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YOUNG KARL MARX IN THE AGE OF PROGRESS: THE HISTORICAL MATERIALISM OF THE 1840S AND ITS LIMITS*

Abstract. The article discusses an early version of Karl Marx's historical materialism. The young Marx was a child of his time—the era of rapid development of technology and science that accompanied the expansion of capitalism. In the 1840s his historical materialism was based on two premises: the *Development Thesis* (history is the continuous development of the productive forces) and the *Primacy Thesis* (the level of development of the productive forces determines social relations). On the basis of these assumptions, Marx had serious problems in theoretically grounding his growing enthusiasm for the workers' class struggle.

Keywords: history, Karl Marx, historical materialism, progress, historiosophy, productive forces, relations of production, class struggle.

1. The Nineteenth-Century Drama of Progress

The 19th c. was marked by an extraordinary acceleration of change. With the rapid expansion of capitalism, a world long perceived as stagnant suddenly appeared to move at a dizzying pace. Modernity, as contemporaries experienced it, was above all an encounter with speed, and transformation—exhilarating for some, unsettling for others.¹ Eric Hobsbawm, chronicler of the *long nineteenth century* (1789–1914), observed that although the 20th c. witnessed greater

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¹ See J. C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, p. 93.

overall upheaval, the changes of the nineteenth were perceived as more striking precisely because they were unprecedented.¹

In this century, urbanisation and industrialisation reshaped the landscapes of Western Europe and, soon after, North America. When Friedrich Engels visited England in the 1840s, he described London as *the commercial capital of the world*² and Manchester as the global emblem of the Industrial Revolution: a city dominated by steam-powered mills, choked with smoke, and divided between bourgeois respectability and squalid workers' quarters.³ By Engels's death in 1895, such industrial cities had become characteristic across the Western world.

The age of iron and coal found its most powerful symbol in the railway. In Britain, the so-called *railway mania* of the 1830s and 1840s produced a national network that transformed mobility and synchronised time itself through the railway timetable. As Hobsbawm noted, it revealed the scale of technical progress more vividly than any other innovation.⁴

For nineteenth-century observers, constant change became almost natural. A Manchester resident born in, say, the 1830s would have witnessed within a single lifetime the rise of the factory system, the spread of steam power, the advent of mass production, and sweeping advances in metallurgy, transportation, chemistry, and medicine. As James C. Scott remarks, one could almost come to expect an endless stream of new marvels. The costs of industrialisation were borne disproportionately by workers and the poor, yet even its victims recognised that something profoundly revolutionary was unfolding.⁵

By the middle of the century, one might well have spoken of a *drama of progress*. The word itself had become the watchword of the age—massive, enlightened, sure of itself, self-satisfied, but above all inevitable. In the Western world, few believed it could be stopped. Instead, progress appeared as the natural order of things—linear, necessary, and destined to culminate in a society of universal well-being. If Europe had still lived in the era of the baroque princes, it would have been filled with spectacular masques, processions and operas distributing allegorical representations of economic triumph and industrial progress at the feet of the rulers.⁶

The Great Exhibition of 1851 epitomised the spirit of the era. A festival of industrial achievement, it displayed the newest inventions in science, technology, and manufacture under the vast glass roof of the Crystal Palace. Could any

¹ See E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1875–1914*, p. 338.

² F. Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England*, p. 328.

³ See F. Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England*, pp. 328–329, p. 350, p. 353 & p. 355 & J. Sperber, *Karl Marx*, p. 104.

⁴ See E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital 1848–1875*, p. 57 & E. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire ...*, p. 88 & p. 98.

⁵ See J. C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, p. 90.

⁶ See E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital 1848–1875*, p. 16 & p. 47.

visitor have doubted that humanity was on the verge of mastering nature itself, bending its forces to endless exploitation in the service of human ambition?

2. The Transformation of Utopian Imagination

The 19th c. witnessed a profound transformation of utopian discourse. Earlier utopias, following the paradigm established by Thomas More, tended to imagine ideal societies in timeless isolation—often on distant islands, removed from history and change. Their *island time* was static and self-enclosed. From the late 18th c., however, utopias increasingly entered history. Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L'An 2440* (1771) was the first major work to locate the ideal society not in some exotic elsewhere but in a future unfolding from the present. Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1794) went further, presenting the future not as prophecy but as a rational extrapolation of historical progress. Utopia was no longer outside of time; it became the projection of history itself.¹

This *utopia through progress* defined the long 19th c. Oscar Wilde was not joking when he said that no map of the world which did not contain Utopia was worth having.² Most nineteenth-century utopias depicted ideal societies as the logical outcome of social theory, grounded in the supposed laws of historical evolution. Unlike earlier models, they did not imagine history coming to a halt in perfection; rather, they envisioned an era of continuous improvement.

Many such visions emphasised science and technology as the engines of transformation. These *techno-scientific utopias* promised abundance, mastery over nature, and even the conquest of pain, disease, and death. Machines, the most visible symbols of industrial modernity, were imagined both literally and metaphorically as the forces propelling humanity toward liberation from toil and the realisation of a higher life.³

As Marek J. Siemek observed, modernity came to see the future as the fulfilment of tendencies already present—progress inscribed in the very fabric of the present.⁴ Few nineteenth-century contemporaries doubted this trajectory, though some critics, such as Nietzsche,⁵ warned that the seemingly inevitable march of progress might culminate in outcomes starkly opposed to its optimistic promises.⁶

For most educated Europeans, however, the future meant a civilisation of reason, abundance, and ceaseless development—a *fulfilled modernity* whose outlines already seemed visible in the industrial West. There appeared to be only one road to such a future: further progress in science, technology, productive forces, and the *rational* organisation of society.

¹ See B. Baczkó, *Wyobrażenia społeczne*, pp. 105–108, p. 117 & pp. 127–128.

² E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1875–1914*, p. 339.

³ See M. Yar, *The Cultural Imaginary of the Internet*, p. 11. See also R. C. S. Trahair, *Utopias and Utopians*.

⁴ See M. J. Siemek, *Wykłady z filozofii nowoczesności*, p. 268.

⁵ See F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*.

⁶ See E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital 1848–1875*, p. 16.

3. General Conclusions of the Young Marx

Already by the mid-19th c., the seemingly *self-evident* conviction that all social dynamics ultimately rested on the development of the productive forces—and above all on the rapid advance of science and technology, the idea later identified by Louis Althusser as lying at the core of what he termed *bourgeois ideology*¹—had come to shape the world view of much of the socialist intelligentsia, despite its critical stance toward the atrocities of nascent bourgeois society. At the beginning of his revolutionary trajectory in the 1840s, Marx himself was clearly influenced by this idea. His early thought reflected an uncritical vision of the productive forces, revealing a tendency to treat their development as the primary vector of progress—a tendency which, in Michael Löwy's words, expressed the young Marx's inclination *to embrace an evolutionism, a philosophy of progress, and a scientism modelled on the natural sciences*.²

In 1859, Marx published *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Although the main body of the work left only a modest mark on the Marxist tradition—soon overshadowed by the more comprehensive and mature *Capital*,³ the first volume of which appeared a few years later—the brief *Preface* proved highly influential. There, Marx states that he will not anticipate his new findings, offering instead *a few brief remarks* on the trajectory of his inquiry into political economy.⁴ Most importantly, he sets out the *general conclusions* he had reached in the mid-1840s, during his time in Paris and subsequently in Brussels—at which point they became the *guiding principle* of his studies. Marx summarised these conclusions as follows:

*In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. [...] At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or—this is merely expresses the same thing in legal terms—with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution.*⁵

Then we read: *the general process of social, political and intellectual life of society is conditioned by the mode of production of [its] material life*—namely,

¹ L. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, p. 209.

² M. Löwy, *Pour un marxisme critique*, p. 97. See also M. Löwy, *Pour un marxisme critique*, pp. 89–97.

³ See K. Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*.

⁴ See K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 262.

⁵ K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, pp. 262–263.

a specific combination of the productive forces, *at a certain stage of their development*,¹ and the relations of production defined by this stage.

Social revolution is nothing more than a profound change in the economic foundation—*material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science*—leading to the emergence of a new mode of production. As we read:

*No social formation is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society. Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since [...] the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation.*²

These statements guarantee that history has unfolded and will continue to unfold regularly—without any hitches or friction.³

The unprecedented development of modern productive forces under capitalism was expected to provide the very basis for its ultimate overcoming. Hence the assertion: *the bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production [...] The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation.*⁴ Its real history—to follow this line of thought—would begin only with the inevitable advent of socialism.

The concluding passages of the *Preface*, however, suggest that the *general conclusions* formulated by Marx around 1845 were ultimately abandoned. Marx himself acknowledges that the political upheavals of the late 1840s had *cut short* his economic investigations, which he was able to resume only after his relocation to London in 1850. As he observes in the *Preface*:

*The enormous amount of material relating to the history of political economy assembled in the British Museum, the fact that London is a convenient vantage point for the observation of bourgeois society, and finally the new stage of development which this society seemed to have entered with the discovery of gold in California and Australia, induced me to start again from the very beginning and to work carefully through the new material.*⁵

¹ K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 263.

² K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 263.

³ See L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p. 58.

⁴ K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, pp. 263–264.

⁵ K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 265.

Althusser argues that it was only in the British capital that Marx recognised the fragmentary and second-hand nature of his earlier engagement with political economy, and that only from this point did he embark upon a systematic and rigorous study of it.¹ We shall return to the theoretical revolution in Marx's thought that indeed took place after his move to England. For now, let us focus on his intellectual outlook in the mid-1840s.

For the sake of clarity, it is worth precisely identifying and naming two theses that can be extracted from Marx's *general conclusions* from the *Preface*. Both of them will recur in the further course of my argument. Firstly: *The productive forces tend to develop throughout history*, and secondly: *The nature of the production relations of a society is explained by the level of development of its productive forces*.² In what follows, we will refer to the first statement as the *Development Thesis* and to the second one—as the *Primacy Thesis*.

Some authors, convinced that Marx was essentially an ingenious thinker always and from the very beginning as well as uneasy with the somewhat simplistic *general conclusions*, maintain that the latter never in fact constituted a genuine foundation of his thought. Such a belief necessarily implies that when Marx declared in 1859 that he was presenting nothing more than what he had already reached in the mid-1840s—which, at least for a time, had become the *guiding principle* of his research in political economy—was, for some unspecified reason, not telling the truth. This conclusion, however, is utterly absurd: among Marx's writings of the 1840s, one can easily find many explicit affirmations of *Development Thesis* and *Primacy Thesis* that *amounted to much more than a few passing comments and aphoristic assertions*.³

The German Ideology (1846), a collection of manuscripts by the young Marx and Engels, still speaks of *forms of intercourse—a precursor of the later, better defined, "relations of production"*.⁴ Yet the familiar schema already appears there. The authors argued, for example, that *in the place of an earlier form of intercourse, which has become a fetter, a new one is put, corresponding to the more developed productive forces [...]—a form which in its turn becomes a fetter and is then replaced by another*.⁵

In the same year, Marx clarified his position on *the real course of history* in a letter to Pavel V. Annenkov (1813–1887). The *great historical movement*, he wrote, can be understood only as *born of the conflict between the productive forces already acquired by man, and his social relations which no longer correspond to those productive forces*. He insisted: *With the acquisition of new productive faculties man changes his mode of production and with the mode of production he changes all the economic relations which were but the necessary relations of that particular mode of production*. A few lines further on, Marx

¹ See L. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, p. 173.

² G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, p. XXV. See also S. H. Rigby, *Marxism and History*, p. 134.

³ See e.g. S. H. Rigby, *Marxism and History*, p. 27.

⁴ G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, p. 143.

⁵ K. Marx & F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, p. 82.

added: *in developing his productive faculties, i.e. in living, man develops certain inter-relations, and [...] the nature of these relations necessarily changes with the modification and the growth of the said productive forces.*¹

The following year, in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), Marx developed the same line of thought: *the relations in which productive forces are developed [...] correspond to a definite development of men and of their productive forces, and [...] a change in men's productive forces necessarily brings about a change in their relations of production.* In another passage he writes:

*In acquiring new productive forces men change their mode of production; and in changing their mode of production, in changing the way of earning their living, they change all their social relations. The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist. The same men who establish their social relations in conformity with their material productivity, produce also principles, ideas and categories, in conformity with their social relations [...] There is a continual movement of growth in productive forces, of destruction in social relations, of formation in ideas; the only immutable thing is the abstraction of movement.*²

In late 1847 Marx delivered a series of lectures on political economy to the German Workers' Society in Brussels (published two years later in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*). Characteristically, he drew an analogy between the determination of production relations by productive forces and the determination of military relations by destructive forces:

*These social relations into which the producers enter with one another, the conditions under which they exchange their activities and participate in the whole act of production, will naturally vary according to the character of the means of production. With the invention of a new instrument of warfare, firearms, the whole internal organisation of the army necessarily changed; the relationships within which individuals can constitute an army and act as an army were transformed and the relations of different armies to one another also changed. Thus the social relations within which individuals produce, the social relations of production, change, are transformed, with the change and development of the material means of production, the productive forces.*³

¹ [K. Marx], *Marx to Pavel Vasilyevich Annenkov*, p. 97, p. 100 & p. 103.

² K. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, p. 166 & p. 175.

³ K. Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital*, pp. 211–211.

The passages cited above represent only a small selection. The same reasoning—that the level of development of a society’s productive forces determines the character of its relations of production, and that advances in those forces compel social transformation—recurs throughout much of the young Marx’s work. At times he even sought to substantiate this thesis with a series of ostensibly historical examples.¹

4. Technological determinism

Louis Althusser summarised the outlook of Marx in the 1840s as follows: *The productive forces [...], in line with their “level of development,” endow themselves with, as it were, their relation of production—that is, with the corresponding relations of production, those adequate to these productive forces. Every revolution in the productive forces, since it leads to non-correspondence with the old relations of production, precipitates a revolution in the relations of production that puts the new relations of production in new (and adequate) correspondence with the new productive forces.*²

According to Althusser, the young Marx formulated the thesis that each stage of productive development exhausts the possibilities allowed by existing relations before contradiction forces their collapse. The future is already immanent within the present—hence Marx’s dictum that *humanity [...] only ever sets itself tasks that it can accomplish*, since the means are always, *providentially, as it were*, already to hand.³

Elsewhere Althusser sharpened the point: *In the “dialectic” productive forces/relations of production, it is the productive forces which are determinant: when they exceed the “capacities” of the relations of production, the relations [...] are shattered, leading to social revolution, an Umwälzung that rocks the whole edifice.*⁴ In other words, *the productive forces [...] need only develop until [...] [they] exceeded [the existing relations], causing the carapace to split open and new relations of production, ready and waiting in the old society, to take their place.*⁵

On this basis, Althusser concluded that the young Marx clearly upheld *the primacy of the productive forces over the relations of production.*⁶ Or, as Rigby put it, Marx’s early thought may legitimately be described as a form of *technological or “productive force determinism”*: *Society’s productive forces [...] are said to bring into being specific forms of class relations [...]. The growth of society’s productivity is thus not only a key theme of human history, but also an explanation of that history.*⁷

¹ See S. H. Rigby, *Marxism and History*, p. 28, p. 36 & p. 44.

² L. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, p. 210.

³ L. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, p. 213.

⁴ L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p. 57.

⁵ L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p. 58.

⁶ L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p. 59.

⁷ S. H. Rigby, *Marxism and History*, p. 12 & p. 27.

Alain Testart argued that if productive forces develop *on their own, according to their own dynamics*, then relations of production are reduced to external obstacles, conceived *mechanically* as something stable against which mobile productive forces collide. In such a view, social structures lack any internal laws of evolution or contradiction; technological progress alone appears as the motor of history.¹ Étienne Balibar, in turn, noted that giving primacy to the productive forces *inevitably leads to the pure elimination of the relations of production and their scientific study, generally replaced by the simple reference to the legal forms of ownership of the means of production.*²

5. The question of historiosophy and communism

In Marx's writings of the 1840s one readily finds what may be called a historiosophy—an account with both an Origin and an End. He sought to give history meaning, to apprehend it as moving in a strictly determined direction,³ culminating inevitably in communism.⁴ These beliefs secured him legions of admirers—faithful as they were naive. As one of them, Gerald A. Cohen, put it: *with focus on the development of the productive forces, history becomes a coherent story.*⁵

The *dialectic* of correspondence and antagonism between productive forces and relations of production was presented as universal, applicable to all of human history. The young Marx outlined a unilinear sequence of modes of production: primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism—later expanded to include the Asiatic mode.⁶ This sequence seemed compulsory: *no society was capable of “catching a moving train”; each had to go through the mandatory series of the prescribed modes of production.* History thus appeared both deterministic and progressive.⁷

Both admirers and critics have linked this vision to Hegel's conception of history as *a coherent and progressive development which passes through distinct stages of evolution.*⁸ For Cohen, Marx preserved Hegel's entire structure—history as a meaningful process moving toward a final purpose—but substituted productive forces for consciousness.⁹ For Althusser Marx's dialectic of productive forces and relations of production was *one hundred per cent Hegelian*, echoing the development of the Idea.¹⁰ These comments, of course, are not

¹ See A. Testart, *Le communisme primitif*, pp. 25–26.

² É. Balibar, *Cinq études du matérialisme historique*, p. 232.

³ See L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p. 36.

⁴ See S. H. Rigby, *Marxism and History*, p. 9.

⁵ G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, p. 150.

⁶ See T. Shanin, *Late Marx: gods and craftsmen*, p. 5.

⁷ See L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, pp. 37–38.

⁸ S. H. Rigby, *Marxism and History*, p. 71.

⁹ See G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*.

¹⁰ See L. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, pp. 212–213.

entirely illegitimate (although Althusser's argumentation leaves much to be desired). Hegel's thought stimulated Marx in various ways throughout his life.

Let's look at the bigger picture, however. The roots of the young Marx's *ordered development* lay also in Enlightenment thought. From the late 18th c., the *four stages* theory of hunting, pastoralism, agriculture, and commerce shaped historical writing, from Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* to John Millar's *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*.¹ As Theodor Shanin observed, Marx was a *child of his time*,² an era when philosophies of progress flourished—from Spencer's evolutionism and Comte's positivism to the socialism of Fourier and Saint-Simon. Evolutionism promised to explain diversity through necessary stages, but at the cost of a built-in teleology. Ellen Meiksins Wood noted that nineteenth-century *unilinearism* claimed to be a theory of history but was in fact *just an attempt to avoid explaining historical change by preempting the question with a mechanical sequence of stages*.³

The young Marx did indeed envision history as a necessary succession of more productive modes, culminating in a classless society. As Rigby explained: *Just as the feudal mode of production became a fetter on the growth of the productive forces, so capitalism has become a barrier. [...] The result is [...] the basis for a higher stage of human development: the socialist [or communist] mode of production*.⁴ True, if *the hand mill gives society with the feudal lord*, and *the steam mill gives society with the industrial capitalist*, then it seems logical that with the explosion of the productive forces, which will eventually free themselves from the shackles of bourgeois property relations, an entirely new mode of production and a new society will emerge—the classless communism will be somehow *given*. And indeed, the young Marx formulates exactly such a thought.

Although the young Marx rejected utopian blueprints, he did not reject utopian goals. Communism, he believed, could not be engineered; it had to emerge from the historical advance of the productive forces. Many nineteenth-century socialists thought similarly, imagining socialism as a continuation of capitalist progress—an even more “*unconditional*” *revolutionising of productive forces*.⁵ Yet neither the young Marx nor his contemporaries answered what the liberating effects of such a socialism would be.

In the 1840s, for Marx history culminated in the ideal of fully transparent human relations under communism: *crystal-clear relations between nothing but individuals [...] in the conquest and realisation of the “free development of their personality.”* In this vision, echoed even in Paul Lafargue's ironic *right to be lazy*, abundance would make labour virtually disappear. Communism thus appears as a *mode of production without production relations*: productive

¹ See S.H. Rigby, *Marxism and History*, p. 72 & E. M. Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, p. 4.

² T. Shanin, *Late Marx: gods and craftsmen*, p. 4.

³ E. M. Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, p. 127 & pp. 132–133.

⁴ S. H. Rigby, *Marxism and History*, p. 48.

⁵ E. M. Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, p. 143.

relations, like the state, money, parties, or the division of labour, would simply vanish.¹

6. The Missing Class Struggle?

Marx's extraordinarily complex intellectual and political biography cannot be grasped without reference to the broader social context—one that has received little attention so far. The rapid expansion of capitalism during his lifetime brought not only spectacular advances in technology and production, but also a phenomenon intimately connected to this development, though irreducible to it and without precedent in history: the modern capitalist proletariat. This powerful force which, beginning in the second half of the 1830s, first in England and then with the expansion of capitalism on an international scale, exerted an increasing influence on the course of history formed the crucial social background against which Marx's thought developed.

The idea that class struggle is the driving motor of history is rightly associated with Marx's name. As he and Engels later recalled: *For almost forty years we have emphasised that the class struggle is the immediate motive force of history, in particular, that the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat is the great lever of modern social revolution.*²

Hence it is striking that the theme of class struggle is entirely absent from the *general conclusions* formulated by Marx in the mid-1840s and later presented in the *Preface*. Some have suggested that the *Preface* was written under the scrutiny of Prussian censorship, which discouraged any explicit reference to violence.³ While this is not implausible, the omission seems less a matter of circumstance than of theory. For Marx in the 1840s, the historical process was governed above all by the correspondence and subsequent contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production (or property relations).⁴ If the decisive motor of change lay in these systemic, objective contradictions, then little space remained for a *voluntarist* agency such as class struggle.⁵

In short, the most plausible reason why Marx omitted class struggle from his *general conclusions* is that, in the 1840s, it had not yet assumed a central place in his theoretical framework. Only later would its role become decisive.

¹ See L. Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, pp. 36–37.

² [K. Marx & F. Engels], *Marx and Engels to August Bebel ...*, p. 408.

³ A. M. Prinz, *Background and Ulterior Motive ...*, pp. 438–439, p. 443, p. 446 & pp. 449–450, has emphasised that in the late 1850s Marx *all of a sudden, after many years of fruitless efforts had the opportunity of reappearing legally* on the German publishing scene. With the help of Ferdinand Lassalle, a publisher agreed to issue *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. At the time, Germany was in *the iron grip of a powerful and ruthless police system*, and Marx, aware of his revolutionary reputation, feared confiscation *if [censors] could find some plausible reason, especially anything that could be construed as an incitement to class hatred*. Thus, while drafting the *Preface* in early 1859, he was determined *to tread warily and ward off the danger of confiscation*. He succeeded: *the Critique was neither prohibited nor confiscated so that the author had indeed regained legal access to the German public*.

⁴ See L. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, p. 211 & p. 213.

⁵ See E. Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, pp. 129–130.

7. Marx Discovers the Working Class

It took Marx some time to recognise the existence and revolutionary potential of the modern proletariat. In the early 1840s his *forays into the social question show someone [...] thinking about social and economic questions along the lines of [...] nineteenth-century liberalism, if perhaps with more sympathies for the poor than many free market liberals.*¹ At that stage Marx, still a *bourgeois radical*, viewed communism in a *hardly favourable light.*² By 1843 he had begun to develop as a critical *social and political theorist*, but his ideas remained shaped above all by two sources: the Young Hegelians, and radical democratic and socialist traditions stemming from the French Revolution.³

Following liberal historians, Marx maintained—essentially to the end of his life—that the French Revolution *was a bourgeois revolution, clearing away archaic social, political and economic impediments to capitalist society.*⁴ As George C. Comninel noted, the *confusion of the issues of capitalism with the issues of the aftermath of the [...] Revolution [of 1789] was virtually universal at the time.*⁵ In reality, before the mid-nineteenth century capitalism was scarcely developed in France, Germany, Italy, or Spain. Continental Europe still relied on urban artisans, day labourers, miners, and cottage industry workers, all organised in traditional, pre-capitalist forms. Popular struggles and even socialist agitation certainly existed, but strictly speaking they did not arise from capitalism. In the early 1840s, then, Marx had not yet confronted genuinely capitalist society—either in his philosophical writings or in the political movements with which he was engaged as a journalist. Unsurprisingly, his early work shows no sign of the specifically capitalist working class.⁶

By 1850 only English society had been deeply transformed by capitalist relations of production. In France, protracted struggles over the state power politicised labour, but that labour was still largely artisanal and pre-capitalist. In England, by contrast, a *modern working class was already making itself in struggles over property rights, industrial labour, and the laissez-faire state.*⁷ It was Engels, not Marx, who first grasped this reality. Arriving in Manchester in 1842 to work in his father's business, Engels encountered a society marked by both working-class suffering and working-class struggle. The Plug Riots had just shaken Britain—a *combination [of] general strike, insurrection, and outburst of rage at working-class existence.*⁸ In Manchester, Chartists demanded universal suffrage, trade unionists fought for wages and conditions, and socialists pressed for sweeping reforms. By the end of 1843, Engels *became*

¹ J. Sperber, *Karl Marx*, p. 78.

² J. Sperber, *Karl Marx*, p. 72, p. 74, pp. 77–78.

³ See G. C. Comninel, *Marx's Context*, p. 478.

⁴ G. C. Comninel, *Revolution in History ...*, p. 72.

⁵ G.C. Comninel, *Revolution in History ...*, p. 94.

⁶ See G. C. Comninel, *Revolution in History*, pp. 74–75, p. 77, p. 79 & p. 85.

⁷ See G. C. Comninel, *Revolution in History ...*, p. 90.

⁸ See J. Sperber, *Karl Marx*, p. 104.

familiar with capitalist society and drew attention to the relative priority of [...] English development in the economy.¹ His engagement with English political economy and the works of the utopian socialists—especially Robert Owen (1771–1858)—gave him ample food for thought: *Many years later he himself recalled that it was in Manchester that he had realised the crucial role in social life of economic relations constituting the basis of class contradictions and the struggle among parties.*²

In his *Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy* (1843),³ Engels suggested that the rising capitalist working class would become the agent of social revolution. Through this essay Marx first gained insight into English capitalism and the *modern* world of labour. After reading Engels' *brilliant essay on the critique of economic categories*, as he later described it, Marx began to move beyond the philosophy of pre-capitalist Europe and to study the English political economists cited by Engels. He came to identify the proletariat as the key to human emancipation.⁴ Soon afterward Marx devoured Engels' *Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), which vividly depicted industrial life in that country. As Lenin later observed:

[Even before him] *many people had described the sufferings of the proletariat and had pointed to the necessity of helping it. Engels was the first to say that the proletariat is not only a suffering class; that it is, in fact, the disgraceful economic condition of the proletariat that drives it irresistibly forward and compels it to fight for its ultimate emancipation. And the fighting proletariat will help itself. The political movement of the working class will inevitably lead the workers to realise that their only salvation lies in socialism.*⁵

Thus Marx became acquainted with capitalist social relations even before he had personally experienced a capitalist society.⁶ Mainly through Engels he *encountered* the English workers who had already begun to struggle against capital. This encounter marked a decisive turning point: it broke Marx away from bourgeois democracy and gave a new direction to his thought. As Comninel summarises, Marx abandoned *his initial idea that it would be the philosophers who would lead the way to human emancipation* and came to argue that *the very structure and contradictions of capitalist class society would lead the*

¹ G. C. Comninel, *Marx's Context*, p. 478.

² P. Fedoseyev, *Karl Marx*, pp. 58–59.

³ See F. Engels, *Outlines of a Critique ...*, pp. 418–443.

⁴ See G. C. Comninel, *Revolution in History ...*, p. 75 & pp. 84–85, G. C. Comninel, *Marx's Context*, p. 482 & P. Fedoseyev, *Karl Marx*, p. 67.

⁵ V. I. Lenin, *Frederick Engels*, p. 22.

⁶ See G. C. Comninel, *Marx's Context*, p. 483.

*working-class majority to end class society as such through its self-emancipation.*¹

By the mid-1840s Marx was already politically and morally on the side of the working class. From this point onward, *the paramount importance of classes, with their economic interests, their ideologies, and their struggles*² became ever clearer in his writings. This tendency, however, fit with increasing difficulty into the theoretical framework of historical materialism, which Marx at that time firmly based on the *Development Thesis* and the *Primacy Thesis*.

8. Manifest's ambiguities

Let us look at the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) from this perspective. Marx and Engels famously declared that bourgeois society *is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.*³ With a keen sense of drama, they traced *the more or less veiled civil war, raging within existing society, up to the point where that war breaks out into open revolution, and where the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat.*⁴ The *Manifesto* was issued as a call to class struggle to effect ultimate historical change. It trumpeted *not only the need for an end of the era of capitalism but—erroneously—the very hour of that end.*⁵ It remains perhaps the most revolutionary text either of them produced.

The *Manifesto* opens with the immortal line:

*The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another [...] in a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.*⁶

This appears to herald a new approach to history, one sharply opposed to technological determinism. Yet the text does not spell out what this supposed new approach consists in—and many passages still reproduce the logic of the *general conclusions* from the *Preface*.

Marx and Engels explain the fall of feudalism in familiar terms: *At a certain stage in the development of these means of production and of exchange [...] the feudal relations of property became no longer compatible with the already developed productive forces; they became so many fetters. They had to be burst*

¹ G. C. Comminel, *Revolution in History ...*, p. 92.

² A.M. Prinz, *Background and Ulterior Motive ...*, p. 437.

³ K. Marx & F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, p. 485.

⁴ K. Marx & F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, p. 485.

⁵ G. C. Comminel, *Revolution in History ...*, p. 72 & p. 92.

⁶ K. Marx & F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, p. 485.

*asunder; they were burst asunder.*¹ This is essentially another formulation of the *Development Thesis* and *Primacy Thesis*.

However, a novelty does appear: Marx and Engels now stress the historical specificity of the bourgeois mode of production. Unlike earlier ruling classes, which largely conserved productive forces, the bourgeois *has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together*. Steam, machinery, chemistry, railways, telegraphs etc.—no earlier epoch had anticipated such powers. Elsewhere, however, they describe the bourgeoisie less as the *creator* of progress than its *involuntary promoter*.²

In their attempt to *explain* the dynamics of capitalism itself Marx and Engels again resort to the *Primacy Thesis*: the bourgeoisie *constantly* revolutionises the *instruments of production*, with the result that the *relations of production, and with them the entire relations of society* change.³

At times the language is strikingly figurative:

*Modern bourgeois society with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells. For many a decade past the history of industry and commerce is but the history of the revolt of modern productive forces against modern conditions of production, against the property relations that are the conditions for the existence of the bourgeoisie and of its rule.*⁴

Ultimately, the verdict is unequivocal: *too much civilisation, too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce [...] The conditions of bourgeois society are too narrow to comprise the wealth created by them*. Hence the prophecy: the fall of the bourgeoisie and the *victory of the proletariat* are *equally inevitable*.⁵ Socialism, it seemed, was just around the corner.

It is true that even before 1848 one can already glimpse Marx's first hesitations about the absolute primacy of productive forces.⁶ Nevertheless, in the *Manifesto* he was still unable to provide a theoretical grounding for his enthusiasm for the class struggle.

¹ K. Marx & F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, p. 489.

² K. Marx & F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, p. 496.

³ K. Marx & F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, p. 487.

⁴ K. Marx & F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, p. 489.

⁵ K. Marx & F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, pp. 490–496.

⁶ K. Marx & F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, p. 40, p. 50 & p. 329, advanced the *Primacy Thesis*, but also hinted at a more reciprocal view. *Civil society*, they wrote, is the *form of intercourse determined by the existing productive forces [...] and in its turn determining these*. Likewise, *industry and commerce [...] determine distribution, the structure of the different social classes and are, in turn, determined by it*. The state itself rests on the *mode of production and form of intercourse which mutually determine each other*.

9. The story is definitely not over

Marx could hardly have foreseen that the short exposition of his *general conclusions* of the 1840s would later be elevated by many followers to be the most authoritative statement of his theory.¹ Gerald A. Cohen, for example, in his once widely discussed *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (1978), treated these lines as the cornerstone of a sweeping interpretation of Marxism in terms of technological determinism. For Cohen, *humans do not make their own history, the productive forces do.*² In his eyes, even Marx's mature writings never fully escaped the framework of the *Development Thesis* and *Primacy Thesis*.

Yet this reading misses what was in fact a profound theoretical rupture in Marx's development. Beginning in the 1850s, and culminating in *Capital*, Marx elaborated an entirely new conception of history. The *Development Thesis* was quietly set aside, and the *Primacy Thesis* effectively inverted: rather than the productive forces determining social relations, it was relations of production—hence, most fundamentally, the class struggle—that ultimately shaped the trajectory of productive power. In this sense, the mature Marx broke decisively with the technological determinism of his youth and with the dominant ideologies of nineteenth-century progress. This transformation will be the subject of the next article.³

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¹ See S. H. Rigby, *Marxism and History*, p. 13 & D. McLellan, *Karl Marx*, p. 280.

² G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, p. XXV.

³ See M. Siermiński, *Marx Against Marx ...*

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