

ground of sheer analogy or in sheer parroting of watchwords and formulas. Marx goes on to this:

Bourgeois revolutions, like those of the eighteenth century, storm swiftly from success to success; their dramatic effects outdo each other; men and things seem set in sparkling brilliants; ecstasy is the everyday spirit; but they are short-lived; soon they have attained their zenith, and a long crapulent depression lays hold of society before it learns soberly to assimilate the results of its storm-and-stress period. On the other hand, proletarian revolutions, like those of the nineteenth century, criticize themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltrinesses of their first attempts, seem to throw down their adversary only in order that he may draw new strength from the earth and rise again, more gigantic, before them, recoil ever and anon from the indefinite prodigiousness of their own aims, until a situation has been created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves cry out: *Hic Rhodus, bic salta!* Here is the rose, here dance!²⁷

This is an interesting résumé of revolutionary patterns, but the flat counterposition of bourgeois and proletarian revolutions with respect to these patterns is not as historically general as the language implies.

In *Capital* Marx emphasizes an advantageous aspect of the change to socialism:

The transformation of scattered private property, arising from individual labor, into capitalist private property is, naturally, a process incomparably more protracted, violent, and difficult than the transformation of capitalistic private property, already practically resting on socialized production, into socialized property. In the former case, we had the expropriation of the mass of the people by a few usurpers; in the latter, we have the expropriation of a few usurpers by the mass of people.²⁸

There are obviously things to be said on both sides of the calculus of difficulty, if that rather unprofitable enterprise is undertaken. The important point for present purposes is simply the fact of difference itself. The luring analogies between bourgeois and proletarian revolutions, or among all revolutions for that matter, are not without interest; but in the last analysis the patterns of proletarian revolution are as unique as the class it reflects.

2 | THE SPECIAL CLASS

A discussion of the political problems of proletarian revolution requires some clarification on a number of points in Marx's social theory. The following summary covers a number of controversial questions by stating Marx's view.

We have used *proletariat* so far with the broad meaning of wage-workers, especially in order to differentiate it from the early history of the word.¹ It is necessary now to be more exact, not so much for the sake of scientific accuracy as in order to dispense with some common misunderstandings of the political import of proletarian revolution. Marx's attitude toward precise definition in political terminology was typical of his day in being relatively permissive as compared with contemporary standards; but he grew more inclined to precision at least in the field of economic science. We saw this reflected in his increased care to distinguish between *proletariat* and *working class* on at least one occasion.²

Part of the problem was that, although *proletarian* was already in use as a term broader than *worker*,³ Marx came to assign a narrower scope to it by a terminological outcome of his economic theory. Over the span of Marx's life, socialist literature attached a whole spectrum of meaning to the word. A good example of the broad end of the spectrum was in a programmatic statement of the Communist League, probably written by Schapper, shortly before the *Communist Manifesto*: "In present-day society proletarians are all those who cannot live on their capital, the worker as well as the men of learning, the artist as well as the petty-bourgeois . . ."⁴ Behind this unworkably broad usage, as also the usage by others,⁵ was the strong honorific coloration that the word was intended to convey in these circles. Actually the real sense was a negative: all who were not idlers. Terminologically it raised

the banner of a united front by disparate social elements against the ruling minority. Although the origins of this kind of honorific aura around *proletarian* are pre-Marxist and non-Marxist,* its effects linger on in Marxist literature.

1. ECONOMIC DEFINITION

In Marx's theory, the proletariat is the working class peculiar to capitalist relations of production. It does not comprise all who work for a living, or who do useful or necessary work. It consists of workers whose livelihood depends on a wage relationship with employers of labor power, and who therefore produce surplus value in the process of commodity production.

Thus the term *proletariat* is not coterminous with a number of other expressions that are often used synonymously.

- The proletariat does not include all wage-workers. For example, it does not include wage-workers employed by government—road-building workers, in one example by Marx⁶—since strictly speaking they do not produce surplus value in the course of commodity production.

- The proletariat does not consist only of industrial workers (whatever that descriptive term is taken to comprise). Surplus value is produced in the course of other types of commodity production.

- The proletariat does not consist only of manual workers. There is a whole sphere of intellectual or mental labor which is as proletarian as any other. (We will return to this in Chapter 16.)

- The proletariat does not consist only of workers "at the point of production" (again, however that phrase is interpreted). For example, transportation may contribute to the surplus value of the transported commodity; and a truck driver may be as proletarian as an assembly-line hand.

- The proletariat does not consist only of workers engaged in producing tangible commodities. Producers of services (nonmaterial commodities) may also be producing surplus value. To take an example

* Contrast Marx's emphasis that the term "productive laborer" (as against unproductive) was *not* honorific but a reflection of capitalist conditions (discussed in Chapter 16 below).

which combines this and a previous point: a salaried teacher in a privately owned school that is run as a profit-making enterprise is producing surplus value for the employer.

Some of the above points restrict the technical coverage of the term more than is commonly realized. There is a final point to be made which expands it significantly.

- The basic unit of the proletariat in capitalist production, considered structurally, is not any individual but the *collective laborer*. This term of Marx's refers to the ensemble of workers whose labor taken together is necessary to produce a given commodity. It may be a small number (rarely one!) or a very large collectivity; but, more important, it commonly unites both manual and intellectual (mental) labor specialties, both labor at the point of production and away from the factory, both labor expended directly on the product and labor indirectly associated with the necessities of production (like floor-sweeping). It also includes supervisory labor of any type necessary to the production of the commodity. No one of this collectivity is responsible for the value embodied in the commodity; all of them are collectively. There is no basis for distinguishing between proletarian and nonproletarian constituents of the collective laborer; all of them are members of the proletariat.

The bourgeois-proletarian antagonism on which Marx bases the modern class struggle is, then, not represented by the dichotomy between dirt-splattered, horny-handed, blue-collared toilers and clean-shirted, chair-warming paper manipulators. The latter is a bourgeois conception, that is, it arises from class conceptions of social antagonisms that are cherished by the ruling class as a self-serving stereotype or caricature of the real world. This remains true even when it is inverted, that is, when the horny-handed lower-class image is idealized by alienated bourgeois who wish to break with their class.

2. WORKING-CLASS CIRCLES

One present importance of emphasizing the narrow economic meaning of *proletariat* to Marx is to shake up common misunderstandings. Thus, it is true that, technically, an editorial supervisor of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* may be a proletarian while a Navy Yard shipfitter is

not. But marginal consequences of this extreme sort are not typical of the sociopolitical role played by proletarian elements as against non-proletarian strata. The example calls attention to the need for the next step: a concrete examination of the relationship between an economic stratum as such and its social role, and hence the tendency of its relationship to the political class struggle.

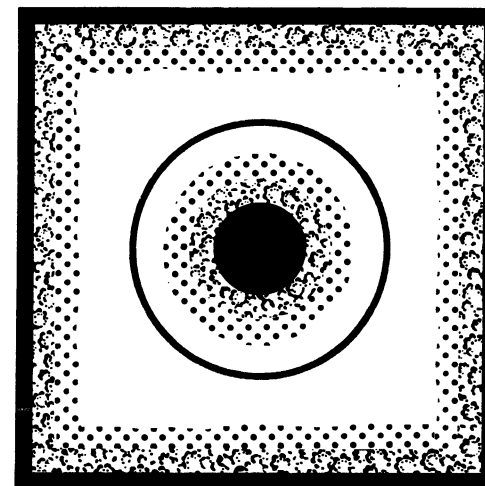
Obviously the encyclopedia editor, even if technically a proletarian, will tend to react socially and politically quite differently from a factory hand. Marx's conception of revolution simply puts forward the following proposition. Objective class status is the most important single determinant of sociopolitical role in the long run; and of the various class situations, that of the proletariat tends to drive most consistently toward a break with bourgeois relations.

Not in vain does it [the proletariat] go through the stern but steeling school of *labor*. It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment *regards* as its aim. It is a question of *what the proletariat is*, and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do. Its aim and historical action is visibly and irrevocably foreshadowed in its life situation as well as in the whole organization of bourgeois society today.⁷

This was written before the young Marx had got very far with his economic investigation of "the whole organization of bourgeois society." But it already roots the revolutionary role of the proletariat in its life situation, the objective relations that condition its social existence. Engels said no more when, much later, he described the proletariat as "a class whose conditions of life necessarily drive it to social revolution."⁸

A social analysis of the relation between classes and politics will, however, not normally show a simple duel situation. The duel pattern implies a highly polarized conjuncture such as commonly occurs at the end of a development, not at its beginning. For a better schema, let us resort to the metaphor implied by the phrase *social circles*. You are invited to think of a system of concentric circles, with surrounding areas. Here the main body of the proletariat is to be seen as a core group, occupying a central position with relation to the revolutionary drives within society.

In the accompanying schematic diagram, one aim is to illustrate the



In this bare schema, the whole circular area in the center represents the *working classes*.

- *Proletariat*: the two central circles—the solid black core and its penumbra. The core represents the *industrial proletariat*; the penumbra, all other proletarian workers.

- *Other wage-workers*: represented by the dotted-area circle.

- *Working petty-bourgeoisie (traditional petty-bourgeoisie)*: represented by the last, all-white circle. It comprises artisans, shopkeepers, etc., in the towns, peasantry in the countryside, depending on self-employed labor and small-property ownership. The significance of including these strata among the working classes is discussed in Chapter 11.

The bourgeoisie is represented by the outer strips running in a square; the three differently shaded strips suggest the small, middle and big bourgeoisies. No significance is to be attached to other features of the schematic sketch.

The "middle classes" (in the residual sense) are suggested by the irregular white area lying vaguely between the working-class circles and the bourgeoisie's square. For the use of the term *middle classes*, see Chapter 11.

fact that revolution entails the setting into motion of ever-expanding circles of society. The strategic position to set these circles into motion is occupied by the proletariat: such is Marx's view—"the proletarians created by large-scale industry assume leadership of this movement and carry the whole mass along with them . . ."9

The relations among classes, class strata, and class elements in revolution involve, of course, far more than the bare bones of class definition. The underlying demarcations of class merely provide a framework for their social interactions. From this standpoint our emphasis will be on the main body of the proletariat *plus* those sections of the population whose life situations in society tend to be similar. (This consideration will be concretized in subsequent chapters.) It is this combination which tends to be called the working classes, or even the working class, in Marx's writings—a term, therefore, which is best regarded as not narrowly technical-economic but as a socially extended penumbra around the proletariat. Let us specify now that when Marx leaves the specific ground of economic science in his discussions, and especially when the context is political affairs, the terms *proletariat*, *workers*, or *working class* tend to denote this same combination.

3. VANGUARD AND ALLIES

When Marx wrote in the *Communist Manifesto* that the proletarian revolution, unlike the bourgeois, was the "movement of the immense majority," it was an anticipative formula. In almost all countries, insofar as the proletarian revolution was the movement of a majority, it could not be the movement of the proletariat only but of the proletariat and its allies, namely, those social circles it could set in motion. "The class exclusively dependent on wages all its life is still far from being a majority of the German people," wrote Engels in 1870. "It is, therefore, also compelled to seek allies."¹⁰ And he proceeded to weigh the worth of various class elements as allies. We shall do so in Part II.

In 1848–1849 the gravamen of Marx and Engels' policies in the revolution was the problem of allies, as we shall see. The revolutionary movement collapsed over this problem, over "the incoherence, incongruence and apparent contradiction which prevailed in that movement" as a consequence of the crisscrossing pulls of the various social sectors:

°°When interests so varied, so conflicting, so strangely crossing each other, are brought into violent collision; when these contending interests in every district, every province, are mixed in different proportions; when, above all, there is no great centre in the country . . . what else is to be expected but that the contest will dissolve itself into a mass of unconnected struggles, in which an enormous quantity of blood, energy, and capital is spent, but which for all that remain without any decisive results?¹¹

What was lacking in this failed revolution was precisely the pattern of a vanguard class successfully drawing all its allies after it.

This standpoint provides a very important qualification to the bird's-eye view embodied in the *Communist Manifesto's* vivid picture that "Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: bourgeoisie and proletariat."¹² This picture emphasizes the long-term trend toward increasing polarization. But in shorter-range terms, a decisive problem of each polar class is to attract and hold class allies and to neutralize others. The proletarian revolution depends not on the proletariat alone, but on the hegemony of the proletariat among the revolutionary forces.

A one-sided dogmatization of this Manifesto aphorism was turned by the Lassallean movement into the watchword that, relative to the working class, "all other classes are only one reactionary mass." Both Marx and Engels ridiculed this apparently "radical" assertion and denounced it as politically reactionary. It meant the defeat of revolution by excluding allies. (This issue will be discussed at large in Chapter 11.)

The social revolution would not be made by the proletariat *solus*, and there was no need to wait until the development of society had made the proletariat a majority by itself, nor even to expect that such an extreme point might be reached. To be sure, the social revolution was possible only where the proletariat had come to occupy "at least an important position among the mass of people," Marx wrote,¹³ but this was so because only such a proletariat could hope to head a revolutionary class alliance. It was the proletarian-dominated alliance which he expected to be the mass basis of the social transformation.

4. WHY THE PROLETARIAT?

What is there in the life situation of the working class that causes Marx to regard it as the historically nominated hard core of modern revolution?

The answer has nothing to do with idealizing workers as such; it does not depend on regarding workers as somehow better, or more clever, courageous, or humanitarian than other people. Nor is it relevant to prove, as can be done with ease, that workers often follow reactionary courses and leaders and by no means show an invariable affinity for progressive causes. They are at least as capable of being misled and deceived as any other section of society (including intellectuals). They are filled with selfish aspirations and unworthy prejudices like everyone else. If this were the sort of thing involved, the case would not only be closed—it could never have been opened.

Taking workers person for person as individuals, the question whether they are better than others because they belong to an anointed class is quite alien to Marx's method of inquiry. In general Marx does not view social conflicts as contests between Good People and Bad People. The capitalists pilloried in *Capital* for their callous disregard of the suffering caused by brutal exploitation were just as likely to be kind parents and generous friends as the next person, and not given to trampling down children in the street. People act one way as individual atoms in the social fabric; they often act quite differently as part of a class collectivity. The bourgeois explanation is "Business is business"—which means that one must make a sharp distinction between an individual-human role and a class-constrained role. The life situation of capitalists also determines a class role, with class characteristics that cannot be deduced simply from the sum total of individual psychologies.

Like every other class and organic social group, the proletariat is more than the sum of its individual atoms. The working class is *atomized* when it is unorganized. Class organization brings class characteristics to the fore, and, as a function of organization, class characteristics increasingly take precedence over merely individual reactions, the greater the scale of class involvement. Then, in a feedback effect, class reactions can also reshape and reeducate individual reactions. Thus class-consciousness develops. When Marx was in a mind for Hegelian phraseology, the atomized class was a "class in itself" (*an sich*) but

became a "class for itself" (*für sich*) insofar as it organized into a social entity and achieved consciousness of its social and political role in the course of struggle.*

All this, for Marx, is a historical process, not a static mystique. "Revolutionariness" does not reside in the substance of the proletariat like sanctity in the Holy Ghost; the notion that every proletarian is immanently more revolutionary than the unanointed at any given time or place has no more to do with Marx than muttering a paternoster. The conditions of existence of the working class provide the connection between the economic position of the class and its political tendencies; "the proletariat is revolutionary in accordance with its whole [social] position . . ." ¹⁵

The historical advantages possessed by the working class for the role of revolutionary vanguard may be summarized as follows.

1. *The conditions of life of the working class lead it to organize, to produce a more and more homogeneous movement.*

Its class propensity to organize is outstanding. The model and pioneer in this respect is the capitalist class itself, whose own class-consciousness and sense of class solidarity have often been inspirations to its workers. But then, the capitalists are the other urban class organized by modern industry. Agrarian populations are unable to rival the achievements of the urban classes, by reason of their own conditions of existence. "The dispersion of the rural laborers over larger areas breaks their power of resistance while concentration increases that of the town operatives," observes Marx in *Capital*. ¹⁶ A similar contrast obtains for the landed possessing classes.

Workers are taught organization not by their superior intelligence or by outside agitators, but by the capitalists. Concentrated geographically in urban areas, workers are further organized in factory gangs, assembly lines, work shifts, labor teams, and so on—that is, by the organization of the division of labor, to which capitalism has contributed so mightily. Capitalism has no choice about teaching its workers the wonders of organization and labor solidarity, because without these the system cannot operate. Capital "assembles the bourgeois and the proletarians

* This distinction is made mainly in three or four of Marx's earlier writings (up to 1852). ¹⁴ It has been widely distorted into the claim that for Marx a class exists only in the form of conscious organization. For Marx's last use of this bit of Hegelese, see below, Chapter 12, §9.

in large cities, in which industry can be carried on most profitably, and by this herding together of great masses in *one* spot makes the proletarians conscious of their power."¹⁷ It expounds the need for discipline, and at the same time involuntarily demonstrates the defects of bureaucratic discipline. It enforces centralization of effort, and glorifies the advantages of combined labor and the subordination of individual self-interest to group needs. It socializes masses of workers in one place and subjects them to simultaneous resentments. The working class can say: "The *organization* you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction."

It is evident that these lessons are not taught equally to all workers, even apart from the usual individual differences. There are differences in working-class life situations, too. For example, the lessons are plainer to assembly-line workers than to an office secretary who works "with" a boss rather than with fellow workers. We will touch on other reasons later.

2. *The interests of workers, as a group organized by capital, lead them to struggle.*

To engage in class struggle it is not necessary to "believe in" the class struggle any more than it is necessary to believe in Newton in order to fall from an airplane. (In the latter eventuality, however, it is advisable to believe in parachutes.) The working class moves toward class struggle insofar as capitalism fails to satisfy its economic and social needs and aspirations, not insofar as it is told about struggle by Marxists. There is no evidence that workers like to struggle any more than anyone else; the evidence is that capitalism compels and accustoms them to do so.

Not only their leaders but workers as a whole begin by preferring class peace and social tranquility, for excellent reasons. But if that ended the matter, it would be impossible to account for the fact of class organization. The basic function of class organization is struggle, present or potential, reality or threat. The very notion of an organization, like a trade union, which is inherently hospitable to members of one class only, and which is inherently weakened until it achieves the organization of the entire class as such, is a notion that fits no bourgeois ideology.

3. *The thrust of the proletariat's organized struggle persistently tends to go outside the framework of bourgeois institutions and ideas.*

The operative contradiction is between the rights of private property, capitalism's juridical idol, and the organized proletariat's inevitable

insistence on *social responsibility* for all vital aspects of life, including the economic. The inherent claim of capitalist private-property relations is that the whole area of economic life, in which one has to earn a living, is withdrawn from the hegemony of society and handed over to the unilateral power of capital as its birthright. The inherent claim of an organized proletariat is that it must have a say in this. This contradiction reflects Marx's proposition that the basic contradiction of capitalism is that between social production and private appropriation.

In the course of working out the contradiction, capitalism accepts many compromises; for example, it yields to state intervention in the name of social responsibility, and even demands intervention, especially for subsidies, strikebreaking, and so on. But it is in the nature of the organized working class that it can never win enough of the substitution of social responsibility for private corporative control; and it is in the nature of capital that it always seeks to subordinate partial and distorted forms of social responsibility to the continued reality of capital's claim to social hegemony. This opposition is a basic one.

There is a spectrum in demands for social responsibility too. More or less radicalized workers may raise demands for price and profit controls, regulation, even nationalization; in intense class struggles, sit-in strikers have taken over factories without a qualm about the rights of private property. But even conservative workers and their unions, taking class collaboration for granted, tend to support social-control proposals which do not impress them with having immediate anti-capitalist implications: controls over prices, health insurance, offshore oil, and many other citadels of property. Capital is usually more class-conscious than that; hence it denounces the insistence on social responsibility versus private-property rights as "creeping socialism." This charge reflects a reality.

Samuel Gompers used to argue that his simple slogan for the labor movement—"More!"—was more revolutionary than the socialist program. The answer need not deny the real revolutionary implications of his slogan, which Gompers had no intention of carrying through. "More!" is an implicitly revolutionary program if one obvious condition is added: that labor consistently and unremittingly press for it *regardless of all capitalist considerations*, that is, even when "more" is incompatible with capitalist needs and interests. Obviously, "more" is not revolutionary if it is raised only when it does not incommode capital; Gompers did not confess to this limitation, which was his actual

regulating principle. His appeal was a class appeal, to be sure, therefore inherently discommoding to capital; it need only be applied unremittingly. As labor presses for more—including more social responsibility, more control over its conditions of existence—the class drives the logic of its own life situation outside the bounds of the capitalist framework and tends to create the conditions for exploding that framework.

None of this happens automatically; hence the complications discussed in many chapters. A potentiality is set up. But this potentiality does not obtain equally for other classes and social strata. The working class is not the only class or group alienated, at one time or another, by the operations and depredations of capitalism; the capitalist class has despoiled middle-class strata, bankrupted petty-bourgeois property owners, embittered an intelligentsia, plundered a peasantry, and so on. Radicalized movements and parties based on these social resentments have not been rare. But the political programs they tend to adopt as they move into opposition to the status quo are likely to remain within the bounds of the capitalist system. Hence they tend to concentrate on mere political reform, on economic nostrums like money manipulation, on demagogic attacks on the Bank Octopus or Interest Slavery or some other excrescence of the system; they do not tend to come out for abolition of the capitalist system. Historically and on a worldwide scale, the latter conclusion is associated with the working class, when it moves left. This is the content of Engels' much-compressed aphorism: "who says proletariat, says socialism."¹⁸

4. *The proletariat's conditions of existence not only impel it toward organized antibourgeois struggle, but push it into a persistent boldness and militancy which is well-nigh unique to this class at critical stages of struggle.*

This points to the largely unexplored terrain of the social psychology of classes. For we are concerned with this as a class phenomenon, not as individual characteristics. This difference is important.

For example: one of the best-known stereotypes of timidity is that of the Timid Professor—the Hollywood caricature of the pince-nez'd, harrumphing, mousy scholar who blends out of sight among the library books. When the individual faculty members of a large American university are examined nowadays, this stereotype hardly seems to exist, and maybe it never did. In fact, more and more professors are

achieving the personalities of vacuum-cleaner salesmen. Yet the organized picture is altogether different. Put these aggressive personages together in the collective form of an Academic Senate and the result is a peak of pusillanimity that would blow the fuse on a sociological computer, even at times when indignation and resentment at Trustees or Regents are sweeping their stout hearts.

In many sociological surveys, as has been set forth to the nearest sigma, well-paid workers, who may live in \$40,000 houses and send their children to college, register answers to questionnaires that stamp them as indistinguishable from middle-class mentalities. So also librarians (to take another occupation I know something about). Yet striking labor aristocrats—say, printers—can if necessary break company windows, rampage on picket lines, beat up scabs, and outrage other forms of gentility, without arousing enough surprise to generate the size of headlines reserved for three-person "student riots." On the other hand, underpaid librarians tend to be uneasy about actually accepting a leaflet about the idea of organizing.

If workers on a picket line have to be restrained from bashing a strikebreaker in an access of indignation, this does not necessarily gainsay the fact that their thinking is "middle class" and "respectable" in some sense; but obviously they are less constrained by the norms of bourgeois respectability. Their militancy reflects not an immediate state of consciousness, but the fact that they are more alienated from bourgeois society than the questionnaires show. It reflects an objective class position that may sooner or later tend to mold their behavior in class-patterned situations more decisively than do their consciously held social views—especially in the context of organization and struggle. In turn, and in time, class-struggle action tends to remold consciousness; it reeducates.

Militancy, taken as a collective and not merely as an individual phenomenon, is in principle an index to the degree of alienation characteristic of a social group, corresponding to its life situation—its objective relationship to the productive process and to the resulting social hierarchy and pressures. This principle is not confined to class questions. Oppressed national or ethnic minorities tend to be more militant than their counterparts in the dominant society, likewise because they are more alienated from the "ruling ideas of the ruling

class" which define the respectable limits of oppositional postures. In the case of the proletariat, the roots of this alienation lie in the capitalist mode of production.*

It is quite true that the peasantry and (say) the petty-bourgeoisie are entirely capable of explosions of violent rage when driven to desperation; in fact, it is precisely these classes that offer the best, or worst, cases of spasms of mindless destructiveness. Few episodes can rival the peasant Jacqueries or the ravages of a "petty-bourgeoisie in a frenzy" for brutal ferocity, with or without the instigation of cooler reactionary heads. This is the typical paroxysm of blind-alley desperation; it is a confession of impotence, not an assertion of strength. There is a great historical difference between bold militancy and going berserk. It was to the former that Engels referred when he contrasted the behavior of the still undeveloped working-class forces in the 1848 revolution with the petty-bourgeois. The workers, he asserted, distinguished themselves from the middle class "in showing upon every occasion, that revolutionary boldness and readiness for action, in which any party, headed by and composed principally of petty tradesmen, will always be deficient."²⁰

5. *The proletariat is the only class that has the social weight and power to carry through the abolition of the old order and to build a new society.*

Contributing to this claim are the four characteristics of the proletariat already considered. But this point is primarily concerned with another factor, which also goes beyond the arithmetic of mere numbers. This is the strategic role of the indispensable services performed

* Alienation of labor under capitalism, in Marx's mature theory, will be touched on again in Volume 4. For present purposes it may be sufficient to point to the following line of thought in *Capital*:

... all means for the development of production transform themselves into means of domination over, and exploitation of, the producers; they mutilate the laborer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into a hated toil; they estrange from him the intellectual potentialities of the labor process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power; they distort the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labor process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness; they transform his life-time into working-time, and drag his wife and child beneath the wheels of the Juggernaut of capital.¹⁹

For the beginnings of this view, see *KMTR* 1, Chapter 7, section 8.

by the proletariat in keeping society going. "Of all the instruments of production, the greatest productive power is the revolutionary class itself," wrote Marx.²¹ By the same token, this class is at the levers of economic power not by conscious decision but by its objective conditions of existence. The conscious decision concerns its willingness to put its hands on the levers; this is indisputably a question of great moment, but it arises because no other class has the choice.

A qualification to this claim is the situation of the technological-scientific employees of a sector of the economy, insofar as they are considered to be outside the working classes (untrue for most of them, from Marx's standpoint) or insofar as they are taken as a separate class by themselves (a view even harder to justify). In any case, the type of argument that can be made for this stratum and its potentiality only underlines the case for the working class as a whole. Experience shows that the whole of society quivers when the working class stirs; when a substantial sector of it undertakes a large-scale battle, the authorities react as to civil war; and this is true even on terrain far from revolution. It is true in spite of all the theses broadcast about the alleged fading away of the working class. So far the periodic announcements that the working class is obsolete, having been displaced by technology, automation, and so on, have not been reflected in the realities of social struggle.*

Behind all of the foregoing considerations is a generalized formulation which needs to be stated. It is perhaps most closely related to the third point. Marx's theory asserts that *only the proletariat, by the conditions of its existence, embodies a social program pointing to an alternative to capitalism.*

However desperate a peasantry or a petty-bourgeoisie may become, these classes cannot give society a lead in a new direction, not simply because of social-psychological constraints, but because there is no social solution that effectively corresponds to these classes' interests while at the same time corresponding to the interests of society in general, including the preservation of the social fabric in time of dissolution and crisis. In contrast, the working class, as the bottom layer of the class system, cannot stir without objectively pointing to a program, even when it consciously rejects it: namely, the assumption of

* For further discussion of this point, see Special Note A, "On the Abolition of the Proletariat by Automation."

social responsibility by a democratically organized people, regardless of private interest—a program which, concretized, means the abolition of capitalism.

In his “Letter to the Labour Parliament” meeting in Manchester in 1854, Marx summarized in a sentence why “the working classes of Great Britain, before all others, are competent and called for to act as leaders” in the movement to emancipate labor. “Such they are from the conscious clearness of their position, the vast superiority of their numbers, the disastrous struggles of their past, and the moral strength of their present.”²²

By the same token, these and other characteristics are preconditions for the role of class leadership; as long as they are not present, the class is not fit to rule, as we shall see in the next chapter. In this light, it is not a question of how the proletariat can be deceived, betrayed, seduced, bought, brainwashed, or manipulated by the ruling powers of society, like every other class. The basic point is that it is the proletariat that it is crucial to deceive, seduce, and so on.

In the same light, it is not a question of guarantees of victory, assurances of optimism, and other irrelevancies. Marx points: *here*, not there, is the arena of decision, the direction of hope.

3 | ANATOMY OF THE PROLETARIAT

The question just discussed, the ground for Marx’s orientation toward the proletariat, has a negative counterpart. There were popular views about the proletariat that Marx rejected, including certain grounds for pro-working-class sympathies.

To begin with, Marx had to reject the pervasive philanthropism of the early socialists, who, as the *Communist Manifesto* eventually explained, “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 them.” This was not primarily a sociological observation; in the case of the early socialists the proletariat “offers to them the spectacle of a class without any historical initiative or any independent political movement.”¹ Pity and do-goodism, excellent attributes for charitably inclined ladies and gentlemen, stand in antithesis to the perspective of revolution: the desire to do good for the people is counterposed against the need for the people to do it themselves.

1. THE REJECTION OF ILLUSIONS

Equally important was the fact that the revolutionaries’ historical analysis relieved them of the natural impulse to harbor comforting illusions about the individuals or strata making up the chosen class, as if the latter was truly a chosen people.

During Marx’s youth, the propagandistic elocution about The People that emanated from the bourgeois revolutionary tradition of ’89 and ’93 had been transmogrified in the early socialist movement into