

Marx and Self Emancipation

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'Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is, necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.' K.Marx and F.Engels, *The German Ideology*, (1845)¹.

'That the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.' K. Marx, *General Rules of the International Workingmen's Association*, (1864)².

'The first socialist view of the revolutionary proletariat was to regard its revolutionary potential as an instrument in others' hands; as a battering-ram to break down the old system but not as a force fit to build a new one in its own name. These non-proletarian socialisms not only preceded Marxism, but have always been far stronger than Marxism, in the socialist movements of the world - today as yesterday.' Hal Draper, *The principle of self emancipation in Marx and Engels*, (1971)³.

Introduction

Many opponents of Marxism, on both the right and left of the political spectrum, present Marxism as an authoritarian or elitist doctrine. For example, Noam Chomsky⁴ states that 'The Leninist intelligentsia ... 'pre-empt the developing revolutionary process' and distort it to their own ends of domination'⁵. The monstrous Stalinist dictatorships with their claim to be Marxist helped to promote this view. Even on the Trotskyist left, there are those who claim the Red Army brought about revolutions across the Eastern Bloc *without* mass

workers revolt⁶. I want to trace Marx's own development from student to democratic journalist and, from there, to advocate of working class revolution in order to demonstrate that Marxism emerged as a critique of elitism, and that Marx was opposed to any substitutes for the mass activity of the working class itself. I also want to argue that Marxism was not the product of an 'intelligentsia' which was then foisted on the working class; in fact, it was the working class, just when it was emerging as a social force, that played a

¹<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/>

²<http://www.marxists.org/history/international/iwma/documents/1864/rules.htm>

³<https://epress.anu.edu.au/archive/draper/1971/xx/emancipation.html>

⁴For a good analysis of the differences between Marxism and Anarchism see 'Anarchism: a Marxist criticism' by John Molyneux, Bookmarks, London 2011

⁵<http://www.marxist.com/noam-chomsky-marxism-authoritarianism1151004.htm>

⁶See Tony Cliff, *Trotskyism after Trotsky* <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1999/trotism/index.htm>

pivotal role in shaping Marxism⁷. There is another reason for writing such an essay. Decades of low levels of working class struggle can lead to ‘substitutionism’- the great parliamentarian, the heroic activists, the perfect party programme come to be seen as substitutes for the self-activity of the working class. The essence of Marxism is working class self-emancipation. Socialism cannot be delivered by decree on behalf of the masses of people, no matter how good the intentions of those who want to do so. Layers of working class activists need to learn how to organise themselves, to grow in confidence and from that confidence to become more aware of their own potential to run society.

Marx becomes a Marxist

Socialism before Marx had quite a few self-appointed saviours and messiahs. A myriad of groups and individuals preached their schemes to transform the world. The conspiratorial followers of Babeuf, with his secret society, were ready and waiting to seize power on behalf of the masses and build a dictatorship that would wait until the people were ‘ready’ (or sufficiently educated by this benevolent elite) to hand over their realm of justice and equality. There were also well-meaning attempts at building perfect communities. Robert Owen was a Welsh socialist, who owned a factory in New Lanark, on the river Clyde, near Glasgow. He realised that productivity would increase if his workers were given a share of the profits, leading him to suggest communism as a way by which people could live in cooperative communities. He built his workers schools and planted gardens. The problem was that

he believed that all it took to change the world was for caring individuals, with a blueprint for change, to lead by good example. His motto was build the perfect community and the world will follow you. It didn’t quite work out as he had hoped and Owen ended up rejected by Victorian society and building utopias in the USA, which fell apart one by one. The conspirators and the utopian reformers both believed that the masses needed to be ‘educated’ and led by ‘good example’. The mass of people were seen as passive, not as subjects of change. The relationship between the level of working class struggle, the youth of the workers’ movement and these groups was summarised by Marx thus:

The Socialist and Communist systems properly so called, those of Saint-Simon, Fourier, Owen and others, spring into existence in the early undeveloped period...of the struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie....the proletariat, as yet in its infancy, offers them the spectacle of a class without any historical initiative or any independent political movement. Since the development of class antagonism keeps even pace with a development of industry, the economic situation, as they find it, does not as yet offer to them the material conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat. They therefore search after a new social science, after new social laws that are to create these conditions. Historical action is to

⁷ I don’t have the space to go into Lenin’s infamous passage in *What is to be done* where he refers to socialism being a product of the intelligentsia which had to be brought to the class from the ‘outside’ just to state that Lenin himself disowned the formulation, at a later stage. See Tony Cliff’s excellent biography available online here: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1975/lenin1/index.htm>

yield to their personal inventive action, historically created conditions of emancipation to fantastic ones, and the gradual, spontaneous class-organization of the proletariat to the organization of society specially contrived by these inventors. Future history resolves itself, in their eyes, into the propaganda and the practical carrying out of their social plans. In the formation of their plans they are conscious of caring chiefly for the interests of the working-class, as being the most suffering class. Only from the point of view of being the most suffering class does the proletariat exist for them⁸.

For all their weaknesses the 'utopian' socialists did develop serious critiques of capitalist society, elements of which were very important to the development of Marxism. Marx developed his thought more fully by developing the positive side of their theories, and learning through criticism of their shortcomings, while at the same time engaging with a more mature workers movement⁹.

Marx's own development

Marx himself was not born with some innate understanding of worker's potential. He had to go through a period of struggle and transformation before arriving at the realisation that the self-activity of the working class was the vital element in overcoming the brutality of a society based on class exploitation. Marxism as a philosophy first appears as the product of Marx's

previous philosophical development which was then reshaped and overthrown by his own struggles and by the immense impact of a workers' uprising. The young Marx was a student of the philosopher Hegel. Hegel was an idealist, which, contrary to the modern popular usage of the word, meant that he saw thought as primary. The idealist sees the world as an emanation of thought, whether the thoughts of God or the thoughts of a collective or individual mind. For materialists, the world is made of matter, it exists outside of thought and thought is a product of matter. But Hegel was a very interesting idealist because of the times he lived in - he was much inspired by the French Revolution - and because of the class of which his idealism was the highest expression. He was also a profound influence on Marx's thought.

The German capitalist class were very weak compared to the French or English bourgeoisie. In 1648, and 1791, the English and the French capitalists had masqueraded as representatives of society as a whole, in order to successfully lead movements against their aristocracies. Germany was a jigsaw of dukedoms, principalities and petty domains, all dominated by a brutal Prussian aristocracy. The German capitalist class longed for the freedoms won by their English and French counterparts but they faced certain obstacles. Firstly, economic development in Germany was far behind those other nations with the result that there was a much weaker and less cohesive bourgeois or capitalist class. Secondly, their rivals were already on the scene: the working class. They were afraid that any challenge to their local Lords and masters might provoke the stirring of the dangerous class below them. This made them a bourgeoisie imbued with no histori-

⁸<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/>

⁹For a good history of socialism from above and below see Hal Draper's *The two souls of socialism* <http://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1966/twosouls/index.htm>

cal initiative, cowardly and timid, performing their revolution in the realm of philosophy, transforming the world of ideas and convincing themselves that the real world would soon follow. The German bourgeoisie were true followers of the Gospel, 'in the beginning was the word', whereas the French capitalist class had understood the efficacy of the deed.

Hegel's consideration of the French Revolution through the spectacles of German philosophy yielded some interesting results. Hegel believed that history had a purpose and that it represented the advance of the consciousness of freedom. He understood that history was the product of labour, conflict and struggle, but being an idealist he believed that that labour was intellectual labour and the struggle was the struggle of ideas. He also grasped that the whole of history was an organic process. This organic approach to understanding social processes was key to the development of Marx's ideas. The whole of social life is to be understood as a process and through struggle and conflict, things move from one level to the next. Mental labour was key to this process. Hegel believed that every existing thing, from society to ideas, is pregnant with the seeds of its own destruction and that the *negative* or *destructive* element brought movement and advance to the whole process. Unfortunately, Hegel believed that this whole process was the unfolding of the Absolute Spirit, a combination of God and collective consciousness, which moved history forward in the realm of thought.

Ideas only explain so much. It was the actions of the Prussian state that impacted on the young Hegelians, (the student followers of Hegel, like Marx) and made them look for a way out of the impasse that German society found itself in.

Amongst some of Marx's contemporaries there were great hopes in the new ruler, Wilhelm IV, when he came to the throne in 1840. Expecting reforms, as 'spring grows green again in all hearts'¹⁰, they soon bitterly realised that the same old reactionary clique was to remain in place and that this would hold back German development. Hegelianism was chased out of universities by a regime which could not tolerate in any form the idea that change was possible and that the present contained the seeds of its own destruction. The young Marx, denied a university post, was thus thrust into a career as an opposition journalist with a democratic newspaper. Looking for a force in society with which they could align themselves, the young Hegelians joined with the Rhineland liberal opposition. The Rhineland was industrially developed and the local capitalists wanted freedom, both political and economic, from the constraints of an aristocratic society. Working at the *Rheinische Zeitung* newspaper, and as part of the democratic opposition, Marx was forced to deal with questions he had not confronted in university. When peasants were denied the right to collect firewood from the land, he was forced to investigate the reasons behind the State's defence of private property. This led him to a re-evaluation of Hegel's views on the State. Hegel believed the State was the embodiment of the absolute idea on earth: it represented universal, communal life above the grubby struggles of the economic sphere which was a war of all against all. Marx began to see how the realm of private property was invading the realm of the State. Previously the peasants of the Mosel region could gather wood as they pleased but now the State was stepping in and declaring the trees, the fruits, even dead trees as 'private property'. This

¹⁰Bruno Bauer quoted in *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx* by Michael Lowy, Haymarket Books, 2005

was a process of enclosure, with former common land and common property being taken under the umbrella of private property. In the assembly debates peasants were referred to as ‘thieves’ for gathering fruit or wood that had fallen on the ground; the change in the laws had suddenly transformed the people into ‘criminals’. The debates discussed the sentence for those who intentionally injured a tree to make it die and fall to the ground so it could be used as firewood.

In his articles on the theft of wood, and the assembly debates, Marx declares the soul of private interest to be ‘petty, wooden, mean and selfish’, a soul that is ‘always cowardly, for its heart, its soul, is an external object’. The State far from being a realm of universal interests is the ‘ears, eyes, arms, legs by means of which the interest of the forest owner hears, observes, appraises, reaches out and runs.’

This claim on the part of private interest, the paltry soul of which was never illuminated and thrilled by thought of the state, is a serious and sound lesson for the latter. If the state, even in a single respect, stoops so low as to act in the manner of private property instead of in its own way, the immediate consequence is that it has to adapt itself in the form of its means to the narrow limits of private property. Private interest is sufficiently crafty to intensify this consequence to the point where private interest in its most restricted and paltry form makes itself the limit and rule for the action of the state. As a result of this, apart

from the complete degradation of the state, we have the reverse effect that the most irrational and illegal means are put into operation against the accused; for supreme concern for the interests of limited private property necessarily turns into unlimited lack of concern for the interests of the accused. But if it becomes clearly evident here that private interest seeks to degrade, and is bound to degrade, the state into a means operating for the benefit of private interest, how can it fail to follow that a *body representing private interests*, the estates, will seek to degrade, and is bound to degrade, the state to the thoughts of private interest?¹¹

He defended the impassioned tone he used for the articles, which were ‘written in *coarse*, and, if you like, even *rude* tones. Anyone who often has to hear directly the *ruthless* voice of want among the surrounding population easily loses the aesthetic tact by which his thoughts can be expressed in the most elegant and modest images. He may perhaps even consider it his *political* duty for a time to speak in public in the popular language of distress which in his native land he had no chance of forgetting’¹².

It was these articles that saw Marx for the first time leaving the philosophical to investigate real material interests. He was outraged by the State’s role in defence of private property, and began to doubt his former idealist view of the State. His radicalism brought him into conflict with the censors and with the paper’s liberal spon-

¹¹<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1842/10/25.htm>

¹²<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/01/15.htm>

sors. In 1843, Marx's ideas were in a period of transition. He was still using the language of an idealist philosopher but was straining to contain his new ideas in the old forms. He began to read socialist authors like Moses Hess as well as French socialists like Proudhon, who had already written about the nature of private property. At first Marx was quite ambivalent about what he termed socialist 'dogmas'.

The *Rheinische Zeitung*, which cannot concede the theoretical reality of communist ideas even in their present form, and can even less wish or consider possible their practical realization, will submit these ideas to a thorough criticism.¹³

But Proudhon and other early socialists made a big impression on Marx who now began to gravitate towards socialism. It was the banning of the newspaper though that really bought things to a head for Marx. The State was shutting down all opposition voices and Marx was appalled by the cowardice of the liberal democratic bourgeois opposition. He handed in his resignation in disgust at the lack of willingness to fight back on the part of the bourgeoisie. He was 'stifled in that atmosphere... I have become tired of hypocrisy...of bowing and scraping'¹⁴.

It is true that the old world belongs to the philistine. But one should not treat the latter as a bugbear from which to recoil in fear. On the contrary, we ought to keep an eye on him. It is worth while to study this lord of the world. He is lord of

the world, of course, only because he fills it with his society as maggots do a corpse. Therefore the society of these lords needs no more than a number of slaves, and the owners of these slaves do not need to be free. Although, as being owners of land and people, they are called lords, in the sense of being pre-eminent, for all that they are no less philistines than their servants¹⁵.

Under the impact of censorship and state repression, the young Hegelian movement broke into different groups. There were the so called 'free' who blamed everything on the retreat of the 'masses'. The cowardice of the bourgeois class was for them an indication of the stupidity of the mass of people and confirmation of their own genius. They retreated into ever more conservative meandering in their own heads, criticising everything and believing that the criticism itself had dealt the real world a blow. There were the philosophical socialists like Hess who were approaching communism from the point of view of philosophy, and believed that their worked out philosophical solutions to the world's problems would be delivered ready-made to the masses. They believed communism to be 'above' the struggle of classes. Marx was suspicious of all rigid formulae and in a famous passage from his correspondence, which is still a wonderful antidote to dogmatism of any kind, noted:

This does not mean that we shall confront the world with new doctrinaire principles and proclaim: Here is the truth, on your knees before it! It means

¹³<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/01/15.htm>

¹⁴*The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx* by Michael Lowy, Haymarket Books, 2005

¹⁵http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_05.htm

that we shall develop for the world new principles from the existing principles of the world. We shall not say: Abandon your struggles, they are mere folly; let us provide you with true campaign-slogans. Instead, we shall simply show the world why it is struggling, and consciousness of this is a thing it must acquire whether it wishes or not. The reform of consciousness consists entirely in making the world aware of its own consciousness, in arousing it from its dream of itself, in explaining its own actions to it... We are therefore in a position to sum up the credo of our journal in a *single word*: the self-clarification (critical philosophy) of the struggles and wishes of the age. This is a task for the world and for us. It can succeed only as the product of united efforts. What is needed above all is a confession, and nothing more than that. To obtain forgiveness for its sins, mankind needs only to declare them for what they are¹⁶.

There was the democratic humanism of Feuerbach. Feuerbach was a philosopher who had criticised Hegel from the point of view of materialism. He showed that man makes Gods and philosophies and then bows down before his own creations. Philosophy was made a product of human minds which in turn were products of material circumstances, of nature. He tended to be too crudely materialist. He had turned Hegel on his head by stating that everything was a product of matter and not thought, but he still held on to the

Hegelian division between ‘active’ thought and ‘passive’ matter. Humans were seen as products of their environment and as members of a natural species but not as products of a social environment that was itself a product of human action. Nature was understood as something to contemplate, not as something that is transformed by human labour. Marx and Engels were initially very interested in Feuerbach’s criticisms of Hegel but would return to make an important critique of Feuerbach later.

It is in this period in 1843 that Marx for the first time mentions the class of ‘direct labour’ as the ground on which the whole of society rests. In April 1843 there were mass strikes in Belgium and other European countries that Marx would have known of. But still he was trapped in a Feuerbachian philosophical schema where those who ‘think’ need to link up with those who ‘suffer’. He understood that the weapon of criticism was not enough, a revolution was needed. But what was it that finally brought about the breakthrough in his thought?

Paris and Silesia 1844

Marx, with all of his ideas in flux, arrived in Paris in 1844, and began attending workers mass meetings, which had a profound impact on him. Paris was alive with workers’ gatherings. His writings and letters were suddenly full of praise for the debates between workers, their own arguments, their own understanding. He wrote in his Paris notebooks:

This practical development can be most strikingly observed in the gatherings of French socialist workers. Smoking, eating, and drinking, etc., are no longer means of creating links

¹⁶http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09-alt.htm

between people. Company, association, conversation, which in turn has society as its goal, is enough for them. The brotherhood of man is not a hollow phrase, it is a reality, and the nobility of man shines forth upon us from their work-worn figures¹⁷.

In this vibrant atmosphere, he expanded his reading of working class literature. There were authors, such as Stein, who stated that the working class must free itself 'on its own' and that 'the people itself has begun to live a life of its own'¹⁸. Marx read communist journals edited by workers themselves. Various articles repeatedly raised the need to rise up without 'having at their head some bourgeois.' Marx met and argued with German working class exiles. One of these was Wilhelm Weitling who was a self educated worker who believed that the working class could only advance through social revolt. Marx absorbed these debates while reading various Parisian journals, and specifically Buret's book on the British Chartist movement. Chartism was a British mass workers' movement that began, in 1838, with a people's charter demanding universal suffrage for men, secret ballots, annual parliaments and the abolition of the property qualification. In 1842, there were mass workers' strikes in response to inaction on reforms and in response to an economic slump. In 1843, the Chartists had gathered over three million signatures on their petitions as well as organising monster mass rallies.

A young Engels, Marx's future collaborator, was profoundly influenced by this movement. He had been sent over to work for his father's cotton firm in Manchester

from 1842 to 1844 and witnessed firsthand the destitution and poverty of the working class slums and came into contact with the Chartists. Engels came from Barmen (now Wuppertal, in North Rhine Westphalia), one of the most industrialised parts of Germany at the time, and was the son of an industrialist. Engels had joined the Young German movement which included the socialist poet, Heinrich Heine, and became interested in radical politics, Hegel, liberal theology and social questions. Engels developed a relationship with an Irish servant girl Mary Burns who guided him through the maze of working class dwellings that had sprung up all around Manchester. He wrote an essay entitled 'Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy' for the *Deutsch Franzoische Jahrbucher* which Marx read and later proclaimed led him to an understanding of economics. Engels, although changing in his ideas, was still imbued with a certain elitism:

the abolition of all government by force and by majority, and the establishment in its stead of a mere administration but the 'the proposal to nominate all officers of this administration ... not by a majority of the community at large or the workers themselves but by those only who have a knowledge of the particular kind of work the future officer has to perform; and, one of the most important features of the plan, that the nominators are to select the fittest person, by means of some kind of prize essay'¹⁹.

¹⁷<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/epm/3rd.htm>

¹⁸See Michael Lowy, p67

¹⁹<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/01/13.htm>

Engels' book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, outlined the terrible state of working class life at the time, and spoke of an approaching war between the classes. The book still carried the some of the tone of the philosophical communists. Some passages referred to communism as standing 'above' the struggle of the classes. But Engels, influenced by the Chartists, also understood the necessity of the union of socialism with a mass movement. When Engels met Marx on his way back to Germany they found themselves 'in complete agreement on questions of theory'²⁰. By pooling their discoveries, they were aided in their mutual transition to a complete theory of working class self- emancipation.

Marx also read French socialist, Flora Tristan, who was also influenced by the Chartist movement. She had written in 1839 that the proletarians had no one to help them: they had to be both 'head' and 'hands'²¹. An insurrectionary strike in Wales, that year, had seen several thousand armed Welsh miners battle police to free Chartist prisoners. Parliament had rejected their petitions calling for the vote, refusing to countenance the workers' demands. Protests broke out all over Britain. The working class was taking action and producing leaders from within its own ranks who gave voice to their demands. A minority were coming to more and more radical conclusions. Marx himself was moving in the same direction. In June 1844, Silesian weavers rose en masse. Silesia was a huge centre of textile manufacturing. Five thousand workers fought armed battles with the army leaving eleven workers dead and many more wounded. The rebellious crowds sacked the houses of the local industrialists and demanded

money from local merchants. The level of class consciousness and combativity displayed by the weavers profoundly moved Marx:

This first of the *Weaver's Song*, that intrepid battle-cry which does not even mention hearth, factory, or district but in which the proletariat at once proclaims its antagonism to the society of private property in the most decisive, aggressive, ruthless and forceful manner. The Silesian rebellion *starts* where the French and English workers' *finish*, namely with an understanding of the nature of the proletariat. This *superiority* stamps the whole episode. Not only were machines destroyed, those competitors of the workers, but also the *account books*, the titles of ownership, and whereas all other movements had directed their attacks primarily at the visible enemy, namely the *industrialists*, the Silesian workers turned also against the hidden enemy, the bankers. Finally, not one English workers' uprising was carried out with such courage, foresight and endurance²².

This revolution led to a revolution in Marx's thought. Marx spent a few months reconsidering all he had previously understood. Theory could no longer be considered as separate from action.

Marx's 'Introduction' to *The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, written between December 1843 and January 1844,

²⁰ *The Condition of the Working Class in England* by Frederick Engels, Oxford Press, New York 1993

²¹ See Michael Lowy, 2005, P91

²² <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/08/07.htm>

shows the start of the transition. On the one hand Marx definitely identifies the proletariat as ‘a class with *radical chains*’, the universal class which will emancipate the whole of society, ‘a *total loss* of humanity which can only redeem itself by a *total redemption of humanity*’ but at the same time he still retains the notion of a division between mental and physical labour: ‘*Philosophy* is the *head* of this emancipation and the *proletariat* is its *heart*’. [Marx’s emphases]²³. *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* mark an important step forward with their identification of the root of alienation as lying in the relation of the worker to his/her labour and their conception of world history as ‘nothing but the creation of man by human labour’²⁴. And clearly the idealist division of mental and manual labour, of thought and deed, is part of human alienation.

However, the real expression of this new world outlook comes in Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* in March 1845. He realised that there was a problem with both idealism and materialism as previously conceived. In Hegel’s philosophy, change occurred and it was able to account for ruptures and leaps in the process of history but ultimately these changes were not the product of material factors, or of human beings, but of the Absolute Mind or Spirit. In opposition to this, the materialists argued that man was a product of matter and that matter was primary. But they had an abstract and fatalistic understanding of materialism. They saw that people were a product of circumstances but not how those very circumstances were the product of human labour and human history. Feuerbach saw the human as an individual, as a member of a species, abstracted from the real social relations that engender the individual. The key to un-

derstanding the dynamic of human history was human labour. Labour transforms our environment and transforms us in the process. We create tools to satisfy our needs and create new needs and then new tools to satisfy those new needs. Humans, unlike animals, have a social history. The act of creating our environment thereby holds the potential to be self-creating. The materialists saw nature as an object of contemplation; they were passive. The idealists saw change but only in the realm of thought. Now the two were brought together on the basis of human labour and revolutionary practice. The revolutionary class, the workers, are the product *and producer* of history. In order to overthrow the old order it becomes a vital necessity to understand the old order. In response to the idea that the masses must be educated, Marx simply asked: who had taught the teacher? The educator must first be educated and that education came through participation in revolutionary and world changing struggles. It took Marx from mid 1844 until the spring of 1845 to reformulate his ideas. Philosophers had tried to understand the world but now Marx realised the point was for the working class to *change it*.

The lightning bolt did not originate from the Mount Olympus of philosophy and ignite the ‘virgin soil’ of the masses, but travelled the other way around. The Silesian weavers had displayed not only courage and determination but also a level of understanding of the structure of society that was far ahead of the ‘enlightened’ philosophers. The worker’s own struggles threw up an insight into how society functioned and a desire for a new cooperative and exploitation-free world. Marxism is not something separate from these insights gained but, through them, provides a syn-

²³K.Marx, *Early Writings*, London 1963, p.58-9

²⁴As above, p.167

thesis of the previous lessons of the working class and the best elements of science and philosophy. Marx had a deep understanding of Hegelian philosophy, French revolutionary politics and the beginnings of a critique of economics developed from his reading of Mill and others. It was the fusion of these elements in the heat of working class action that brought about their inversion and transformation.

Philosophy from the point of view of the working class had to be materialist not idealist but a materialism that understands conflict and contradiction. It starts from Hegel's view that the old is pregnant with the new but understands that this is not a battle of ideas but real world conflicts involving real world victories and losses. The movement of the French Revolution where a minority substituted for the masses and led on their behalf was different to that of the working class which in order to win has to be a conscious process of mass self emancipation. Because the working class has no material wealth, the working class rules collectively or not at all.

The subsequent workers' revolts in 1848 and 1871 revealed more fully the truths Marx had discovered in the early 1840s. In 1848 uprisings broke out from one end of Europe to the other. In these movements, which in many countries were battles against the rule of aristocracy and for capitalist democracy, the capitalist class was more fearful of the working class below it than it was of reaction from above. It either fought half-heartedly or jumped straight into the arms of the State and counter revolution. Wherever workers put their faith in bourgeois or middle class democrats and intellectuals they were betrayed. Marx in his 'March Address' to the International Working Men's Association was clear on the role that the bourgeois elements would play in future revolts

and that it was vital for workers to organise themselves in defence of their own interests in any revolution. Workers had to be their own head *and* hands.

We told you already in 1848, brothers, that the German liberal bourgeoisie would soon come to power and would immediately turn its newly won power against the workers. You have seen how this forecast came true. It was indeed the bourgeoisie which took possession of the state authority in the wake of the March movement of 1848 and used this power to drive the workers, its allies in the struggle, back into their former oppressed position. Although the bourgeoisie could accomplish this only by entering into an alliance with the feudal party, which had been defeated in March, and eventually even had to surrender power once more to this feudal absolutist party, it has nevertheless secured favourable conditions for itself... Although the German workers cannot come to power and achieve the realization of their class interests without passing through a protracted revolutionary development, this time they can at least be certain that the first act of the approaching revolutionary drama will coincide with the direct victory of their own class in France and will thereby be accelerated. But they themselves must contribute most to their final victory, by informing themselves of their own class interests, by taking up their

independent political position as soon as possible, by not allowing themselves to be misled by the hypocritical phrases of the democratic petty bourgeoisie into doubting for one minute the necessity of an independently organized party of the proletariat. Their battle-cry must be: **The Permanent Revolution**²⁵.

Marx's doctoral thesis, written in 1841, contained the simple words, 'I hate the pack of gods'²⁶. The line is spoken by one of Marx's heroes - Prometheus - a Titan from Greek mythology. He had stolen fire from heaven and gave it to mankind. As punishment he was tied to a rock and tortured for all eternity. The young philosophy student may have imagined himself in that role. But Prometheus was now a collective, a class, not a great individual and the new theories had arisen from earthly struggles. In 1871, following the Franco Prussian war the working class of Paris, provoked by the ruling class abandonment of injured Paris to Bismarck's troops, rose up and instituted the world's very first working class government - the Paris Commune. Marx had never been explicit as to the form a working class government would take. In *The Communist Manifesto*, he and Engels had written of winning the battle of democracy and the need for the working class to take back the wealth from the capitalists. Now with stunning audacity and ingenuity, the workers of Paris had presented to the world what a working class government might look like. The mechanisms by which the rich stay in power were dissolved. Instead of a police force and standing army, the Commune was based on the arming of the

working population. Instead of clerical darkness preached in every school aiding and aided by the State, the Commune enacted the separation of Church and State. Judges were elected. The Commune itself saw workers elected from each district, recallable by the electorate and placed on a worker's wage. Although it was eventually crushed, with the massacre of thousands of workers, the Commune was a glimpse of what was to come. The bright flame of working class revolt had 'stormed the gates of heaven' itself.

Conclusion

Marx stated in the third of his Theses on Feuerbach that the 'educator must first be educated'²⁷. It applied to Marx who had himself been educated by the social world in which he lived. His involvement in radical opposition movements first drew him to ever more radical conclusions until, under the impact of the Silesian weavers and Parisian workers, he was then drawn to the understanding that the revolution must be a process of mass self-emancipation. This guiding principle underlies all other Marxist principles. The revolt of the working class is a combination of transformation of the world and the transformation of itself. Revolutionary struggle is necessary, not only to destroy the old order, but for 'the alteration of men on a mass scale'. This process can be seen again and again in every workers' uprising. The high points of Marxist theory, for example the understanding of the State machine, are generalisations made from participation in and observation of the revolutionary practice of the working class. The lessons of previous battles inform the practice of present struggles. This ideological material, by in-

²⁵<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/communist-league/1850-ad1.htm>

²⁶<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1841/dr-theses/foreword.htm>

²⁷<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/index.htm>

tervening in current struggles, is enlivened and transformed, made concrete and hammered into shape.

Socialism from 'above' always has an appeal as long as we live under a system of domination, hierarchy and exploitation. When struggles are defeated or when workers are beaten back, the loss of confidence that ensues allows for 'substitutionism' - when organisations or individuals step in claiming to liberate the masses 'from above'. What differentiates Marxism from many other theories of change

is its focus on self-activity and its criticism of elitism and all substitutes for the self-activity of the working masses. In the midst of the present crisis, when we will be witness to massive upheavals and displays of working class strength as well as crushing defeats, it is important that we restore to its rightful place the principle of self- emancipation. Revolutionaries have to be willing to enter into a constant dialogue with the working class. The educators must themselves first be educated.