

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

philanthropic-humanitarian rhetoric about the suffering proletariat. It can be read in great quantity, in perhaps its most attractive guise, in English Chartist literature; it can be seen in its most repulsive form in Eugène Sue's "socialistic" romances like *The Mysteries of Paris*. Idealization of "proletarians" (really artisanal workers for the most part) in the French communist clubs was reflected in the roseate glow of Marx's first reaction to meeting circles of genuine workers in Paris.² It was the development of his historical and theoretical analysis that freed him to be as tough-minded as necessary about the ignorance, backwardness, or venality of sections of the working class as it is, along with seeing their capacity for militancy, sacrifice, heroism, and other laudable qualities. This analysis, with the help of educational experience, also gave him another context: the capacity of the bourgeoisie and its intelligentsia to be outdone by no one in ignorance, backwardness, and venality, with less excuse.

In fact, in another year Marx had disposed of this traditional approach. In *The Holy Family* he answered Bruno Bauer's diatribes against the masses in this way: "When socialist writers ascribe this [revolutionary] world-historic role to the proletariat, it is not at all, as Critical Criticism [Bauer] pretends to believe, because they regard the proletariat as *gods*. Rather the contrary."³ The contrary was a great deal of overemphasis on the "dehumanization" of the proletariat, serving to underline the factors of objective necessity. The proletariat "cannot emancipate itself without abolishing the conditions of its own life. It cannot abolish the conditions of its own life without abolishing *all* the inhuman conditions of life of society today which are summed up in its own situation."⁴

The mythology that makes White Knights out of horny-handed workers or Galahads out of certified proletarians was later elaborated by radical literati out slumming; but it has nothing to do with Marx. His correspondence, particularly with Engels, can yield a thick anthology of uninhibited damnations against workers and workers' groups, as well as against all other known classes, groups and creeds, for behaving like asses, sheep, knaves, traitors, clowns, reactionaries, and renegades—all of which proves his impartial cantankerousness.* During the American Civil War, Marx could offhandedly write Engels that "England has

* There seems to be a special problem about calling workers *asses*. For one marxological view, see Special Note H.

disgraced herself more than any other country, the workers by their christian slave nature, the bourgeois and aristocrats by their enthusiasm for slavery,"⁵ and later rebound to enthusiasm for English workers' support to the North. In a letter to Marx, Engels commented on the education of the Chartist leftist Ernest Jones:

. . . without our doctrine he . . . would never have found out how on the one hand the instinctive class hatred of the workers against the industrial bourgeoisie, the sole possible basis for the reorganization of the Chartist party, can not only be retained but even widened, developed and made to serve as the foundation of enlightening propaganda, and how on the other hand one can be progressive all the same and oppose the reactionary cravings of the workers and their prejudices.⁶

To call the proletariat a revolutionary class is a condensation: it means a class with the historical potential of making a revolution; it is a label for a social drive; it is not a description of current events. This revolutionary class begins, like everybody else, by being filled with "reactionary cravings" and prejudices: otherwise the proletarian revolution would always be around the corner. Marx's theory looks on the proletariat as an objective agency of social revolution in the process of becoming. In this respect his conception of the proletariat as the historically revolutionary class is similar to his reiterated view that the bourgeoisie was such a revolutionary class in a previous era, in spite of its well-known timidity and narrow-mindedness.

One of the illusions, therefore, that Marx combats is the illusion of the Instant Revolution. Put crudely it goes: *If the proletariat is by nature revolutionary, then why doesn't it go and make a revolution?* This unhistorical ultimatism crops up frequently in socialist history, but not as an outcome of Marx's theory; it typically reflects the impatience of bourgeois intellectuals who cannot afford to wait.

Such was the case with the ultraleftists in the Communist League after the failure of the revolution to sweep Europe in 1849. One of them wrote Marx in 1851: "Your warning that one should not harbor any illusions about the proletariat was really very well taken by me." Thereupon this fire-eater, who had been impatient for a good insurrection the year before, repudiated socialism in another year and wound up life as a minister of the kaiser.⁷

The proletariat is a part of bourgeois society; it is born and raised in the same slough. The problem of revolution begins there, it does not

end. As Laura Marx once put it, in a letter to Engels: "The rottenness of our society breaks out, there is no denying it, as well among the workmen as the Wilsons [referring to a French deputy symbolizing corruption] and a revolution is badly needed to sweep the world clean."⁸ Over a long life Engels observed the corruption of workers, including revolutionary workers, by bourgeois society under various pressures. Commenting on the rife corruption of the Social-Democracy's bourgeois intellectual parliamentarians in the 1880s, he thought back to a comparison with an old practical problem:

The necessarily more or less bourgeois parliamentarians [of the Social-Democratic party] are an inevitable evil just like the case of workers who are blacklisted by the bourgeoisie, hence left jobless, and who are saddled on the party as professional propagandists. The latter case was already rife in 1839-1848 among the Chartists and I was able to observe it at that time. Give them a per-diem allowance and they will go over to the dominant bourgeois and petty-bourgeois or "educated" deputies. But all that will be overcome. My confidence in our proletariat is just as unqualified as my mistrust of the wholly rotten German philistinism is unbounded.⁹

How will it be overcome?

2. THE PROLETARIAT AS PROCESS: MATURATION

So far we have often referred to the proletariat as if it constituted a homogeneous whole. All such global statements are approximations at best. Most of the problems of proletarian revolution stem from the massive role of divisions, disproportions, and disparities within the working classes, among its different sectors, and among its individuals. The process of overcoming these diversities and discords is a key part of the road to proletarian revolution.

One can view this process as one of maturation. Maturation has several sides (physical, intellectual, emotional, and so on) even in the simple case of an individual; so also in the case of a class, which is a more complex phenomenon. To mention a few prominent aspects:

1. There is the process of maturation of the objective conditions

under which the proletariat develops, that is, the maturation of the economic system itself.

2. This is closely connected with a process of homogenization in the conditions of existence of different sectors of the working class (though this process is never complete). There are innumerable subdivisions of this problem, from the effect of labor aristocracies to the radicalizing (or alienating) effect of different occupations; we will have occasion to mention some in the course of illustrations.

3. In explaining Marx's theory of the state and social evolution, there is inevitable emphasis on the "ruling ideas of the ruling class," the decisive effect of bourgeois domination on social outlooks. The working class, of course, is as subject to this effect as the rest of society; in fact, it is the chief target. The process of maturation is, in these terms, the process in which the working class frees itself from the impact of bourgeois power, propaganda, and socioeconomic pressures. But all other differences aside, that part of the working class which is always under the strongest pressure from the bourgeois world is its leadership. As the interface between the proletariat and its dominators, working-class leaders take the brunt of this pressure, and (like earth strata suffering from slippage) it is this layer that is most easily deformed by the resulting stresses and strains. The process of maturation demands an eye on the relation between the class and its leadership or representatives.

4. Finally, maturation is closely associated with the self-organization of the class; in fact, the latter can be viewed as the measuring rod of the former. Insofar as organization is the barometer of maturation, some of the problems of maturation will come up concretely below in Chapters 4 and 5 on trade-unionism.

We begin here with the first and basic aspect of the question. The maturation of the proletariat goes hand in hand, if not step by step, with the level of development of the capitalist economy itself. There cannot be a strong proletariat without widespread or intensive industrialization. Contrariwise, weak development of industry and commerce implies an underdeveloped proletariat. In addition, disparities will arise in the stage of social development of the working class within a country and between countries.

When the 1848 revolution broke out, Engels noted, both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat of Germany were more backward than the

French and English. ("Like master, like man.") The different stages of development induce different reactions to the revolutionary wave.

°°The working-class movement itself never is independent, never is of an exclusively proletarian character until all the different factions of the middle class [that is, the bourgeoisie] and particularly its most progressive faction, the large manufacturers, have conquered political power . . .¹⁰

The big bourgeoisie, the "large manufacturers," are more progressive in the basic economic sense that, by developing industry on a large scale, they also develop the social conditions for the growth, organization, and education of a modern proletariat: that is, they produce their own gravediggers.

Now, in Germany the mass of the working class were employed, not by those modern manufacturing lords of which Great Britain furnishes such splendid specimens, but by small tradesmen, whose entire manufacturing system is a mere relic of the Middle Ages. And as there is an enormous difference between the great cotton lord and the petty cobbler or master tailor, so there is a corresponding distance from the wide-awake factory operative of modern manufacturing Babylons to the bashful journeyman tailor or cabinet-maker of a small country town, who lives in circumstances and works after a plan very little different from those of the like sort of men some five hundred years ago.¹¹

The lack of modern economic conditions (continues Engels) means "a pretty equally general absence of modern ideas." In the Germany of 1848 a large part of the working class actually raised the cry for a return to the medieval guild system. Only a "mere minority" were even capable as yet of thinking in terms of their emancipation as a class. But after all, it was only four years before, with the uprisings of the Silesian and Bohemian textile workers, that a working-class movement had come into existence in Germany at all!¹²

Some thirty years later, by the 1880s, the picture in Germany was vastly different, and still changing. In letters Engels used to give the German party's editor, E. Bernstein, a sort of correspondence course in this question. In the immediate background was the problem of disparities within the working-class movement, in the first place of opportunistic currents in the party, and of the relationship between radicalization and impoverishment in the mass. In one such letter Engels began by

expressing his joy that "The center of gravity of the movement has shifted from the semirural districts of Saxony into the *big industrial cities*":

The mass of our people in Saxony consists of hand-weavers, who are doomed to extinction by the steam loom, and only drag out an existence on starvation wages through side jobs (gardening, toy carving, etc.). These people are in an economically reactionary situation and represent a declining stage of production. Therefore they are, to say the least, not the natural-born representatives of revolutionary socialism to the same extent as the workers in large-scale industry. They are not on that account reactionary by nature (as, for instance, the remnants of the hand-weavers here [in England] finally became—the hard core of the "Conservative Working Men"), but they are unreliable in the long run. Especially also because of their terribly miserable condition, which makes them far less capable of resistance than the urban workers, and because of their dispersion, which makes it easier to enslave them than the people of the big towns. In view of the facts given in the *Sozialdemokrat*, the heroism with which these poor devils have still held out in such numbers is indeed to be admired.

But misery and militancy do not add up to the historic mission of the proletariat:

But they are not the right kind of nucleus for a great national movement. Under certain circumstances—as from 1865 to 1870—their misery makes them more immediately responsive to socialist views than the big-city people. But the same misery also makes them unreliable. A drowning man grasps at every straw, and cannot wait for the rescuing boat to cast off from shore. The boat is the socialist revolution; the straw is the protective tariff and [Bismarckian] state-socialism. It is indicative that in our old districts it is almost only the Conservatives that have any chance against us. And if Kayser [opportunist Social-Democratic deputy] could perpetuate such an absurdity as the protective-tariff business, without the others daring to come right out against it, the trouble lies (as Bebel himself wrote me) nowhere else than among the voters, especially Kayser's!

Now everything is different. Berlin, Hamburg, Breslau, Leipzig, Dresden, Mainz, Offenbach, Barmen, Elberfeld, Solingen, Nuremberg, Frankfurt, Hanau, *plus* Chemnitz and the Erzgebirge

districts—that provides an entirely different foothold. The class which is revolutionary because of its economic position has become the nucleus of the movement.¹³

The last sentence emphasizes that objective social situation is the basic factor conditioning the revolutionary maturation of the proletariat, though other elements may bring about conjunctural radicalization (misery, for example). The unstable radicalism of the old declining crafts was also one of the chief weaknesses of the First International in Britain, since the International's base lay more among these crafts than in heavy industry.¹⁴

Engels was often more interested in the political consequences of these patterns than in the theory of development; it should not be thought that the problem was simply abstract.

We cannot draw the mass of the nation over to us without this mass gradually developing itself. Frankfurt, Munich, Königsberg cannot suddenly become as pronouncedly proletarian as Saxony, Berlin, the mining-industry districts. The petty-bourgeois elements among the leaders will temporarily find in the masses, here and there, the background they lacked hitherto. What has hitherto been a reactionary current among individuals can now reproduce itself as a necessary element of development—locally—among the masses. This would make change in tactics necessary, in order to lead the masses farther along without thereupon leaving the bad leaders on top.¹⁵

All this emphasizes the objective side of the development. But the social-historic process is naturally accompanied by changes in consciousness (social psychology). Another way of looking at both aspects is suggested by the concept of bourgeoisification.

3. BOURGEOISIFICATION: MODERNIZING ASPECT

The term *bourgeoisification* may suggest the image of a virginally uncorrupted proletariat being debauched by a pathological process. The historical reality is not that simple-minded.

The proletariat comes into the world in an already bourgeoisified

milieu; and outside this milieu the main alternatives are simply more reactionary prebourgeois conditions and ideas. But the proletariat does not arrive panoplied in full modernity any more than does the bourgeoisie; it evolves over a historical era from more backward conditions, trailing the old consciousness as well. As society itself is bourgeoisified, so too is the proletariat—that is, developed into the modern working class typical of bourgeois society. At this stage, bourgeoisification also means progress and maturation.

For a whole transitional era, complained Marx and Engels, German society—all classes, hence also the proletariat—remained under the sign of the pigtail, symbol of prebourgeois backwardness. As Engels explained: “A country cannot pass through 200 years like what 1648–1848 were for Germany without leaving a small impression of the philistine even on the working class. Our revolution of 48/49 was too short and too incomplete to wipe that out altogether.”¹⁶ As the proletariat, pushed forward by its social situation, emerges from this miasma, elements still bound to the past stand in the way, even inside the movement, says Engels:

From the outset we have fought to the utmost against the petty-bourgeois philistine mentality within the party, because this mentality, developed since the Thirty Years War, has taken hold of *all* classes in Germany, and become a hereditary German evil, sister of servility, of the spirit of subservience and of all hereditary German vices. This is what has made us [Germans] ridiculous and contemptible abroad. It is the main cause of the flabbiness and weak character predominating among us. It reigns on the throne as often as in the cobbler's lodge. Only since a *modern* proletariat has been formed in Germany—only since then has a class developed there that is hardly at all affected by this hereditary German plague, and that has shown a free outlook, energy, humor, tenacity in struggle. And shouldn't we fight against every attempt to artificially inoculate this healthy class, the only healthy class in Germany, with the old hereditary poison of philistine narrowmindedness and philistine slackness?¹⁷

It happens that Engels' target here is the reformist leadership of the Social-Democratic Party itself, but he is not describing them as merely bearers of bourgeoisification; for the bourgeois intelligentsia, like the bourgeoisie, was also infected with “the hereditary German plague.” Under German conditions, the debilitating consciousness they pro-

moted derived also from earlier influences, as did the flabbiness of the German bourgeoisie itself in face of the Bismarckian state.

A distinction must be made therefore: a *modernized* proletariat develops along with the bourgeoisification of society, but whether this means a bourgeoisified proletariat (in the pejorative sense) is another matter; for this modern proletariat arrives in struggle with the bourgeoisie.

In another letter directed against the reformist leadership, Engels likewise counterposed the influence of modernizing forces on the proletariat against the narrow backwardness of social relations in the country:

I never concealed the fact that in my opinion the masses in Germany are much better than the gentlemen [who are their] leaders . . . Germany is an atrocious country for people who have little will-power. The narrowness and pettiness of civil as well as political conditions, the small-town character of even the big cities, the small but constantly increasing pettifoggeries in the struggle with police and bureaucracy—all this enervates instead of spurring on to resistance; and so in this “big children’s nursery” [as Heine put it] many become childish themselves. Petty conditions beget petty outlooks, so that it takes great understanding and energy for anyone living in Germany to see beyond the immediate, to keep one’s eye on the large-scale interconnection of world events, and not to fall into that self-complacent “objectivity” which sees no further than its nose and precisely for that reason is the most narrowminded subjectivity even when it is shared by thousands of such subjects.

. . . [This trend] must be fought resolutely. And here the mass of workers themselves furnish the best point of support. They alone live in Germany under approximately modern conditions; all their afflictions big and small are centered on oppression by *capital*, and whereas all other struggles in Germany, both social and political, are petty and trivial and revolve around trivialities which elsewhere have long been settled, their struggle is the only one with grandeur, the only one that is up to the mark of the times, the only one that does not enervate the fighters but supplies them with ever new energy.¹⁸

The same pattern could be seen in France, though it was more modernized than Germany. There the mass legacy from the prebourgeois past was the peasantry, and sectors of the proletariat were

continuously being recruited from this source. A worker did not become a modern proletarian the day after he left the farm in the Franche-Comté and got a job in a Paris workshop. This could be seen on a big scale especially when Bonaparte’s prefect for Paris, Haussmann, carried through an urban renewal project in Paris involving much building and boulevard construction, work that gave new employment to building-trades workers, thus buying them off as supporters of the Second Empire. This was the source of “the imperialistic [Bonapartist], Haussmannist building-trade proletariat stemming from the peasants, which Bonaparte created in the big towns,” wrote Engels.¹⁹ These new-minted proletarians were yesterday’s peasants, therefore peasants still in consciousness, and a more easily manipulated base than an experienced working class.

England, the most modern society in Europe, was also notoriously encrusted with traditionalism in thought as well as customs. In any case the process of organizing the proletariat (reaching full maturation) was also a process of eliminating “traditional prejudices”:

This workers’ party is only just being formed [in England]; its elements are still occupied with casting off traditional prejudices of every sort—bourgeois, old trade-unionist, and even doctrinaire-socialist—so that they may finally be able to get together on a basis common to all of them.²⁰

There is still another complication, a countervailing factor arising from prebourgeois conditions. While big industry is still developing, therefore still dislocating the status quo, and bringing unaccustomed problems and evils, there is a special impetus given to struggle by the newly proletarianized masses.

The class struggles here in England, too [wrote Engels to an American], were more turbulent during the *period of development* of large-scale industry and died down just in the period of England’s undisputed industrial domination of the world. In Germany, too, the development of large-scale industry since 1850 coincides with the rise of the socialist movement, and it will be no different, probably, in America. It is the revolutionizing of all traditional relations by industry *as it develops* that also revolutionizes people’s minds.²¹

It is the flux, the climate, of instability—the feeling that if so much can change, anything else can—that provides this factor.

Our great advantage is that with us [in Germany] the industrial revolution is only now in full swing, whereas in France and England it is settled in the main. . . . The great mass of the people grow up in the conditions in which they have later to live; they are accustomed to them; even the fluctuations and crises have become something they take almost for granted. Then there is the remembrance of the unsuccessful attempts of previous movements. With us, on the other hand, everything is still in full flow.²²

This thought appeared in another letter to Germany, but in a wider context:

In England and France the transition to large-scale industry is thus pretty much completed. The conditions under which the proletariat exists have already become stable . . . for a new revolt against capitalist production a new and more powerful impulse is required, say, the dethronement of England from its present dominance in the world market, or a particular revolutionary situation in France.²³

In this passage one gets a view of the three stages involved: the stage of *transition* (to full bourgeoisification of society) which we have been discussing in this section; the stage of relative *stability* of the system; and the stage of *downturn*, which, for England, was to be marked especially by its loss of hegemony in the world market.

4. BOURGEOISIFICATION: "SHARING THE FEAST"

It was in the middle stage of bourgeois society that a proletariat could most easily be bourgeoisified. It is an expensive business: the capitalist class must first be able to afford it. From a short-term view, periods of prosperity are most conducive, since there is more to trickle down.

The upswing of the Bonapartist regime was an example for Engels:

With the temporary prosperity and the prospect for the *gloire de l'empire*, the [French] workers seem to be clean bourgeoisified

after all. It will take a harsh chastisement by crises if they are soon to become capable of anything again.²⁴

The effects of the Second Empire's economic changes far outlasted the emperor:

°° The transformation of Paris into a *Luxusstadt* [luxury city] under the second empire could not help taking [effect] on the working class too. But any serious movement will shake off a good deal of that. The effect upon the intellect of the masses, I am afraid, will be more lasting.²⁵

In England, during the doldrums of the 1850s, the liberal bourgeois "are making use of the prosperity or semi-prosperity to buy the proletariat," with an ex-socialist acting as broker.²⁶ We often find that such comments by Engels on the bourgeoisification of proletarian consciousness have to do with parliamentary politics: the workers follow the bourgeois parties. In the 1860s: "Everywhere the proletariat is the °tag, rag and bobtail° of the official parties," and it is the Tories rather than the Liberals who have gained from the increase in the urban workers' vote. This has its good side—

But it remains a desperate certificate of poverty for the English proletariat all the same. The *parson* has shown unexpected power, and so has cringing before °respectability°. Not a single working-class candidate had a ghost of a chance, but °mylord Tom Noddy° or any parvenu snob could have the workers' votes with pleasure.²⁷

Even in the 1890s, when this sad state of affairs was changing rapidly, Engels was as ready to express his impatience at the English workers "with their sense of fancied national superiority, with their essentially bourgeois ideas and views, with the narrowmindedness of their 'practical' outlook, with their leaders who are strongly infected with parliamentary corruption," though he immediately added: "But things are moving forward for all that."²⁸ For the old-line trade-unionists were now being overshadowed by the militant New Unionism; and when Engels rejoiced over "the defeat of the *bourgeois labor party*," this term means the bourgeois-minded tendency in the trade-union movement, not a political party.²⁹

In America, the relative absence of a feudal past is part of the reason why the pressure to think like a bourgeois is so strong:

... there are the special American conditions: the ease with which the surplus population is drained off to the farms, the necessarily rapid and rapidly growing prosperity of the country, which makes bourgeois conditions look like a *beau idéal* to them, and so forth.³⁰

Especially with regard to England, there was a long-term factor that overshadowed the short-term pattern of boom and bust. This, as Engels emphasized many times over several decades, was England's economic monopoly position on the world market, the profits of which trickled down to its working class and muted its struggle. As early as 1856 Engels had noted this effect in the specific case of Ireland: "Ireland may be regarded as the first English colony . . . and one can already notice here that the so-called liberty of English citizens is based on the oppression of the colonies."³¹ As he and Marx were to reiterate later, the loss of Ireland could be decisive for precipitating the whole of English society into crisis.

Colonies were a special form of superexploitation, but economically England's industrial superiority levied an exploitive toll on the whole world. As England headed into a new upswing, Engels recognized this as a long-term factor of bourgeoisification:

... the English proletariat is actually becoming more and more bourgeois, so that this most bourgeois of all nations is apparently aiming ultimately at the possession of a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat *alongside* the bourgeoisie. For a nation which exploits the whole world this is of course to a certain extent justifiable.³²

In this letter to Marx, Engels was adding a certain heightened color to the formulation; but he was going to repeat the essential ideas both in articles and letters.³³ The absence of a "separate working-class political party" in England, he wrote in 1874, "is understandable in a country in which the working class has shared more than anywhere else in the advantages of the immense expansion of its large-scale industry. Nor could it have been otherwise in an England that ruled the world market . . ."³⁴ He looked forward to America's encroachment on English-dominated trade:

³⁰The fact cannot be longer shirked that England's industrial monopoly is fast on the wane. . . . But what is to become of the "hands" when England's immense export trade begins to shrink down every year instead of expanding? . . .

It will do one great thing: it will break the last link which still binds the English working class to the English middle class. This link was their common working of a national monopoly. This monopoly once destroyed, the British working class will be compelled to take in hand its own interests, its own salvation, and to make an end of the wages system. Let us hope it will not wait until then.³⁵

We see it was not a question of fatalistic resignation but of looking facts in the face (as he stressed in the same article). It was also a question of accounting for reality as well as facing it: in the midst of a report on the antics of the English socialist sects, he explained that "apart from the unexpected, a really general workers' movement will come into existence here [in England] only when the workers feel that England's world monopoly is broken. Participation in the domination of the world market was and is the economic basis of the political nullity of the English workers."³⁶

And this reality shows up ideologically as bourgeoisification:

You ask me what the English workers think about colonial policy. Well, exactly the same as they think about politics in general: the same as the bourgeois think. There is no workers' party here, you see, there are only Conservatives and Liberal-Radicals, and the workers gaily share the feast of England's monopoly of the world market and the colonies.³⁷

"Sharing the feast" is a key idea. Insofar as the proletariat does get a sufficient share of the feast, the class struggle will be muted, Marx expected. But it is not only a question of the class as a whole. We have already mentioned that the proletariat's interface with the bourgeoisie, its leadership, is inevitably under the greatest social pressure. On a somewhat less ideological level, it must also be stressed that it is much easier for the bourgeoisie to "share the feast" with a restricted sector of the working class than with the whole. This understandable strategy applies to several such sectors (especially the labor aristocracy, as we shall see) but it applies most forcibly to that thin section of the proletariat which is both indispensable and specially exposed: leaders.

It would be a mistake to see this solely in cash terms, a worse mistake to see the problem as simple bribery. Such cases, while frequent enough, are least interesting. Even where money is directly involved, its power can be exerted publicly or semipublicly. When Engels wrote that "The leaders [of the English movement] are almost all petty

unreliable fellows . . . while the two big bourgeois parties stand there, purse in hand, on the lookout for someone they can buy,"³⁸ he was referring to the purchase of labor leaders by financing their candidacy for Parliament. If elsewhere he describes trade-union leaders as "venal" (*verkäuflich*),³⁹ the word is more social than moral: it means *ready to be bought off*.

But the more profound respect in which a labor leadership is bought off is not by money at all, but by social cooptation (which naturally may be accompanied by perquisites). Marx called the turn on two trade-union leaders who were still active in the General Council of the International when he observed (to Engels) that they "are both possessed with a mania for compromise and a thirst for respectability."⁴⁰ When both openly embraced bourgeois respectability, after the to-do of the respectables over the Paris Commune, it was not because they were being paid in money. The trade-union candidates coopted by the Liberals, wrote Engels, are "so-called workers' representatives, that is, those people who are forgiven their being members of the working class because they themselves would like to drown their quality of being workers in the ocean of their liberalism . . ."⁴¹

Even where Engels refers broadly to the working class he often has the leadership more specifically in mind:

The most repulsive thing here [in England] is the bourgeois "respectability" which has grown deep into the bones of the workers. The division of society into innumerable strata, each recognized without question, each with its own pride but also its inborn respect for its "betters" and "superiors," is so old and firmly established that the bourgeois still find it fairly easy to get their bait accepted. I am not at all sure, for instance, that John Burns is not secretly prouder of his popularity with Cardinal Manning, the Lord Mayor, and the bourgeoisie in general than of his popularity with his own class. . . . And even Tom Mann, whom I regard as the best of the lot, is fond of mentioning that he will be lunching with the Lord Mayor. If one compares this with the French, one realizes what a revolution is good for after all.⁴²

This sort of thing does not happen because a John Burns is more corruptible than any other John, for it is only workers' leaders who get invited to lunch with lord mayors; they are in the exposed positions. As

it happened, a few years later Burns broke with socialism and rose rapidly to become a Liberal nonentity, today footnoted in history only because of the past he repudiated; on the other hand, Tom Mann later got better acquainted with his lordship's jails than with his cuisine. As Engels had remarked in another connection,* "unfortunately it seems to be a law of the proletarian movement that everywhere a section of the workers' leaders necessarily goes bad . . ."⁴⁴

In the last analysis, it is misleading to consider something called bourgeoisification as an independent phenomenon. It is a useful term especially for the more extreme manifestations of a bourgeois mentality and of cooptation to a bourgeois lifestyle, but at bottom the characteristics and pressures it denotes are mainly the negative side of the proletariat's maturation toward class-consciousness. In a bourgeois society, everything is more or less bourgeoisified.** *Debourgeoisification* is the negative way of saying revolutionization. Marx's comment on that subject in 1863 was pitched in terms that he also applied to revolution as the "locomotive of history":

How soon the English workers will free themselves from their apparent bourgeois infection one must wait and see. . . . Only the small German petty-bourgeois . . . would imagine that in developments of such magnitude twenty years are more than a day—though later on days may come again in which twenty years are embodied.⁴⁶

* The connection is worth mentioning. The *Bee-Hive*, the only labor paper of the time, 1869, was being taken over by thoroughly bourgeois elements. Some months later, Engels wrote:

It is really lucky that the *Bee-Hive* now shows its bourgeois colors both impudently and stupidly. . . . This cringing before Gladstone, and the whole bourgeois-patronizing-philanthropic tone, must soon break the paper's neck and make a real workers' paper a necessity. It is very good that, just at the moment when the workers are rousing from their Liberal intoxication, their only paper is becoming more and more bourgeoisified.⁴³

** Engels included; so he pointed out in 1857. Hailing the onset of economic crisis as a political ice-breaker, he informed Marx that

I feel in mighty good spirits amidst this ° general breakdown.° The bourgeois filth of the last seven years had stuck to me to some extent after all; now it is being washed away, and I am beginning to feel like a new person again. The crisis will do me good physically like a sea bath, I already see that.⁴⁵

5. INTERNAL DIVISION

The splitting up of the working class into antagonistic fractions, and the overcoming of this split, are crucial to the process leading to proletarian revolution. A survey of differences inside the working class would show a very long list of important points of short-term and long-term conflict inside the class—about as much as beset the capitalist class.⁴⁷ All of them are rooted in, and some concern only, intra-class competition for livelihood. Marx stated this pattern very early, as the basis for a long-range view of proletarian development:

Competition separates individuals from one another, not only the bourgeois but still more the workers, in spite of the fact that it brings them together. Hence it is a long time before these individuals can unite, apart from the fact that for the purpose of this union—if it is not to be merely local—the necessary means, the big industrial cities and cheap and quick communications, have first to be produced by large-scale industry. Hence every organized power standing over against these isolated individuals, who live in conditions daily reproducing this isolation, can only be overcome after long struggles. To demand the opposite would be tantamount to demanding that competition should not exist in this definite epoch of history, or that the individuals should banish from their minds conditions over which in their isolation they have no control.⁴⁸

Many of these areas of competition are more important as trade-union problems than for present purposes; but the type of internal conflict which we take for illustration here is also one that traditionally has racking political effects. This is the antagonisms among different groups (taken by ethnic or national origin, color, creed, or other division) within the proletariat of a single country. This question has a long dark history; we will give a couple of brief illustrations.

1. *Irish workers in England.* Marx saw this problem as intimately linked to the need for Ireland's liberation from English rule, which, by draining Ireland economically, forced its surplus labor into the English market, and "thus forces down wages and lowers the moral and material condition of the English working class":

And most important of all! Every industrial and commercial center in England now possesses a working class *divided* into two *hostile* camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The

ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he feels himself a member of the *ruling* nation and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists of his country *against Ireland*, thus strengthening their domination *over himself*.⁴⁹

From these economic sources bloom the poison flowers of national hatreds. The English worker's attitude toward the Irish

is much the same as that of the "poor whites" to the "niggers" in the former slave states of the U.S.A. The Irishman pays him back with interest in his own money. He sees in the English worker at once the accomplice and the stupid tool of the *English rule in Ireland*.

From these national hatreds, the bourgeoisie gains a comfortable position for exploiting both of them:

This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short, by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. This *antagonism* is the *secret of the impotence of the English working class*, despite its organization. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And that class is fully aware of it.⁵⁰

As a consequence of this analysis, one of the main fields of activity of the International in England, under Marx's leadership, was the struggle of the Irish workers, who were well represented in the General Council. There were successes; reporting an important demonstration, held in spite of a police ban, Engels related:

This is the first time an Irish demonstration has been held in Hyde Park; it was very successful . . . It is also the first time the English and Irish sections of our population have united in friendship. These two elements of the working class, whose enmity towards each other was so much in the interests of the Government and wealthy classes, are now offering one another the hand of friendship; this gratifying fact is due principally to the influence of the last General Council of the International, which has always directed all its efforts to unite the workers of both peoples on a basis of complete equality.⁵¹

The ethnic antagonism, rooted in economic competition, could be dissolved only by joint struggle, which was the road to maturation.

2. *Black workers in the United States.* Irish workers were the

"niggers" of England, as we have seen Marx mention above, but it was the American case that provided the biggest arena for this pattern of exploitation. It is in the U.S. melting pot that the widest variety of racial and national conflicts have been kept boiling; the effect was to split the proletariat and corrupt the socialist movement, which was also shot through with anti-Chinese racism as the importation of Chinese cheap labor undercut working conditions.

Our concern here is not with justice for the oppressed, but something else. Just as the liberation of Ireland was a necessity for *English* freedom from capitalist rule, so also Marx saw the special oppression of black labor in the United States as a life-and-death problem of the class struggle of the entire working class:

In the United States of North America, every independent movement of the workers was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labor with a white skin cannot emancipate itself where labor with a black skin is branded. But out of the death of slavery a new life at once arose. The first fruit of the Civil War was the eight hours' agitation . . .⁵²

During the Civil War one of the bases for Marx's support to Northern victory was the thesis that the enslavement of blacks also meant the superexploitation of white workers. If slavery spread to new states, argued Marx in 1861, then—

The slave system would infect the whole Union. In the Northern states, where Negro slavery is in practice unworkable, the white working class would gradually be forced down to the level of helotry. This would accord with the loudly proclaimed principle that only certain races are capable of freedom, and as the actual labor is the lot of the Negro in the South, so in the North it is the lot of the German and the Irishman, or their direct descendants.⁵³

In the United States, the English-Irish antagonism became intertwined with native-immigrant and black-white antagonisms in one cluster of internecine hatreds that was the bulwark of the Democratic Party, to which Marx referred as "this conservative and °blackleg° element."⁵⁴ In the first place, Marx linked transatlantic tension between England and America with the latter's growing Irish population: "The English and American governments (or the classes they represent) play on these feelings in order to perpetuate the covert struggle be-

tween the United States and England." This tension also provides England with a pretext for maintaining "a *big standing army*, which, if need be, as has happened before, can be used against the English workers after having done its military training in Ireland."⁵⁵ In the United States, the Irish made their way up over the backs of the blacks. When, in the 1862 elections after the Republicans had finally come out for the abolition of slavery, the Democrats made gains in New York and elsewhere, Marx pointed to some elements in the ethnic pattern:

The *city* of New York, mightily torn apart by the Irish mob, actively involved in the slave trade up to recent times, the seat of the American money market, and full of owners of mortgages on Southern plantations, was from time immemorial decisively "Democratic," just as Liverpool is still pro-Tory today. . . .

. . . The Irishman sees in the Negro a dangerous competitor. The sturdy farmers of Indiana and Ohio hate the Negro in second place after the slaveholder. To them he is a symbol of slavery and the debasement of the working class, and the Democratic press daily threatens them with an inundation of their territories by the "nigger."⁵⁶

The Democratic Party, the bulwark of black oppression in this period, flourished especially on the basis of pullulating ethnic antagonisms splitting the working class. The German and Irish workers whom Marx had referred to in 1861 were succeeded by immigrant waves of Italians, East Europeans, Chinese, and others, and the melting pot became a steaming cauldron of ethnic hostilities as each stratum was educated to trample on the lower in accordance with the American Way of Life. Engels offered a summary view in 1892:

Your great obstacle in America, it seems to me, lies in the exceptional position of the native workers. Up to 1848 one could only speak of the permanent working class as an exception: the small beginnings of it in the cities in the East always had still the hope of becoming farmers or bourgeois. Now a working class has developed and has also to a great extent organized itself on trade-union lines. But it still takes up an aristocratic attitude and wherever possible leaves the ordinary badly paid occupations to the immigrants, of whom only a small section enter the aristocratic trades. But these immigrants are divided into different nationalities and understand neither one another nor, for the most part, the language of the country. And your [U.S.] bour-

geoisie knows much better even than the Austrian government how to play off one nationality against the other: Jews, Italians, Bohemians, etc., against Germans and Irish, and each one against the other, so that differences in the standard of life of different workers exist, I believe, in New York to an extent unheard-of elsewhere. And added to this is the total indifference of a society which has grown up on a purely capitalist basis, without any comfortable feudal background, towards the human beings who succumb in the competitive struggle: "there will be plenty more, and more than we want, of these damned Dutchmen, Irishmen, Italians, Jews and Hungarians"; and, to cap it all, John Chinaman stands in the background who far surpasses them all in his ability to live on next to nothing.

In such a country, continually renewed waves of advance, followed by equally certain setbacks, are inevitable.⁵⁷

A year later Engels made the same point in the course of explaining to a correspondent why the American movement was still so backward. Besides the two-party system and the influence of economic prosperity:

Then, and more especially, immigration, which divides the workers into two groups: the native-born and the foreigners, and the latter in turn into (1) the Irish, (2) the Germans, (3) the many small groups, each of which understands only itself: Czechs, Poles, Italians, Scandinavians, etc. And then the Negroes. To form a single party out of these requires quite unusually powerful incentives. Often there is a sudden violent élan, but the bourgeoisie need only wait passively, and the dissimilar elements of the working class fall apart again.⁵⁸

There is an especially big gap in this area between the relative simplicity of theory and the difficulties of practice. Marx's theory points to vitally important problems and choices for a proletarian movement, but the theoretical role of ethnic antagonisms is the least mystery of all.

6. A CLASS FOR ALL CLASSES

We saw that in the course of the young Marx's development, the adoption of an orientation toward the proletariat as the revolutionary class first had to solve the problem posed by Hegel's position, which

counterposed classes with particular (selfish) interests against a universal class which stood for the general interests of society against all particularism. Marx not only rejected the notion that the state bureaucracy was such a universal class, but also the idea that any class embodied society's universal interest in some eternal way. The universal class, in a given historical context, was one whose own interests were such as to coincide with the transformation needed by society as a whole. In this sense, he nominated the proletariat as the universal class of the coming era, hence the class agent of revolution.⁵⁹

Although the formulation later became less Hegelian, the basic idea did not change for Marx in subsequent writings, and reappeared in virtually every stage of his theoretical formation. In the period leading up to the *Communist Manifesto* it is restated several times. In the Paris manuscripts, the aim is the emancipation of the workers, "not that *their* emancipation alone is at stake, but because the emancipation of the workers contains universal human emancipation—and it contains this, because the whole of human servitude is involved in the relation of the worker to production . . ."⁶⁰ Likewise in *The Holy Family* and *The German Ideology*:

When the proletariat is victorious, by no means does it thereby become the absolute side of society, for it is victorious only by abolishing [transcending] itself and its opposite.⁶¹

If [self-] interest properly understood is the principle of all morality, then the point is for men's private interest to coincide with the interest of humanity.⁶²

[Class divisions] cannot be abolished until a class has formed which no longer has any particular class interest to assert against the ruling class.⁶³

[A revolutionary class must] present its interest as the communal interest of all members of society . . . it must give its ideas the form of universality . . . [It] comes forward from the outset . . . not as a class but as the representative of the whole society, it makes its appearance as the whole mass of society confronting the one ruling class.⁶⁴

The *Communist Manifesto* put it that, in conquering political power, the proletariat must raise itself to the position of "the national class" (changed in the Moore-Engels English version to "the leading class of the nation" to avoid misunderstanding); it "must constitute itself as the nation," thus "it is itself still national, though not in the sense of the

bourgeoisie."⁶⁵ Two years later: the proletariat is "a class in which the revolutionary interests of society are concentrated."⁶⁶ Formulations of this idea keep cropping up,⁶⁷ and merge into the well-known conception about the eventual abolition of all class distinctions in the new society ushered in by proletarian victory.

In all this Marx and Engels were emphasizing that they did not become partisans of the proletarian revolution because they had become partisans of the proletariat as a particular class, or of the class interests narrowly peculiar to it. This is a distinction which has to be understood with some precision. It will help to counterpose Marx's approach to two others which he rejected.

1. Marx rejected the kind of pro-worker sympathy which limits its horizon to the narrow, class-bound, corporative interests of the proletariat as it exists today under capitalism. The latter approach may lead to pure-and-simple trade-unionism or bread-and-butter reform, on the one hand, or on the other, to the kind of "professional proletarianism" (*ouvriérisme*) which became prominent in the syndicalist movement, counterposing proletarian interests to universal social concerns.⁶⁸

2. Equally alien to Marx is the apparently opposite approach, which sees only the ideal goal of universal human emancipation, divorced from the actual class struggle, and held by high-minded Men of Good Will untainted by class considerations.

In short, Marx's theory aims to integrate proletarian class interests and universal social interests. This integration is possible only for the revolutionary class of the era. It is necessary in order to broaden the social base of proletarian revolution.

7. REVOLUTIONIZING THE REVOLUTIONARY CLASS

There is a final problem Marx had to solve, the solution to which is the capstone of his theory of revolution.

The young Marx began, like all other socialists of the time, with the proletariat seen as victim. Emphasizing, and at first exaggerating, the proletariat's total estrangement from the rest of society, he rang changes on its "dehumanization" as part of a Hegelian pattern whereby only complete dehumanization can negate itself into complete realiza-

tion of humanity, and so forth.⁶⁹ This was suitable for philosophic theses, but the Hegelian dialectic had no solution for the political difficulty this talk creates. It makes a workable argument for intellectuals denouncing the system for brutifying the people, but—can one expect these poor brutes to make a revolution, let alone build a new society?

Even if the exaggerated language is dropped, it is still true, not only of the proletariat but of the upper classes and scornful intellectuals, that all strata of the population under a stultifying system are mentally crippled by the ruling ideas they absorb, are cramped by tradition and habit into patterns of acquiescence. *You expect these wretches to make a revolution?*

Marx's answer is: no. These people as they are cannot make a revolution or build a new world. They will have to be changed and transformed before they are fit to take power or wield it. But they will not be changed by preachments, books, leaders, or commands. They will become fit to rule only through their own struggle—a course of struggles against intolerable conditions, to change the conditions and thus change themselves.

On the one hand, then, it is important for Marx to point to the goal of proletarian revolution now, not waiting until a new and fit generation has arisen, since no such happy result will ever eventuate if the struggle is not begun *before* it has a possibility of being consummated. On the other hand, the same principle shows how a revolutionary can maintain an objective and cold-eyed view of the defects and inadequacies of the class, without illusions, since only such an attitude comprises the need for change. The principle is so basic that even before he was a socialist, Marx knew that if a child is told not to walk until it is able to walk, it will never be able to walk.⁷⁰

As in so many other questions, the first suggestions of this view appear dimly in *The Holy Family* and then come out fullblown in *The German Ideology*. The former made tentative efforts to get out of the dilemma without quite hitting the point dead-center. Thus:

To use an expression of Hegel's, it [the proletariat] is, in its abasement, the *revolt* against this very abasement, a revolt to which it is necessarily driven by the contradiction between its human *nature* and its life situation which is the open, decisive and comprehensive negation of that nature.⁷¹

It does a little better later, by noting the relation between self-change and organization against opposition.*

In *The German Ideology* the new principle is present in clear statements. We have already quoted one such passage in Chapter 1.⁷⁴ Then even more forcefully:

Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a *revolution*; the revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the *ruling* class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class *overthrowing* it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the old crap and become fitted to found society anew.⁷⁵

The point is made yet again, this time against a challenge by Max Stirner: "a society cannot be made new," said Stirner, "so long as those of whom it consists *and* who constitute it remain as of old." This is the old static dilemma. Marx replies that the communist proletarians do not remain as of old.

The tireless propaganda work carried on by these proletarians,

* This comes up almost accidentally as a retort to the Bauerites, who aver that a spiritual mode of being cannot be elevated without being changed, and to be changed it must be subjected to extreme opposition. Marx replies: if the Bauerites "were better acquainted with the movement of the lower classes," they would know "that the extreme opposition they have been subjected to from practical life is changing them every day." Literature by workers shows "that the lower classes know how to elevate themselves intellectually [*geistig*]" even without the help of the Bauerites. How? By organization, the "organization of the masses" of which the Bauerites talk abstractly but which is actually accomplished by bourgeois conditions themselves.⁷² There is another passage which is really more to the point, though bogged down in the philosophic jargon typical of the book. The Bauerites proclaim the mass of people as the main enemy, and Marx replies:

The enemies of progress *outside* the mass are precisely those *products* of *self-debasement*, *self-rejection* and *self-alienation* of the *mass* which have been endowed with independent being and a life of their *own*. The mass therefore aims against its *own* deficiency when it aims against the independently existing *products* of its *self-debasement*, just as man, turning against the existence of God, turns against his *own religiosity*. But as those *practical* self-alienations of the mass exist in the real world in an outward way, the mass must fight them in an *outward* way. It must by no means regard these products of its self-alienation as merely *ideal* phantasmagoria, mere *alienations of self-consciousness*, and must not wish to abolish *material* estrangement by a purely *inward spiritual* action.⁷³

their daily discussions among themselves [in the communist clubs], sufficiently prove how little they themselves want to remain "as of old" and how little they in general want people to remain "as of old." . . . they know too well that only under changed circumstances will they cease to be "as of old," and therefore they are determined to change these circumstances at the first opportunity. In revolutionary activity the changing of oneself coincides with the changing of circumstances.⁷⁶

Marx then calls it "this great dictum": revolutionary activity changes you as you change conditions. Marx and Engels held it up as a measuring-rod in the first days after the outbreak of the revolution of 1848.

In Berlin the people who made the March 18 revolution were soon quieted by the king's promises. This, wrote Engels, is the clearest proof that revolutionary struggle was needed, to educate people so easily duped. "Not only the state, its *citizens* too had to be revolutionized. Their submissiveness could only be shed in a sanguinary liberation struggle."⁷⁷ The revolution gave the people new liberties and arms, but—

That, however, is not yet the main result. The people that fought and won on the barricades is an altogether different people from the one that assembled before the castle on March 18 to be enlightened about the meaning of the concessions obtained, by the attacks of the dragoons. It is capable of altogether different things, it has an altogether different stance with relation to the government. The most important conquest of the revolution is *the revolution itself*.⁷⁸

Engels shortly found that the Berliners had not changed so drastically so quickly. The principle was still the measuring rod of the limitations of the March revolution: "Its greatest shortcoming is that it has not revolutionized the *Berliners*."⁷⁹

This, it turned out, was the epitaph of the revolution in Germany. Summing up the events in France, in 1850, Marx buried illusions with the statement that the workers were still incapable of accomplishing their tasks; conditions would become ripe only when the proletariat was pushed to the van in England, which dominated the world market:

The revolution, which finds here not its end but its organizational beginning, is no short-winded revolution. The present generation

is like the Jews whom Moses led through the wilderness. It has not only a new world to conquer, it must go under in order to make room for the men who are equal to coping with a new world.⁸⁰

Praising an economic study by a working tailor, Marx made the point: "Before the proletariat wins its victory on the barricades and battle lines, it announces the coming of its rule by a series of intellectual victories."⁸¹ Among the conquests on the road to revolution is the development of working-class intellectuals (to use a later phrase). Later that year Engels echoed the view at a Chartist banquet where the continental émigrés were urged to unite:

Engels, in replying to this speech [writes Schoyen], made plain his and Marx's view that revolution would come only as the "result of a long struggle, consummated by a new generation of men"—a belief which smacked of apostasy to the majority of the emigration, still desperately dreaming of imminent action.⁸²

Two decades later, Engels had a similar point to make about the still-backward Spanish working class, leading, however, to an affirmative perspective in politics. The new republican government in Madrid called for elections to a Constituent: "what position was the International to take?"

Spain is so backward a country industrially that *immediate* complete emancipation of the working class is still entirely out of the question. Before it gets that far, Spain must pass through various preliminary stages of development and clear away quite a number of obstacles. The republic offered an opportunity to compress the course of these preliminary stages into the shortest possible period of time, and to rapidly eliminate these obstacles. But this opportunity could be made use of only through the active *political* intervention of the Spanish working class. The mass of workers felt this; everywhere they pressed for participation in the event, insisting that the opportunity be utilized to take action, instead of leaving the field free to the action and intrigues of the possessing classes, as heretofore.⁸³

The maturation of the proletariat was not a detached process, like the training of plants in a greenhouse before being exposed to the rigors of weather. This maturation took place only by getting into struggle; it was hastened by political storms. But it could not be simply skipped.

The anarchist policy of abstention from politics (immediate revolution or nothing) assured disaster. One of the schools of revolution was class politics independent of the ruling classes and parties.

8. TO BECOME FIT TO RULE

The "great dictum"—that revolutionary struggle changes the revolutionary—was Marx's solution to the old static dilemma. In 1848–1849 the revolution had proved that the working class was not yet ready to cope; but it had also shown the difference between revolutionary and prerevolutionary days. Struggle was the school in which the education took place; revolution speeded up the curriculum and enriched the course.

... in this vortex of movement [in the revolution], in this torment of historical unrest, in this dramatic ebb and flow of revolutionary passions, hopes, and disappointments, the different classes of French society had to count their epochs of development in weeks where they had previously counted them in half centuries. A considerable part of the peasants and of the provinces was revolutionized.⁸⁴

The peasants were revolutionized as disillusionments overwhelmed them "with revolutionary speed." At this point Marx adds another great dictum, italicized: "*Revolutions are the locomotives of history.*"⁸⁵

From this standpoint the failed revolution was not simply a negative fact. Defeats—"the disastrous struggles of their past"⁸⁶—were a precondition for class leadership. The revolution of 1848 was a landmark in the process of self-changing and self-education that was equivalent to the production of a proletariat fit to rule.

But only socialists with such a theory of revolution could look on it that way. Most of the Forty-eighters faded away as the ground cooled, with more or less bluster. More rather than less bluster characterized the group in the Communist League which broke with Marx at this time on the ground that one either made a revolution right away or went to sleep. Either way there was no question of a long-term perspective in which a class was fitted to cope.

Well before this split, Marx had stated more than once that the time

dimension of the revolutionary development had to be a lengthy one. Even in his "Address to the Communist League of March 1850," written while he still thought that the international revolutionary situation was continuing, he had warned that "the German workers are not able to attain power and achieve their class interests without completely going through a lengthy revolutionary development," in the course of which they had the task of "clarifying their minds as to what their class interests are."⁸⁷ We have also seen what he had written in his series of articles *The Class Struggles in France*. But a minority group in the Central Committee of the league led by Schapper and Willich (supported by a majority of the London membership) had absorbed little of Marx's conception of revolution. For them, power boiled down to an act of will. There was nothing unexpected about this, since this was the traditional mind-set of the old Jacobin-style revolutionism (sometimes called Blanquism after its best-known representative). It was the pre-Marx revolutionism of the European movement. These revolutionaries had no need for a lengthy period of self-change in the movement since they did not really expect the class as such to move at all: the rule of the revolutionary band would be imposed by a *coup de main*, and a period of educational dictatorship would follow.

This trend was brought out virulently by the stresses of émigré disappointments after a failed revolution; the concluding debate took place at a meeting of the league's Central Committee on September 15, 1850. In a speech Marx formulated the issue around the "great dictum":

In place of the critical outlook the Minority substitutes a dogmatic one; in place of the materialist, an idealist one. Instead of the actual conditions, *pure will* becomes the drive-wheel of the revolution for them. Whereas we tell the workers: "You have fifteen, twenty, fifty years of civil wars and peoples' struggles to go through, not only to change the conditions but in order to change yourselves and make yourselves fit for political rule," you say on the contrary: "We must come to power right away, or else we might as well go to sleep."^{*}

* This is how Marx quoted himself "verbatim" in an account written in 1852.⁸⁸ He was presumably correcting the corresponding passage in the minutes of the meeting, or quoting from his own notes. The minutes give the passage in slightly different form:

Instead of the materialist outlook of the Manifesto, the idealist outlook

On the practical side, this principle on how the proletariat becomes "fit for political rule" also makes the revolutionary fit for waiting out and working through periods of nonrevolutionary struggles. Marx had to refer to it again in writing on two subsequent defeats of the French working class, each of which ushered in a difficult period for the socialists. In his study of Bonaparte's accession to power, reviewing the 1848 period Marx dwelt on the gap between the limited bourgeois-democratic aims of the February revolution and the advanced social stamp which the fighting ability of the proletariat had put on it.

There was thus indicated the general content of the modern revolution, a content which was in most singular contradiction to everything that, with the material available, with the degree of education attained by the masses, under the given circumstances and relations, could be immediately realized in practice.⁹⁰

A week after Bonaparte's coup d'état, Engels had written Marx with his thoughts on why the proletariat had not intervened to fight (a subject on which he later wrote an extensive article). He was very sure that the working class would not be ready for "a new revolution until it gathers new strength by spending a few years of wretchedness under the rule of maximum order."

... it cannot be denied in the least that when the revolutionary party [tendency, not organization] in a revolutionary development allows affairs to take decisive turns without any say of its own or, if it does interfere, without emerging victorious, one may be fairly certain that for some time it is to be considered as done for.⁹¹

The new revolution did come eventually, and new strata were indeed revolutionized; but in 1871 Marx had to write with the "great dictum" in mind as before:

°°The working class did not expect miracles from the Commune. . . . They know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which pres-

was emphasized. Instead of the actual conditions the *will* was emphasized as the main thing in the revolution. Whereas we tell the workers, "You have fifteen, twenty, fifty years of civil war to go through in order to change the conditions, to make yourselves fit for ruling," this is what is said instead: "We must come to power *right away*, or else we may as well go to sleep."⁸⁹

ent society is irresistibly tending by its own economical agencies, they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men.⁹²

The mere overthrow of an oppressive rulership by its (untransformed) victims does not necessarily “transform circumstances” at all. On the contrary, a common historical pattern has been that of the “servant become master,” who may be even more obnoxious than a more traditional ruler—as Marx noted in another connection.⁹³ Others before Marx had called it “the slave on the throne.”

On the theoretical side, the “great dictum” emphasized that not only the proletarian revolution but the proletariat itself is a historic process. This begins as a process of maturation, first of all in terms of the social system. It ends as an educational and transforming process. Marx’s theory is about the proletariat as a revolutionary class *in posse*; revolution makes it a revolutionary class *in esse*.

4 | TRADE UNIONS AND CLASS

A key to the nature of Marx’s conception of proletarian socialism is a seldom noted fact: Marx was the first leading figure in the history of socialism to adopt a position of support to trade unions and trade-unionism, on principle.

This position was not difficult to take in later decades, after the trade-union movement had entrenched itself; its success was not hard to recognize by that time. What Marx recognized in advance was the basic relationship of trade unions as an institution to the proletariat as a class and to the social revolution as a goal.

1. THE LITMUS-TEST

Before Marx, there were some individual socialists, at least in England, who took a positive and favorable view of these new-fangled workers’ “combinations,” and they too have received insufficient attention.* In fact, their point of view now has to be exhumed from history, precisely because they did not make a lasting impress on the ongoing movement—unfortunately.

But of the recognized socialistic tendencies proliferating in the 1840s as well as in the preceding quarter of a century, all were hostile to the beginnings of trade unions to one degree or another, and from

* Above all, William Thompson, who is now noticed in histories of socialism almost only because of his first work, *Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth*; but his subsequent *Labor Rewarded* gave a pioneer analysis of a socialist basis for supporting trade unions.¹ Another outstanding individual exception was James Morrison, editor of the trade-union paper *The Pioneer*; but typically Morrison’s socialism was of a mild sort, as his paper shows.