

Andrew Levine 'Engaging' Politics Philosophy  
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equivalence, not a dictionary".<sup>1</sup>

| <i>Economy (Smith)</i> | <i>Philosophical Anthropology (Feuerbach)</i>            |
|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| product                | object                                                   |
| labor                  | species-being (generic activity)                         |
| means of subsistence   | means of life                                            |
| capital                | estranged being ( <i>fremdes Wesen</i> )                 |
| worker                 | Man                                                      |
| exchange value         | value (dignity: <i>Würde</i> )                           |
| exchange               | community                                                |
| wealth                 | <i>Simlichkeit</i> (sensuousness, the perceptible world) |

Ultimately, what this translation manual suggests is an inversion of the ideal relation between the actual and the real. The way the world appears is the opposite of the way it really is. Means are ends and ends are means. For example, exchange value, the terms on which products of labor exchange, is the form of appearance of "dignity" (*Würde*), the name Kant and his successors gave to what Rousseau had in mind when he deemed essential humanity *priceless*. And because capital, a thing, a product of human activity, is a *fremdes Wesen*, an estranged being that rules human beings through its own "laws," the ideal person/thing relation is inverted too. This is why, as Rousseau announced in *The Social Contract*, "man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains."

<sup>1</sup> This "critical lexicon" is taken, in modified form, from a very useful essay by Jacques Rancière, called "Le Concept de Critique et la Critique de l'Economie Politique des *Manuscrits* de 1844 au *Capital*" in Louis Althusser, Etienne Balibar, et al., *Linele Capital*, vol. 1 (Paris: Maspéro, 1967), pp. 99f. Unfortunately, this essay was not included in the English version of *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1970). There is, however, an English translation published in the journal *Theoretical Practice*, no. 1 and 2 (1971). The account offered here of Marx's program in the *Paris Manuscripts* draws substantially on Rancière's essay.

In a world of alienated labor, autonomy is lost. So far from being the masters of their own fates, persons are the "slaves," in Rousseau's sense of the economic order they have created. What rules humankind is not literally another human being. But in the inverted world human beings have contrived, capital is a person; a being separate from the human beings who made it and whom it rules. What determines individual wills is an impersonal and unintended consequence of a host of individual activities, structured by the exchange relations that increasingly govern human interactions. Within this framework, individuals may choose rationally and deliberately. Indeed, individually rational choices constitute, unintentionally but inexorably, the estranged Being, capital, to whose laws individuals are bound. It is, therefore, the system itself that is irrational and beyond deliberate control; not its victims. But it is nevertheless through their *praxis*, their own practical world-building, world-transforming activity – the activity that creates *Simlichkeit*, the sensuous, perceptible world – that human beings enslave themselves. On a (literally) revolutionary praxis, one that deliberately inverts the inverted world order that humankind has concocted for itself, can free them. The end, in the end, is what Reason requires. By deliberately undoing the means ends, person/thing relations emblematic of the regime of alienated labor, the real can finally become actual. Then Reason will be in control and autonomy, rational self-determination, will finally be realized. The human race will be free at last – not just in the political arena, but in the facets of life.

### Marx in Transition

It is therefore in the *Paris Manuscripts* that we find Marx's first use of the notion of praxis, the key to his critique (in the ordinary, not the Feuerbachian sense) of Feuerbach in the *Theses on Feuerbach* and *The German Ideology*. It was in these texts, written just a year after the *Paris Manuscripts*, that Marx self-consciously set out "to settle accounts with his erstwhile philosophical conscience." But his settling of accounts was anything but complete. These works are transitional not only because, in them, Marx remained an Hegelian and therefore, despite himself, still in the grip of his "erstwhile philosophical conscience" but also because it was only after these texts that Marx's attention turned away from philosophy to political economy, history, and social theory. Once a break with Feuerbach was declared, however, Marx abandoned the critical program Feuerbach had contrived, taking up

**Explanatory** strategies of modern science in its stead. The theoretical orientation of his work therefore shifted profoundly. Nevertheless, the general political and normative convictions evident in Marx's early writings survived into his later work. Marx never abandoned his overarching concern with human emancipation, and never altered his view of what it involves. In short, Marx broke with Feuerbach, but not with Rousseau. To the end of his life, he remained as much a partisan of autonomy as Rousseau was. It would therefore be fair to say that Marx remained true to the vision that motivated the Young Hegelian project. But in almost every other aspect of his theoretical work, he did eventually break as decisively as he claimed he did from the philosophical circle within which he came of age politically and intellectually. This break, however, was not yet fully accomplished in 1845, despite Marx's claims to the contrary. Thus, in his writings of that period, Marx's efforts to distance himself from Feuerbach were still couched, tellingly, in Hegelian terms and motivated by Hegelian concerns. Marx lauded Feuerbach's materialism and identified expressly with it. But he castigated Feuerbach for being insufficiently "dialectical" – for failing properly to appropriate the philosophical legacy of Hegel.

These themes were developed most directly in the *Theses on Feuerbach*. The "materialism" Marx defended there, Feuerbach's materialism, was a metaphysical position about the real substantial nature of things.<sup>2</sup> It is a position that only makes sense from within the tradition of thought that was the intellectual legacy of René Descartes's "invention" of modern philosophy in the seventeenth century, the tradition that ran from Descartes through Kant and then to Hegel. Descartes maintained that everything that is either mental (non-spatial) or material (mind-independent) in its substantial nature. For a variety of reasons, including the need, recognized expressly by Descartes, to understand how mind and matter interact, most philosophers after Descartes abandoned his metaphysical dualism, the idea that there are two radically distinct kinds of being, mind and matter, adopting instead a monistic metaphysics, according to which everything that is is comprised of the same substance. Thus there were materialists, who regarded ostensibly mental phenomena as forms of appearance of matter, and idealists, for whom everything, including physical objects, were ultimately ideal or mental in nature. For a number of historically contingent reasons, it was part of the com-

mon sense of European political culture for nearly two hundred years that materialism implied or at least suggested both atheism and revolutionary politics, and that idealism supported theism and opposition to revolutionary change.<sup>3</sup> Classical German philosophy, from Kant through Hegel, was expressly idealist, as was the theology of the Right Hegelians. The Young Hegelians were materialists. Thus they identified with the atheism and the revolutionary politics of their materialist forebears, especially in France before the French Revolution. Marx's complaint against them was that, in purporting to reconstruct Hegelian philosophy on a materialist basis, Feuerbach and his followers, including himself while he was still a disciple of Feuerbach's, effectively failed to take over from Hegel a proper sense of the interactive or "dialectical" relation between the subject and object of knowledge. This is the principal claim advanced and developed in the *Theses on Feuerbach*. The idea is implicit too in the first section of *The German Ideology*, where Feuerbach was also ostensibly the target.

In a word, throughout the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx insisted that Feuerbach was a Cartesian without knowing it, a follower of Descartes. For Descartes, the central epistemological problem was to grasp how the knowing subject, the "I" (the existence of which Descartes believed he had established with his celebrated *cogito* argument, summarized in the formula "I think, therefore I am") could come to know what is the case in the "external world." Ultimately, Descartes concluded that knowledge of the external world is possible only because an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly truthful God guarantees the veracity of certain of the I's ideas, those Descartes called "clear and distinct." Descartes' general view of the problem of knowledge remained in force, in one or another form, until Kant. Against it, Kant argued that to develop a theory of knowledge that could defeat skepticism, philosophers must take into account the knowing subject's contribution to knowledge. They must explain how the knowing subject, Descartes' I, supplies structure to what is "given" to it. This is what Kant set out to do. But to his successors, Kant's successes in this endeavor came at too great a cost. Kant made things-in-themselves, the reality that grounds appearance but that is not part of it, unknowable in principle. It was to defend the possibility of knowledge in this domain too, knowledge of the Real, that Hegel wen-

<sup>2</sup> Substance was a category Descartes and his successors took over from their medieval predecessors. A substance is a category of being. As such, according to the received understandings, it is radically distinct from other substances.

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mon sense of European political culture for nearly two hundred years that materialism implied or at least suggested both atheism and revolutionary politics, and that idealism supported theism and opposition to revolutionary change.<sup>3</sup> Classical German philosophy, from Kant through Hegel, was expressly idealist, as was the theology of the Right Hegelians. The Young Hegelians were materialists. Thus they identified with the atheism and the revolutionary politics of their materialist forebearers, especially in France before the French Revolution. Marx's complaint against them was that, in purporting to reconstruct Hegelian philosophy on a materialist basis, Feuerbach and his followers, including himself while he was still a disciple of Feuerbach's, effectively failed to take over from Hegel a proper sense of the interactive or "dialectical" relation between the subject and object of knowledge. This is the principal claim advanced and developed in the *Theses on Feuerbach*. The idea is implicit too in the first section of *The German Ideology*, where Feuerbach was also ostensibly the target.

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on to argue that things-in-themselves become comprehensible when it is understood that the subject and the object of knowledge constitute each other through their mutual interactivity. Schematically, these views of the relation between the subject and object of knowledge can be depicted as follows:

|            |                      |                     |
|------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Descartes: | Subject of knowledge | Object of knowledge |
| Kant:      | Subject of knowledge | Object of knowledge |
| Hegel:     | Subject of knowledge | Object of knowledge |

For Descartes, the subject and object of knowledge are radically distinct; for Kant, the knowing subject (partly) constitutes the object of knowledge; for Hegel, the subject and object of knowledge constitute one another in a process of becoming that culminates, in the end (which is also the end of history), in the establishment (or recovery) of an essential unity that overcomes the alienation (separation) of the one from the other.

Because he was persuaded that Hegel's view of the relation between the subject and the object of knowledge was sound, Marx sought to combine Feuerbach's materialism with Hegel's insistence on the interactive relation of the knower and the known. As already indicated, the concept he invoked for this purpose was *praxis*. In the first instance, *praxis* is just the Greek word for "practice." But, for philosophers after Aristotle, the term has a more specific connotation. Aristotle distinguished *praxis* from *poesis*. Aristotle's concern, again, was with what is distinctively human. Many animals are capable of *poesis*, of goal-directed activities. A lion, for example, can find its way to its prey. But, according to Aristotle, only human beings are capable of *praxis*, of purposeful activity undertaken for the sake of realizing an ideal. Following Feuerbach, Marx identified *praxis*, so conceived, with "practical sensuous activity" – the material (mind-independent) constitution of the perceptible "external world" (*Sinnlichkeit*). In consequence of the mutual interactivity of the subject and object of knowledge, this activity constitutes the knowing subject as well.

Marx's main charge in the *Theses on Feuerbach* was that Feuerbach failed to grasp the full implications of the essentially dialectical structure of the real. Specifically, he failed to realize that the human essence itself changes because it is continually created by praxis, just as the perceptible world is. Instead, Feuerbach conceived of the human essence as a timeless presence that human beings either externalize, as history unfolds, or incorporate, after history ends. It is this ahistorical view of essential humanity that Marx had in mind, for example, in the ninth *Thesis*, when

he derogated Feuerbach's "perceptual materialism." In contrast, the materialism Marx endorsed accords primacy to the human collectivity, to what Rousseau called "the whole community." It is this collective subject, interacting with the external world, which constitutes both the individual and the human essence, and which is itself always in a process of *becoming*. In the tenth *Thesis*, Marx faulted the ahistoricity of Feuerbach's critical program, even when it is applied, as Marx himself had applied it, to civil society. Then, finally, from a standpoint that accords the concept of praxis its due, Marx declared, in the eleventh *Thesis*, that the goal of the philosophical project of interpretation can only be realized by changing the world the philosophers seek to understand. Thus the *Theses on Feuerbach* elaborate, from an Hegelian perspective, the thought implicit in the narrative sketched in the still Feuerbachian 1843 "Introduction," according to which the culmination of the project of classical German philosophy requires nothing less than a genuine social revolution, a transformation of the social world, deliberately undertaken for the sake of an ideal.

However, in the kinds of explanations he provided, the Marx of *The German Ideology* did indeed break with his Feuerbachian past. When Marx was still a Feuerbachian critic, he supposed that to explain is to interpret, to uncover meanings or significances. In the natural sciences, however, the idea that phenomena have meanings had been abandoned long ago. In that domain, to explain a phenomenon is to subsume it under its relevant causal determinations. It is not a goal of the natural sciences to discover what phenomena mean. That would be a futile objective, in any case, since, on the modern view, there are no meanings to discover. The world science investigates just *is*; it means nothing or at least nothing that science can discern, even in principle. Thus the main explanatory goal of the natural sciences has long been to discover the causal structure of the world in which phenomena occur; to identify what Aristotle called "efficient causes," in contrast to the "final causes" of ancient and medieval science and of Hegel's philosophy of history. To be sure, because human action is intentional, interpretation is still an appropriate explanatory objective in historical writing and in other so-called human sciences. But it may also be the case, even for the phenomena that historians and social scientists investigate, that there exist causal relations awaiting discovery. We will see that Marx's mature theory of history makes precisely this claim; that it identifies real causal determinations.

The first intimations of that theory are evident in *The German Ideology*. There we find the beginnings of an account of history's structure

and direction that is not teleological. Thus Marx set out an account of history's real *natural kind* divisions, identifying structural discontinuities within human history that have, in his view, genuine theoretical significance. Natural kind divisions contrast with convenient classifications. Classifications that do not represent theoretically meaningful natural kind divisions include, for example, in the theory of evolution, the Age of Mammals or the Age of Dinosaurs, and, in US History, the Age of Lincoln or the Progressive Era. These classifications represent investigators' interests, not real differences underwritten by theoretical claims. In contrast, "the capitalist mode of production" and the various pre-capitalist economic structures Marx identified in *The German Ideology* – "the feudal mode of production," for example, or "the ancient mode of production" or the "Asiatic mode" – do purport to be theoretically meaningful natural kind divisions.

This point is of some importance for understanding the limitations of the young Marx's reflections on alienation. According to Smith, the division of labor is the key to enhancing labor productivity. Thus it was an ever increasing division of labor that accounted for growth in "the wealth of nations," the phenomenon he was mainly concerned to explain. Therefore, in the *Paris Manuscripts*, where Marx assumed that Smith got political economy right, and where he took increasing wealth to signify a diminution of essential humanity, Marx maintained, implicitly, that it is the division of labor itself that explains human alienation and that is therefore responsible for intensifying human unfreedom. He could hardly have concluded otherwise. Smith did not have a developed concept of capitalism, and therefore neither did Marx. A concept of capitalism as a distinct mode of production and natural kind division of human history does appear, however, in *The German Ideology*.

But because the concept was unavailable to Marx a year earlier, it is unclear what a society without alienated labor would be like for the Marx of the *Paris Manuscripts*. Presumably, it would be a society without a developed division of labor. But, then, if Smith was right about the causes of the wealth of nations, a society where individuals were genuinely free (autonomous) in the economic sphere would be a society that is deficient with respect to wealth, to *Simlichkeit*. This is hardly a satisfactory view, as Marx himself must have realized. Perhaps this thought helped to motivate Marx, in *The German Ideology* and then in his later writings, to conceptualize an alternative to the world he sought to change. The first step in this process was to name the enemy – capitalism. The next step was to begin to envision an alternative to it. Beginning with *The German Ideology*, Marx conceived that alternative as a distinct *mode of produc-*

*tion*. In line with the usage of some of the more radical early nineteenth century French socialists, Marx called it *communism*.

Marx's development of the concept mode of production amounted to a conceptual breakthrough. Even so, his reflections on the communist mode of production in *The German Ideology* continue to show Feuerbach's influence. Thus his sketch of life in communist society reveals that, like Feuerbach, Marx still thought of essential humanity as a unified capacity, awaiting realization. As human beings self-actualize under communism, they become ever more able to do all kinds of things – to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, raise cattle in the evening, and criticize at night. Needless to say, this is an unlikely view of human potentialities, made plausible only because the bucolic activities Marx mentions, with the possible exception of "criticism," do not require extensive training. Could anyone seriously contemplate human beings solving complex differential equations in the morning, fixing jet engines in the afternoon, filling cavities in the evening, and then performing as concert pianists at night! To self-realize in any one of these areas, it is necessary to dedicate a considerable portion of one's time and energy to cultivating the requisite capacities, to the detriment of other activities one might pursue. There is, however, a weaker claim that Marx may also have had in mind. It seems to have been Marx's view that freedom is diminished in a world in which people identify themselves with their economic tasks, where they are hunters, say, rather than people who hunt. Undifferentiated, self-realized human beings hunt because they freely choose to do so; hunters hunt because that is what hunters do. Then the claim would be that, under communism, there would only be freely chosen activities; people would perform tasks, but no one would have an occupation. But even if having an occupation does diminish freedom, an unlikely contention, this too is an implausible claim because self-realization typically involves *self-identification* with some activities to the exclusion of others. In general, one cannot self-realize through work without, as it were, making one's work one's own. Marx's idea seems to have been that fully self-realized human beings would be able to do more or less whatever they freely choose to do. Arguably, this is an attractive picture, but it is almost certainly utopian in the derogatory sense of the term. It is an impossible objective. Self-realization involves focusing efforts and identifying with them; not developing in all ways at once. ❧

It is not surprising, therefore, that, after *The German Ideology*, Marx let this aspect of his philosophical anthropology lapse, without ever quite expressly repudiating it. Still, Marx's *German Ideology* reflections on

communism express a viable message. The vision of communism that Marx sketched there contrasts in the extreme with the world of alienated labor that he had depicted the year before. The communism of *The German Ideology* is a world of maximal freedom (autonomy), while the world of alienated labor is a world of maximal unfreedom (heteronomy). This idea is retained in Marx's mature theory of history, and in the idea of communism that it underwrites.

It should be observed, finally, that Marx's sense of what is humanly possible differs radically from Hobbes's. For Marx, a world of maximal freedom (autonomy), so far from being a war of all against all, is a maximally harmonious regime in which, as Marx would say in *The Communist Manifesto*, "the condition for the free development of each is the free development of all." It is, in short, Rousseau's just state, generalized to encompass all aspects of social and economic life. This idea is already implicit in *The German Ideology*, though it is presented there in a utopian form. But it is not itself a utopian idea, as Marx's reflections on the state and on history make clear.

### The State

Almost everything Marx wrote bore in one way or another on the state, especially in the last three decades of his life when his principal concern was to develop a theory of the capitalist mode of production and of its "laws of motion." For our purposes, however, it will suffice to focus on some of Marx's claims in *The Communist Manifesto* (co-authored with Friedrich Engels), where the general outline of a distinctively Marxist political theory, consonant with Marx's mature views on history and with his developing understanding of political economy, is established.

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels defined the state according to what it does, not according to how it operates. Throughout history, they claimed, the state organizes the *economically* dominant class into a *ruling* class – overcoming internal divisions that would otherwise render it unable to dominate subordinate classes and to sustain the mode of production from which it benefits; while, at the same time, encouraging internal divisions within subordinate classes. The state does so through historically specific institutions. Thus it is a tenet of Marx's political theory that the nature of the state, its institutional form, varies according to the kind of economic system or mode of production it superintends. There is a distinctively capitalist state; and, although Marx had very little to say directly about it, there is also a distinctive form of the state appropriate

for the social order that will supersede capitalism, socialism – the "first phase" of communism, the final mode of production.

In *The State and Revolution*, a visionary and free-spirited text written just before the Bolshevik Revolution brought him to power, Vladimir Lenin, drawing on a number of Marx's texts, including the *Communist Manifesto*, maintained that all states are "dictatorships."<sup>4</sup> This claim is plainly false if "dictatorship," is understood to designate a form of government in which an individual or group of individuals rules at its own discretion, without the "checks and balances" of parliamentary or judicial institutions. But this is not what Lenin had in mind. Thus Marx described representative democracy, ostensibly dictatorship's opposite, as the characteristic form of the class dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. And Marx called the Paris Commune of 1871, a short-lived and brutally repressed experiment in direct democracy, the closest historical approximation to the dictatorship of the proletariat. The rationale for Marx's usage becomes apparent, however, when we realize that what Marx and Engels had in mind in calling states "dictatorships" was the state in Rousseau's sense of the term, the sense that contrasts with *government*. The state is the political entity itself, not the institutional apparatus through which it conducts its affairs. Their contention, then, was that, in the final analysis, state power rests on force; not on laws or customs, and certainly not on the will of the governed. In other words, Marx and Engels thought of state power, everywhere and in all its forms, as rule based on extra-legal and extra-consensual violence, just as dictatorial governments are. Marx's and Engels' terminology was deviant and misleading; indeed, dangerously so, in view of what would be made of "the dictatorship of the proletariat" after the Bolshevik Revolution. But the point behind this designation is standard throughout the modern political philosophy. The idea that force is the foundation of the state has been the dominant view since Hobbes. Where Marx diverged from the mainstream was not in holding that states are dictatorships, but in claiming that states are *class* dictatorships; specifically, dictatorships of the economically dominant class or class coalition.

There is therefore a sense in which Marx's central theoretical claim amounts to an emendation of the interest-based, Hobbesian case for states, at least if Hobbes's argument is understood to have descriptive, not normative, force. For Hobbes, individuals in a state of nature are incapable of coordinating their behaviors in ways that accord with their interests. By doing what *is* individually best, they unintentionally generate radically

<sup>4</sup> V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution, Collected Works*, vol. 25 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1954).

sub-optimal outcomes; they improve themselves to ruin in a generalized "war of all against all." The solution to this problem is the institution of sovereignty, of a power sufficiently mighty to coordinate individuals' behaviors through the use or threat of force. Sovereignty or, what comes to the same thing, the state form of political organization therefore solves a Prisoners' Dilemma problem that exists because the payoff structure individuals confront in the state's absence is such that, by maximizing their own utility, they find themselves worse off than they might otherwise be. The state solves this problem by constraining individuals' maximizing behavior. It changes the payoff structure individuals confront, making it irrational for self-interested individuals always to do what would be individually best in a state of nature. Subjects of a sovereign must instead adjust their behaviors to accord with the sovereign's commands. They must maximize their own utility against a background of laws, coercively enforced. Hobbes thought that this constraint makes everyone (or nearly everyone) better off.

Marx took over this view of the state's role in advancing interests, but in a way that echoes Rousseau's claim, in *The Second Discourse*, that the (*de facto*) state is a trick foisted on the poor by the rich. His position follows from his contention that state power is always the power of a social class or coalition of classes. Again, it will be instructive to compare it with Hobbes's. For Hobbes, the point of departure for thinking about political institutions was the atomic individual. For Marx, the fundamental unit of society, for purposes of political theory, was social classes. In Marx's view, then, there is no general, inter-individual coordination problem for the state to solve. There is a class coordination problem. However, unlike Hobbes's atomic individuals, classes are not mired in a war of all against all. To be sure, their interests are antagonistic. But a war of all against all presupposes relative equality and, in consequence of the economic structure in place, classes are too unequal. Among the classes whose interests stand opposed, some (usually one) are powerful enough to dominate the rest. In particular, some (usually one) are in a position to take unfair advantage, to *exploit*, all the others. Strictly speaking, then, the inter-class coordination problem does not require a direct, political solution, analogous to the institution of sovereignty in Hobbes's state of nature. Class relations are coordinated by the economic structure or mode of production itself. But, for the economic structure to be in place and to reproduce itself, there is an intra-class or, more precisely, an intra-ruling class coordination problem, similar to the one Hobbes identified for subjects generally, that must be solved. Among the exploiters, individuals and coalitions of individuals have conflicting interests. But they also have a common

interest, analogous to the interest in peace that individuals in a Hobbesian state of nature share. Everyone in the economically dominant class has an interest in maintaining the system of exploitation itself, for it is only in interest in this system that they are economically dominant. The state is the virtue of this system which they succeed in having this interest realized. It is means through which they succeed in having this interest realized. It is what allows the economically dominant class to overcome its own internal coordination problem, its (potential) *intra-class* "war of all against all," the better to wage "war," class war, against those it dominates economically. The state, in short, is the means by which the exploiters organize their own class dictatorship. It is, as Marx and Engels said in *The Communist Manifesto*, the "executive committee" of the entire ruling class.

Needless to say, subordinate classes also face coordination problems. These problems are exacerbated by the class dictatorship that enforces their subordination in any of a variety of ways. Marx and Engels had little to say about this phenomenon in *The Communist Manifesto* itself, except to reflect on it very generally and abstractly. But it was a perennial theme in many of the very subtle analyses of actual political events that Marx would go on to write. By the 1860s, when he helped to found the First International, a confederation of European and North American working-class political organizations, Marx had come to believe that, under capitalism, working-class political parties are indispensable for countering the state's role in decapitating the working class, just as he believed them to be indispensable for the conquest of state power itself. But working-class parties, even revolutionary parties, can only do so much. It is only *after* the conquest of state power that the coordination problems of the working class can finally be definitively solved. More generally, it is a tenet of Marx's political theory that it is only by organizing its own "class dictatorship" that a previously subordinate class is able, finally, to act coherently in its own interest.

The dictatorship of the proletariat, then, is a state in which the working class, the proletariat, holds state power. In its original meaning, therefore, "the dictatorship of the proletariat" has nothing to do with dictatorial forms of government or one-party rule or with wholesale transgressions of human rights. Indeed, as remarked, the model for the dictatorship of the proletariat, in Marx's own thinking, was the radically democratized social order that emerged in the Paris Commune. Nevertheless, workers' power is at odds with Hegel's notion of a *Rechtsstaat* and its liberal equivalents. The idea of a proletarian class dictatorship implies restrictions on the rights of former exploiters and other social strata whose interests are detrimental to workers' interests. A proletarian class dictatorship is therefore not a **state form** in which all persons are genuinely equal before the

law. The reason why is perfectly general. If it is true that states are always class dictatorships, then genuinely equal citizenship is impossible so long as states exist. This was Marx's view in his early, Feuerbachian period too. In his early writings, however, Marx formulated this thought in a way that accorded with the philosophical preoccupations of the Young Hegelians; in other words, with positions he later abandoned. In *The Communist Manifesto* and then in his sustained reflections on actual political events, he framed his thinking in a way that is consistent with the various bodies of theory he was in the course of developing. But his contention throughout all of his work was that in class divided societies pretensions of equality are always, in the final analysis, shams. Liberal representative democracies, class dictatorships of the bourgeoisie, proclaim equality, the better to organize the domination of the many by the few. Proletarian class dictatorships are no more true to the Hegelian ideal; they are only more transparent. They proclaim inequality, to the advantage of the many and to the detriment of the few, in order to superintend the transition to a classless society in which genuine equality for all is finally achievable. Paradoxically, then, for Marx, a *Rechtsstaat* is a utopian dream, an unrealizable ideal. The moment it becomes possible, it is no longer necessary. As Marx famously put it, the state that succeeds the capitalist state "withers away." It does so for want of a sufficient reason for being.

The dictatorship of the proletariat was conceived as a transitional political form, one that superintends the transition from capitalism to communism, a society without a state. It is a state that, through its educative effects as well as through its use of state power, progressively undermines the conditions that make it both necessary and possible. Beyond this very general description, however, Marx had little to say about the dictatorship of the proletariat. His accounts of it are scattered throughout his later, political writings, especially in his reflections on the failed Paris Commune. They consist largely of speculations about its institutional forms. This focus is well chosen inasmuch as different institutional forms are appropriate for different class dictatorships. But it can be misleading. Proletarian class rule does not strictly require a particular set of institutional arrangements. Thus of the measures proposed in *The Communist Manifesto*, some, like the establishment of a progressive income tax and the centralization of the means of communication and transport in the hands of the state, seem obvious or, at least, benign to contemporary readers. Others, like the abolition of private property in land and the "gradual abolition of all the distinction between town and country by a more equitable distribution of the population over the country" seem

dangerously utopian. But, whatever their merits, these measures were put forth as a program for the German revolution that would erupt in 1848. Marx and Engels never thought of them as anything other than demands appropriate for their particular time and place. In other times and places, different measures might be correspondingly apt. The same is true of Marx's other, post-Commune recommendations on institutional forms.

Nevertheless, there are some general implications for state institutions when the working class controls the state. Since the proletariat has no interest in maintaining itself as a class, since its interest instead is to abolish class divisions altogether, state institutions in a proletarian class dictatorship will ideally be of such a nature as not to reproduce themselves indefinitely, in contrast with all other forms of state power. Their principle instead will be to seek to undo progressively the conditions that make them necessary. Hobbes would have considered the very idea of a state that seeks to undo the conditions for its own necessity unthinkable, and so too would the overwhelming majority of modern political philosophers whose views fall within the Hobbesian statist tradition. But Rousseau would not. To be sure, Rousseau wrote of the just state as if it were an eternal form. But it follows from his account of *de jure* political authority that state institutions are necessary only insofar as individuals remain recalcitrant to rational self-determination. There is therefore, implicitly, a Rousseauian notion of statelessness too, at least if we suppose, as Rousseau did, that recalcitrance will diminish as "opinion" is shaped by just institutional arrangements. Through its laws and through the active and direct participation of its citizens in law-making, the state educates its citizenry to the point that it makes itself superfluous. We can therefore say what Rousseau himself never quite said: that the state of *The Social Contract*, like the dictatorship of the proletariat, would "wither away," that it would undo the conditions for its own necessity. Allowing for the very different theoretical contexts within which the ideas were contrived, it would even be fair to say that the dictatorship of the proletariat, as Marx conceived it, is Rousseau's just state. More precisely, the dictatorship of the proletariat is the state of *The Social Contract*, conditioned by a conviction that Marx retained from his Young Hegelian past, the idea that political institutions be understood in their historical specificity, and guided by the discovery, proclaimed at the beginning of *The Communist Manifesto*, that human history is a "history of class struggles."

In view of the many affinities joining the political theories of Rousseau and Marx, it will be well, before turning to Marx's views on history itself, to acknowledge that his account of the state – or, more precisely, of the state that oversees the transition to communism – is flawed in just

the way that Rousseau's vision of the just state was. In short, both Rousseau and Marx saw humanity's possible future too clearly, underestimating the difficulties in the way of getting from here to there – from a state of nature (with or without *de facto* legitimate states) to the just state in Rousseau's case, or from capitalist civilization to communism in Marx's. Rousseau failed to appreciate the full extent of the difficulties in the way of overcoming human recalcitrance, of putting reason in control. Similarly, Marx failed to appreciate the extent to which life in class societies, especially during the capitalist era, turned humankind away from its solitary and egalitarian vocation, rendering cooperative solutions to coordination problems, internally organized ventures in general will coordination, difficult to attain. Both were therefore unduly dismissive of the kinds of protections that liberals sought to defend; both seriously underestimated the normative importance of restrictions on state power. To put this point somewhat differently, both Rousseau and Marx were concerned, very nearly to the exclusion of all else, with what had to be done in order to arrive at a destination they both thought humanly possible and normatively compelling. Both were therefore too quick to dismiss the pessimistic concern, the fear of impending tyranny, that has motivated liberalism since its inception. Both were therefore loathe to focus on the all important question of what is *not* to be done, the paramount issue for Locke, Mill and Rawls and indeed for liberals generally.

Arguably, this is a difficulty with the Rousseauan–Marxian strain of political theory that can be remedied without detriment to the core of Rousseau's and Marx's common political vision. But it is a difficulty that must be addressed somehow. If it is not, the consequences can be tragic, as the history of illiberal regimes in the twentieth century attests. Some of these horrors were committed by men and women who took themselves, in all sincerity, to be followers of Marx. But however history finally judges the official Marxisms of the twentieth century, it is plain that it would be recklessly unfair to blame the *guilt* on Marx's political theory or on Rousseau's. Still, it must be acknowledged that neither Marx nor Rousseau did nearly enough to address the concerns that the liberals have made central to their own understanding of political morality. In retrospect, it therefore seems clear that Marx's political theory calls out for liberal supplementation.

Nowadays it has become a dogma of the prevailing political culture that *any* visionary political philosophy, not just Marx's, inevitably leads to disaster. The idea that Marx's notion of what is humanly possible and historically feasible might somehow be joined to a liberal political program is therefore likely to invite skepticism. I would hazard, though, that

this reaction is wrong, and also that it debilitates both political philosophy and political life. However, I will not attempt to defend this conviction here, except insofar as the ensuing discussion of Marx's theory of history speaks to the issue. In the end, the question of the plausibility of Marx's vision cannot be resolved by philosophical arguments alone. One would have to reflect too on the course of real history to speculate reasonably about whether, on balance, it is worth attempting to implement anything like what Marx thought humankind could attain and, if so, how to go about attaining it. The history of world Communism, in and out of power, from the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution through the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, though plainly relevant, hardly provides decisive evidence, if only because the kind of Marxism to which the Communist parties of the world adhered had so little to do with the political theory of *The Communist Manifesto* or, for that matter, of *The State and Revolution*. If and when a radical politics motivated by the values that mobilized so many for so long under the banner of Marxism revives, it will be necessary, in order not to repeat the old mistakes, to subject this long and complicated history to careful scrutiny. Obviously this is a task that, in its entirety, extends beyond the range of political philosophy. It involves economic theory, historical analysis, and social science; in short, all the fields that Marx himself contributed to incisively. In this larger endeavor, though, the philosophical study of Marx's political philosophy will have a role to play. Throughout the twentieth century, Marx's political theory was perhaps the least well understood side of his thinking. Many important affinities joining Marx's positions to the liberal tradition have therefore gone unnoticed.<sup>5</sup> Marx himself was loathe to acknowledge these connections. He wanted to draw a line of demarcation between socialist and liberal politics. Without passing judgment on whether or not this political stance was, on balance, misguided or wise, I would venture that it partly explains the disfavor into which Marx's political thought has fallen in recent years, even in the eyes of those who not long ago saw Marxism as the repository of all truth. It may also partly explain why so many truly egregious mistakes and even crimes were committed in Marx's name.

<sup>5</sup> I elaborate on this claim in *Arguing for Socialism: Theoretical Considerations*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 2nd edn. (London: Verso, 1988), ch. 6; *The End of the State* (London: Verso, 1987); *The General Will: Rousseau, Marx, Communism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), chs. 5–9; and in *Rethinking Liberal Equality: From a "Utopian" Point of View* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), chapter 5.

## History

Marx's theory of history, *historical materialism*, aims to account for history's structure and direction by identifying a real causal process internal to human history, an *endogenous* process, that supplies history with a determinate trajectory or, strictly speaking, that would do so in the absence of countervailing exogenous causes. It is important to acknowledge this potential limitation on historical materialism's explanatory power. It is one thing to identify an endogenous causal process and something else to maintain that it actually explains the phenomena it would explain if nothing else were involved. For example, biologists may discover that all organisms are, so to speak, genetically programmed to die, but, within particular populations, deaths may in some or even in all cases be caused by factors other than the execution of this program. Perhaps an environmental toxin kills off all members of the population before old age and death set in, as they otherwise would. Then the fact that the organisms are programmed to die would probably explain *something*. It might explain the nature of the organisms' life stages, for example. But it would not explain why some or all of the organisms died. Similarly, there is good reason to think that Marx's theory of history explains *something* of why history has taken the course that it has; why capitalism, once introduced, has been so successful and what its possible futures may be. But Marx was probably wrong to maintain, as he claimed in the "Preface" to the 1859 *Critique of Political Economy*, that it explains actual epochal historical transformations. With respect to that explanandum, contingent and exogenous factors are very likely more important.

Historical materialism purports to identify real natural kind divisions within human history and to explain movement from one natural kind division to another. This is a very strong ambition. In chemistry, for example, the periodic table of elements provides an account of the natural kind divisions of matter. In specifying what the *elements* are, it identifies all the ways that matter can be; it provides a map of possibilities. But the periodic table is only a map. It makes no claim about movement from one element to another. Historical materialism does. Not only does it propose an account of possible modes of production or economic structures, a map describing all the ways economies can be; it also predicts movement, of an irreversible and progressive kind, from one point on the map to another. As in chemistry, however, it requires a body of theory even to conceptualize the possibilities. That there is, say, a capitalist mode

of production is no more self-evident, no more a part of pre-theoretical "common sense," than the existence of oxygen was before Priestley isolated it in 1774. That "capitalism" designates a certain reality may seem unexceptionable to people nowadays. But this fact is due, in part, to the effects of Marx's theorizing on the larger intellectual culture, not to the obviousness of the concept.

However, it was widely acknowledged by the end of the eighteenth century that a "great transformation" in European, especially British, society was taking place, and that economic changes were central to the changes in progress. There was considerable disagreement, however, about how to characterize these changes and about how to account for them. Major technological transformations in manufacturing, the so-called Industrial Revolution, clearly had a great deal to do with the emerging social order, a fact not lost on contemporary thinkers. So too did changes in the organization of production, especially the increasing division of labor. We have seen how Adam Smith, in particular, thought the division of labor crucial, and how this idea of his was taken over by Marx in his youthful reflections on alienation. The idea that changes in real property relations, in control and revenue rights over productive resources, are key to understanding the great transformation then taking place was an idea that was distinctively Marx's. Of course, no new idea comes out of nowhere. There were others, before Marx, for whom property relations were of prime importance. French socialists, along with their English counterparts, those whom Marx called "utopian socialists," had already made forms of property central to their thinking about ideal social arrangements. The utopian socialists despised private property, upholding various forms of social ownership in its stead. Their indictment of private property regimes was palpable, and of a piece with Marx's fervent reproach against the emerging status quo in the 1844 *Paris Manuscripts*. Marx followed their lead. This is why, in "Three Sources and Component Parts of Marxism" (1913), Lenin identified French socialism, along with British political economy and German philosophy, as one of the roots from which Marx's thought sprang.

But even the utopian socialists did not quite grasp how *economic structures* or *modes of production* constitute distinct, historically specific, ways of organizing human societies. They named what they opposed *capitalism*; and they called what they proposed *socialism*. But, in Marx's view, they had, at best, a very inadequate understanding of these economic forms. They can hardly be blamed for this shortcoming, however. The idea of an economic structure or mode of production is a new idea. Thus, it would be difficult to imagine someone for whom

capitalism was not already available thinking, say, that fifteenth-century Italian city states and late twentieth-century Japan fall under the same theoretical designation. But this is just what Marx's theory of history implies. Marx contended that the modes of production he first identified in *The German Ideology* – feudalism, capitalism, and socialism, among others – are real, natural kind divisions of human history, and that understanding their internal functioning is indispensable for grasping the course of history itself.

An *economic structure* or *mode of production* is a set of real property relations, where "property," again, designates a bundle of control and revenue rights over productive resources. In pre-capitalist societies, there is private ownership of persons and also of things. Chattel slavery, of the sort that existed in the American South before the Civil War, is a clear example of ownership of other persons. Ownership of other persons existed too, in a less severe form, under feudalism – where lords had property rights in (some of) their serfs' labor. Under capitalism, there is private ownership of external things, but not of other persons. In communist societies, as Marx envisioned them, neither other persons nor external productive resources are privately owned – though, presumably, personal property would still exist. The abolition of private property in major external productive resources is also a distinguishing feature of any likely *socialism*, communism's "first phase."

Marx used the terms *production relations* or *social relations of production* to designate real property relations, effective control and/or revenue rights over productive assets. *Production relations* are distinguished from *productive forces* or *forces of production*. Marx used these terms to designate technology in the broadest sense, that by means of which human beings engage in productive activities. Thus means of production like tools and instruments, the organization of the production process, and also knowledge, insofar as it figures in production, are included among the productive forces. An *economic structure* or *mode of production* may then be defined as a set of production relations. The chief explanatory claim of Marx's theory of history, its first Master Thesis, is that *the level of development of productive forces* explains *the nature of the economic structure*.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> What follows draws substantially on the seminal work of G. A. Cohen in *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense* (Oxford and Princeton: Oxford University Press and Princeton University Press, 1978). Cohen calls the claim just stated the Primacy Thesis. In the Appendix to this chapter, I offer a brief reconstruction of Cohen's case for the Primacy Thesis, and some critical assessments of it.

*Explains* in this context means "functionally explains." Functional explanations are genuine causal explanations, unlike the teleological explanations advanced in Hegel's philosophy of history. Where X explains Y functionally, X and Y causally affect one another. There is, to be sure, an explanatory asymmetry, but, in a genuine functional explanation, X and Y do causally interact. Consider, for example, the causal connection between a furnace and the ambient temperature in a room heated by that furnace and regulated by a thermostat. Thanks to the workings of the thermostat, the ambient temperature in the room causally affects the operation of the furnace, and the operation of the furnace causally affects the ambient temperature in the room. But it is the function of the furnace to regulate the room temperature; it is not the function of the room temperature to regulate the operation of the furnace. The same relation holds in the theory of evolution by natural selection. Natural selection is an optimizing "mechanism." It purports to explain why, for example, giraffes have long necks. Within the population of giraffe ancestors, those individuals who had longer necks, thanks to random variations in neck size, did better than individuals with shorter necks. They were more successful at obtaining nourishment from leaves that grow on tall trees, and therefore had a better chance of surviving to reproductive age. Thus they produced more offspring, and so their descendants, rather than the descendants of shorter-necked giraffes, came to be prevalent in later giraffe generations. If this explanation is correct, there is a causal interaction between the long necks of giraffes and the trees whose leaves giraffes eat. But there is, again, an explanatory asymmetry. The function of giraffes' long necks is to obtain the leaves that grow on tall trees; it is not the function of the trees and their leaves to lengthen giraffes' necks.

Because the theory of evolution by natural selection is so well supported by evidence, functional explanations are well established in the biological sciences. They are more controversial in the social sciences, where they are sometimes offered with reckless abandon. For social scientists of all intellectual tendencies, including some who identify with the intellectual tradition inaugurated by Marx, it is inordinately tempting to infer from the fact that because X benefits Y that X stands in a functional relation to Y. Since it is so easy to confound benefits with genuine functional relations, it is often worth demanding of those who would proffer functional explanations, that they provide an account of the mechanism(s) through which the functional relations they purport to have discovered are achieved – in other words, that they identify what plays a role analogous to thermostats or to natural selection. Marx fell short on this

account; he had very little, if anything, to say about *how* forces of production explain relations of production but not vice versa. This shortcoming does not automatically render his theory false, especially if, in each case of an epochal historical transformation, a plausible causal story can be told that explains why one mode of production succeeded another. But the absence of a developed account of the mechanisms through which there is movement along the map of historical possibilities is a concern. In this respect, historical materialism is in roughly the situation that the theory of evolution was in before Darwin discovered natural selection. Before this mechanism was understood, people could truthfully say that giraffes have long necks *because* it helps them obtain food. But they either had no idea how this functional relation was achieved or else they had a false idea; they believed, for example, that God designed giraffes' necks for this purpose.

There is a second Master Thesis of historical materialism: that *economic structures* or "*modes of production*" *explain legal and political "superstructures" and also ways of thinking or "forms of consciousness."* The idea, in other words, is that the economic structure or *base* explains non-economic phenomena. Again, the relevant sense of "explains" is *functionally explains*. The contention, then, is that the legal and political superstructure, the state and its laws, and also forms of consciousness help to *stabilize* and *reproduce* the economic "base." Thus they stand in a functional relation to the economic base. In this sense, the economic base explains superstructural phenomena. The state and its laws and also forms of consciousness are as they are because the economic base needs them to be just that way in order to sustain and reproduce itself.

G. A. Cohen has pointed out, contrary to the orthodox Marxist view and very likely to Marx's own understanding as well, that there is no compelling reason to interpret what Marx said about the relation between superstructural phenomena and the economic base in an "inclusive" way.<sup>7</sup> To sustain the claim that forces (functionally) explain relations of production, it is not necessary to maintain that there are economic explanations for all non-economic phenomena. That claim is not only unnecessary; it is almost certainly false. It is possible, of course, that anything can be explained by reference to its role in stabilizing and reproducing the economic base. But is it even remotely plausible, for example, that there is an economic explanation for why Kant formulated the cat-

<sup>7</sup> See G. A. Cohen, "Restricted and Inclusive Historical Materialism," reprinted in G. A. Cohen, *History, Labour and Freedom: Themes from Marx* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

egorical imperative in five versions rather than, say, in two or seven? Is there an economic reason why September has thirty days while October has thirty-one? In all likelihood, there is not. Thus while it is possible that anything is susceptible to an economic explanation, it is plainly not the case that literally everything actually is.

Cohen's suggestion is that historical materialists need only hold that economic structures functionally explain those non-economic phenomena that have effects on social relations of production and therefore on the endogenous historical dynamic that historical materialism identifies. Cohen calls this view *restricted* historical materialism, in contrast to the *inclusive* historical materialism of orthodox Marxism and of Marx himself. For inclusive historical materialists, Marx's theory of history is comprised of two distinct claims, each asserting a functional relation – forces of production (technology, broadly conceived) functionally explain relations or production (real property relations), and then these relations (or, rather, sets of production relations) functionally explain the legal and political superstructure (the law and the state) and forms of consciousness. For restricted historical materialists, however, the two Master Theses of historical materialism are intimately joined. What counts as "superstructural" in the sense of the second Master Thesis cannot be specified independently of the first Master Thesis. Non-economic phenomena are superstructural if and only if they affect the endogenous dynamic process that moves history along. Because many aspects of political life have nothing to do with the connection between forces and relations of production, they fall outside the scope of Marx's theory of history altogether. Similarly much, indeed most, of humankind's intellectual, artistic, religious, and scientific history also falls outside historical materialism's purview. Restricted historical materialism is not a theory of everything historical. It is therefore much weaker in its explanatory pretensions than inclusive historical materialism is. But it is also much more plausible, and much less vulnerable to facile refutation. It would not challenge restricted historical materialism, as it would inclusive historical materialism, if it should turn out that, for example, the US Constitution requires a two-thirds (rather than, say, a three-fourths) majority in both houses of Congress (rather than in only one) to override a Presidential veto for reasons that are strictly political and that therefore have nothing to do with the underlying economic base, or that the doctrinal differences between, say, Presbyterians and Methodists are explicable for theological, not economic, reasons. Unless these phenomena somehow impinge on the underlying historical materialist dynamic, they have nothing to do with historical materialism's second Master Thesis, and

historical materialism, accordingly, has nothing to offer in the way of explanations for them.

Even so, in conjunction with the historical materialist view of history's structure and direction, restricted historical materialism has important implications for political philosophy. Above all, it underwrites the claim that the state form of political organization is not, as Hobbes believed, an eternal human necessity. It is instead a creature of a "moment" in human history, spanning roughly the period from the emergence and consolidation of the capitalist mode of production to the dawn of the end of class divisions under communism. In its time, the state is indispensable for satisfying urgent human interests. In atomized, market societies, it is necessary for order, as Hobbes believed. With the end of capitalism, it is required for moving people along to a point where communism becomes feasible. But, if the socialist state, the dictatorship of the proletariat, does its job well, people will eventually be able to do without states altogether. As productive forces develop and as appropriate economic and political changes take place, either automatically or as a result of deliberate state policies, the need to which the state responds will pass. This is why, under communism, there will be no state at all.

### *Marx's Politics*

On the face of it, Marx's contention that statelessness is feasible contradicts the statism endemic to modern political philosophy. But there is a sense in which it is also consistent with it. Hobbes maintained that the state is a trans-historical human necessity thanks to what he took to be ineluctable facts about human nature and the human condition. Marx agreed, in effect, with Hobbes's argument; it was Hobbes's premise that he would qualify. In Marx's view, the facts of human nature and the human condition that make states necessary are not beyond transformation. As the forces of production develop, the human condition can change to a point where the factors that make states necessary no longer obtain. Then, at the end of the trajectory historical materialism describes, the anarchists' ideal, regimes in which individuals' behaviors are coordinated in accord with their interests *but without coercion*, finally appears on the historical agenda.

Restricted historical materialism, in conjunction with the claim that economic structures rise and fall to track ever increasing levels of technological development, also explains the centrality Marx accorded class

struggle in his account of the state, in contrast to the untrammelled individualism emblematic of mainstream political theory. To be sure, orthodox interpretations of Marx's view of the relation of base and superstructure claimed too much for class analysis, in part because the historical materialism of orthodox Marxism, inclusive historical materialism, implied the pertinence of class analysis to all questions bearing on political and "ideological" affairs. If, however, restricted historical materialism takes the place of its more encompassing rival, class analysis is strictly prescribed only for what affects the underlying historical materialist dynamic; otherwise, its explanatory pertinence is an open question. The degree to which restricted historical materialism deflates historical materialism's explanatory range is therefore quite extensive. But even restricted historical materialism leaves Marx committed to a very powerful claim. It implies the relevance of economic explanations for justifying theories of political institutions or, at least, for those aspects of justifying theories that pertain to institutional arrangements that stabilize or reproduce the existing economic system in the case of capitalist states, or that work to undo the conditions for their own possibility in the states of socialist societies.

In contrast, mainstream political philosophy proceeds in almost complete obliviousness to class relations and class struggles. Especially in its liberal form, it is concerned with what Marx would consider superstructural phenomena, to the exclusion of nearly everything else. Underlying (class) power relations that purportedly explain why the law and the state are as they are therefore fall outside its range of concern. This is a theoretical difference with important practical implications. It is what turns liberalism away from political orientations that would radically alter underlying class relations. It leads even the most progressive liberal thinkers, like Mill or Rawls, to address social problems by engineering away society's ills, rather than by revolutionizing society itself. The idea that changes of the kind necessary to advance what Mill called "the permanent interests of man as a progressive being" might have to be radical and comprehensive, that they might have to transform social relations of production fundamentally, is foreign to the liberal way of thinking. If Marx view was generally sound, liberalism is bereft of a satisfactory account of the forms and limits of political arrangements. It is therefore incapable of motivating a politics adequate to the task of changing life radically for the better.

The idea that the economic base must be socialist and eventually communist if human beings are to make the social world as good as it can be was one of Marx's signal contributions to political theory. So too was

the idea, implicit in this larger conviction, that the agents of change must, in the end, be the bearers of new social relations, not existing elites, no matter how enlightened or benevolent they may be. This understanding is central to Marx's notion of communism, and of the politics necessary to establish and sustain it. I will conclude by focusing, very briefly, on two problematic aspects of Marx's view.

The first follows from the fact that Marx's politics is similar to Rousseau's, though, unlike Rousseau's, it is generalized beyond the political sphere and conditioned by the understanding of what is materially possible that historical materialism provides. In just the way that Rousseau's *de jure* state is feasible if and only if its citizens transform themselves to the point that they are able, as the theory prescribes, to place themselves "under the supreme direction of the general will," Marx's communism is feasible if and only if persons develop their capacities for internally coordinated self-governance to the fullest possible extent. Like Rousseau's citizens, communist men and women are the authors and directors of the institutions that affect their lives. But genuinely communal and autonomous agents of this kind do not yet exist. If they are ever to exist, they must be created. Because social engineering is inadequate to this task, would-be communists must create themselves. Individuals and groups who would make the communist ideal real must, like Rousseauan citizens, transform themselves, through their praxis, to the point that they genuinely become the communist men and women communism requires. Thus, for Marx, the movement is what matters most. As declared in the third of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, it is what "educates the educators." This process of self- and world-transformation is more important than theoretical speculations about what is materially and humanly possible. As the third *Thesis* continues, "the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice." In other words, it is ultimately the self-activity of those who would remake society for the better that determines the content of the ideal, not the speculations of philosophers intent on "interpreting the world." Is this a defensible strategy? The idea that human beings can transform themselves radically goes against the grain of modern political philosophy. It is fundamentally non-Hobbesian. But as Rousseau's example attests, Marx's thought is not without precedent in the tradition. In any case, on this issue, appeals to authority are unavailing. The adequacy of the Rousseauan-Marxian hope for changing humankind is ultimately an empirical question that only real historical events can settle.

A more problematic claim implicit in Marx's politics has to do with

who the agent of this self-transforming and world-transforming process is. Already in the 1843 "Introduction," Marx vested this historical mission with the (then nascent) proletariat, with those workers who are, as Marx put it, *in civil society*, but not *of it*, the direct producers of the emerging industrial order. This thought survived Marx's break with Feuerbach and came to full fruition in the development of his mature social and economic theory. But the proletariat, as Marx conceived it, no longer exists, if it ever did. In consequence of the political and social transformations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century capitalist societies, and in no small part thanks to the successes of the labor movement itself, the direct producers are no longer society's principal victims. They do not stand, in the words of the labor song "Solidarity Forever," "outcast and starving midst the wonders. . . [they] have made." Quite the contrary. Modern liberal democracies have, to some considerable degree, succeeded in *integrating* the working class into the capitalist order. Thus, contrary to the proclamation that concludes *The Communist Manifesto*, the vast majority of direct producers have a good deal more than their chains to lose. Needless to say, many of the world's inhabitants, especially in the so-called "developing countries," live in wretched conditions. They are indeed "outcast and starving." But they do not exactly constitute a proletariat in Marx's sense, for they are not *in civil society* in the right way; they are not bearers of communist social relations. Can Marx's vision of communism survive the absence of a proletariat? This is perhaps the most serious question confronting anyone who would attempt to assess the relevance of Marx's thought today.

The jury is out on this question; out for an indefinite term. In startling contrast to what was the case only a few decades ago, Marx's work is nowadays all but ignored. Will the pendulum swing back? I think it will because the real world problems that Marx addressed, like the hopes he articulated, remain as urgent as they ever were. But the Marx who will have a role to play in the political philosophy of the future will almost certainly not be the Marx whose specter haunted twentieth century liberalism. At this point, no one can say with assurance what a revival of the intellectual and political tendency Marx epitomized will be like or what role the study of Marx's own work will play in it. I would only register the opinion that political philosophers ignore this magisterial thinker at their peril, and that they would do well, once again, to make some of his more radical *ideals* and aspirations their own.

### Appendix: The Primacy Thesis<sup>8</sup>

Following Cohen's lead, let us call historical materialism's first Master Thesis, *that the level of development of the forces of production (functionally) explains the social relations of production*, the Primacy Thesis. Then Marx's case for the Primacy Thesis breaks down into a number of subordinate claims, from which the Primacy Thesis follows:

- (A) **The Compatibility Thesis:** Given levels of *productive forces* are compatible with only certain types of *economic structures* or *modes of production*; in other words, with certain kinds of *production relations*;
- (B) **The Development Thesis:** The productive forces tend to develop throughout human history;
- (C) **The Contradiction Thesis:** Given the reciprocal limits that exist between forces and relations of production (Thesis A) and the tendency of the productive forces to develop (Thesis B), with sufficient time, the productive forces will develop to a point where they are no longer compatible with the relations of production under which they had previously developed;
- (D) **The Capacity Thesis:** Because there is an objective human interest in transforming the relations of production in order to restore compatibility with the productive forces, the very same interest that purportedly makes Thesis B correct, the capacity for bringing that change about will eventually come into being. In particular, a *social class* will emerge with the capacity to bring about the requisite transformation;
- (E) **The Transformation Thesis:** When forces and relations of production are incompatible, as they will eventually become as long as development proceeds in class divided societies, the relations will change in a way that restores compatibility between forces and relations of production. It is, in other words, the set of production relations that will change; the productive forces will not regress.
- (F) **The Optimality Thesis:** When the productions relations change, they will be replaced by production relations that are functionally optimal for the use and further development of the productive forces.

<sup>8</sup> The point of reference for what follows is G. A. Cohen's reconstruction of Marx's theory in *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense*. For a fuller elaboration of what follows and also of some of the preceding remarks on historical materialism, see Erik Olin Wright, Andrew Levine, Elliott Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism* (London: Verso, 1992). Terms in *italics* have been explained above, in the main body of the text.

(F) is, effectively, what the Primacy Thesis claims. The modes of production identified in *The German Ideology* are optimal sets of production relations for particular levels of development of productive forces. It should be noted, however, that Cohen's reconstruction of historical materialism acknowledges fewer modes of production or economic structures than Marx did. For Cohen, the Primacy Thesis explains the transition from "primitive communism," a classless society with only barely developed means of production, to pre-capitalist class societies, to capitalism, to post-capitalism (socialism). Thus Cohen assimilates the Asiatic mode of production, the ancient mode of production, the feudal mode of production, and all the rest into the single category of pre-capitalist class society.

The Optimality Thesis makes clear that the sense of "explains" intended in the Primacy Thesis is indeed *functionally explains*. The claim is that, at its inception, a set of production relations is optimal for furthering the development of productive forces; in other words, that at the level of development already attained, the economic structure put in place by the appropriate class agent is as good as can be for furthering future development. Then, as development proceeds under the aegis of this economic structure, structural instabilities, "contradictions," emerge. The formerly optimal set of production relations increasingly *fetters* further development. At that point, a radical transformation of production relations occurs, a *social revolution*. A new economic structure, optimal for further development, replaces the economic structure that had become a fetter.

Communism, the last economic structure, is therefore the *end of history*, but not in the Hegelian sense. It is not history's *telos*. Communism is the end of history in the sense that it is an economic structure suitable to massively developed productive forces. In contrast to class divided societies that presuppose relative scarcity, communism presupposes *abundance* – not in the (clearly impossible) sense that everyone can have everything they could possibly want without expending any effort at all, but in the sense that everyone can have all (or nearly all) of what they actually do want or, rather, of what they would want if they were truly free authors of their own desires, without expending more effort than they freely choose to spend. To the end of his life, Marx believed that people are, at root, productive animals. He was therefore confident that communist men and women will want to expend effort, even in conditions of abundance. But they will only want to produce in a "meaningful," unalienated way. Of course, there is a sense in which this is just what people in all times and places want, whether they realize it or not. But it is a