” But this was a personal philosophy. He was intelligent and honest enough to understand that most men did not share it and he could not convince them to do so.

### **Adam Smith and Classic Bourgeois Liberalism**

A far more influential and historically significant response to Hobbes was that of Adam Smith. Smith agreed with Hobbes that men were naturally selfish and acquisitive, which did not exclude altruistic feelings, either. But he argued that individual selfishness could be channeled to serve the interests of society as a whole through a certain set of institutions.

These institutions were those which formed a competitive capitalist market economy. Within this system men could acquire wealth only by producing more efficiently than their competitors, thereby increasing the total goods available and benefiting all members of society, even the poorest. Take, for example, Sir Richard Arkwright, the leading cotton textile magnate of the day and a pioneer of the factory system. Arkwright, who came from a working-class background, may have been motivated solely by a desire to acquire wealth for himself and his heirs, perhaps for social respectability. But to achieve this goal, Arkwright invented and employed machinery which radically reduced the labor time needed to produce cotton textiles, thereby leading to a reduction in the cost of clothing for everyone.

Adam Smith was the primary theorist of classic bourgeois liberalism. This doctrine held that inequalities in income and

wealth and social conflict over the division of wealth were the necessary cost, so to speak, for a technologically dynamic economy combined with a high level of individual freedom.

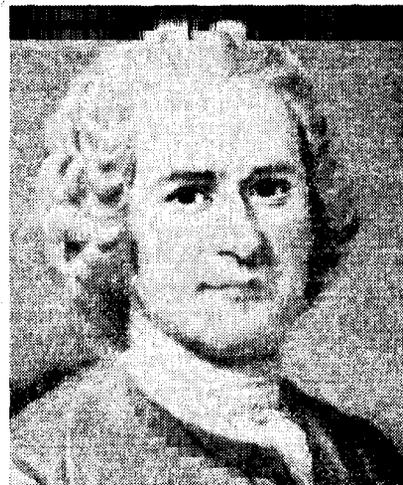
Today, especially in the U.S., Adam Smith is identified with the “free market” right wing. However, in the late 18th century and for many decades after, classic bourgeois liberalism had its progressive aspects and even revolutionary implications. Personal wealth was justified insofar as one contributed to production, to the “wealth of nations” in Smith's term. This might apply to British manufacturers, merchants or even enterprising landlords. But it did not apply to the landed nobility of France and other continental countries, living off rent from the peasantry, who did nothing to acquire their wealth except to be born.

Adam Smith was also an early and influential opponent of slavery in Britain's American colonies. He opposed slavery on economic as well as moral grounds. He argued that slaves had no incentive to work efficiently since unlike free wage laborers they could not, through hard work and frugality, ever rise above their servile condition. At the same time, slaveowners had far less incentive to improve productivity than capitalists employing wage labor in a competitive environment. The idea that a society based on free labor was superior—economically as well as morally—to one based on slave labor would become the main ideological doctrine of the North in the American Civil War. There's a good book on this subject: *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* by Eric Foner.

### **Rousseau: Primary Theorist of the Left**

Getting back to the Enlightenment. If Adam Smith was the primary theorist of classic bourgeois liberalism, Rousseau was the primary theorist of the left as it emerged from the French Revolution a decade after Rousseau's death. Rousseau argued that Hobbes falsely attributed to human nature the vices engendered by society: “All these philosophers talking ceaselessly of need, greed, oppression, desire and pride have transported into the state of nature concepts formed in society” (*A Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* [1755]).

Rousseau maintained that man was originally *pre-social*, existing as an individual hunter-gatherer with only casual and transitory contact with his fellow men. The idea of a pre-social man, while having no basis in anthropological fact, nonetheless had profoundly revolutionary implications,



Maurice Quentin de La Tour

**Jean-Jacques Rousseau**

even though Rousseau himself did not draw out these implications. All attempts to justify the existing social and political order on the basis of tradition were thrown out the window, since the oldest tradition of all was that of pre-social individualism. Thus all social institutions—property, organized religion, monarchy, feudalism—could be justified in Rousseauian terms only if they contributed to the well-being and happiness of the people. And the people always had the right to tear up and renegotiate the “social contract,” as Rousseau stated in his work of that name:

“When it happens that a people sets up a hereditary Government, either monarchical in one family or hereditary in one class of citizens, it is in no sense entering into a binding undertaking, but only giving a provisional form to the administration, until it decides to order things differently.”

In 1789, the French people decided, so to speak, to order things differently.

Rousseau also held that while man was originally pre-social, he was not thereby indifferent to his fellow men. In addition to the instinct for self-preservation, there exists an instinctual compassion for the suffering of others: “I believe I can discern two principles antecedent to reason: the first gives us an ardent interest in our own wellbeing and our own preservation, the second inspires in us a natural aversion to seeing any other sentient being perish or suffer, especially if it is one of our kind.”

How then did natural man—free, independent and compassionate—turn into civilized man, driven by greed, envy and ambition and subject to oppression at the hands of his fellow men? For Rousseau, the basis of society and the root of all evil in the modern world was the institution of property:

“The first man who, having enclosed a piece of land, thought of saying ‘This is mine’ and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. How many crimes, wars, murders; how much misery and horror the

human race would have been spared if someone had pulled up the stakes and filled in the ditch and cried out to his fellow men: ‘Beware of listening to this impostor. You are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to everyone and that the earth itself belongs to no one!’”

Man, of course, can never return to a pre-social “state of nature.” Thus Rousseau’s ideal—and it was an *ideal*, not a program—was a democratic and egalitarian society in which there would be “no citizen so rich as to be able to buy another, none so poor as to be forced to sell himself.” He envisioned small, self-governing communities of independent farmers and artisans.

From a Marxist standpoint, two fundamental criticisms can be leveled against Rousseau, leaving aside his myth of a pre-social state of nature. The first of these criticisms was also made by other Enlightenment thinkers, especially Voltaire. This was Rousseau’s economic primitivism, his aversion to technological progress and to what would now be called a rising standard of living.

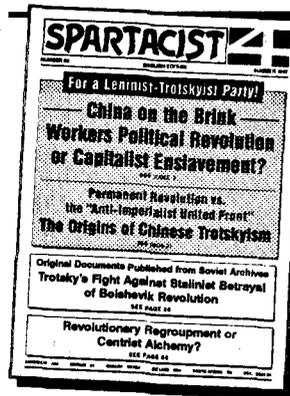
Rousseau and Adam Smith shared the same basic premise but drew opposite conclusions from it. Both maintained that a technologically dynamic economy necessarily generated widespread inequalities. The men who invented and financed new machines or improved agricultural techniques would exploit these advantages to acquire riches for themselves. New items of consumption could not be made available to everyone but would be enjoyed only by the wealthy. Hence Rousseau’s democratic republic had to be based on Spartan austerity and a static technology. The actual society which came closest to his ideal was that of the mountaineer peasant villages of his native Switzerland, an economically backward region even by the standards of mid-18th century Europe.

At the beginning of this talk, I quoted a contemporary of Marx to the effect that he had united, among other thinkers, Rousseau and Voltaire. The main way in which Marx did

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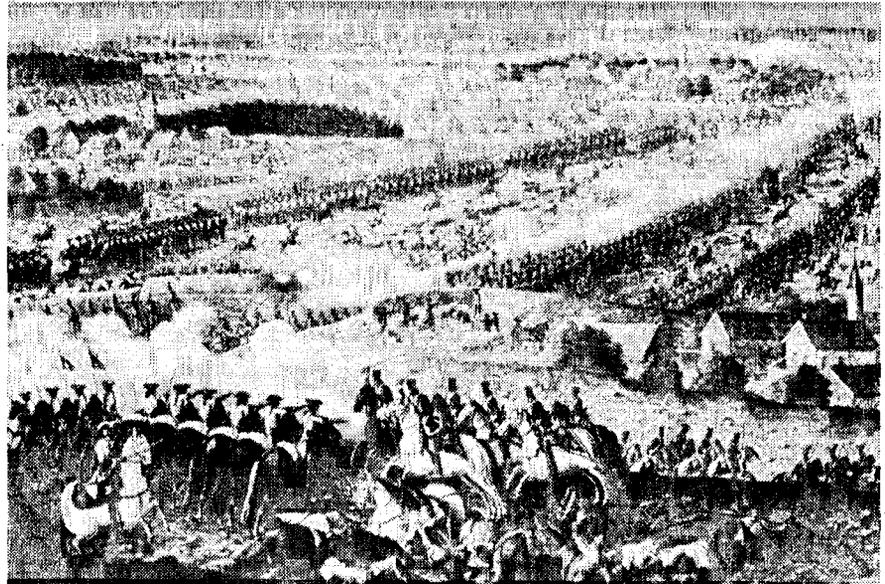


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**Voltaire (far left), depicted dining with Prussia's Frederick the Great, later denounced his strident militarism. Above: Prussian army battling Austria during Seven Years War.**

this was to combine Rousseau's commitment to a democratic and egalitarian society with Voltaire's understanding that advances in science and technology are key to social progress.

The second fundamental criticism of Rousseau from a Marxist standpoint is one which is applicable to Enlightenment social thought in general. Rousseau maintained that it was the institution of property which caused men to become selfish, envious, ambitious. At the same time, the desire for wealth and power drives men to acquire, and maintain property. How then is it possible to break out of this vicious circle?

As Plekhanov explained in *The Development of the Monist View of History*, Enlightenment social thought was in a sense circular. Prevailing opinions or attitudes are said to be determined by existing institutions. And existing institutions were sustained by prevailing opinions. How then did Enlightenment thinkers expect social and political progress to come about, how did they expect to bridge the gulf between what existed in the present and what they wanted in the future?

### The Political Evolution of the Enlightenment

To understand how the Enlightenment thinkers expected the social and political ideals they advanced to be implemented, we have to turn from political theory, values and ultimate goals to the question of political means—politics in the everyday, conventional sense of the term. First, it is necessary to understand that we are considering an era in which the organization of the lower classes against the existing social and political order was *not* possible. This was true even in relatively liberal England. In France and the rest of Europe under the *anciens régimes* even spontaneous protests such as bread riots were savagely suppressed, with the leaders of such actions being routinely tortured and executed.

Even intellectual dissidence was a risky business. Both Voltaire and Diderot spent some time in prison for their writings, even though they had friends in high places. Some printers of Enlightenment literature, who did not have

friends in high places, were "sent to the galleys," which was considered to be a living death.

We take it for granted that left-wing intellectuals can involve themselves in mass struggles—through trade unions, parties, protest movements of various kinds—against the ruling class. But this possibility—left-wing politics as we know it—was created by the French Revolution and did not exist before then. And what is not possible is often not conceivable either.

But even if the *philosophes* could have organized a political movement of artisans and peasants under the *ancien régime*, they would not have done so. A central premise of Enlightenment rationalism was that support for humane social policies—religious tolerance, abolition of judicial torture and the death penalty, opposition to slavery in the colonies—was based on a scientific understanding of nature. Since the common people were deprived of such an understanding, they could not be expected to support enlightened social policies either. Holbach expressed mainstream Enlightenment opinion in this regard when he wrote: "The people reads no more than it reasons; it has neither the leisure nor the ability to do so."

Of course, Holbach did not regard the people as inherently incapable of reason. Quite the contrary. He was an early advocate of free, universal public education. He saw the people as the beneficiary of enlightened social policies but not the agency for bringing these policies about. In general, the *philosophes* and their cothinkers elsewhere in Europe shared the conventional upper-class view that the mass of the people were superstitious and under the thumb of the local Catholic priest or Protestant pastor. The movement was marked by a strain of intellectual elitism which would only be eradicated by the French Revolution.

The political strategy of the Enlightenment was thus one of promoting reform from above. This is often described as advocacy of "enlightened despotism," a doctrine particularly ascribed to Voltaire. I believe this is a distortion or, at any rate, a gross oversimplification. Enlightenment thinkers did

not believe in despotism as a positive good, as something to be desired. Rather they believed that there was no alternative to monarchical absolutism in the Europe of their day. Voltaire had always been an admirer of the British system of a constitutional monarchy with a strong parliament. But he saw no possibility of replicating these institutions in France.

Furthermore, Voltaire and his fellow *philosophes* became increasingly disillusioned with "enlightened despotism," if one wants to call it that. There was one major figure of this era who did believe in "enlightened despotism," with the emphasis on the despotism rather than the enlightened. This was Frederick II of Prussia, known to history as Frederick the Great. He fancied himself a patron of the *philosophes* and something of a *philosophe* himself. When Voltaire got in trouble with the French authorities around 1750, Frederick invited him to take refuge in Prussia.

But Voltaire quickly became disillusioned with this so-called "enlightened despotism." Apart from religious tolerance, conditions in Prussia were every bit as reactionary and repressive as in other European states, if not more so. All economic and social life was organized for one purpose: military conquest. Peasants conscripted into the Prussian army were subjected to savage discipline, sometimes beaten to death. Frederick was more than willing to kill tens of thousands of people—civilians as well as soldiers—to acquire ever more territory to rule over. Voltaire quipped that while the rest of Europe consisted of states with armies, Prussia was an army with a state. He soon broke with Frederick and left Prussia, explaining in a letter to a French colleague: "There are absolutely no resources here. There are a prodigious number of bayonets and very few books. The king has greatly embellished Sparta, but he has transported Athens only into his study" (quoted in Peter Gay, *Voltaire's Politics: The Poet as Realist* [1959]).

### The Revolutionary Culmination

Even more important in shaping the political evolution of the Enlightenment were developments in France itself. In

the 1770s, a *philosophe* of the second rank, Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, was appointed comptroller general of France, equivalent to finance minister. He immediately proposed to eliminate the tax exemptions for the nobility and clergy. This provoked a powerful aristocratic reaction and Turgot was dismissed by the king.

The effect on his fellow *philosophes*—the "party of humanity" as they sometimes called themselves—was traumatic. Voltaire, then in his last years, wrote to his colleagues: "The dismissal of this great man crushes me. I have been in a perpetual depression since we were deprived of the protector of the people." In a less personally anguished way, Holbach also expressed the rather pessimistic attitude of Enlightenment thinkers in the decades immediately before the French Revolution: "The perfecting of politics can only be the slow fruit of the experience of centuries" (quoted in Charles Frankel, *The Faith of Reason* [1948]).

However, the party of humanity had built better than they knew. Enlightened social policies came to France and much of the rest of Europe not through reform from above, as they hoped and expected, but through revolution from below—as they certainly did not expect.

Over the decades, the ideas of the Enlightenment percolated from the literary salons down to the urban lower classes. A key social link between the *philosophes* and the people was provided by skilled artisans, who necessarily were literate, had some knowledge of the sciences and were interested in the latest technological developments. The main collective work of the Enlightenment, the *Encyclopaedia*, edited by Diderot, involved close collaboration between the radical intellectuals and skilled craftsmen. Diderot and his colleagues went around to the foremost artisans and craftsmen in France, interviewed them, had them fill out questionnaires, and on that basis wrote the articles in the *Encyclopedia* about what were then called the mechanical arts. Diderot explained: "This is a work that cannot be completed except by a society of men of letters and skilled workmen, each working separately on his own part, but all

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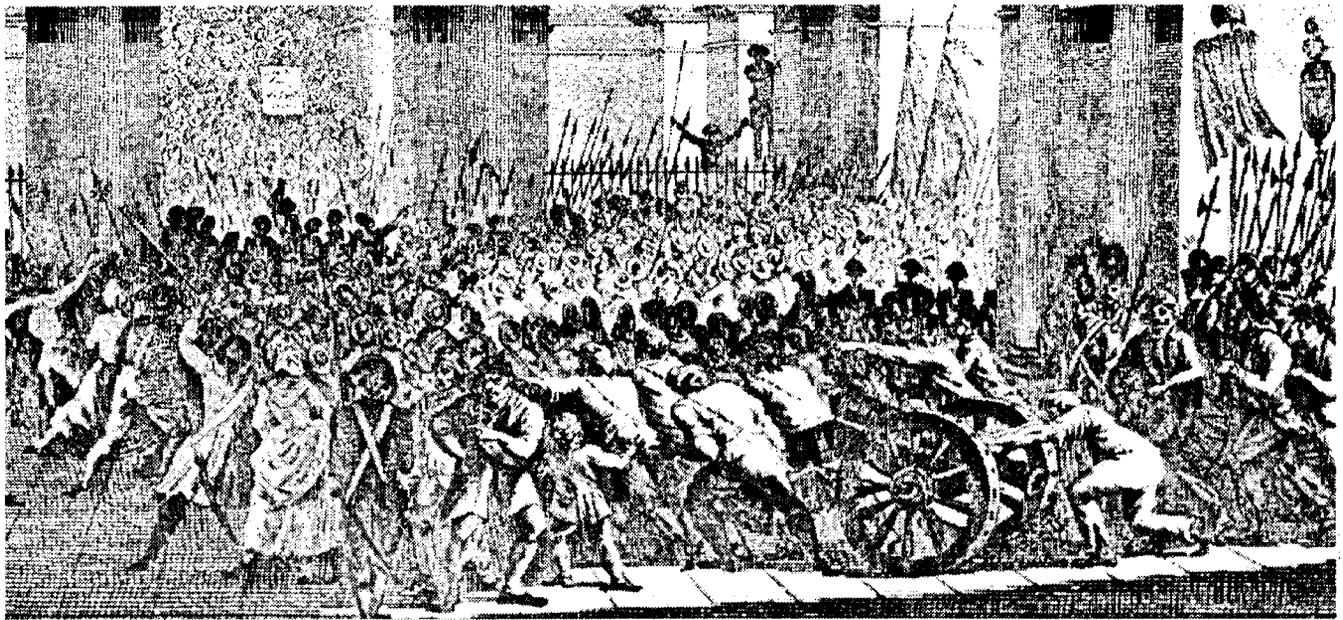
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Parisian lower classes, known as *sans-culottes*, invade king's palace, 1792. Revolutionary masses raised banner of "liberty, equality, fraternity."

bound together solely by their zeal for the best interests of the human race."

The *Encyclopedia* and other Enlightenment literature disseminated subversive political ideas as well as technical knowledge. A few years before the storming of the Bastille, a French writer, Restif de la Bretonne—he was a liberal, not a reactionary—complained, "In recent times the working people of the capital have become impossible to deal with, because they have read in our books truths too potent for them" (quoted in Norman Hampson, *The Enlightenment* [1968]).

Most of the radical leaders of the revolution were from the bourgeoisie; typically they were lawyers. A significant exception was Lazare Hoche, a leading general in the revolutionary army, best known for suppressing the Catholic-royalist peasant uprising in the Vendée. As a youth in his teens, Hoche had been a stable boy in the royal palace at Versailles. He later recalled that in his spare time, when not cleaning the stables and grooming the horses, he had read Voltaire and the other *philosophes*. When a stableboy in the king's stables is reading Voltaire and Diderot, you know that the *ancien régime* is in deep horse manure.

The clearest and strongest proof that the ideas of the Enlightenment had penetrated the masses, centrally the artisan proletariat, was the course of the French Revolution. Within a few years the trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost was displaced in Paris, Marseille and other French cities by the trinity of liberty, equality and fraternity. The revolution produced and was driven forward by a genuinely dialectical interaction between radical intellectuals and the urban working classes, the so-called *sans-culottes*—those who wore loose trousers rather than the tight leggings of the upper classes.

On the one hand, the literature of the Enlightenment legitimized popular hostility toward the old order—the aristocracy, the clergy, the monarchy. Throughout Europe, not only reactionaries but also liberals retrospectively de-

nounced the *philosophes* for inciting the people against their betters. The English liberal historian, Edward Gibbon, who rejected Christianity for himself, criticized the deceased Voltaire for not recognizing "the danger of exposing an old superstition to the contempt of the blind and fanatic multitude."

At the same time, the revolutionary heroism, energy, commitment and idealism of the people propelled the radical intellectuals far to the left. The children of the Enlightenment—Robespierre, Saint-Just, Babeuf—developed an optimistic, aggressive, world-conquering outlook that would have been unthinkable for Voltaire or Rousseau.

### The Impact of the French Revolution

By the time of the revolution, all of the major *philosophes* had left the scene, with the exception of the Marquis de Condorcet. Condorcet had been a protégé of Voltaire. He had edited Voltaire's collected works and written his semi-official biography. But under the impact of the revolution Condorcet moved light years to the left of anything Voltaire had considered remotely possible in France. He became an advocate of a democratic republic based on universal suffrage. And I mean *universal* suffrage not just universal *male* suffrage. He was one of the very few people in France or anywhere else at the time to champion the same political rights for women as for men. To appreciate what this meant, consider that it was not until a century and a quarter after this that women got the vote in the United States or Britain. Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Human Mind*, written in 1793-94 during the radical climax of the French Revolution, presents a sweepingly optimistic vision of the future beyond Voltaire's wildest imaginings.

There's an interesting book by a modern scholar, Joan McDonald, about the radical reinterpretation of Rousseau during the revolution. Before the revolution, Rousseau had admirers in all political circles, including right-wing circles. He was not regarded as an advocate of social revolution or



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**Last of the Enlightenment *philosophes*, Condorcet championed democratic rights for women. Political discussion at militant women's club during French Revolution.**

even reform; rather he was viewed as a proponent of individual moral regeneration. His message was that members of the educated classes should abandon their luxury-loving, money-grubbing, career-climbing ways and retreat to the countryside to lead a simple and honorable existence like the heroes and heroines of his immensely popular novels.

During the first years of the revolution, all factions claimed the authority of Rousseau. Liberals and even some counterrevolutionaries argued that Rousseau had considered that a democratic republic was not possible in a country like France. It was too big, too diverse, its people too habituated to monarchy over the centuries. McDonald explains how the left responded to this argument:

"Rousseau, it was pointed out, could not possibly have foreseen the great progress of political knowledge and public enlightenment which would take place after his death. The Revolution had rendered his fears groundless, in Fauchet's [a left Rousseauian] view, because in 1789, for the first time, the people were conscious of their rights, and would therefore no longer be the ignorant victims of those who in the past had usurped their sovereignty."

She goes on to explain how Rousseau's ideas were transformed from a doctrine of individual moral regeneration into a doctrine of social revolution:

"The revolutionaries had accepted the view that the regeneration of the individual could be brought about by the regeneration of society; and because it was with the name of Rousseau that the idea of individual moral regeneration had become particularly associated, so, in carrying the idea into the wider sphere of social regeneration, it was with Rousseau's name that the practical devices of the Revolution were associated. Since Rousseau had stated the ends, then the means adopted by the Revolution were also regarded as having been approved by Rousseau."

— *Rousseau and the French Revolution, 1762-1791*  
(1965)

In one of Marx's early writings, he states that the weapons of criticism cannot replace the criticism of weapons. That is,

a theoretical denunciation of an unjust social order cannot substitute for the overthrow of that social order by the revolutionary mobilization of the masses. With the French Revolution the Enlightenment was transformed from a weapon of criticism to a criticism of weapons. It ceased to be a movement of an intellectual elite and became the theoretical basis for a revolutionary movement of the exploited classes, centrally the artisan proletariat.

The first attempt in history to establish communism through the insurrectionary overthrow of the bourgeois state by the working class was Babeuf's Conspiracy of Equals in 1796. At his trial, facing a death sentence, he declared:

"The masses can no longer find a way to go on living; they see that they possess nothing and that they suffer under the harsh and flinty oppression of a greedy ruling class. The hour strikes for great and memorable revolutionary events, already foreseen in the writings of the times, when a general overthrow of the system of private property is inevitable, when the revolt of the poor against the rich becomes a necessity that can no longer be postponed."

A very tough and a very great man.

In defending the principles of communism, Babeuf cited and quoted extensively from the writings of Rousseau, Mably and Morrelly—the most left-wing expressions of Enlightenment social and political thought. But the rational humanism of the Enlightenment was an inadequate theoretical basis for the communist movement and proletarian revolution. First, it held that all men of all classes could be won to the communist cause through an understanding of natural law and natural rights. Second, it held that communism could be established under any and all conditions if only the people were sufficiently enlightened.

It was Marx who would provide an adequate theoretical basis for communism and proletarian revolution. But to explore this next chapter in our history, we have to take a second trip in our time machine.

In early 1841, shortly before his 23rd birthday, Karl Marx completed and submitted his doctoral dissertation in philosophy, entitled "Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature." His ambition and intent was to become a professor of philosophy at a German university, that is, a respectable bourgeois intellectual. His close friends and colleagues were teachers or students of philosophy of the Hegelian school. His writings were directed toward—and only intelligible to—intellectuals thoroughly familiar with German philosophy, its various tendencies and disputes.

Six years later, Marx joined and became a principal leader of an underground communist organization, largely composed of

## PART TWO

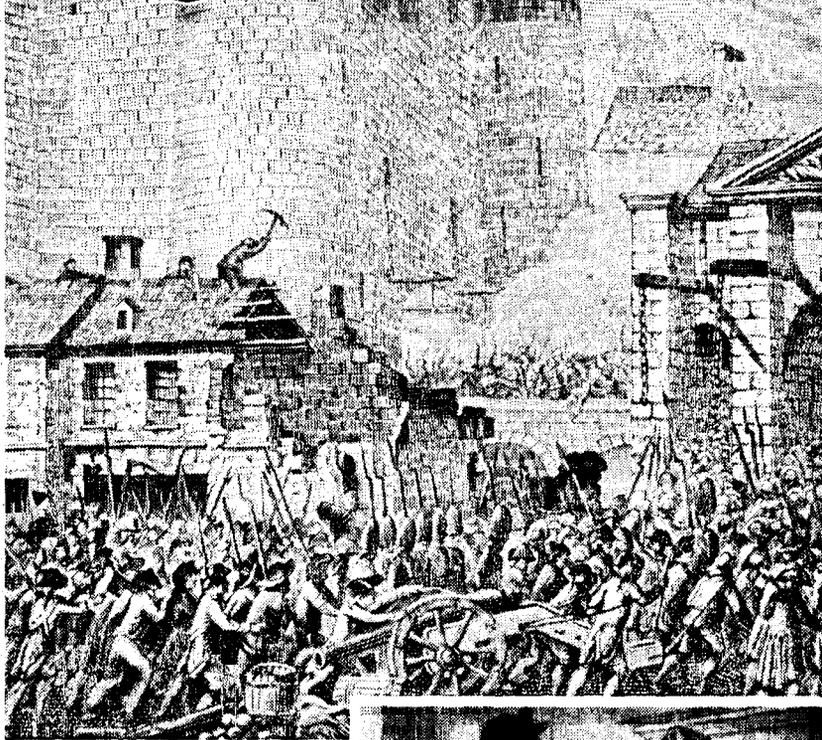
workingmen, dedicated to the overthrow of every government in Europe, first and foremost the Kingdom of Prussia. The nature of his *new* comrades can be gauged by the political biography of Karl Schapper, the organization's leading figure before Marx joined it.

In the early 19th century, the storming of the Bastille in Paris in 1789 was for leftist youth what the storming of the Winter Palace in Petrograd in 1917 was for leftist youth during much of the 20th century. They all dreamed of storming their own Bastille and igniting a great, world-shaking revolution. In the mid-1830s, about 50 revolutionary "hotheads" in central Germany—among them Karl Schapper, a 21-year-old student of forestry—decided the time for dreaming was over and they should just do it. So they took over a police station in Frankfurt. Needless to say, this adventure was easily and quickly suppressed by the authorities.

Schapper managed to escape arrest and made his way to southern France, where he joined a ragtag army led by Italian radical democrat and nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini. Mazzini's army of national liberation, numbering about 300 men, promptly invaded the Kingdom of Savoy—the strongest absolutist state in Italy—whose forces easily repelled the revolutionary invaders.

But once more Schapper was unscathed and this time he made his way to Paris, the political and spiritual center of the European revolutionary movement. There he joined the newly formed League of the Just, a secret communist society largely composed of émigré German workers. The League had close ties to similar French secret societies led by the redoubtable Auguste Blanqui. One fine spring day in 1839, Blanqui assembled about a thousand of his armed followers—mainly Frenchmen, with a contingent of Germans—

# Enlightenment Rationalism and the Origins of Marxism



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**Storming of Bastille in July 1789 inspired fighters against tyranny around the world. Overthrow and arrest of Robespierre (right) five years later signified triumph of Thermidorian reaction.**



British Museum

in central Paris, where they set up barricades and declared their intent to overthrow the government of Louis Philippe, the so-called bankers' king. This time Schapper and his German comrades were arrested, along with Blanqui and the other leaders.

However, there was considerable popular sympathy for the insurgents, so Louis Philippe decided simply to expel Schapper and the other German communists, who then went to London. I would like to recount that two months after arriving in England, Schapper and 2,000 other guys tried to storm Windsor Palace aiming to overthrow Queen Victoria.

But this time he decided to change his strategy and tactics. I'll discuss this a little later.

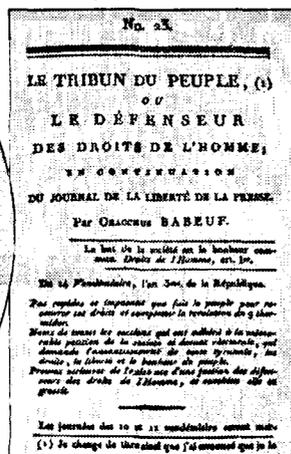
What I want to emphasize here is how radical a change Marx underwent between 1841 and 1847. It was not simply his ideas about the world that changed, but every significant aspect of his public life and to a large extent his private life as well. How and why did this young academic philosopher become a leader of a working-class-based, communist movement aiming at the revolutionary overthrow of the existing European social and political order? What was the relationship—positive or negative—between the philosophical ideas of Hegel and what was later called scientific socialism?

## Two Paths from the French Revolution

To answer these questions one has to go back to the French Revolution. For *both* the political movements with which the young Marx was successively involved—the Young Hegelians and the Communist League—had their origins in the French Revolution and its extension to Germany through the Napoleonic empire. The youthful Hegel enthusiastically welcomed the French Revolution, and as a mature and respected bourgeois intellectual he became an ardent supporter of Napoleon, whom he dubbed “the world-soul on horseback.” Here it's important to point out that Napoleon was an ex-Jacobin and onetime protégé of Robespierre, whose memory



Radio Times Hulton



Gracchus Babeuf publicized early communist ideas in his journal, was later executed for leading 1796 insurrection by Conspiracy of Equals.

he always held in high regard. For its part, the German League of the Just was rooted in the theoretical, political and organizational tradition begun by Gracchus Babeuf's Conspiracy of Equals of 1796, Babeuf himself having earlier been a Jacobin militant.

In a sense, there were two paths leading from the French Revolution to Marxism: a rightward path from Napoleon through Hegel to the Young Hegelians; and a leftward path leading from Babeuf and Philippe Buonarroti through Blanqui to the German League of the Just. These two paths converged in 1847 when the former Young Hegelian intellectuals Marx and Engels effected a revolutionary regroupment with erstwhile German Babouvist militants to form the Communist League, whose doctrine and program was codified in the *Communist Manifesto*.

Both Hegel and Babeuf were members of that generation of young intellectuals who believed that with the French Revolution the principles of the Enlightenment were being transformed into reality. Decades later, when in his fifties, Hegel recounted in a lecture to his students (published in *The Philosophy of History* [1956]) the apocalyptic atmosphere ushered in by the storming of the Bastille and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen:

“The conception, the idea of Right asserted its authority *all at once*, and the old framework of injustice could offer no resistance to its onslaught. A constitution, therefore, was established in harmony with the conception of Right, and on this foundation all future legislation was to be based.... This was accordingly a glorious mental dawn. All thinking beings shared in the jubilation of this epoch. Emotions of a lofty character stirred men's minds at that time; a spiritual enthusiasm thrilled through the world, as if the reconciliation between the Divine and the Secular was now first accomplished.”

The belief that heaven was about to descend to earth necessarily led to a disillusionment among the youthful idealists who had held this vision. Both Babeuf and Hegel expressed this disillusionment, albeit for very different reasons, in very different ways and with very different conclusions. Babeuf maintained that the French Revolution did not go far enough. He therefore inaugurated a movement and tradition defined by communist idealism and revolutionary voluntarism. Hegel decided that the French Revolution had gone too far, too fast; that the French people were not spiritually mature enough to achieve heaven on earth. He thus became an advocate of gradual—very gradual—reform from above. In his last years, he wrote in his 1821 work, *The Philosophy of Right*, that political change should be such that “the advance from one state of affairs to another is tranquil in appearance and unnoticed. In this way a constitution changes over a period of time into something quite different from what it was originally.”

Marx came to believe in communism and proletarian revolution and, in that sense, embraced the Babouvist tradition. But he also adhered to Hegel's anti-utopian realism. Like Hegel, he maintained that revolutionaries could not simply reconstruct the world at will according to their own moral ideals. In Marx's first work as a self-considered communist, in 1844, he states: “It is not enough for thought to strive for realisation, reality must itself strive towards thought” (“Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction,” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 3 [1975]). In other words, men can change society only insofar as society itself has changed so as to make possible their goals and program.

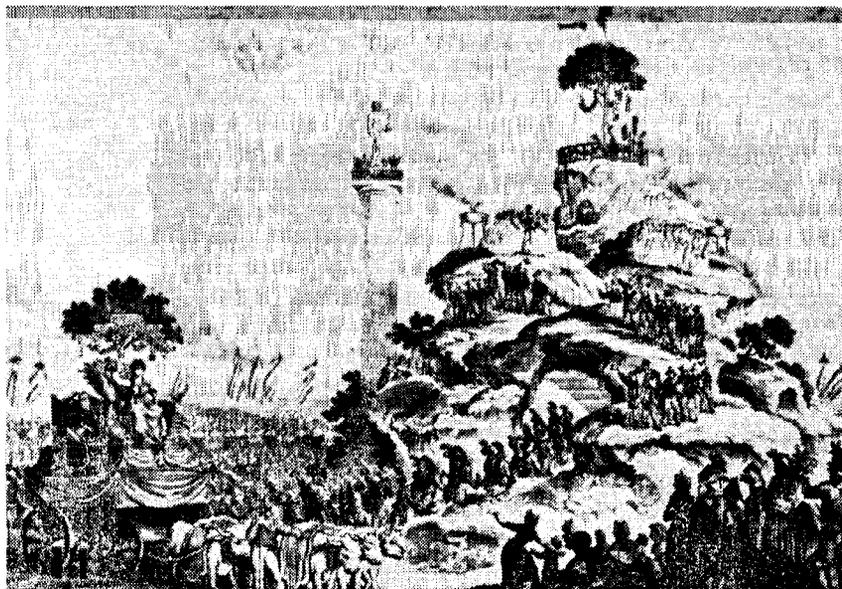
Communism is possible not because it is a moral ideal but because its economic preconditions have been created by industrial capitalism along with a social class—the proletariat—with a vital interest in economic collectivism. Thus he and Engels wrote in their 1846 work, *The German Ideology*: “Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the now existing premise.”

## Jacobin Idealism

To understand both the Hegelian component of Marxism as well as its Babouvist heritage, we have to take a closer look at the French Revolution, especially its ideological dimensions during its most radical phase, the Jacobin



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**Jacobins attempted to replace Christianity with new state religion based on deism, expressed in artworks of the time: "Regenerated Man" triumphant over superstition (left), "Feast of the Supreme Being."**

regime of 1793-94. If the young Hegel, viewing the upheaval in France from across the Rhine, believed that heaven was about to descend on earth, imagine the apocalyptic fervor of the men actually leading the revolution.

The Jacobin leader Saint-Just declared that happiness was a new idea in Europe. Obviously, he was not talking about the momentary happiness of individuals: long before the French Revolution, men and women were happy when they fell in love, when they had a healthy infant whom they wanted, when they got drunk and partied all night (though perhaps they were not so happy the next morning). Saint-Just was talking about collective happiness as a permanent social condition. He meant that the French democratic republic was the first state in Europe committed to the well-being of all its citizens, to ensuring them liberty, equality and fraternity.

More than a century after the French Revolution, Leon Trotsky called the rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union in the 1920s a "Thermidorian reaction." When you think about it, this is an odd term used in no other context. It does not derive from a person (there was no Joe Thermidor), place or movement. It derives from the month that Robespierre was overthrown by a right-wing Jacobin faction. But you might say, there is no month called Thermidor in French. Not today there isn't. However, in 1792 the leaders of the French Revolution decided to signify their total break with the past by scrapping the Gregorian calendar and beginning world history anew with the year I, written in Roman numerals. They also gave new names to the months, such as Thermidor, Fructidor and the like.

Along similar lines, the Jacobins attempted to establish a new state religion, based on deism, which would replace Christianity. Robespierre's speech proposing this new civic religion is a good expression of the Jacobin worldview. As a true son of the Enlightenment, he begins by pointing to the enormous progress in science and technology over the previous few decades: "Compare the imperfect language of hieroglyphics with the miracles of printing.... Measure the distance between the astronomical observations of the wise men

of Asia and the discoveries of Newton." He then goes on:

"All has changed in the physical order; all must change in the moral and political order. One half of the world revolution is already achieved, the other half has yet to be accomplished.... "The French people appear to have outstripped the rest of the human race by two thousand years; one might even be tempted to regard them as a distinct species among the rest. Europe is kneeling to the shadows of the tyrants whom we are punishing. "In Europe a ploughman or an artisan is an animal trained to do the pleasure of a noble; in France the nobles seek to transform themselves into ploughmen and artisans, and cannot even attain this honor. "Europe cannot conceive of life without kings and nobles; and we cannot conceive of it with them."

— reproduced in George Rudé, ed., *Robespierre* (1967)

Robespierre concludes by proposing the following legislation:

"Article I. The French people recognizes the existence of the Supreme Being, and the immortality of the soul.  
"Article II. It recognizes that the best way of worshipping the Supreme Being is to do one's duties as a man.  
"Article III. It considers that the most important of these duties are: to detest bad faith and despotism, to punish tyrants and traitors, to assist the unfortunate, to respect the weak, to defend the oppressed, to do all the good one can to one's neighbor, and to behave with justice towards all men."

In other words, the Jacobins believed it was possible by law to instill in the French people unselfish concern for their fellow man; to use the language of the day, to instill "patriotism" and "virtue" as the dominant principles of social and political life.

The Jacobins represented a revolutionary *minority* of the French bourgeoisie. They did *not* come to power through gaining a majority of the votes in elections to the revolutionary parliament, the Convention, which would have required support from a majority of the peasantry. Rather, they came to power by organizing an insurrection of the Parisian lower classes—the so-called *sans-culottes*—which overthrew the more moderate bourgeois faction, the Girondins, then governing the country. Consequently, the Robespierre regime had to conciliate the Paris artisan proletariat which

constituted its main base of support against its many enemies, both within and without France.

The Jacobin regime was waging war against most of the rest of Europe as well as civil wars against royalist forces in key regions of France. These wars inevitably caused enormous economic dislocations and shortages. The combined pressure of the *sans-culottes* from below and the dislocations of war forced the revolutionary government to institute a primitive version of a controlled economy, for example, setting a maximum price for basic foodstuffs such as bread.

Given its idealistic ideology, the Jacobins did not justify these policies on pragmatic grounds—as temporary emergency measures—but as a manifestation of the fundamental rights of man. Thus Robespierre declared:

“Which is the first object of our polity? To guarantee the imprescriptible rights of man. And which is the first of these rights? That of existence. The first social law is, therefore, that which assures every member of society of the means of existence; all others are subordinated to it; property has only been founded and protected to give it greater strength.”

— Robespierre

If, as Robespierre maintained, the right to exist permits and even justifies restrictions on private property, it is but a logical extension to maintain that the right of existence demands the abolition of private property altogether. That extension was soon made by ex-Jacobin militants such as Babeuf, Buonarroti, Sylvan Marichal and others.

But before discussing this I want to say something about the Jacobin “Terror,” since it played a central role in the development of Hegel’s political attitudes and theories. Over 90 percent of the people executed under the “Terror” were in the two regions of France beset by full-scale civil war. They were people who were captured arms in hand fighting against the revolutionary army. People were *not* executed for merely expressing opposition to the Jacobin government and its doctrines. Catholic priests were not killed or imprisoned for giving sacraments to the faithful, or whatever Catholic priests do with the faithful. (Not part of my personal experience, thank god!) Some Catholic priests were killed for inciting peasants to insurrect against the revolutionary government.

However, counterrevolutionary propaganda—liberal as well as reactionary—portrayed the Jacobin “Terror” as what would later be called “totalitarian thought control.” The Englishman Edmund Burke denounced Robespierre and his colleagues for seeking to establish a reign of virtue through a reign of terror. This was a lie, but a lie that was widely accepted, especially outside France, and one which has been perpetuated and has remained widely accepted ever since.

### The Babouvist Tradition

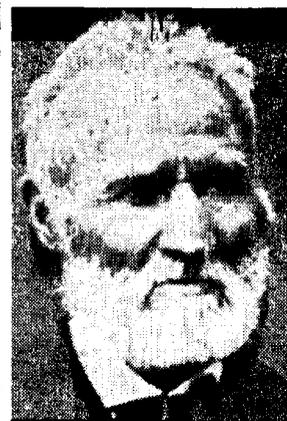
During the Jacobin regime, Gracchus Babeuf served as a local official administering the food supply in a working-class district in Paris. Thus on the basis of his own firsthand experience he recognized that attempts by the revolutionary government to regulate the capitalist market in the interests of the workers and poor were at best inadequate and at worst totally ineffectual. Merchants evaded the price maximum by hoarding and selling at higher prices on what we would now call the black market. After Robespierre was overthrown, all economic controls were abolished, and the conditions of the workers in Paris and other French cities deteriorated into ever greater wretchedness.

Considering these developments during the Thermidorian



H. Roger-Viollet

**Jacobin communist  
Auguste Blanqui  
participated in July  
1830 revolution which  
brought down ultra-  
reactionary French  
Bourbon regime.**



Institute for Social History, Amsterdam

reaction, Babeuf concluded that the right to existence was fundamentally incompatible with the right of private property. He therefore developed a crude system of communism. This was a communism of distribution, not production—though Babeuf did advocate agricultural collectivism rather than peasant smallholding. In Babeuf’s view, peasants and workers would produce as before but would deliver their products to government warehouses rather than sell them on the market. The government would then distribute these goods equally and in proportion to need. Those families with more children would receive more food, clothing, etc.

The Conspiracy of Equals in 1796 was an attempt to realize this communist program through an armed insurrection—centrally based on the artisan proletariat of Paris—against the Thermidorian regime. The movement was suppressed by the authorities before it reached the stage of insurrection and the principal leaders were arrested and tried. While Babeuf

was sentenced to death, another leading figure, Buonarroti, was only imprisoned for a time, possibly because his mistress had seduced one of the judges.

For the next 40 years of his life, Buonarroti sought to keep alive the principles and program of Jacobin communism, first in the hostile climate of the Napoleonic empire and then under the even more reactionary conditions of the post-Napoleonic restoration. In 1828, he published in Belgium a history of the Conspiracy of Equals, including many of its original documents, a book which became known as "the bible of revolutionaries." At one point the young Marx considered translating this book into German.

In 1830, the ultra-reactionary Bourbon regime in France was overthrown by a popular revolution and replaced by the less repressive monarchical regime of Louis Philippe. For a time the political situation in France was relatively open. Buonarroti thus returned to the country of the Revolution and was able to intersect and influence a new generation of leftist militants, the outstanding figure among them being Auguste Blanqui.

At that time there was a sizable population of émigré German workers in Paris, and a number of these were won to Jacobin communism and came under the sway of Blanqui's secret societies. Central to the Blanquist strategy was what might be called military vanguardism, the belief that the bold action of a small group of revolutionary militants could inspire the masses to rise up in revolt against the oppressive monarchical regimes.

However, after experiencing defeat in the streets of Paris in 1839 and being expelled from France to England, leading German communists such as Karl Schapper and Joseph Moll reconsidered the Blanquist strategy. They concluded that the mass of workers had not heeded the revolutionaries' call to arms because they did not understand and therefore did not support the communist program. Consequently, adherents of the League of the Just—which was centered in London but also existed in Paris and other European cities—now devoted themselves to propaganda and education, postponing the revolution to an indefinite future. Ironically, it was the former left-Hegelian intellectuals Marx and Engels who had to convince the former revolutionary adventurers Schapper and Moll that popular insurrections in Germany and France were possible in the historical short term.

During the 1970s, I gave a lecture series under the heading "Marxism and the Jacobin Communist Tradition," which was published and is available in the bound volumes of *Young Spartacus*. So what I know and think about this subject is accessible in far greater detail and analytical elaboration than I can convey to you today. Therefore I'm going to devote the rest of this talk to Hegel and his school, the intellectual and political development of the young Marx and certain controversies about this. I'm weighting this educational in this way *not* because I consider the left-Hegelian component more important in understanding Marxism than the Jacobin component—I don't think that—but rather because the left-Hegelian component is far harder to understand and has been subject to much confusionism and mystification.

### Hegel's Political Biography

I think the easiest way to approach Hegel—and I said easiest, not easy—is to first consider his political biography. Before we descend to the mind-bending depths of Hegelian

philosophy, we should look at the major historical events which affected him and how he responded to them.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was born in 1770 in the principality of Swabia in southwestern Germany, a relatively economically advanced region in that then-divided country. His father was a senior government bureaucrat involved in finance and trade. Hegel's background was thus typical of the German bourgeoisie of the Lutheran persuasion. He was educated in the spirit of the German Enlightenment, which was more idealistic, more concerned with individual morality and spiritual values, so to speak, than the English and French versions of the Enlightenment.

As previously noted, he enthusiastically welcomed the French Revolution and believed that the rights of man were about to triumph on the German side of the Rhine as well. In 1795, he wrote to his friend and fellow philosopher-in-training, Friedrich Schelling:

"I believe that there is no better sign of the times than the fact that mankind as such is being represented with so much reverence, it is a proof that the halo which has surrounded the heads of the oppressors and gods of the earth has disappeared. The philosophers demonstrate this dignity [of man]; the people will learn to feel it and will not merely demand their rights, which have been trampled in the dust, but will themselves take and appropriate them."

—quoted in Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (1972)

However, over the next several years this naive democratic idealism and optimism dissipated and were replaced by a moderate liberalism which for Hegel represented a reconciliation with social and political reality as he viewed it. A key factor in Hegel's rightward evolution was his extremely negative reaction to the Jacobin regime in France. In part this represented a reaction to what actually happened in France at this time, and in part it was based on a common misunderstanding of this crucial historical episode.

Even when he was a democratic idealist, Hegel opposed social leveling and regarded the right to property as an important guarantor of individual liberty. Thus he denounced what he termed "sans-culottism" in France. At the same time, he believed that Robespierre and his colleagues had resorted to mass terror in order to impose on the French people their own philosophical principles, such as deism, and their concept of revolutionary morality. He later wrote that the French Revolution represented

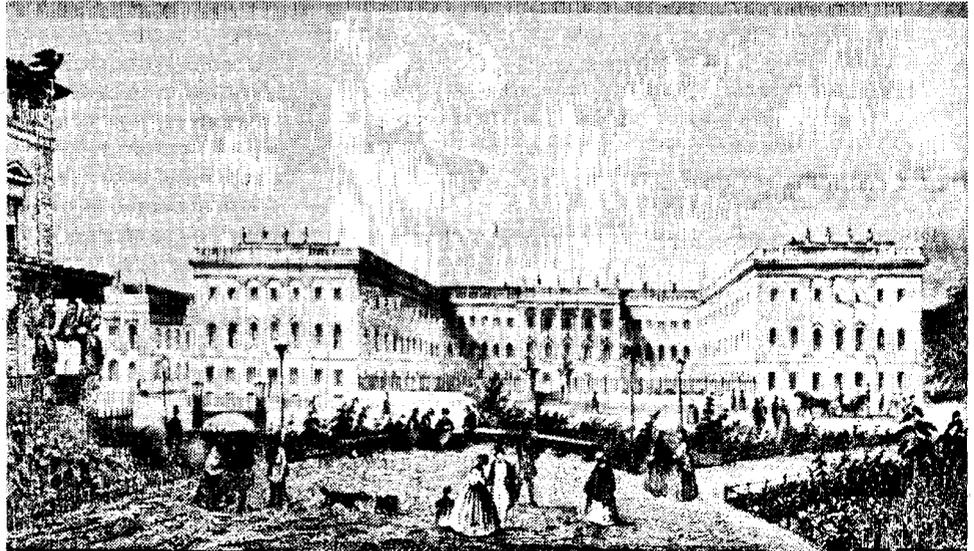
"for the first time in human history the prodigious spectacle of the overthrow of the constitution of a great actual state and its complete reconstruction *ab initio* [from the beginning] on the basis of pure thought alone, after the destruction of all existing and given material. The will of the refounders was to give it what they alleged was a purely rational basis, but it was only abstractions that were being used; the Idea was lacking; and the experiment ended in the maximum of frightfulness and terror."

—Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*

As a criticism or even understanding of what actually happened during the French Revolution, Hegel's view was profoundly wrong. But as a criticism of Jacobin *ideology*, Hegel was in this respect on the mark. The Jacobins did believe they could sweep away the old society and rebuild the world anew according to their ideals—not only in terms of social, economic and political institutions but in all fundamental aspects of popular consciousness. Robespierre, Saint-Just and their comrades believed that through an act of will or even an act of law they could eradicate almost



Historia Photo, Bad Sachsa



F. Hirchenheim

**Georg Hegel exercised a profound influence on younger generation of progressive German intellectuals as head of the philosophy department in the 1820s at University of Berlin (right), today Humboldt University.**

2,000 years of Christianity, respect for traditional authority and even individual egoism. Hegel was right that no government—even a revolutionary government—possesses absolute freedom to reconstruct society according to its own principles and ideals. As Marx later wrote in a very Hegelian passage in his 1852 work, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.”

### The Napoleonic Empire

To understand the politics of the mature Hegel, it is necessary to understand the meaning of liberalism—both the term and, more importantly, the underlying concept—in the age of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic empire. Liberalism represented a middle ground between reaction and democracy, between right and left.

Reactionaries wanted to turn the calendar back to before 1789, to restore monarchical absolutism—backed by a state church—which would suppress all political and religious dissent. In a formal sense, democracy meant a republic with a government elected on the basis of universal male suffrage. However, democracy also had a strong connotation of social leveling shading into communism, a connotation reinforced by the course of the French Revolution. It was assumed on all points of the political spectrum that if the workers and peasants were allowed to vote in a government, that government would take from the rich to give to the poor. In short, “democrat” in those days was a soft-core term for “red.”

Liberalism meant support for a constitutional monarchy in which the king shared power with a parliament representing men of property. Liberals generally favored religious tolerance, considerable freedom for intellectual discourse and government support for scientific investigation and technological progress. They opposed the legal privileges of the nobility and advocated equality before the law (but *not*

equality in making the laws). In short, liberalism represented the interests of the bourgeoisie as against the landed nobility on the right and the workers and peasants on the left.

Liberalism in this sense did not come to Germany through revolution or even internally generated reform but through military conquest from without. In 1807, Napoleon defeated the Prussian army at the battle of Jena. He then occupied western and southern Germany, which he proceeded to reconstruct along the lines of post-revolutionary France. In a letter of instruction to his younger brother Jerome, whom he had installed as king of a newly created western German state, Napoleon wrote:

“What German opinion impatiently demands is that men of no rank, but of marked ability, shall have an equal claim upon your favour and your employment; and that every trace of serfdom, or of a feudal hierarchy between the sovereign and the lowest class of his subjects, shall be done away with. The benefits of the Code Napoleon, public trial, and the introduction of juries will be the leading features of your government.... What people will want to return under the arbitrary Prussian rule, once it has tasted the benefits of a wise and liberal administration?”

— quoted in George Rudé, *Revolutionary Europe 1783-1815* (1964)

When Napoleon wrote of winning over German opinion, he did not, of course, mean the opinion of workers and peasants but that of the bourgeoisie and its intellectual representatives, like Hegel. And to a large extent he succeeded in doing so, at least initially. A few years earlier, the great German composer Beethoven dedicated his Third Symphony, the *Eroica*, to Napoleon, although he soon became disillusioned with the liberal emperor. Beethoven was more radical and idealistic than Hegel, who remained a loyal supporter of Napoleon to the end, and even after the end. Hegel edited a pro-French newspaper under the Napoleonic occupation and then became head of a prestigious *gymnasium*, equivalent to an elite prep school like Eton in England or Andover in the U.S.

Not all of Germany was incorporated into the Napoleonic empire. The Kingdom of Prussia, while stripped of its western provinces, remained an independent state in northeastern

Germany, then a relatively economically backward region. This proved to be unfortunate, not only for Napoleon but for the future course of world history, in other words, for us as well.

### Liberalism and Absolutism In Prussia

The defeat at Jena had a traumatic effect on the Prussian ruling class, the so-called Junkers. Dominant elements among them recognized they would have to reform and modernize the Prussian state if it was to survive in the Europe of Napoleon. One of the leading reformers, Prince Hardenberg, who later became Hegel's patron, wrote in 1807:

"The illusion that one can resist the revolution most surely by holding fast to the old and by vigorously persecuting the principles that hold sway in such times has in fact resulted in producing the revolution and in giving it a steadily expanding influence. The authority of those principles is so great, they are so generally acknowledged and promulgated, that the state that does not adopt them shall be faced either with accepting them forcibly, or with its own downfall."

— quoted in Jacques D'Hondt, *Hegel in His Time* (1988)

The so-called "era of reforms" did not change the class nature of the Prussian state. It remained an absolutist monarchy dominated by the Junker nobility. But the Prussian state acquired a liberal façade which was most visible in the sphere of education and intellectual life. State-funded public schools were provided at nominal fees for all young males, both Protestant and Catholic. This engendered in the educational system a climate of religious tolerance and respect for intellectual discourse.

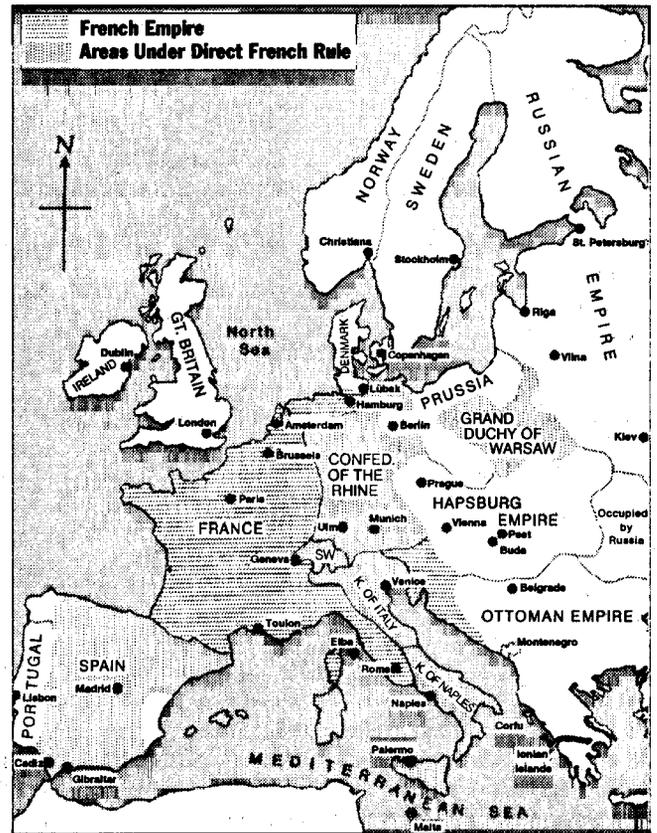
Following Napoleon's downfall in 1815, Hegel sought to preserve and cautiously extend the liberal reforms and intellectual climate engendered by the French occupation. He denounced reactionary attempts to restore the institutions and conditions of the old Germany:

"We must oppose this mood which always uselessly misses the past and yearns for it. That which is old is not to be deemed excellent just because it is old, and from the fact that it was useful and meaningful under the different circumstances, it does not follow that its preservation is commendable under changed conditions—quite the contrary.... The world has given birth to a great epoch."

— quoted in Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (1972)

In 1818, Hegel accepted an invitation by the Prussian government to become head of the philosophy department at the University of Berlin, the most prestigious academic institution in Germany. In 1830, he was elevated to rector of the university. He was thus very much an establishment intellectual. It has become common to maintain that Hegel in his last years idealized the Prussian state as the very embodiment of reason in the Europe of his day. This is a distortion or, at any rate, an oversimplification of Hegel's views, one which Marx carefully avoided in criticizing Hegel.

Hegel believed that the Prussian state could organically evolve into one fully representing the principles of reason, not that it actually did so. His principal work of political philosophy, the *Philosophy of Right*, which was written in this period, is implicitly critical of the Prussian state from a liberal standpoint. It advocated a parliamentary-type body representing public opinion, which did not then exist in Prussia. It advocated civil rights for Jews, rights which did not then exist in Prussia. It advocated official tolerance for those Christian sects such as the Quakers and Anabaptists whose



Hippocrene Books

Europe in 1811: Napoleonic Empire reorganized western and southern Germany on a bourgeois-liberal basis, removing vestiges of the old feudal order.

members opposed in principle serving in the Prussian army.

In short, Hegel was a liberal by the standards of the Germany of his day. Furthermore, the policies of the Prussian government in the 1820s, especially in education and intellectual life, were relatively liberal amid the extremely reactionary conditions of post-Napoleonic Europe. I am emphasizing this because it is necessary to understand the subsequent divisions and breakup of the Hegelian school after Hegel's death. Had Hegel been a reactionary supporter of monarchical absolutism and Christian orthodoxy, how could a significant current of his followers have become radical democrats, atheists and even communists?

There have been more than a few historical conjunctures over the past 200 years in which young liberal intellectuals have been propelled toward the radical left. The 1960s in the U.S. was such a conjuncture. Most of the older comrades in this room, myself included, began their political activism as liberals. On the other hand, I suspect very few of you, if anyone, first became involved in politics as a flag-waving American patriot, a hardline racist or a religious fundamentalist.

### Hegel's Philosophy

Hegel has a well-deserved reputation for being the most tortuously obscure, the most impossibly difficult to understand of any major thinker. Key terms in his philosophical system—spirit, reason, reality, existence—are invested with a meaning very different not only from our understanding of them but also from the understanding of other German

philosophers in his own lifetime. After Hegel's major work, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, was published in 1807, the German philosopher Schelling, his friend since their university days, complained in a letter to Hegel that the book made no sense to him. So if you've tried reading Hegel and given it up as hopeless, you have a lot of company.

There's another reason that Hegel is difficult for us to understand that has as much to do with us as with Hegel. When we consider the concept of god and religious ideas, we naturally have in mind the Judeo-Christian tradition. In this tradition, god is an all-powerful supernatural patriarch. God gives Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai; he destroys Sodom and Gomorrah to punish the sinfulness of their inhabitants. God is the big boss, the top honcho. As they say in the mafia, *il capo di tutti capi*, the boss of all bosses.

But Hegel's god is not the great mafia don in the sky. His conceptual framework was rooted in ancient Greek philosophy. In a sense, he was the last of the ancient Greek philosophers and was regarded by his followers as the Aristotle of the modern age. It's no accident that as a young Hegelian philosopher, Marx chose to write his doctoral dissertation comparing two schools of ancient Greek philosophy.

In ancient Greek philosophy, the line between the profane and the divine is *not* between the natural and the supernatural but between the ephemeral and the eternal. The human body is regarded as profane because it is subject to decay and death. Mathematics, on the other hand, is divine because it embodies eternal and unchanging truths. The square root of four is always two, from the beginning of time to the end of time. Similarly, the value of pi as the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter is unchanging. Thus, for Plato, Aristotle and their followers the study of mathematics is divine not because it endows one with magical powers but because one thereby acquires knowledge of that which is eternal and unchanging. The same is true for philosophy and also astronomy, since the ancient Greeks believed that the heavenly bodies were fixed in space.

Hegel's conceptions are rooted in ancient Greek philosophy, especially neo-Platonism, and also in certain currents of Christian mysticism. A key element of this tradition is that god exists *through* man, through his consciousness and faith, not outside and independently of man. Thus the medieval German mystic Meister Eckhart wrote: "The eye with which God sees me, is the eye with which I see Him; my eye and His eye are one.... If God were not, I should not be, and if I were not, He too would not be" (quoted in J. N. Findlay, *Hegel: A Re-Examination* [1958]).

For Hegel, god—which he prefers to call "the absolute"—is *not* a supernatural entity but a process of formation. He thus gives divinity a historical character: there is a single, necessary chain of development from the primordial creation of matter to the highest level of human consciousness attained by philosophy. Nature is considered to be a lower phase in the self-development of the absolute, with spirit as the highest phase. Hegel writes:

"Nature is by no means something fixed and finished for itself, which could also exist without Spirit; rather does it first reach its aim and truth in Spirit. Just so Spirit on its part is not merely something abstractly beyond nature, but exists truly and shows itself to be Spirit, insofar as it contains nature as subjugated in itself."

—quoted in *Hegel: A Re-Examination*

What Hegel means by "spirit" are those intellectual activ-

ities—art, religion, philosophy—by which man appreciates and seeks to comprehend the totality of existence.

For Hegel, lower levels of human culture and civilization give rise to higher levels marked by greater knowledge and spiritual maturity. This process culminates in what Hegel terms absolute knowledge, the point at which man comprehends the entire previous course of nature and spirit. The achievement of absolute knowledge by man is at the same time for Hegel the achievement of god's own self-consciousness: "God is only God if he knows himself; furthermore, his knowing himself is his self-consciousness in man and man's knowledge of God which leads to man's knowledge of himself in God" (quoted in Nicholas Lobkowitz, *Theory and Practice: History of a Concept from Aristotle to Marx* [1967]).

Hegel is not only tortuously obscure but is regarded as a very humorless guy. Well, Voltaire he ain't. Nonetheless, he seems to have had a bit of a sense of humor and even a capacity to make light of his own ideas. On one occasion, he concluded a lecture to his students with these words:

"A new epoch has arisen in the world. Finite self-consciousness has ceased to be finite; and in this way absolute self-consciousness has, on the other hand, attained to the reality which it lacked before. This is the whole history of the world up to the present time.... I bid you a most hearty farewell."

—quoted in Robert C. Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (1972)

So what are we to make of it all? In a sense, Hegel's concept of spirit is an idealization and generalization of human intellectual and cultural activity. A composer might think of a new piece of music before he writes the notes on paper or plays it on a piano. Beethoven was composing great music when he was totally deaf and couldn't hear it played on instruments the way other people heard it. A poet might compose a poem in his head before he writes it down on paper or recites it aloud. A computer programmer might have a new program in mind before he sits down at a keyboard and transforms it into electrical impulses. In intellectual activity, ideas often precede and determine their material and public manifestations.

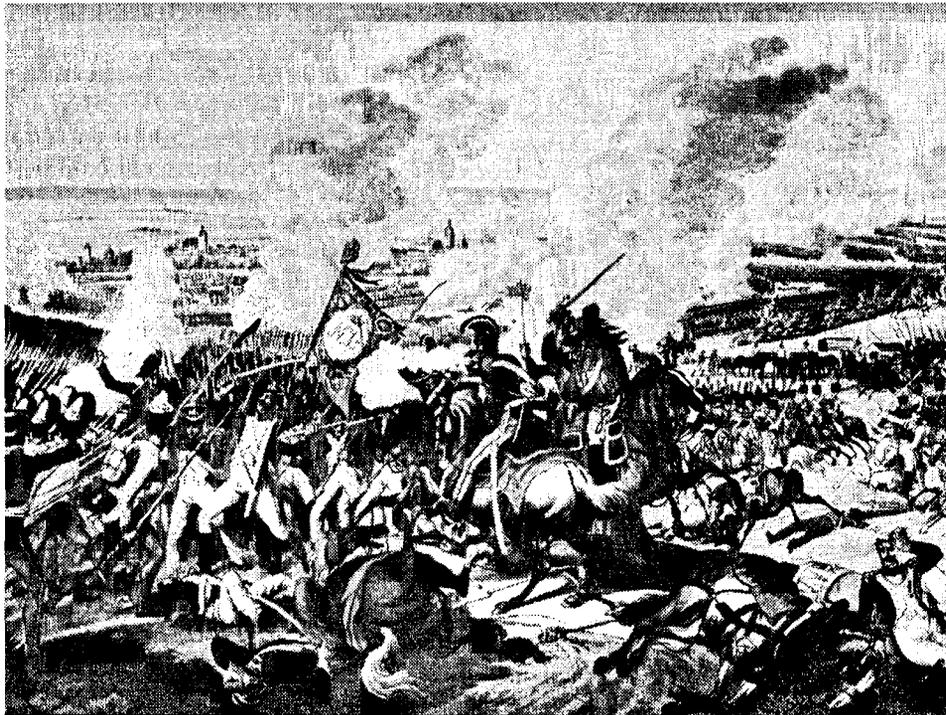
For Hegel, man—in the natural, biological sense—is to thought what a piano is to music: man exists so that thinking can exist. For materialists, it's the other way around: thinking exists so that man can exist and survive. And let's not be human chauvinists about this. Thinking exists also so that wolves and cats can exist. Take my cat Bubula, for example. She thinks so that she can catch birds and swipe my lunch meat when I'm not looking. She does not catch birds and swipe my lunch in order to contemplate the world spirit. In fact, she doesn't think much about the world spirit at all since she can neither eat it nor play with it.

### Does History Have a Conscious Aim?

A modern student of Hegel, J. N. Findlay, accurately defined his philosophy as teleological idealism:

"He employs throughout the Aristotelian notion of teleology or final causation, and he holds Mind or Spirit to be the final form, the goal or 'truth' of all our notions and the world.... Hegel's thoroughgoing teleology means, further, that nothing whatever in the world or our thought can have any meaning or function but to serve as a condition for the activities of self-conscious Spirit."

Teleological idealism ascribes to nature and/or history a purpose or goal of its own. Much human activity, especially



Historisches Museum, Frankfurt am Main



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**Battle of Leipzig, 1813: Napoleon's defeat by the Russian and Prussian armies ushered in a period of reaction throughout Europe.**

labor, is teleological. What people do and the order in which they do it is often determined by what they want in the future. Before a carpenter builds a wooden table, he has a plan on a blueprint or a computer disc for what that table will be like. How he selects the wood, measures the wood, cuts the wood, treats the wood is determined by the desired end-product. If the table is to be three feet high, he'll cut the legs three feet in length, not two feet or four feet.

Human activity—whether individual or collective—can be teleological because men have a consciousness which enables them to link what they want in the future to what they do in the present and in the intervening period. But nature and history do *not* have the conscious capacity to plan and determine their own futures. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels scathingly criticized teleological idealists, for whom

“later history is made the goal of earlier history, e.g., the goal ascribed to the discovery of America is to further the eruption of the French Revolution. Thereby history receives its own special goals and becomes ‘a person ranking with other persons’ (to wit: ‘self-consciousness, criticism, the unique,’ etc.), while what is designated with the words ‘destiny,’ ‘goal,’ ‘germ,’ or ‘idea’ of earlier history is nothing more than an abstraction from later history, from the active influence which earlier history exercises on later history.”

Since Marx rejected and opposed teleological idealism, why then are Hegel's philosophical conceptions an important constituent element of Marxism? Centrally because Hegel was the first major thinker to maintain that human nature was social nature and that it therefore changed and evolved through the historical development of civilization. He rejected and opposed the prevailing Enlightenment view that human behavior was governed by unchanging biological needs and impulses such as the instinct for self-preservation. Similarly, he rejected and opposed the conception of society

as a collection of atomized individuals whose behavior could be understood independently of their historically given culture. Here is the crux of Hegel's criticism of Enlightenment thought in this regard:

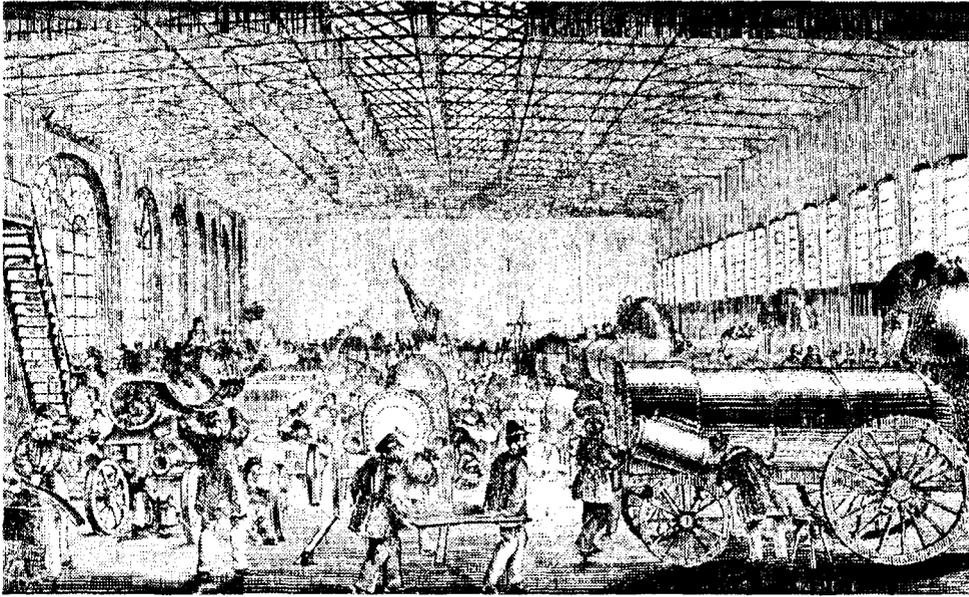
“If one thinks away everything that might even remotely be regarded as particular or evanescent, such as what pertains to particular mores, history, culture or even the state, then all that remains is man imagined as in the state of nature or else the pure abstraction of man with only his essential possibilities left. One can now discover what is necessary in man merely by looking at this *abstract* image.”

—quoted in Lewis P. Hinchman, *Hegel's Critique of the Enlightenment* (1984)

In his “Theses on Feuerbach”—as we shall see, Feuerbach was a throwback to Enlightenment naturalism—Marx makes exactly the same point: “The essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.”

One of the most influential doctrines of the last period of the Enlightenment was utilitarianism, developed by the Englishman Jeremy Bentham. This doctrine held that the behavior of all men was motivated by the desire either to obtain pleasure or avoid pain. Hegel regarded utilitarianism as an empty and trivial truism, since what is pleasurable and painful for members of a given culture at a certain level of historical development is different than for members of another culture at a different level of development. Greenland Eskimos and German philosophy students both strive to attain pleasure and avoid pain. But Eskimos would find reading Hegel quite painful and German philosophy students are unlikely to take much pleasure in eating walrus blubber.

Hegel was the first major thinker to maintain that how men think and act is primarily governed by their own self-created culture and not by natural law. As Marx wrote in one of his then-unpublished early works, *Economic and Philosophic*



Dietz Verlag Berlin

**Berlin factory in 1840s. Hegel's political doctrines represented the interests of the German bourgeoisie against both the conservative landed nobility and the working masses.**

*Manuscripts of 1844*, "Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process.... He thus grasps the essence of *labour* and comprehends objective man—true, because real man—as the outcome of man's *own labour*." However, he then adds the important qualification: "The only labour which Hegel knows and recognises is *abstractly mental labour*"—that is, art, religion, philosophy.

The materialist understanding of the "self-creation of man" through labor is clearly and succinctly stated by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*:

"History is nothing but the succession of the separate generations, each of which uses the materials, the capital funds, the productive forces handed down to it by all preceding generations, and thus, on the one hand, continues the traditional activity in completely changed circumstances and, on the other, modifies the old circumstances with a completely changed activity."

### Hegel: Reason and Reality

Central to Hegel's political philosophy is the view that the actual course of history is governed by the self-development of the "world spirit." He writes: "A people has the constitution which corresponds to the consciousness which the world spirit realizes in that people." During the Napoleonic wars, Hegel asserted:

"Through consciousness spirit intervenes in the way the world is ruled. This is its infinite tool—then there are bayonets, cannon, bodies. But the banner [of philosophy] and the soul of its commander is spirit. Neither bayonets, nor money, neither this trick nor that, are the ruler. They are necessary like the cogs and wheels in a clock, but their soul is time and spirit that subordinates matter to its laws."

— quoted in Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*

Hegel's most famous aphorism is "what is rational is real and what is real is rational." This is not only ambiguous, but its two parts are implicitly contradictory. If what is rational is real, then what is not rational is fated to disappear. But if what is real is rational, then the world as it currently exists is by definition rational. Furthermore, world history is subject to major reversals. If Napoleon's victory over the Prussian army in the battle of Jena represented the progress of reason in history, as Hegel maintained at the time, then how

could the victory of the Prussian army over Napoleon six years later at the battle of Leipzig also represent the progress of reason?

Hegel, however, did not regard the march of reason in history like it was the Prussian army on parade, one measured step forward after another. He allowed that there may be periods in which reason is thrown into a retreat, as well as sideways marches and a good deal of meaningless shuffling around. Here Hegel's terminology becomes very confusing because he distinguishes "reality" from "existence," the German words being *wirklichkeit* and *dasein* respectively. Reality is that which conforms to reason, while existence is merely that which happens to exist. As Hegel puts it: "All else, apart from this actuality established through the working of the concept itself, is ephemeral existence, external contingency, opinion, unsubstantiated appearance, falsity, illusion and so forth" (*Philosophy of Right*).

Since I was initially scheduled to give this educational first in Chicago, where some of the older comrades are into playground basketball, I figured I'd use playground basketball to explain the difference between reality and existence in the Hegelian sense. Say you're playing and the ball is kicked out of bounds and is picked up by a 12-year-old kid. He wants to play. He does his Michael Jordan imitation. He fakes left, he fakes right, he drives to the hoop. If Hegel were watching this, he'd say: "This is not a real basketball player but merely the unsubstantiated appearance of a basketball player." But let's say the kid hits a couple of outside jump shots. Then you'll say, "Hey, this kid's for real. Let him play."

So that's the problem. How do you know what's really real and what's merely existent? In a war between two major states, how do you know which side represents the progressive development of the world spirit and which is a dead remnant of the past? Here Hegel cops out with the most famous metaphor in philosophical literature:

"One word more about giving instructions as to what the world ought to be. Philosophy in any case always comes on the scene too late to give it. As the thought of the world, it appears only when actuality is already there cut and dried after its process of formation has been completed.... When

philosophy paints its grey in grey, then has a shape of life grown old. By philosophy's grey in grey it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk."

— *Philosophy of Right*

Minerva is the ancient Roman goddess of wisdom and the owl was her symbol. So what Hegel is saying is that the progress of reason in the world can be judged only in hindsight.

This political stance, which Hegel adopted in the 1820s, was possible only because that was a period of reactionary stabilization throughout Europe. There were no major wars, no revolutions, no serious threats of revolution. In Germany there weren't even any significant social or political conflicts. Minerva's owl could thus muse about the past in peace and tranquility.

But let's say that in 1825 a popular revolution in France overthrew the Bourbon monarchy, and revolutionary France then went to war with Prussia. The head of the philosophy department of the University of Berlin could hardly say, "I'm neutral. I'll wait for the outcome, think about it a while and then determine which combatant embodied the world spirit." Hegel's above-the-battle political posture was untenable except in the historical short term. Thus, within a decade of his death in 1831 his followers broke up into increasingly hostile factions.

### Emergence of the Hegelian Left

The break first came on the religious front. Hegel considered himself to be a devout Christian of the Lutheran persuasion. He maintained that religion expressed in the language of symbol and metaphor the same truths which philosophy expressed in the language of logic. He believed that Jesus Christ represented that point in history when man became aware of his own divine nature. However, Hegel's philosophy was not really compatible with Christian orthodoxy. As a modern scholar, Nicholas Lobkowitz, put it in his *Theory and Practice*, Hegel claimed "that man has become capable of Knowledge in the most far-reaching and daring sense, that is, of an Absolute Knowledge ascribed by Christianity to God alone."

Even during his lifetime, Hegel's views were attacked as heretical by religious fundamentalists—the so-called pietists in Germany—and these attacks escalated after his death. At the same time, some of Hegel's followers argued after his death that his philosophy transcended Christianity. In 1835, David Strauss published *The Life of Jesus*, in which he maintained that Jesus was a mythological figure created by the Hebrew people, similar to other religious-mythological figures. More fundamentally, Strauss argued that the world spirit operated through humanity as a whole and not merely through those who embraced Christ as savior. "Is not the idea of the unity of divine and human natures a real one in a more lofty sense," he asked rhetorically, "when I regard the entire human race as its realization than if I select one man as its realization?"

It was Strauss who first used the terms left, center and right to describe the divisions within the Hegelian school. He was referring to the respective attitudes toward Christianity, not toward the Prussian state. But since Prussia was officially a "Christian state," repudiation of Christian orthodoxy necessarily had political implications. Even though he was not

at all a political radical, Strauss was subjected to such fierce denunciations by the ecclesiastical and academic establishment that he emigrated to Switzerland.

While Strauss repudiated Hegel's Christianity in the name of his philosophical principles, other Hegelians repudiated Hegel's political quietism, symbolized by the night-flying owl of Minerva. In 1838, August von Cieszkowski, a Polish count, published *Prolegomena zur Historiosophie*, which translated means "A Foreword to the Wisdom of History." Cieszkowski maintained that Hegel was wrong and inconsistent in asserting that man could acquire knowledge only of the past but not of the future. By studying past history and current developments, Cieszkowski claimed, one could project the future—not in specific detail, to be sure, but in broad



Ludwig Feuerbach (left) and David Strauss, leading figures in the Hegelian left.

outline. Hence men could and should actively support the progressive development of the world spirit, not merely contemplate it after the fact. Thus Cieszkowski declared that man need no longer be a "blind instrument either of chance or of necessity" but had become the "conscious master builder of his own freedom." "Humanity," he maintained, "has become mature enough to make its own determinations perfectly identical with the Divine Plan of Providence" (quoted in Lobkowitz, *Theory and Practice*).

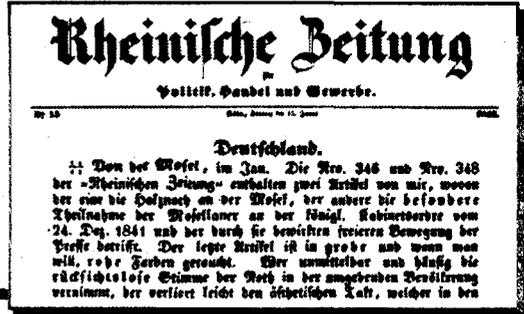
Cieszkowski was a left Hegelian as that term was then used, but he was not a leftist in the political sense. Like Hegel, he was a moderate liberal and therefore opposed to democracy, not to speak of social revolution. He was also a Polish nationalist. The belief that intellectuals should involve themselves in politics in order to realize their principles and ideals is not inherently leftist or even liberal. After all, religious fundamentalists and fascists, too, are very hostile to the existing state of affairs and want to change the world in accordance with their ideals.

Why then did most of those Hegelians who favored political activism rapidly evolve toward the left, toward radical democracy and even communism? Initially, the left Hegelians shared Hegel's liberal political outlook and respect for the Prussian state. In 1838, Arnold Ruge, a key figure in this movement, declared: "If the state contains within itself, as does Prussia, a reforming principle, then there is neither the necessity nor the possibility of a revolution" (quoted in David McLellan, *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx* [1969]). This statement had important implications for the



Beard

Karl Marx first entered the political stage in the early 1840s as editor of the bourgeois-liberal *Rheinische Zeitung*, a newspaper "For Politics, Trade and Industry."



future. First, it implies that the Prussian state needs to be reformed, and second, that if it proves unreformable, then revolution is both necessary and possible.

In 1840, the old king died. His son and successor was a religious fundamentalist who was more active in imposing his monarchical authority. Thus both government policy and general ideological climate moved to the right. Censorship was tightened. The left Hegelians were purged from their teaching posts in the universities; even the moderate Hegelians lost their former high status in the German academic establishment. This academic "red" purge directly affected the young Marx, whose expectation of a university appointment was dashed.

The rightward shift in political conditions adversely affected not only the left-Hegelian intellectuals but also the liberal bourgeoisie, which was strongest in the Rhineland, then the most economically developed region of Germany with the closest cultural affinities to France. For a brief period, the left-Hegelian intellectuals became spokesmen and publicists for a bourgeois-liberal opposition. The main expression of this collaboration was a newspaper, the *Rheinische Zeitung*, subtitled "For Politics, Industry and Commerce." The paper's chief financial backer, Ludolf Camphausen, would later be named Prussian prime minister during the Revolution of 1848.

### Marx: From Radical Democrat to Communist

Karl Marx first enters political history as a contributor, staff writer and finally editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung* in the early 1840s. He was at that time in the political mainstream of the Young Hegelians, being a radical democrat but not a communist. There was a circle of left Hegelian communists, centered in Berlin, who called themselves *die Freien* (the Free). They included, among others, the young Friedrich Engels and a young Russian nobleman, Mikhail Bakunin. Marx rejected the communism of "*die Freien*" as theoretically vacuous and given to empty phrasemongering. In a letter to Arnold Ruge, he joked that he had thrown out more contributions by them than had the government cen-

sor. Nonetheless, the views that Marx did publish in the *Rheinische Zeitung*, his own and others, proved too much for the Prussian authorities to stomach, and the paper was officially suppressed in early 1843.

Unable to publish his views in Germany, Marx emigrated to France in the fall of that year. On arriving in Paris, he moved into a kind of commune for German radicals which included a leader of the Paris branch of the League of the Just. Marx attended meetings of the League and also of its French counterparts. This experience had a profound effect on him, as he recorded at the time in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*:

"When communist *artisans* associate with one another, theory, propaganda, etc. is their first end. But at the same time, as a result of this association, they acquire a new need—the need for society—and what appears as a means becomes an end. In this practical process the most splendid results are to be observed whenever French socialist workers are seen together... The brotherhood of man is no mere phrase with them, but a fact of life, and the nobility of man shines upon us from their work-hardened bodies."

In late 1843, Marx declared himself in favor of communism and proletarian revolution. There are two points I want to emphasize in this regard. First, Marx's transition from radical democrat to communist was conditioned by his actual encounter with a communist workers movement in France; it was *not* a self-contained intellectual development. Second, Marx's theoretical and political views in 1843-44 were very different—I would say fundamentally different—than in 1847. In the first period he still operated within the theoretical framework of Hegelian philosophy in its left interpretation. Communism was for Marx what absolute knowledge was for Hegel: the final stage in the self-development of man's intellectual maturation, in which all previous contradictions are resolved. Thus he writes in his 1844 *Manuscripts* that communism is

"the complete return of man to himself as a *social* (i.e., human) being—a return accomplished consciously and embracing the entire wealth of previous development. This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man—the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species. Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution."

Communism is here presented as a synthesis of certain abstract categories, such as existence and essence, which were regarded as antagonistic in Hegelian and earlier philosophies. There is no consideration of the historical and economic preconditions for communism. There is no consideration of the actual socioeconomic structure of European

society, its class divisions, the state of the class struggle, the consciousness of the proletariat and the like. Furthermore, the notion that history sets men riddles to solve implies that history has a consciousness of its own ends, a view that Marx would soon totally reject.

Similarly, Marx's view of the proletariat in this period is framed by a left-Hegelian outlook. In his 1844 "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction," (Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* Volume 3 [1975]), he writes:

"The emancipation of the German is the emancipation of the human being. The head of this emancipation is philosophy, its heart is the proletariat. Philosophy cannot be made a reality without the abolition of the proletariat, the proletariat cannot be abolished without philosophy being made a reality."

The proletariat is here regarded as a kind of ready-made instrument to realize the goals set for mankind in Hegel's philosophy. In a sense, the proletariat is for Marx at this point what the state was for Hegel: the material manifestation of reason in the contemporary world.

### The Impact of Feuerbach

In the development of Marx's thought toward historical or dialectical materialism, two other left Hegelians played crucial, albeit very different, roles: Ludwig Feuerbach and Friedrich Engels. Prior to Feuerbach all Hegelians accepted the axiom that what is rational is real. The left Hegelians maintained that since the Christian church, the Prussian monarchical state and, for some, the capitalist market economy were not rational, these institutions were soon fated to disappear.

Feuerbach challenged the central premise of Hegel's teleological idealism: the notion that the self-development of spirit governs the actual conditions of mankind. He argued that Hegel's spirit is simply a metaphysical version of god, to which real living men are supposed to be subordinate. Men are not subordinate to thought as an independent entity, said Feuerbach, rather thought serves the interest and needs of men: "The new philosophy deals with being as it is for us, not only as thinking, but as really existing being.... It is the being of the senses, sight, feeling and love" (quoted in David McLellan, *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx* [1969]).

Feuerbach's general worldview is essentially similar to that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, though there was no direct

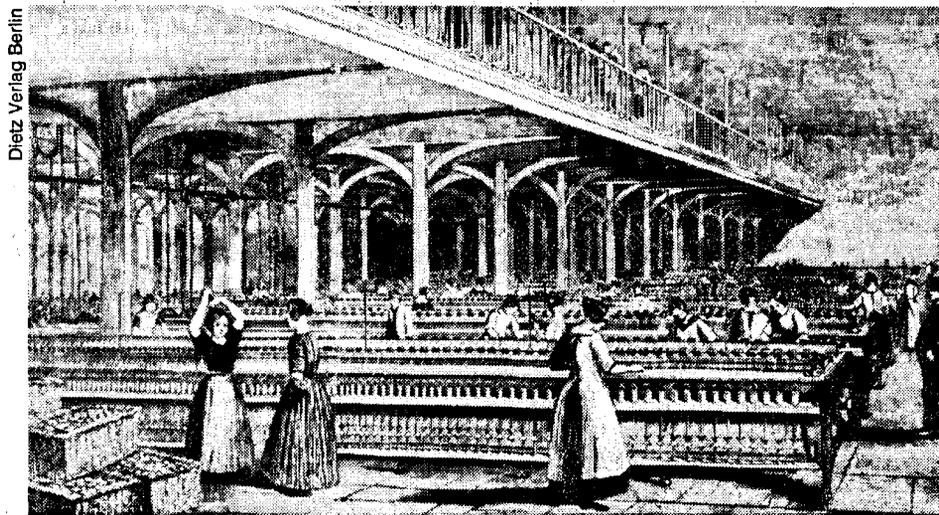
influence. Like Rousseau, Feuerbach believed that man is naturally good and has a natural affinity with other members of his species. Indeed, the term "species" is central to Feuerbach's conceptual framework. What property was for Rousseau, religion is for Feuerbach: that point where mankind turned down the path of error leading to all the wretchedness and evils of the modern world.

In Feuerbach's view, men ascribe to a supernatural entity called god the actual and potential powers which they themselves possess. Men ascribe to an otherworldly place called heaven the happiness and social harmony which is possible on earth. Feuerbach advocated what he called the "religion of humanity." He called on all men to give up their illusion in an otherworldly god as well as their individual egoism and live for the collective well-being of the human species. "Only community constitutes humanity," he insisted, "that the thou belongs to the perfection of the I, that men are required to constitute humanity" (quoted in John Edward Toews, *Hegelianism: The Path Toward Dialectical Humanism, 1805-1841* [1980]).

Feuerbach was an extremely contradictory thinker in that he was simultaneously more advanced and more backward than Hegel. He rejected Hegel's idealism in favor of a thoroughgoing materialism. But in doing so, he also rejected Hegel's understanding of the dialectical development of man's social nature. Instead, Feuerbach reverted to a crude version of Enlightenment materialism based on the notion of an unchanging human nature.

In later years, Marx would point to both the progressive and retrogressive influence of Feuerbach on German intellectual life. In the 1860s, he wrote to the German workers' leader and radical J. B. Schweitzer: "Compared with Hegel, Feuerbach is certainly poor. Nevertheless he was epoch-making after Hegel because he laid stress on certain points which were disagreeable to the Christian consciousness but important for the progress of criticism, points which Hegel had left in semi-obscurity" (Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* Volume 20 [1984]). However, a few years later Marx commented in a letter to Engels: "The gentlemen in Germany (with the exception of theological reactionaries) believe Hegel's dialectic to be a 'dead dog.' Feuerbach has much on his conscience in this respect" (*Collected Works* Volume 42 [1987]).

British textile mill in mid-1800s. Rapid growth of industrial proletariat shaped the development of scientific socialism by Marx and Engels.



Dietz Verlag Berlin



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Friedrich Engels

The difference between Marx's dialectical materialism and Feuerbach's naturalistic materialism is clear in their respective views of religion. Here is Marx's justly famous position on this question:

"Religious distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and also the *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.

"To abolish religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is to demand their *real* happiness. The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the *demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions.*"

— "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction"

The key phrase here is a "state of affairs which needs illusions." For Feuerbach and the entire tradition of Enlightenment rationalism, there are no conditions which need illusions. Illusions are deemed always and everywhere unnecessary and harmful, and can always be dispelled by scientific evidence and rational argument.

Marx understood that life, alas, is not so simple. Religion is what Engels later called false consciousness. False consciousness is a distortion or denial of objective reality necessarily conditioned by a given stage of social development. All ruling classes operate with some form of false consciousness. Thus slaveowners in the American South believed that blacks were innately inferior to whites. And they had to believe that in order to own and operate their slave plantations. White slaveowners could no more be convinced of racial equality through rational argument than they could be convinced to emancipate their slaves and devote their own lives to the well-being of humanity. Therein lay the basic fallacy of a "religion of humanity" which would be embraced by the oppressors as well as the oppressed, the exploiters as well as the exploited.

### Marx's Early View of the Proletariat

Feuerbach's influence on Marx was partial and transient. But in 1845 Marx entered into a political and intellectual partnership with Friedrich Engels which would last for four decades and alter the course of world history. As previously

noted, Engels was initially part of "the Free," a coterie of extreme left-Hegelian radicals. Like Marx, his political and theoretical views underwent a significant change when he was forced to leave the hothouse atmosphere of German academia and confront the real world of the class struggle. In 1843, Engels was sent by his father to learn the family business in a textile factory in Manchester, England. He thus acquired firsthand experience of an advanced industrial capitalist economy and of a mass movement of the industrial as well as artisan proletariat, the British Chartist movement.

It was Engels who introduced Marx to the importance of bourgeois economic theory (mainly British) in understanding the class structure of modern Europe and the struggle between labor and capital. However, I want to discuss another aspect of Engels' contribution to the development of scientific socialism because it is not generally recognized. As I've already indicated, upon becoming a communist Marx still viewed the proletariat through the prism of left-Hegelian idealism. In his first published work as a communist, the "Introduction" to his critique of Hegel's philosophy of law, he described the proletariat as

"a class with *radical chains*, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no *particular right* because no *particular wrong* but *wrong generally* is perpetrated against it... which does not stand in any one-sided antithesis to the consequences but in all-round antithesis to the premises of the German state; a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society."

Here the revolutionary role ascribed to the proletariat is presented entirely in negative terms, as the antithesis of existing society. Such a view was by no means unique to Marx but was then current in the left wing of the Hegelian left. For example, Edgar Bauer, a leading figure in "the Free," wrote at that time that the "poor, working and laboring classes of humanity" were destined to "destroy the present condition of the world" and "establish a new form of life" (quoted in Nicholas Lobkowitz, *Theory and Practice: History of a Concept from Aristotle to Marx* [1967]). For Marx at this point, just as for Edgar Bauer, there was no consideration of the *objective* condition of the proletariat in Germany, its relative social weight, its relation to other, more numerous classes such as the peasantry, its political consciousness.

In fact, the term "proletariat" is quite ambiguous as applied to Germany in the 1840s. Only a minority of wage laborers worked in factories. The majority worked in small shops. Many owned the tools of their trade and intended to go into business for themselves. Thus aspiring and potential members of the petty bourgeoisie made up a sizable proportion of the German proletariat. When the political situation opened up for a time during the Revolution of 1848, the mass of the German working class did *not* embrace the communist cause but rather supported economic policies, such as trade protectionism, intended to *arrest industrialization* and preserve a small-scale manufacturing sector. It was not until the 1870s that the socialist program acquired mass support among the German proletariat.

To better understand why Marx's initial attitude toward the proletariat was left-Hegelian, not materialist, it is useful to consider a contemporary young European radical intellectual, Alexander Herzen, the founder of Russian populism. Herzen, then living in St. Petersburg, read Hegel and left

Hegelians like Cieszkowski. He dubbed Hegelian philosophy "the algebra of revolution." But since there was no proletariat to speak of in Russia at the time, Herzen assigned to the peasantry the revolutionary role of overthrowing the tsarist autocracy and, on the morrow, establishing a new socialist society. Had a left-Hegelian intellectual lived in the American South of the time, he doubtless would have seen in the black slaves the force destined to emancipate not only themselves but all of humanity.

All leftist radicals who adhered to or were influenced by Hegelian philosophy sought to locate that social group which corresponded to the "negation of existing society." However, the fact that a group of people are exploited and oppressed does not in itself imbue them with the capacity to overthrow the existing oppressive social order, much less to reconstruct society on a just and egalitarian basis.

### Class Struggle and Communist Consciousness

Engels' experience in England was of critical importance in moving from left-Hegelian idealism to a materialist and dialectical understanding of the proletariat. Because British Chartism was a genuine mass workers movement, it reflected the political *heterogeneity* of the actual proletariat, with factions ranging from moderate reformers on the right to Jacobin communists on the left. Many workers were devoutly religious, respectful toward the monarchy and supportive of the British empire, while others were "red republicans" who commemorated the French Revolution. Workers with such different outlooks might well be employed in the same factory and even work side by side.

The revolutionary capacity of the proletariat is not simply given by the condition of exploitation but is a product of its historical development in which consciousness plays a central role. It may seem odd and unnecessary to quote at length from a work as famous and widely read as the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, but it is not generally appreciated or recognized how different the treatment of the working class is in the *Manifesto* than in Marx's first writings as a communist. Here the analysis of the proletariat is genuinely materialist and dialectical, sketching out the interrelation between its objective and subjective development:

"The proletariat goes through various stages of development. With its birth begins its struggle with the bourgeoisie. At first the contest is carried on by individual labourers, then by the

workpeople of a factory, then by the operatives of one trade, in one locality, against the individual bourgeois who directly exploits them. They direct their attacks not against the bourgeois conditions of production, but against the instruments of production themselves; they destroy imported wares that compete with their labour, they smash to pieces machinery, they set factories ablaze, they seek to restore by force the vanished status of the workman of the Middle Ages.

"At this stage the labourers still form an incoherent mass scattered over the whole country, and broken up by their mutual competition....

"But with the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more.... The unceasing improvement of machinery, ever more rapidly developing, makes their livelihood more and more precarious; the collisions between individual workmen and individual bourgeois take more and more the character of collisions between two classes. Thereupon the workers begin to form combinations (Trades' Unions) against the bourgeois; they club together in order to keep up the rate of wages; they found permanent associations in order to make provision beforehand for these occasional revolts....

"Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever-expanding union of the workers."

It was in the *Manifesto* that Marx for the first time defined the *main obstacles to communist consciousness* among an industrial proletariat which no longer had illusions about restoring small-scale artisan production:

"The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole."

One hundred and fifty years later this is still a pretty good definition of the difference between us communists and all other working-class tendencies.

### Marxism Is Not Teleology

I want to conclude by discussing a common misconception about Marxism. The reason that it's common is that it represents the convergence between the falsification of Marxism by bourgeois ideologues and by Stalinist ideologues. This is the notion that Marx held communism to be the necessary final stage of social development, that Marxism is a socialist



Illustrated London News

**Chartist demonstration in London, 1848. Engels was actively involved in British Chartism, the first mass movement of the industrial proletariat.**



Novosti

**1917: Revolutionary soldiers march through Moscow under the banner of Communism. The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia marked the first successful conquest of political power by the proletariat.**

version of Hegelian teleology. Thus the Scottish Hegel scholar J. N. Findlay asserts: "There is certainly also a strong strain of teleological idealism in the supposedly scientific materialism of Marx."

While Stalinist intellectuals would never have described Marx as a teleological idealist, in substance that is how they presented his views. The English-language *Collected Works* of Marx and Engels was edited by a team of high-level Soviet, British and American Stalinist academics and intellectuals. The preface to Volume 5, which contains *The German Ideology* and was published in 1976, informs us "that the development of the class struggle must necessarily lead to a communist revolution carried out by the proletariat." What makes this statement especially ironic today is I'm dead certain that all of those Soviet academics involved in this project who are still alive now think that communist revolution is a utopian fantasy and that capitalism is forever.

From their first writings to their last, Marx and Engels rejected the idea that proletarian revolution leading to communism was guaranteed in advance, so to speak, by some impersonal and transcendent law of history. Their first joint work, *The Holy Family*, written in 1845, states:

"History does *nothing*, it 'possesses *no* immense wealth,' it 'wages *no* battles.' It is *man*, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; 'history' is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve *its own* aims; history is *nothing but* the activity of man pursuing his aims."

*The Holy Family* was and remains an obscure and little-read work. But one of the most famous passages in Marx's most

famous work, the *Communist Manifesto*, states that while the class struggle is inevitable its outcome is not:

"Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes."

During the late 19th century, a vulgar misinterpretation of Marx's theory of historical development gained widespread currency. According to this notion, Marx supposedly held that all peoples had to go through certain fixed stages of development: primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism. In the 1870s, a Russian populist intellectual, M. K. Mikhailovsky, denounced Marx for maintaining that Russia had to go through a prolonged period of capitalist development before reaching socialism.

In a letter to a Russian populist journal, Marx repudiated any such position and any such methodology. He criticized Mikhailovsky for metamorphosing "my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into an historico-philosophic theory of the general path every people is fated to tread, whatever the historical circumstances in which it finds

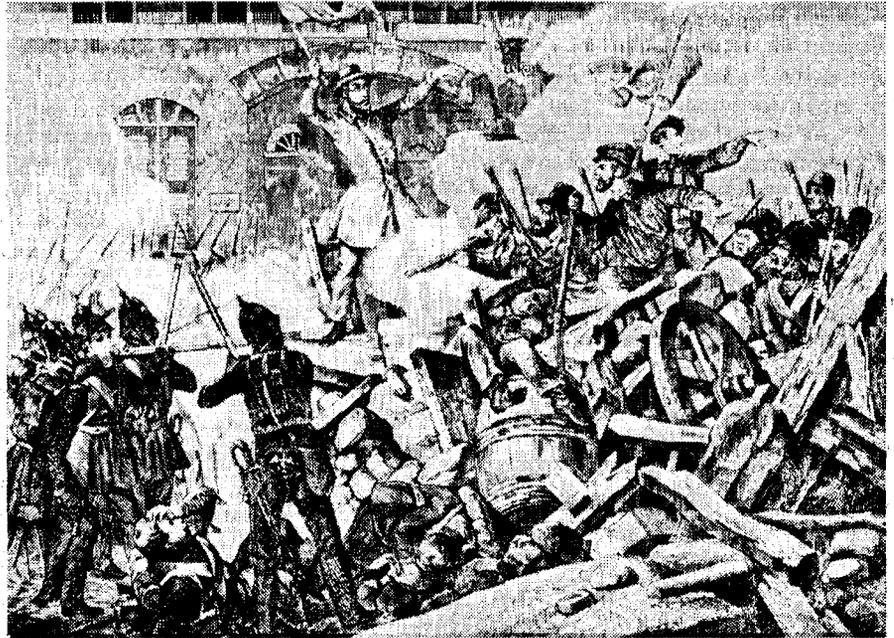
itself, in order that it may ultimately arrive at the form of economy which ensures, together with the greatest expansion of the productive powers of social labour, the most complete development of man." Marx went on to dismiss Hegelian-type teleology as "a general historico-philosophic theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being super-historical" (Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence* [1965]).

Engels, who survived Marx by 12 years and died in 1895, was a keen student of the developments in modern technology; he was one of the first people in London to get a telephone. By the late 1880s, Engels recognized that new military technology meant that a major European war would be qualitatively more destructive than in the past. He predicted:

"The only war left for Prussia-Germany to wage will be a world war, a world war, moreover, of an extent and violence hitherto unimagined. Eight to ten million soldiers will be at each other's throats and in the process they will strip Europe barer than a swarm of locusts. The depredations of the Thirty Years' War compressed into three to four years and extended over the entire continent; famine, disease, the universal lapse into barbarism..."

— Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* Volume 26 (1990)

With the development and deployment of nuclear weapons, it is obvious that an all-out war between capitalist states would likely destroy civilization and might well lead to the annihilation of the human race. There is no god, there is no natural law, there are no laws of history which ensure the victory of communism or even the survival of mankind. That's up to us, nothing and no one but us. With that uncomfortable truth, I'll conclude. ■



The Manifesto was published as the revolutions of 1848 erupted across Europe. Workers defend barricades in Frankfurt, Germany. Dietz Verlag Berlin

# 150 Years of the Communist Manifesto

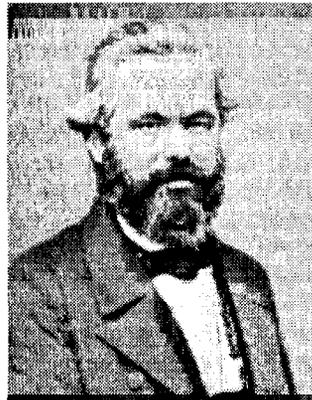
The *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 opens with the statement that a spectre is haunting Europe, the spectre of communism. Today the world's bourgeoisies, particularly the American, would have you believe that communism is dead and that mankind is at the "end of history." The imperialists of course are still celebrating the recent destruction of the Soviet Union, ignominiously served up to them by Stalinism. But if you strip away their ideological hype and examine their deeds, we see the capitalist rulers are still haunted by the October Revolution of 1917, by that same old spectre of 1848. For the greatest confirmation of the *Manifesto* was precisely the Russian October Revolution of 1917, a revolution which inscribed on its banner the *Manifesto's* concluding slogan: "Workers of the World, Unite!"

Communism is far from dead. One need only examine the pathology of contemporary capitalism through the prism of the *Communist Manifesto* to see the great prescience of this document, which marked the programmatic founding of modern communism.

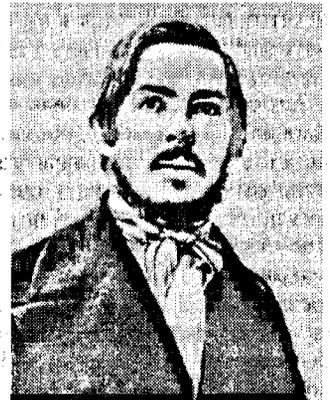
Thus in this supposed period of the "death of communism," the Chicago police are actively campaigning to reconstitute their Red Squad, a unit that was formally disbanded some years ago. The example is trivial, but nonetheless characteristic of the current period. Since the destruction of the Soviet Union, the capitalists everywhere have been running amok, feeling there is nothing to restrain

them. In an expression of intensified interimperialist rivalry and competition, the bourgeoisies have been ratcheting up the rate of exploitation of the working class across Europe, North America, Asia and Latin America. This has led to accelerating impoverishment of working people around the world, as the few grow even richer.

Hand in hand with this accumulating social tension, we see another feature of present-day capitalism—a massive



Beard



Dietz Verlag Berlin

Communist revolutionaries Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, founders of scientific socialism.

increase in the forces of state repression. In the United States, this vastly augmented police apparatus has become a patently parasitic and self-conscious layer, part of an immense system of capitalist injustice which has consigned a whole generation of minority and immigrant youth to the hellholes of prison. More and more, the bourgeoisie cultivates chauvinism and racism to divide and weaken the working class and to sap its revolutionary will. And commensurately, there is a sinister resurgence of extreme reaction in the form of fascist bands, capitalism's last line of defense. The bourgeoisie's real motto is not that "communism is dead"; it's "October 1917—never again!"

### Origins of the *Communist Manifesto*

The *Communist Manifesto* is one of the first two mature works of Marxism and the founding document of the communist movement. It was commissioned in November 1847 by the Communist League, a small international organization of proletarian-artisan communists, as its statement of principles. The most famous account of the genesis of the *Manifesto* is one written in 1885 by Marx's lifelong collaborator and comrade-in-arms, Friedrich Engels. The Bolshevik David Ryazanov, founder of the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow, gave an amusing synopsis of this account in his short 1927 book, *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*:

"Engels' story can be summarised as follows: Once there lived Marx and Engels, two German philosophers and politicians, who were forced to abandon their native land. They lived in France and they lived in Belgium. They wrote learned books, which first attracted the attention of the intelligentsia, and then fell into the hands of the workers. One fine morning the workers turned to these two savants who had been sitting in their cloisters remote from the loathsome business of practical activity and, as was proper for the guardians of scientific thought, had been proudly awaiting the coming of the workers. And the day arrived; the workers came and invited Marx and Engels to enter their League. But Marx and Engels declared that they would join the League only on condition that the League accept their programme. The workers agreed, they organised the Communist League and forthwith proceeded to authorise Marx and Engels to prepare the *Communist Manifesto*."

What Ryazanov objects to in Engels' account is that it overlooks the very persistent organizational efforts from 1845 onwards, especially by Marx, to win proletarian communists to his and Engels' views. In addition to being very far-sighted thinkers, both Marx and Engels were active revolutionists who early on had links to the forebear of the Communist League, the League of the Just. Engels had also sought links with militant workers gathered in the Chartist movement in Britain, where he had done ground-breaking work on the conditions of life of the proletariat under modern capitalism.

Particularly as their ideas began to solidify in 1845-46, Marx and Engels sought out working-class communists with the aim of forging an organization around those ideas, an organization that from its outset was to be built upon an international foundation. One should understand that at the time there was a clear distinction drawn between communism and socialism. Socialism was considered a bourgeois doctrine, identified with the various experimental/utopian and reformist schemes of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideologues. The communists clearly defined themselves as those who were for the revolutionary overthrow of the existing order and for the establishment of an egalitarian society. The communism of that era originated in a far-left split

from French Jacobinism, exemplified by Gracchus Babeuf and Filippo Buonarroti.

The League of the Just consisted of workers, mainly exiled German artisans, located in London, Brussels, Paris and a few outposts in Germany. These were not mainly modern proletarians working in large-scale mechanized factories. But nonetheless, and to their credit, they were won over to Marx and Engels' conceptions of the nature of modern capitalist society. The League of the Just had inscribed on its banner the slogan, "All Men Are Brothers!" When it embraced Marx's standpoint and transformed itself into the Communist League, it adopted the *Manifesto*'s ringing call, "Workers of the World, Unite!"

When the *Manifesto* was commissioned in November 1847, everyone was expecting that Europe was about to erupt in revolution. Yet despite this widely felt sense of urgency Marx, as was apparently his wont, took some time to write this document. He was then living in exile in Brussels, while the leadership of the Communist League resided in London. In late January, they sent Marx a testy and impatient letter which read:

"The Central Committee hereby directs the District Committee of Brussels to notify Citizen Marx that if the *Manifesto* of the Communist Party, which he consented, at the last Congress, to draw up, does not reach London before Tuesday, February 1, further measures will be taken against him. In case Citizen Marx does not write the *Manifesto*, the central committee requests the immediate return of the documents which were turned over to him by the congress."

The letter and the *Manifesto* crossed in the mail, the latter arriving literally just in time for the outbreak of the expected revolution. It first erupted in Switzerland, spreading rapidly to Italy and Paris, and from there to the Rhineland, then Prussia, thence to Austria and Hungary.

The *Manifesto* was worth the wait. It really is the first systematic explication of scientific socialism, of what modern communism stands for. As Engels explained in 1883, the year Marx died, the basic thought in the *Manifesto*—which "belongs solely and exclusively to Marx"—was the understanding that the

"economic production and structure of society of every historical epoch necessarily arising therefrom constitute the foundation for the political and intellectual history of the epoch; that consequently (ever since the dissolution of primeval communal ownership of land) all history has been a history of class struggles, of struggles between exploited and exploiting, between dominated and dominating classes at various stages of social development; that this struggle, however, has now reached a stage where the exploited and oppressed class (the proletariat) can no longer emancipate itself from the class which exploits and oppresses it (the bourgeoisie), without at the same time forever freeing the whole of society from exploitation, oppression and class struggles."

The previous systems of egalitarianism, of primitive communism based on distribution, of the sundry utopian and reform schemes of various ideologues earlier in the 19th century, were superseded. The whole understanding of society was placed by Marx on a materialist basis.

### The Rise of Modern Industrial Capitalism

Marx's views did not spring from his brow ready made, but were the result of study, struggle and historical experience. Russian revolutionary leader V.I. Lenin noted that the three constituent parts of Marxism were classical German philosophy, classical English political economy, and French socialism as it was up to that time, including its



Bullioz

**The Great French Revolution of 1789: working women of Paris lead march on Versailles.**

organizational doctrines. That is to say, Marxism could not have arisen as a set of ideas at some earlier juncture of history, but rather grew both out of its historical antecedents and the real material conditions and struggles of the time, including those of the very new industrial working class.

Capitalism had been around in its mercantile form for well over two centuries before the *Manifesto* was written, but it was just then beginning to extend and transform itself outside of Britain into modern large-scale industrial manufacture ("machinofacture"), using instruments such as steam power to mass-produce goods in the factory system. In 1847, Britain had 850 miles of railroad. That was to increase by several orders of magnitude over the next 25 years.

The *Manifesto* makes the point that the history of all human society, past and present, has been the history of class struggle. The recognition of the role of class struggle was not a discovery of Marx. Bourgeois historians of the Great French Revolution had begun to view the class struggle as important in history. In a letter to his comrade Joseph Weydemeyer in 1852, Marx explained what his specific contribution had been:

"What I did that was new was to prove: 1) that the *existence of classes* is only bound up with *particular historical phases in the development of production*, 2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to *the dictatorship of the proletariat*, 3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*."

This is a very succinct summing up of the *Manifesto*. Commenting on this statement, Lenin observed that the theory of the class struggle is in fact acceptable to the bourgeoisie, that those who only recognize the class struggle are not Marxists but still operate within the bounds of bourgeois thinking and bourgeois politics. What is unacceptable to the bourgeoisie is Marx's recognition that this class struggle must lead to the dictatorship of the proletariat, and from there to the abolition of class society. This is the main distinction between the doctrines of Marx and those of the reformists and the various schools of bourgeois historiography.

### **Dialectical Materialism vs. Idealism**

Following publication of the *Manifesto*, Marx spent the rest of his years elaborating and refining and, where necessary, correcting the conceptions he had developed in the light of his subsequent experiences, struggles and study.

Materialism is at the core of Marxism. Marx rejected all forms of idealism, the doctrine that thought is primary and the world is simply a reflection of thought. Religion, metaphysical idealism, social Darwinism, etc., are all in different ways expressions of the false consciousness of the ruling class and its various strata.

Engels succinctly summarized the anti-metaphysical, dialectical materialist outlook of Marxism:

"The world is not to be comprehended as a complex of ready-made *things*, but as a complex of *processes* in which things, apparently stable no less than their mind image in our heads, the concepts, go through uninterrupted change of coming into being and passing away."

Engels goes on to say, "But to acknowledge this fundamental thought in words and to apply it in reality in detail to each domain of investigation are two different things." Lenin put it a little more pithily when he observed that a formal knowledge of dialectics will help you to think about the world as much as a knowledge of physiology will aid your digestion of food.

To understand phenomena they must be examined in their concrete mediations, in their interrelationships, in their contradictions and development, in their totality. Thus the dialectical philosophy that Marx and Engels took from Hegel and firmly anchored in materialism accepts nothing as final, absolute or sacred. As Engels noted, in commenting on the revolutionary kernel contained in Hegel's philosophy, dialectics "reveals the transitory character of everything and in everything and nothing can endure before it except the uninterrupted process of becoming and passing away. And dialectical philosophy itself is nothing more than the mere reflection of this process in the thinking brain."

What Marx set out to do—and accomplished—was to bring the science of society into harmony with its materialist foundations. The bourgeoisie, particularly in its current state of decay and despair, does everything to obfuscate the point.

It is inconceivable that one could have Marxism without certain key developments in modern science and production. The proletariat is a historically determined class, one unknown in its modern form in previous historical periods. As Marx noted:

"In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces."

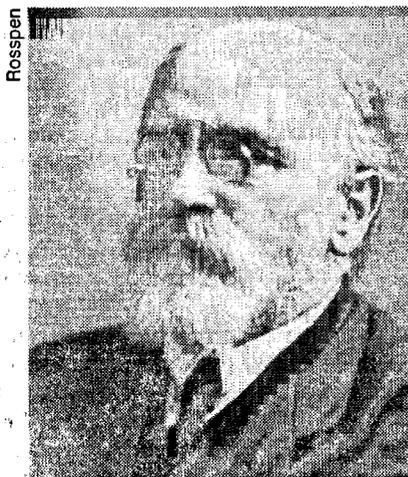
Marx stated that the sum total of the relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society. On this foundation arises a legal and political superstructure and corresponding forms of social consciousness.

This is the fundamental discovery of Marx. You cannot really understand modern society or any society without adopting such a viewpoint. Marxism represents an enormous leap in human understanding. Previously the study of history had concentrated on the role of individuals or ideologies or religions. But such study really did not lay bare the dynamics and processes. For the first time, Marxism gave the working class the tools to understand society and to change it.

Thus in the *Manifesto* Marx cogently explains what capitalism is, how this new system came into being, and why and how it was revolutionizing the relations of production, revolutionizing the relations between people, revolutionizing the planet. The *Manifesto* focuses on the capitalist organization of production in which labor power is treated as a commodity on the market. The workers have nothing to sell but their labor power, the capitalists have capital. Marx shows that the source of surplus value (profit) is really an appropriation of part of that labor power by the capitalists.

Commodity exchange per se does not generate surplus value. A commodity is exchanged for money, which is really concentrated labor power. But the profit made from the sale

David Ryazanov  
edited an  
authoritative  
annotated version  
of the *Communist  
Manifesto*.



of that commodity does not come from the exchange itself but from the value of the labor invested in its production. A worker who works 12 hours a day has to work maybe six hours producing goods that when exchanged on the market will cover the cost of reproducing his labor. The other six hours of his work is solely for the benefit of the capitalist, who appropriates this surplus.

## The Revolutions of 1848

As I noted, the *Manifesto* appeared coincident with the onset of the great European-wide wave of revolutions in 1848, but nevertheless too late to have much of an impact on the actual course of events. When revolution erupted in Paris in late February, a frightened Belgian government expelled the communist exiles living in Brussels. Marx and his comrades moved to Paris and began actively preparing for intervention into the revolutionary events that had

quickly spilled over into Germany.

German workers had congregated in Paris in large numbers, and there were intense debates about how to intervene in the unfolding German revolution. One group, led by Georg Herwegh and the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, organized a revolutionary legion to invade Germany. Marx instead argued for revolutionaries to enter Germany individually in order to participate in the upheaval. Herwegh and Bakunin pressed ahead with their legion, which was soundly defeated at the border by Prussian troops. Meanwhile Marx, Engels and their comrades proceeded as planned, with Marx and Engels ending up in Cologne, in the Rhineland.

Cologne was chosen for a number of reasons. The revolutionary upsurge was tolerated by the local bourgeoisie, who in fact petitioned the Prussian autocracy in Berlin to grant concessions. Cologne was the most developed part of Germany. It was also the site of the first radical political organ of the German bourgeoisie, the 1842 *Rheinische Zeitung* edited by Marx. All in all, it was the place which promised more freedom of action and a greater latitude for propaganda and agitation.

Rather than attempt the immediate organization of a communist party, Marx and Engels planned to utilize the radical bourgeois-democratic organizations as a means of cohering workingmen's circles. Thus during the initial period of the 1848 German Revolution, Marx and Engels blocked with and entered the extreme left wing of the bourgeois democracy. Acting as open communists, they managed to capture the central organ of the radical bourgeoisie, the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, transforming it into an organ of the German proletariat—a point that did not escape the notice of the bourgeois democrats. Within a few months, all of the paper's original stockholders had abandoned them.

Marx and Engels' orientation put them at organizational cross-purposes with the Cologne Workingmen's Union, which embraced most of the city's workers. It was led by a physician named Gottschalk, who, though not a communist, opposed any cooperation with the bourgeoisie. At the same time, Marx's supporters were also an active faction within this formation.

Marx and Engels expected the German bourgeois revolution to be the immediate precursor of a proletarian revolution. Their perspective, as outlined in the *Manifesto*, was to join hands in the first instance with the revolutionary wing of the German bourgeoisie "against the absolute monarchy, the feudal squirearchy, and the petty bourgeoisie."

The revolutionaries of the time, including Marx, based themselves on the experience of the Great French Revolution of 1789. The French Revolution was a protracted affair. From 1789, when the Parisian masses stormed the Bastille, the revolution moved through a series of increasingly radical stages. In 1792, the threat of an invasion by a counterrevolutionary coalition of European powers galvanized the population, leading to the proclamation of the Republic. The following year, the king was executed and the left-wing Jacobins came to power under conditions of revolutionary war. Marx and Engels believed that a democratic revolution and universal suffrage in the circumstances of 1848 would lead quickly to the rule of the proletariat and the expropriation of the bourgeoisie.

The course of the 1848 Revolutions was in fact quite different. In France, the peasantry voted in a reactionary





New York Public Library

1839 Chartist uprising in Wales, drowned in blood by British troops.

Marx and Engels denounced the “unity-mongering” of the petty-bourgeois democrats, who “strive to entangle the workers in a party organisation in which general social-democratic phrases predominate, behind which their special interests are concealed and in which the particular demands of the proletariat may not be brought for the sake of beloved peace.” More than 80 years later, in the 1930s, the Stalinists employed the same artifices under the rubric of the “popular front” to fend off workers revolutions in Spain and France. What Marx and Engels said of unity with the petty-bourgeois democrats of their day applied with equal force to the Stalinists’ later popular-front betrayals:

“Such a union would turn out solely to their advantage and altogether to the disadvantage of the proletariat. The proletariat would lose its whole independent, laboriously achieved position and once more sink down to being an appendage of official bourgeois democracy.”

Marx and Engels instead called for the creation of independent workers organizations—both secret and open—alongside the official democrats, adding: “In the case of a struggle against a common adversary no special union is required. As soon as such an adversary has to be fought directly, the interests of both parties, for the moment, coincide and, as previously, so also in the future, this connection, calculated to last only for the moment, will arise of itself.”

This is a seminal document. And Lenin’s fondness for the 1850 circulars is not surprising, permeated as they are with revolutionary spirit and intransigence. In that regard, they remind me of Lenin’s own writings on the lessons of the 1905 Moscow uprising, which are too little known. There he

makes the point that the culmination of the Russian Revolution of 1905 was not the soviets nor the general strikes, but the Moscow workers going over to an insurrection against the tsarist autocracy. That was the real dress rehearsal for 1917.

In their 5 March 1850 document, Marx and Engels pointed to the necessity of arming the workers. In a clear change from their position of a year earlier, they also stressed the need for the workers to put forward their own candidates in elections—even when there was no chance of winning—in order to preserve the class independence of the proletariat, to gauge their own strength and to bring their revolutionary position and party standpoint to public attention. “If the German workers are not able to attain power and achieve their own class interests without completely going through a lengthy revolutionary development,” Marx and Engels wrote, “they at least know for a certainty that the first act of this approaching revolutionary drama will coincide with the direct victory of their own class in France and will be very much accelerated by it.” The document closes: “Their battle cry must be: the Revolution in Permanence.”

Tellingly, there are two political tendencies who really don’t like these two documents. One is the Mensheviks, who never transcended Marx’s early tactics in 1848—to function as the extreme left wing of the bourgeois-democratic revolution—which accorded very well with their later schema of revolution by stages. The other tendency is the Stalinists, Mensheviks of the second mobilization, who found Marx’s exposition on permanent revolution to be anathema to their anti-internationalist doctrine of “socialism in one country.”

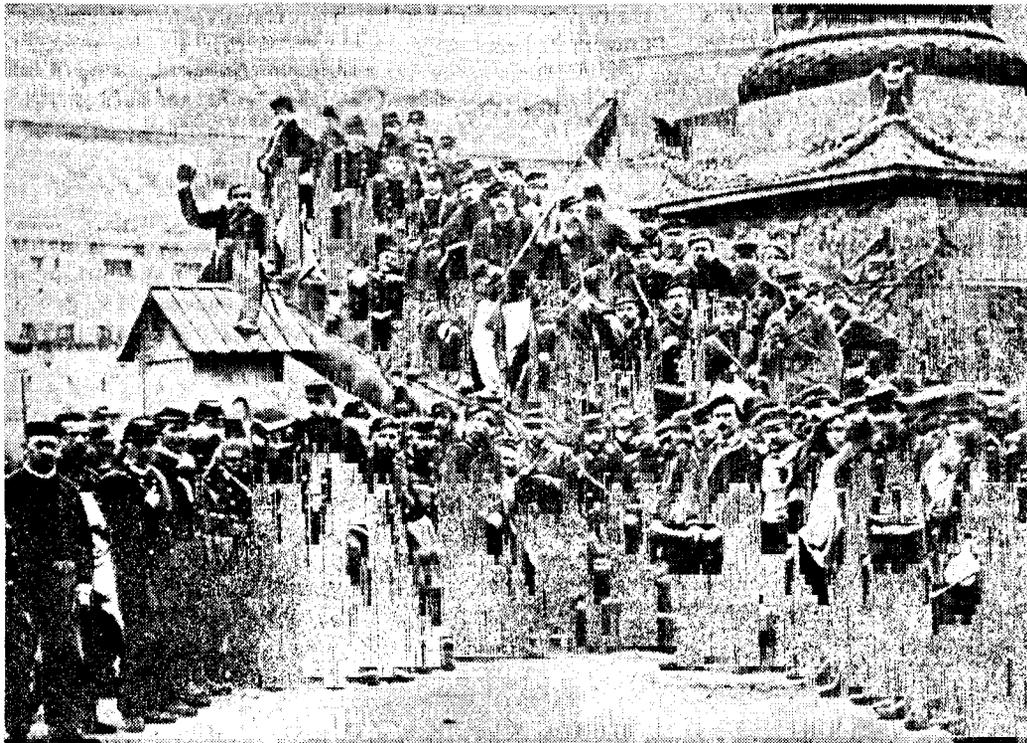
Thus, commenting on the first of the 1850 circulars, the famous Menshevik archivist Boris Nikolayevsky writes in *Karl Marx: Man and Fighter*: “Whether the document in all its details really represents Marx’s ideas is difficult to decide.” Basically, Nikolayevsky views the document as an aberration flowing from an unrealistic assessment of the revolutionary possibilities in Germany in 1850, noting that Marx’s optimistic projections of a resurgence of revolution led him into a political bloc with “left” communists such as August Willich. To buttress his argument, Nikolayevsky remarks that Marx at the same time founded the Société Universelle des Communistes Révolutionnaires, which included not only the Communist League and the British Chartists, but also the followers of French insurrectionary Auguste Blanqui. According to Nikolayevsky, for whom Blanquism was nearly synonymous with Bolshevism:

“The fact that Marx accepted this kind of revolutionism, which he had condemned so violently both before and afterwards, and was so utterly foreign in every way to the essential nature of proletarian revolution, the fact that he formed an alliance with the Blanquists, proves better than anything else the extent to which his judgement had been affected by the breakdown of his immeasurable hopes.”

In fact, what this comment graphically demonstrates is the chasm between Marx the revolutionary and Nikolayevsky the Menshevik reformist.

### From 1848 to the Paris Commune

It is important for comrades to appreciate the historic circumstances in which the *Communist Manifesto* was written, and that its authors extended their analysis based on the subsequent experiences and development of the class struggle.



Comblair

March 1871 uprising which ushered in the Paris Commune, hailed by Marx as the first "working-class government."

Thus, in grappling with the events which followed the 1848 French Revolution, Marx came to a more precise understanding of the bourgeois state than that contained in the *Manifesto*. In *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, completed in 1852, Marx wrote:

"This executive power with its enormous bureaucratic and military organisation, with its ingenious state machinery, embracing wide strata, with a host of officials numbering half a million, besides an army of another half million, this appalling parasitic body, which enmeshes the body of French society like a net and chokes all its pores, sprang up in the days of the absolute monarchy, with the decay of the feudal system, which it helped to hasten.... The first French Revolution, with its task of breaking all separate local, territorial, urban and provincial powers in order to create the civil unity of the nation, was bound to develop what the absolute monarchy had begun: centralisation.... Finally, in its struggle against the revolution, the parliamentary republic found itself compelled to strengthen, along with the repressive measures, the resources and centralisation of governmental power. All revolutions perfected this machine instead of smashing it."

Referring to this passage, Lenin wrote: "In this remarkable argument Marxism takes a tremendous step forward compared with the *Communist Manifesto*. In the latter the question of the state is still treated in an extremely abstract manner, in the most general terms and expressions. In the above-quoted passage, the question is treated in a concrete manner, and the conclusion is extremely precise, definite, practical and palpable: all previous revolutions perfected the state machine, whereas it must be broken, smashed." Marx had made the same point in 1871:

"If you look at the last chapter of my *Eighteenth Brumaire*, you will find that I declare that the next attempt of the French Revolution will be no longer, as before, to transfer the bureaucratic military machine from one hand to another but *to smash* it, and this is the preliminary condition for every real people's revolution on the Continent. And this is what our heroic Party comrades in Paris are attempting."

But even then, Marx did not have a clear idea of what would

replace the bourgeois state which had to be smashed. That question was answered by the experience of the 1871 Paris Commune.

In 1870, the French bourgeoisie, led by the Louis Bonaparte of the *18th Brumaire*, was provoked into a war with Prussia. The rather attenuated calls of liberty, equality and fraternity by the French Bonapartists of the second mobilization were answered by the Prussians' artillery, cavalry and infantry. Following the decisive French defeat at the Battle of Sedan, a weak Republican government negotiated with the Prussians. Marx cautioned against a revolutionary uprising by the Parisian masses in reaction to this defeat, warning that it could only be a foolhardy adventure.

But the Parisian proletariat, with the German armies at the gates of the city and the government surrendering, rose up in a heroic act, threw out the very weak remnants of the bourgeoisie and instituted the first workers government in history. The Paris Commune lasted only a couple of months, but sufficiently long to establish that the workers cannot lay their hands on the ready-made machinery of the state to turn it to their purpose, but must instead smash it and replace it with a new type of government, a government of the working people organized collectively.

Thus the *Manifesto* gives us a general summary of history, which teaches us to regard the state as an organ of class rule and leads to the inevitable conclusion that the proletariat cannot overthrow the bourgeoisie without first winning political power. But a lot of the blanks had to be filled in by the concrete experiences of proletarian struggle.

### Marxism: A Guide to Action

In his "Ninety Years of the *Communist Manifesto*" (October 1937), Trotsky observed that "this pamphlet astounds us even today by its freshness." He enumerated a number of key points "which retain their full force today": the

materialist conception of history, the theory of the class struggle, the understanding of capitalism as a specific stage in the economic development of society, the tendency toward immiseration of the proletariat, the crises of capital (which include not only cyclical economic dislocations but also political crises and interimperialist wars).

It is the *Manifesto* which first taught the workers that the capitalist state is nothing but "a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie." It taught that every class struggle is a political struggle, as against the conceptions of the anarchists and syndicalists. It asserted, against the arguments of reformism, that the proletariat can't conquer power within the legal framework established by the bourgeoisie. It boldly proclaimed that the workers have no fatherland and that communists stand for the forcible overthrow of all existing conditions, for the socialist transformation of society, for internationalism, and for the withering away of the state. The contrast between the *Manifesto's* ringing call, "Workers of the World, Unite!" and the Stalinist doctrine of "socialism in one country" could not be starker.

For revolutionaries, Marxism is a living science and a guide to action, not a set of ossified dogmas to be repeated by rote. Thus Trotsky also spoke of what had to be modified in the *Manifesto* in light of experience, and also pointed to certain omissions. Contrary to Marx's prediction at the time, there was only a *relative* retardation of the productive forces of capitalist development. The Revolutions of 1848 ultimately consolidated the economic rule of the bourgeoisie, although in a combined and uneven way. But there was an enormous expansion of productive forces up to the period before World War I. So there was a telescoping of the historical development of capitalism in the *Manifesto*.

What was also made clear by the experience of the Paris Commune was that without the leadership of a revolutionary party the working class can't ultimately wrest power from the bourgeoisie. (One of Marx's criticisms of the Commune was that it did not immediately take energetic measures for the breaking and suppression of bourgeois power.)

The *Manifesto* also did not deal with the interlinked questions of capitalist development and the degeneration of sections of the working class into a labor aristocracy. Marx certainly later became aware of this phenomenon in the case of the English working class, but hammering out the revolutionary party's relation to the trade unions, and their place in the struggle for revolution, required the experience of the workers movement ranging through the October Revolution.

The *Manifesto* assumes a capitalism of free competition. Later, when Marx wrote *Capital*, he delineated the tendency of capitalist free competition to turn into its opposite, namely monopoly capital, which finds its current expression in imperialist finance capital.

Trotsky further notes that the liquidation of the intermediate classes projected in the *Manifesto* did not happen. He points out that capitalism ruined more of the petty bourgeoisie than could be absorbed into the proletariat. And the capitalist state, itself a parasitic excrescence, self-consciously and artificially maintained a considerable petty-bourgeois layer. Aside from the vast layers of petty state functionaries and technicians, other examples are noteworthy. The Japanese bourgeoisie has for decades artificially maintained a large peasantry. In the U.S., the great Western water pro-

grams were undertaken by the bourgeoisie with the aim of drawing farmers to the region as a conscious alternative to building up an urban proletarian population.

Trotsky makes the point that legions of technicians, administrators, commercial employees—a whole new middle class—has grown up in a situation where capitalism's existence has been prolonged. He warns that this creates profound social contradictions, most sharply when this layer, facing ruin because of the economic impasse of capital, becomes a ready base for fascism.

Those of you who have read the *Manifesto* know that it contains a section with ten demands, demands that a quarter of a century later Marx and Engels were to criticize as "dated" and in need of revision. But as Trotsky points out, these demands constitute a revolutionary "transitional program" for their time, counterposed to the subsequent social-democratic conception of a "minimum program." As with Trotsky's 1938 Transitional Program, the aim was to advance a series of demands based on the objective needs of the proletariat, to mobilize them in struggle and to teach them the only conclusion: that the successful realization of these demands and of any hope for a real life for the working class depends on a workers revolution.

Trotsky also speaks of permanent revolution. Since 1848 the bourgeoisie has proven itself incapable of repeating the experience of the French Revolution of 1789. The complete sweeping away of all the feudal rubbish and the accomplishment of the historic tasks of the bourgeois revolution in the colonial and semicolonial countries is today the task of the working class. This was the conclusion Trotsky came to in tsarist Russia, with its weak and servile bourgeoisie and its preponderant peasant population. While the Mensheviks argued for subordinating the working class to the bourgeoisie, Trotsky recognized that the vast peasantry had to be mobilized behind the small but socially concentrated and cohesive proletariat, which was the only social force capable of carrying out even the agrarian revolution. Marx came to a similar conclusion in Germany in the mid-19th century, at a time when the proletariat was a minority of the population, arguing that a socialist revolution would have to be backed by some second edition of the Peasant War.

Another weakness in the *Manifesto*, noteworthy by its omission, is the national question, particularly as it applies to the backward colonial and semicolonial countries. Early on Marx and Engels thought, incorrectly it turned out, that the more advanced capitalist countries could play a progressive role in places such as Mexico or Algeria. They began to change their views over the issue of Ireland, recognizing that workers revolution in Britain could not occur as long as Ireland is kept in bondage.

Section Three of the *Manifesto*, under the heading "Socialist and Communist Literature," is undoubtedly exotic to the contemporary reader, as it refers to organizations that have long, long since passed from the stage of history. But it's useful to go back and review this material. With the final unraveling of the October Revolution, we are currently in a period of a big setback for the world proletariat. As a consequence, there is a tendency for the proletariat to be thrown back to more primitive conceptions of social struggle. And certainly some layers of youth, while disaffected by the more gross excrescences of capitalist society, have no understanding of Marxism and tend toward vague utopian

anarchoid sentiments not fundamentally different from those advanced by the precursors and early opponents of Marxism.

### Fight for New October Revolutions!

The finishing touches, in a way, on many of the conceptions of the *Communist Manifesto* and their implementation was really the October Revolution of 1917. And there's a reason for that. Lenin's Bolshevik Party grew up in a very unusual set of circumstances. Here was a party that had to confront a very wide-ranging and rapidly shifting series of challenges, from trade-union struggle to struggle against autocracy, that had to confront the national question in a large multinational empire. Periods of open revolutionary struggle, periods of exile, of underground work, of parliamentary work gave to the Bolshevik Party a set of experiences that were far richer than those in West Europe.

Just as Marx was not born a Marxist, Lenin did not become a Leninist overnight, nor did the Bolshevik Party suddenly appear on the scene fully fledged and tested. If you study the history of the Bolshevik Party, you can see a development. Lenin worked his way through conceptions inherited from Karl Kautsky and the German Social Democracy to the conception of the Leninist combat party. And at every stage this was accompanied by sharp struggle, internal and external, in defense of the program of Marxism.

This process found its culmination in the 1917 October Revolution, which occurred at the weakest link in the chain of world imperialism, toward the end of World War I. And the lessons of this revolution were codified in the early congresses of the Communist International. We very much are the party of the Russian Revolution, but we are also much more than that, because comrade Trotsky and the forces around him actually went on to struggle against a new phenomenon, the degeneration of the October Revolution. The Left Opposition was forged in struggle against the consolidation of the Stalinist bureaucracy, which itself was a direct consequence of the economic backwardness of Russia and the failure of the October Revolution to spread internationally.

So we are both the party of the Russian Revolution and the party of those who struggled to defend it against its Stalinist degeneration. The subsequent struggles of Trotsky—his generalization of the theory of permanent revolution based on the defeat of the Chinese Revolution in the

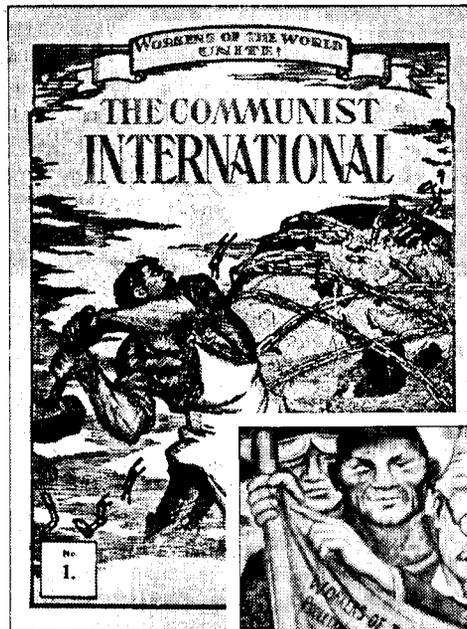


E. Schaumann

**"Workers of the world, unite!"**  
**Communists fight to forge world party of socialist revolution.**  
 From top: Founding of First International, 1864; 1875 congress of German Socialists, leading party of Second International founded in 1889; publication of Third International, 1919; Leon Trotsky, depicted in Diego Rivera mural, founded Fourth International in 1938.

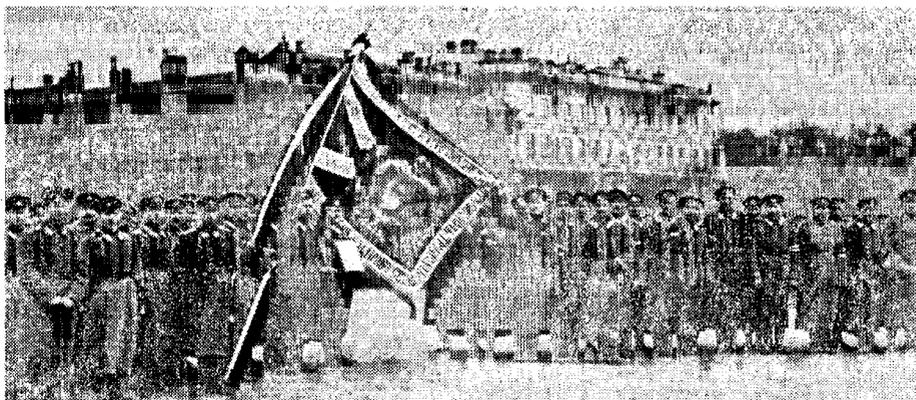


Verlag Kurt Desch



Diego Rivera





VAAP

**Workers and soldiers exchange banners in Petrograd on eve of 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.**

1920s, his elucidation of the tactic of the united front in the struggle against fascism in Germany, his struggles against the betrayals of the popular front in France and Spain in the 1930s—these all represent extremely valuable theoretical and programmatic accretions. Marxism is a living science. What is so remarkable about the *Manifesto* is that it retains so much of its vital relevance today. That is truly remarkable since it was written at the dawn of the age of modern industrial capitalism.

“Today the Soviet Union is no more, and I think China is on the skids. The question posed there is who will prevail: the proletariat throwing off the Stalinist bureaucracy that is increasingly moving toward capitalist restoration, or imperialist-backed counterrevolution. Trotsky, in *The Third International After Lenin*, addressed what he thought was an unlikely theoretical possibility, but unfortunately one that we confront in significant aspects today. He wrote: “Theoretically, to be sure, even a new chapter of a *general* capitalist progress in the most powerful, ruling, and leading countries is not excluded. But for this, capitalism would first have to overcome enormous barriers of a class as well as an inter-state character. It would have to strangle the proletarian revolution for a long time; it would have to enslave China completely, overthrow the Soviet republic, and so forth. We are still a long way removed from all this.” Not any more. And it raises even more acutely the dangers of interimperialist war.

But as much as the bourgeoisie whistle in the dark about the death of communism, don’t believe them for a moment, because the more farsighted of them don’t believe it for a moment. If their line is, “October 1917—never again!” our line is, “Again and again and again—one, two, many October Revolutions.” As revolutionary Marxists our object is not simply to understand the world, but to change it. But to be able to change it requires that we have an actual lever to effect a revolution, to rip up this rotten social system, which more and more threatens grave destruction if not extinction for mankind. That lever is a revolutionary workers party of the Leninist type, organized in a democratic-centralist Fourth International. Such parties cannot be simply proclaimed but must be forged in struggle.

And that requires a struggle as well against those who call themselves Marxists or Trotskyists while renouncing in practice the fundamental principles of the Marxist movement. Take, for example, the British Militant group, which now calls itself the Socialist Party. Their international resolution of a couple of years ago had three little propositions

which showed a touching faith in the bourgeois order. The first was that a revolutionary party is not necessary because the workers will one way or another, through trial and error, find their own way. They go on to say that there’ll be no nuclear war because the bourgeoisie is rational. And they also say there won’t be any fascism, because the bourgeoisie experienced Hitler. All of this is presented within a very “orthodox” framework, yet it is a complete revision of everything Marxists understand about the state, imperialism and fascism.

Then there is David North’s outfit, which currently styles itself the Socialist Equality Party. The Northites have taken to dismissing the unions as absolutely corrupt agencies of the bosses, in no way organizations of the working class. Yet the American bourgeoisie spends over one billion dollars a year in busting unions, breaking up organizing drives, breaking strikes, decertifying unions. They have a rather different appreciation of the question.

While promoting their scabberding, economist version of “class struggle,” the Northites also spit on the struggle against black oppression. It is precisely because of the black question that the U.S., uniquely among advanced capitalist countries, does not have an independent class party of the proletariat, even of a labor-reformist type. In general, America’s capitalist rulers have been very successful in playing the race card; it’s the legacy of the unfinished Civil War for black freedom that contributes mightily to the political backwardness, if you will, of this country. We understand that the fight for black liberation is a strategic question for proletarian revolution in this country.

A century and a half has passed since the appearance of the *Communist Manifesto*, a period marked by many proletarian struggles. Our purpose in discussing the *Manifesto* today is the same as the purpose of its authors. Like Marx and Engels, our aim is to overthrow the old society and replace it with one that will open the road to the abolition of all class oppression.

Capitalism will not fall of its own accord—that’s been clear since the 1917 October Revolution. If the Mensheviks and Bolshevik conciliators like Stalin had prevailed against Lenin in 1917, there would have been no Russian Revolution. And very educated pundits would be standing before you in halls of academia explaining how a revolution in Russia in 1917 was impossible. That really is the question of the subjective factor. There is no terminal crisis for the bourgeoisie—aside from nuclear war, perhaps—barring revolution. Comrades, they have to be thrown out. That’s our job. ■

# Marxism and Religion...

(continued from page 48)

change, socialist revolution, was based entirely on *existing* social forces.

Marxism as an outlook, a mode of thought and a means of change can be applied to history. Since it is not based on faith, you can scientifically prove Marxism. No philosophy can ever honestly assert this, because they all base themselves on some form of idealist outlook that places mankind's ideas above its environment. For example, as the feudal system collapsed and the bourgeois system was on the rise, the philosophy that aided and explained capitalism's revolutionary development also was formulated by Enlightenment *philosophes*. An idealist, for example, might argue that these philosophical ideals of the Enlightenment developed the capitalist system of production and distribution; if someone had thought of capitalism two thousand years earlier, we would've had it then. This is how it was taught in a college history course I took a couple of months ago. Marxism, on the other hand, is materialist because it analyzes the world based on the relationship of classes to each other and to the existing means of production. Likewise, with this understanding, Marxists can intervene to *change* this relationship.

## Religious Mysticism in Capitalist America

According to the *Los Angeles Times* (17 May), 75 percent of Americans believe in angels, and 87 percent said their religious faith is very important in their lives. A recent study found that almost 45 percent of American college freshmen do not believe in Darwin's theory of evolution (*Scientific American*, October 1997). We live in a period marked by a general absence of social struggle and working-class consciousness, allowing for obscurantism to pose as legitimate. Whatever their entertainment value, television programs like the *X-Files*, *Paranormal News* and *Unsolved Mysteries* propagate mystification and irrationalism. Then there are things like the "Psychic Friends Network" which prey on social

backwardness and ignorance. The collapse of Stalinism and the world-historic destruction of the Soviet Union and the East European deformed workers states only helped to expand reactionary obscurantism, both there and here. In St. Petersburg, formerly called Leningrad, the new capitalist rulers closed down a beautiful museum dedicated to materialism and atheism which the Bolsheviks had created in a former church, and replaced it with an Orthodox church (which would-be tsar Boris Yeltsin once again made the effective official church of Russia). Marxism, the only ideology that was consistently both materialist and dialectical had just, according to the bourgeoisie, ultimately failed. In this country, as a *Los Angeles Times* (19 May) editorial noted, "Alien abductions, nightly visitations, spirit channeling, interdimensional travel and psychic ability are just a few of the fringe claims that permeate our media."

The working masses continue to have little control or understanding of the real conditions that govern their lives, and, in the absence of class struggle and class consciousness, religion serves as a tremendous emotional solace.

Religion is a private matter. As Marxists we oppose all forms of religious persecution and oppression. People should be able to hold their religious faiths without interference from the state, and, likewise, we don't want religion to dictate the policy of the state—Marxists believe in the complete separation of church and state. This is why in 1877 Friedrich Engels, Marx's close collaborator, condemned the German philosopher Eugen Dühring's pseudo-revolutionary proposal that religion should be prohibited in socialist society.

We should not be arrogant toward leftist youth who, despite having good impulses on racism, abortion and gay rights, are caught in a tremendous contradiction between their impulses and their religious beliefs. With the individual cases we *will* run across in this period of reaction we must be resolute. The odds are currently against us. Unless we win these youth to our *full* program, their contradiction will most likely be resolved in the direction of reaction and obscurantism. Obviously, we don't see the breaking of the working class from the religious hold as a linear process where we convince each person we run across of religion's

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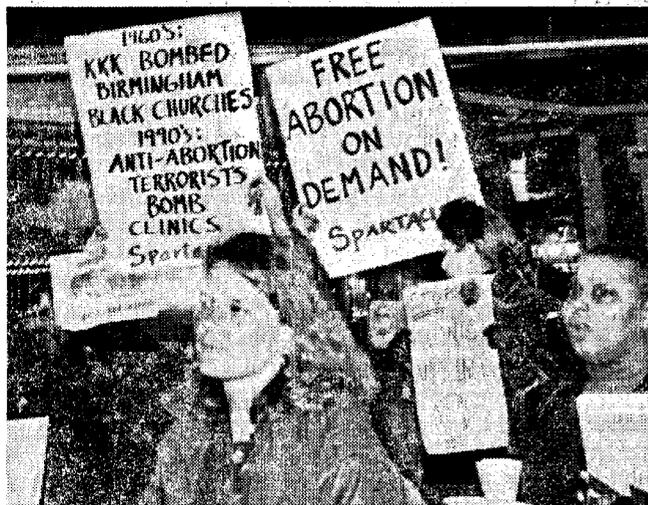


UFO hysteria, religious mysticism flourish in capitalist America.

backwardness. As Lenin wrote, we “understand that only the class struggle of the working masses could, by comprehensively drawing the widest strata of the proletariat into conscious and revolutionary social *practice*, really free the oppressed masses from the yoke of religion.”

There might be some usefulness in drawing a comparison between religion and the family. Both are means of oppression and justification for oppression which also serve a social purpose. The family raises a new generation of people, albeit by tremendously oppressing women. In a workers state these services would be taken up by society itself, becoming socialized through communal kitchens, laundry facilities, child care, all at the expense of the state. The family is not “abolished”; it is replaced. We are the only leftist organization today to have published a journal, *Women and Revolution*, dedicated to explaining a Marxist view of the woman question and other social issues.

Likewise, for the oppressed, religion serves as a sort of consolation for material oppression and degradation. It is a world outlook and a philosophy that is directly counterposed to Marxism. However, the workers state cannot simply abolish religion. This would only raise sympathy for and create



Workers Vanguard  
**2 February 1998 protest in New York City against bombing of Birmingham, Alabama women's clinic by anti-abortion bigots.**

a reaction in the direction of religion and mysticism. To fight religion, a workers state must create the material conditions to replace it, and for it to be rejected by the masses themselves in favor of rationalism, materialism. The religious worldview is replaced with an understanding of how the natural and social world works, and how humans can intervene in it, creating the best possible material conditions for those living on earth, for themselves. The outlook which creates religion is thus not abolished; it is replaced with materialism, Marxism.

### Fight Against Religion

The party must resolutely fight to win youth over to materialism. This is not a question of freedom to believe what one wants, but, as stated earlier, mysticism and Marxism are two counterposed ways not only of looking at the world and studying it, but also of acting upon it. It makes perfect sense

that a Marxist party expects that its members embrace a Marxist worldview, i.e., be materialists, atheists. The Spartacus Youth Clubs do not dilute the party's program of socialist revolution and pursue an unyielding fight with youth over mysticism and religion. As Lenin wrote, Marxists “regard religion as a private matter *in relation to the state*, but not in relation to themselves, not in relation to Marxism, and not in relation to the workers' party.”

The Spartacist League's program is concrete on the question of religion: point ten of our organizational rules (see *Marxist Bulletin* No. 9) states, “Substantial material support to cults, religions or comparable fads or proselytizing for them is incompatible with SL membership.” As Lenin wrote:

“A Marxist must be a materialist, i.e., an enemy of religion, but a dialectical materialist, i.e., one who treats the struggle against religion not in an abstract way, not on the basis of remote, purely theoretical, never varying preaching, but in a concrete way, on the basis of the class struggle which is going on *in practice* and is educating the masses more and better than anything else could.”

— “The Attitude of the Workers Party to Religion”

That said, in our current period marked by growing religious belief, we only recruit exceptional individuals, and we are not in a position to recruit the masses but only that minority of the working class and oppressed which is class conscious. The question of religion and mysticism comes to the fore, and we must develop a thoughtful approach to winning away radical-minded workers and youth from religion.

We must show concrete examples of the atrocities committed in the name of gods and religions, especially against women—from medieval European witch trials to female genital mutilation, anti-abortion terrorism to the imposition of the veil in Afghanistan and Iran, to gay-bashing to advocacy of slavery. Religious wars, persecution and obscurantist oppression are endemic to *all* religions.

We must also argue effectively against the idealist view of the world in general. It is common to get spiritualists who agree with us completely on the ravages of organized religion, but still believe in magic or “alien abductions.” The fight against idealism is especially important for those who reject organized religion only to embrace New Age spiritualism or modern-day witchcraft (or who pick and choose those tenets of religion they want to accept, such as a Catholic who supports abortion and gay rights but still clings to Jesus). We have to prove to them that Marxism is the only way to understand the world and fundamentally change it. We must concretely show how a mystical or moral view of the world is in the end counterposed to workers revolution and socialism.

The struggle against religion is not some academic or philosophical exercise. Most of the people on earth are beholden to some form of religiosity and this works as an obstacle to socialist consciousness. In the end, the question of religion will be worked out in the class struggle itself and through the intervention of the party as the leader of the most advanced section of the proletariat in that struggle. As the class struggle ebbs and flows, though, the revolutionary party must keep its theoretical bearings intact at all times; it must maintain its program. That means we must fight to resolve the contradiction of someone with good impulses on broad social questions who is still seeing the world through the eyes of god. This is the only way to win youth and workers to communism, that is to the struggle for a truly just and free world. ■

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# Marxism and Religion

Today, especially in the wake of the counter-revolution in the Soviet Union and East Europe, religious obscurantism and mystical superstition are increasing. Religion is also prevalent among youth who are repelled by the horrors of capitalism and racism, many of whom look toward some kind of spiritualism as an answer to "corporate greed" and exploitation. Various so-called Marxist and revolutionary organizations pander to this prevailing social backwardness. For example, the Progressive Labor Party, despite bellowing its mantra of "Communist Revolution," brags that since "many people we want and need in the Party are active in churches," there is a "need for PLP members to be active in churches" (Challenge, 18 June 1997).

In order to win over a new generation to the struggle for socialism, based on a materialist conception of society, socialists must ceaselessly combat religion and other forms of idealism which look toward the supernatural, explaining that freedom from oppression lies in this world, not another. The following, based on a presentation by comrade Alan Wilde to the Los Angeles Spartacus Youth Club, explains the SYCs' approach.

As Marxists we are materialists, dialectical materialists, which therefore means irreconcilable atheists, as the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky once put it. We need to know religion not only as an academic exercise but to *combat* it. Lenin, the leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution, wrote:

"The dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels... applies the materialist philosophy to the domain of history.... We must combat religion—that is the ABC of *all* materialism, and consequently of Marxism. But Marxism is not a materialism which has stopped at the ABC. Marxism goes further. It says: We must *know how* to combat religion, and in order to do so we must explain the source of faith and religion among the masses *in a materialist way*."

— Lenin, "The Attitude of the Workers Party to Religion" (1908)

At one point in history, religion served a particular purpose. As a hunter or gatherer wholly dependent on a cruel and ever-changing nature he couldn't understand, man devised a system of explanations for natural occurrences. This was the function of spiritualism, mysticism and religion. With the advent of private property and class society, religion, which developed simply to explain what human empirical logic could not, became a means both of oppression and of escape for the oppressed. Noting that "*Man makes religion, religion does not make man,*" Karl Marx explained:

"*Religious* suffering is at one and the same time the *expression* of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a



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**Bolshevik poster shows Central Asian woman rejecting the veil as part of the revolution's struggle against religious and social oppression. Today, Boris Yeltsin's counterrevolutionary regime has restored power of Russian Orthodox church.**

Grigory Dukor



heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.

"The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to *call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions.*"

— "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" (1844)

Marxism is not one of several competing and potentially equal means to achieve progress. *It is the only way to fundamentally change society.* Marxism can stake that claim because it bases itself entirely on the material world. Unlike philosophers who only sought to interpret the world, Marx and Engels fought to change society. Their perspective for

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