I

Introduction

Things and Actions are what they are, and the
Consequences of them will be what they will be:
Why then should we desire to be deceived?

Joseph Butler[1]

No thinker in the nineteenth century has had so direct, deliberate and powerful an influence upon mankind as Karl Marx. Both during his lifetime and after it he exercised an intellectual and moral ascendancy over his followers, the strength of which was unique even in that golden age of democratic nationalism, an age which saw the rise of great popular heroes and martyrs, romantic, almost legendary figures, whose lives and words dominated the imagination of the masses and created a new revolutionary tradition in Europe. Yet Marx could not, at any time, be called a popular figure in the ordinary sense: certainly he was in no sense a popular writer or orator. He wrote extensively, but his works were not, during his lifetime, read widely; and when, in the late 1870s, they began to reach the immense public which several among them afterwards obtained, their reputation was due not so much to their intellectual authority as to the growth of the fame and notoriety of the movement with which he was identified.

Marx totally lacked the qualities of a great popular leader or agitator; he was not a publicist of genius, like the Russian

[1] *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* (London, 1726), sermon 7, 136 (§16).

democrat Herzen, nor did he possess Mikhail Bakunin's spell-binding eloquence; the greater part of his working life was spent in comparative obscurity in London, at his writing table and in the reading room of the British Museum. He was little known to the general public, and while towards the end of his life he became the recognised and admired leader of a powerful international movement, nothing in his life or character stirred the imagination or evoked the boundless devotion, the intense, almost religious, worship, with which such men as Kossuth, Mazzini, and even Lassalle in his last years, were regarded by their followers.

His public appearances were neither frequent nor notably successful. On the few occasions on which he addressed banquets or public meetings, his speeches were overloaded with matter, and delivered with a combination of monotony and brusqueness, which commanded the respect, but not the enthusiasm, of his audience. He was by temperament a theorist and an intellectual, and instinctively avoided direct contact with the masses to the study of whose interests his entire life was devoted. To many of his followers he appeared in the role of a dogmatic and sententious German schoolmaster, prepared to repeat his theses indefinitely, with rising sharpness, until their essence became irremovably lodged in his disciples' minds. The greater part of his economic teaching was given its first expression in lectures to working men: his exposition under these circumstances was by all accounts a model of lucidity and conciseness. But he wrote slowly and painfully, as sometimes happens with rapid and fertile thinkers, scarcely able to cope with the speed of their own ideas, impatient at once to communicate a new doctrine, and to forestall every possible objection;[1] the published versions, when dealing with

[1] Anyone interested in Marx's method of composition would be well advised to read the *Grundrisse* (1857–8) [see Guide to Further Reading, 294], which remained in manuscript until 1939 and contains the main doctrines both of *Capital* and of earlier studies of alienation.

abstract issues, tended at times to be unbalanced and obscure in detail, although the central doctrine is never in serious doubt. He was acutely conscious of this, and his son-in-law, Paul Lafargue, reports that he once compared himself with the hero of Balzac's 'The Unknown Masterpiece',[1] who tries to paint the picture which has formed itself in his mind, touches and retouches the canvas endlessly, to produce at last a formless mass of colours, which to his eye seems to express the vision in his imagination.

He belonged to a generation which cultivated the imagination more intensely and deliberately than its predecessors, and was brought up among men to whom ideas were often more real than facts, and personal relations meant more than the events of the external world; by whom indeed public life was at times understood and interpreted in terms of the rich and elaborate world of their own private experience. Marx was by nature not introspective, and took little interest in persons or states of mind or soul; the failure on the part of so many of his contemporaries to assess the importance of the revolutionary transformation of the society of their day, due to the swift advance of technology with its accompaniment of sudden increase of wealth, and, at the same time, of social and cultural dislocation and confusion, merely excited his anger and contempt.

He was endowed with a powerful, active, concrete, unsentimental mind, an acute sense of injustice, and little sensibility, and was repelled as much by the rhetoric and emotionalism of the intellectuals as by the stupidity and complacency of the bourgeoisie; the first seemed to him, as often as not, aimless chatter, remote from reality, and, whether sincere or false, equally irritating; the second at once hypocritical and self-deceived, blinded to the salient social features of its time by absorption in the pursuit of wealth and social status.

This sense of living in a hostile and vulgar world (intensified

[1] 13/1.

perhaps by his latent dislike of the fact that he was born a Jew) increased his natural harshness and aggressiveness, and produced the formidable figure of popular imagination. His greatest admirers would find it difficult to maintain that he was a responsive or tender-hearted man, or concerned about the feelings of most of those with whom he came into contact; the majority of the men he met were, in his opinion, either fools or sycophants, and towards them he behaved with open suspicion or contempt. But if his attitude in public was overbearing and offensive, in the intimate circle composed of his family and his friends, in which he felt completely secure, he was considerate and gentle; his married life was essentially not unhappy, he was warmly attached to his children, and he treated his lifelong friend and collaborator, Friedrich Engels, with almost unbroken loyalty and devotion. He had little charm, his behaviour was often boorish, and he was prey to blinding hatreds, but even his enemies were fascinated by the strength and vehemence of his personality, the boldness and sweep of his views, and the breadth and brilliance of his analyses of the contemporary situation.

He remained all his life an oddly isolated figure among the revolutionaries of his time, equally unfriendly to their persons, their methods and their ends. His isolation was not, however, due merely to temperament or to the accident of time and place. However widely the majority of European democrats differed in character, aims and historical environment, they resembled each other in one fundamental attribute, which made co-operation between them possible, at least in principle. Whether or not they believed in violent revolution, the great majority of them, in the last analysis, appealed to moral standards common to all mankind. They criticised and condemned the existing condition of humanity in terms of some preconceived ideal, some system, whose desirability at least needed no demonstration, being self-evident to all men with normal moral vision; their schemes differed in the degree to which they could be realised

in practice, and could accordingly be classified as less or more utopian, but broad agreement existed between the schools of democratic thought about the ultimate ends to be pursued. They disagreed about the effectiveness of the proposed means, about the extent to which compromise with the existing powers was morally or practically advisable, about the character and value of specific social institutions, and consequently about the policy to be adopted with regard to them. But even the most violent among them – Jacobins and terrorists (and they, perhaps, more than others) – believed that there was little that could not be altered by the determined will of individuals; they believed, too, that powerfully held moral ends were sufficient springs of action, themselves justified by an appeal to some universally accepted scale of values. It followed that it was proper first to ascertain what one wished the world to be; next, one had to consider in the light of this how much of the existing social fabric should be retained, how much condemned; finally, one was obliged to look for the most effective means of accomplishing the necessary transformation.

With this attitude, common to the vast majority of revolutionaries and reformers at all times, Marx came to be wholly out of sympathy. He was convinced that human history is governed by laws which cannot be altered by the mere intervention of individuals actuated by this or that ideal. He believed, indeed, that the inner experience to which men appeal to justify their ends, so far from revealing a special kind of truth called moral or religious, tends, in the case of men historically placed in certain situations, to engender myths and illusions, individual and collective. Being conditioned by the material circumstances in which they come to birth, the myths at times embody in the guise of objective truth whatever men in their misery wish to believe; under their treacherous influence men misinterpret the nature of the world in which they live, misunderstand their own position in it, and therefore miscalculate the range of their own and others' power, and the

consequences of both their own and their opponents' acts. In opposition to the majority of the democratic theorists of his time, Marx believed that values could not be contemplated in isolation from facts, but necessarily depended upon the manner in which the facts were viewed. True insight into the nature and laws of the historical process will of itself, without the aid of independently known moral standards, make clear to a rational being what step it is proper for him to adopt, that is, what course would most accord with the requirements of the order to which he belongs.

Consequently Marx had no new ethical or social ideal to press upon mankind; he did not plead for a change of heart; a mere change of heart was but the substitution of one set of illusions for another. He differed from the other great ideologists of his generation by making his appeal, at least in his own view, to reason, to the practical intelligence, denouncing intellectual vice or blindness, insisting that all that men need, in order to know how to save themselves from the chaos in which they are involved, is to seek to understand their actual condition; believing that a correct estimate of the precise balance of forces in the society to which men belong will itself indicate the form of life which it is rational to pursue.

Marx denounces the existing order by appealing not to ideals but to history: he denounces it, as a rule, not as unjust, or unfortunate, or due to human wickedness or folly, but as being the effect of laws of social development which make it inevitable that at a certain stage of history one class, pursuing its interests with varying degrees of rationality, should dispossess and exploit another, and so lead to the repression and crippling of men. The oppressors are threatened not with deliberate retribution on the part of their victims, but with the inevitable destruction which history (in the form of activity rooted in the interests of an antagonistic social group) has in store for them, as a class that has performed its social task and is consequently doomed shortly to disappear from the stage of human events.

Yet, designed though it is to appeal to the intellect, his language is that of a herald and a prophet, speaking in the name not so much of human beings as of the universal law itself, seeking not to rescue, nor to improve, but to warn and to condemn, to reveal the truth and, above all, to refute falsehood. *Destruam et aedificabo* ('I shall destroy and I shall build'), which Proudhon placed at the head of one of his works,[1] far more aptly describes Marx's conception of his own appointed task. By 1845 he had completed the first stage of his programme, and acquainted himself with the nature, history and laws of the evolution of the society in which he found himself. He concluded that the history of society is the history of man seeking to attain to mastery of himself and of the external world by means of his creative labour. This activity is incarnated in the struggles of opposed classes, one of which must emerge triumphant, although in a much altered form: progress is constituted by the succession of victories of one class over the other. These in the long run embody the advance of reason. Those men alone are rational who identify themselves with the progressive – that is, ascendant – class in their society, either, if need be, by deliberately abandoning their past and allying themselves with it, or, if history has already placed them there, by consciously recognising their situation and acting in the light of it.

Accordingly Marx, having identified the rising class in the struggles of his own time with the proletariat, devoted the rest of his own life to planning victory for those at whose head he had decided to place himself. This victory the process of history would in any case secure, but human courage, determination and ingenuity could bring it nearer and make the transition less painful, accompanied by less friction and less waste of human

[1] [Epigraph on the title page of Proudhon's *Philosophy of Poverty* (Paris, 1846), attributed to Deuteronomy 32. This is presumably an allusion to the Vulgate's 'ego occidam et ego vivere faciam' ('I shall kill and I shall make alive') in verse 39.]

substance. His position henceforth is that of a commander, actively engaged in a campaign, who therefore does not continually call upon himself and others to show reason for engaging in a war at all, or for being on one side of it rather than the other: the state of war and one's own position in it are given; they are facts not to be questioned, but accepted and examined; one's sole business is to defeat the enemy; all other problems are academic, based on unrealised hypothetical conditions, and so beside the point. Hence the almost complete absence in Marx's later works of discussions of ultimate principles, of all attempts to justify his opposition to the bourgeoisie. The merits or defects of the enemy, or what might have been if the enemy or the war had been other than they were, is of no interest during the battle. To introduce these irrelevant issues during the period of actual fighting is to divert the attention of one's supporters from the crucial issues with which, whether or not they recognise them, they are faced, and so to weaken their power of resistance.

All that is important during the actual war is accurate knowledge of one's own resources and of those of the adversary, and knowledge of the previous history of society, and the laws which govern it, is indispensable to this end. *Capital* is an attempt to provide such an analysis. The almost complete absence from it of explicit moral argument, of appeals to conscience or to principle, and the equally striking absence of detailed prediction of what will or should happen after the victory, follow from the concentration of attention on the practical problems of action. The conceptions of unalterable, universal natural rights, and of conscience as belonging to every man irrespective of his position in the class struggle, are rejected as self-protecting liberal illusions. Socialism does not appeal, it demands; it speaks not of rights, but of the new form of life, liberated from constricting social structures, before whose inexorable approach the old social order has visibly begun to disintegrate. Moral, political, economic conceptions and ideals alter with the social conditions from which they

spring: to regard any one of them as universal and immutable is tantamount to believing that the order to which they belong – in this case the bourgeois order – is eternal.

This fallacy is held to underlie the ethical and psychological doctrines of idealistic humanitarians from the eighteenth century onwards. Hence the contempt and loathing poured by Marx upon the common assumption made by liberals and utilitarians, that since the interests of all men are ultimately, and have always been, the same, a measure of understanding, goodwill and benevolence on the part of everyone may yet make it possible to arrive at some sort of general consensus satisfactory to all. If the class war is real, these interests are totally incompatible. A denial of this fact can be due only to stupid or cynical disregard of the truth, a peculiarly vicious form of hypocrisy or self-deception repeatedly exposed by history. This fundamental difference of outlook, and no mere dissimilarity of temperament or natural gifts, is what distinguishes Marx sharply from the bourgeois radicals and utopian socialists whom, to their own bewildered indignation, he fought and abused savagely and unremittingly for more than forty years.

He detested romanticism, emotionalism, and humanitarian appeals of every kind, and, in his anxiety to avoid any appeal to the idealistic feelings of his audience, systematically tried to remove every trace of the old democratic rhetoric from the propagandist literature of his movement. He neither offered nor invited concessions at any time, and did not enter into any dubious political alliances, since he declined all forms of compromise. The manifestos, professions of faith and programmes of action to which he appended his name contain scarcely any references to moral progress, eternal justice, the equality of man, the rights of individuals or nations, the liberty of conscience, the fight for civilisation, or other such phrases which were the stock-in-trade (and had once genuinely embodied ideals) of the democratic movements of his time; he looked upon these as so

much worthless cant, indicating confusion of thought and ineffectiveness in action.[1]

The war must be fought on every front, and, since contemporary society is politically organised, a political party must be formed out of those elements which, in accordance with the laws of historical development, are destined to emerge as the conquering class. They must ceaselessly be taught that what seems so secure in existing society is, in reality, doomed to swift extinction, a fact which men may find it difficult to believe because of the immense protective facade of moral, religious, political and economic assumptions and beliefs, which the moribund class consciously or unconsciously creates, blinding itself and others to its own approaching fate. It requires both intellectual courage and acuteness of vision to penetrate this smokescreen and perceive the real structure of events. The spectacle of chaos, and the imminence of the crisis in which it is bound to end, will of itself convince a clear-eyed and interested observer – for no one who is not virtually dead or dying can be a disinterested spectator of the fate of the society with which his own life is bound up – of what he must be and do in order to survive. Not a subjective scale of values revealed differently to different men, determined by the light of an inner vision, but knowledge of the facts themselves must, according to Marx, determine rational behaviour.

A society is judged to be progressive, and so worthy of support, if it is one whose institutions are capable of the further development of its productive forces without subverting its entire basis. A society is reactionary when it is inevitably moving into an impasse, unable to avoid internal chaos and ultimate collapse in spite of the most desperate efforts to survive, efforts which themselves create irrational faith in its own ultimate stability,

[1] His remarks, in a letter to Engels, about his attitude to such expressions in the draft of the declaration of its principles which the First International Workingmen's Association submitted to him are highly instructive in this connection. Marx to Engels, 4 November 1864, CW 42: 15–19.

the anodyne with which all dying orders necessarily conceal from themselves the symptoms of their true condition. Nevertheless, what history has condemned will inevitably be swept away: to say that something ought to be saved, even when that is not possible, is to deny the rational plan of the universe.

To denounce the process itself – the painful conflicts through and by which mankind struggles to achieve the full realisation of its powers – was for Marx a form of childish subjectivism, due to a morbid or shallow view of life, to some irrational prejudice in favour of this or that transient virtue or institution; it revealed attachment to the old world and was a symptom of incomplete emancipation from its values. It seemed to him that under the guise of earnest philanthropic feeling there throve, undetected, seeds of weakness and treachery, due to a fundamental desire to come to terms with the reaction, a secret horror of revolution based on fear of loss of comfort and privilege and, at a deep level, fear of reality itself, of the full light of day. With reality there could, however, be no compromise; and humanitarianism was but a softened, face-saving form of compromise, due to a desire to avoid the perils of an open fight and, even more, the risks and responsibilities of victory. Nothing stirred his indignation so much as cowardice: hence the furious and often brutal tone with which he refers to it, the beginning of that harsh 'materialist' style which struck an unfamiliar note in the literature of revolutionary socialism. This fashion for 'naked objectivity' took the form, particularly among Russian writers of a later generation, of searching for the sharpest, most unadorned, most shocking form of statement in which to clothe what were sometimes not very startling propositions.

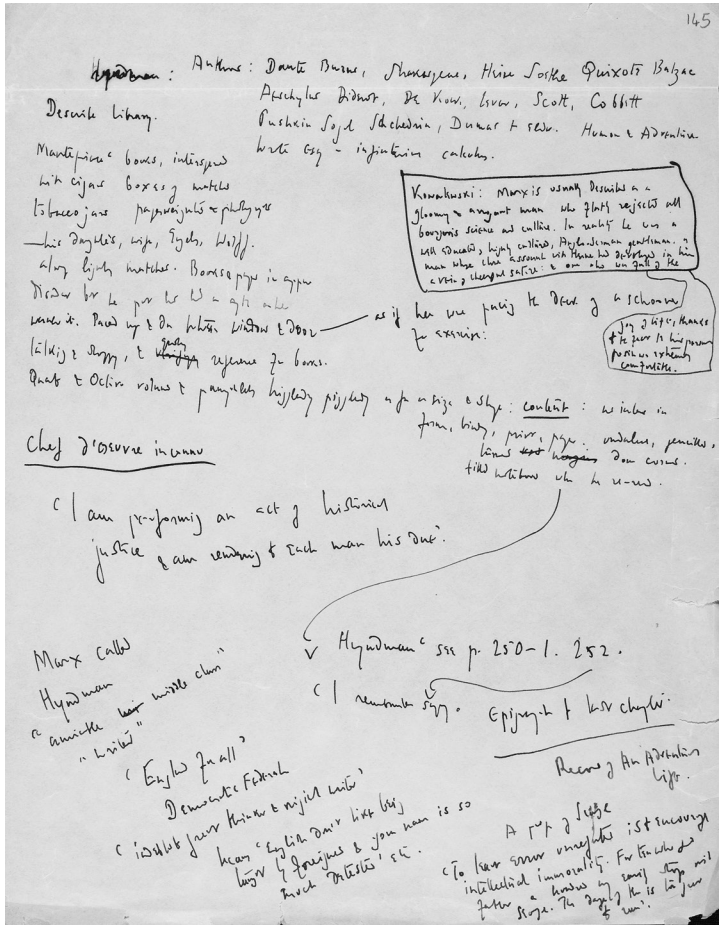
Marx had, by his own account, begun to build his new instrument from almost casual beginnings: because, in the course of a controversy with the government on economic questions of purely local importance, in which he was involved in his capacity as editor of a radical newspaper, he became aware of his almost

total ignorance of the history and principles of economic development. This controversy occurred in 1843. By 1848 his basic standpoint as a political and economic thinker was fully formed. With prodigious thoroughness he had constructed a complete theory of society and its evolution, which indicated with precision where and how the answers to all such questions must be sought and found.

Its originality has often been questioned. It is original, not indeed in the sense in which works of art are original when they embody some hitherto unexpressed individual experience, but as scientific theories are said to be original, where they provide a new solution to a hitherto unsolved, or even unformulated, problem, which they may do by modifying and combining existing views to form a new hypothesis. Marx never attempted to deny his debt to other thinkers: 'I am performing an act of historical justice, and am rendering to each man his due', he is said to have loftily declared.[1] But he did claim to have provided for the first time a wholly adequate answer to questions which had been previously either misunderstood, or answered wrongly or insufficiently or obscurely. The characteristic for which Marx sought was not novelty but truth, and when he found it in the works of others, he endeavoured, at any rate during the early years in Paris in which the basic direction of his thought took its shape, to incorporate it in his new synthesis. What is original in the result is not any one component element, but the central hypothesis by which each is connected with the others, so that the parts are made to appear to follow from each other and to support each other in a single systematic whole.

To trace the direct source of any single doctrine advanced by Marx is, therefore, a relatively simple task which his numerous critics have been only too anxious to perform. It may well be that there is not one among his views whose embryo cannot be found

[1] [Untraced; probably a fictitious attribution.]



[1] Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Berlin 412, fol. 145r: scan © Bodleian Library 2013. These notes aptly illustrate the author's characteristic sparsely referenced manner of note-taking. For example '*chef d'oeuvre inconnu*' is a reminder of what Paul Lafargue wrote about Marx's comparison of himself with the hero of Honoré de Balzac's short story 'The Unknown Masterpiece' (see p. 3 above) in 'Karl Marx: Persönliche Erinnerungen', *Die neue Zeit*, year 9 (1890–1), i 10–17, 37–42, at 15.

in some previous or contemporary writer. Thus the doctrine of communal ownership founded upon the abolition of private property has probably, in one or other form, possessed adherents at most periods during the last two thousand years. Consequently the often debated question whether Marx derived it directly from Morelly or Mably, or Babeuf and his followers, or from some German account of French communism, is too purely academic to be of great importance. As for more specific doctrines, historical materialism of a sort is to be found fully developed in a treatise by Holbach printed almost a century before, which in its turn owes much to Spinoza; a modified form of it was restated in Marx's own day by Feuerbach. The view of human history as the history of war between social classes is to be found in Linguet and Saint-Simon, and was to a large extent adopted by such contemporary liberal French historians as Thierry and Mignet, and equally by the more conservative Guizot, as indeed Marx acknowledged. The scientific theory of the inevitability of the regular recurrence of economic crises was probably first formulated by Sismondi; that of the rise of the Fourth Estate was certainly held by the early French communists, and popularised in Germany in Marx's own day by Stein and Hess. The dictatorship of the proletariat was adumbrated by Babeuf in the last decade of the eighteenth century, and was explicitly developed in the nineteenth in different fashions by Weitling and Blanqui; the present and future position and importance of workers in an industrial state was more fully worked out by Louis Blanc and the French state socialists than Marx was prepared to admit. The labour theory of value derives from Locke, Adam Smith, Ricardo and the other classical economists; the theory of exploitation and surplus value is found in Fourier, and of its remedy by deliberate state control in the writings of early English socialists, such as Bray, Thompson and Hodgskin; the theory of the alienation of the proletarians was enunciated by Max Stirner at least one year before Marx. The influence of Hegel and German philosophy is

the deepest and most ubiquitous of all; the list could easily be continued further.

There was no dearth of social theories in the eighteenth century. Some died at birth, others, when the intellectual climate was favourable, modified opinion and influenced action. Marx sifted this immense mass of material and detached from it whatever seemed to him original, true and important; and in the light of it constructed a new instrument of social analysis, the main merit of which lies not in its beauty or consistency, nor in its emotional or intellectual power – the great utopian systems are nobler works of the speculative imagination – but in the remarkable combination of simple fundamental principles with comprehensiveness, realism and detail. The environment which it assumed actually corresponded to the personal, first-hand experience of the public to which it was addressed; its analyses, when stated in their simplest form, seemed at once novel and penetrating, and the new hypotheses, which represent a peculiar synthesis of German idealism, French rationalism and English political economy,[1] seemed genuinely to co-ordinate and account for a mass of social phenomena hitherto thought of in compara-

[1] [The notion of this threefold synthesis comes from Moses Hess's *Die europäische Triarchie* (Leipzig, 1841), 155–78, esp. 178. Cf. Berlin's 1959 essay on Hess in his *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy, 2nd ed. (Princeton, 2013), 281, where he writes: '*The European Triarchy* in particular advocated the union of the three civilised powers in Europe: Germany, the home of ideas and the champion of religious liberty; France, the battlefield on which effective social reform and political independence had been won; and England, the home of economic freedom, and moreover itself the synthesis of the French and German spirit – neither over-speculative like Germany, nor vulgarly materialistic like France.' The idea was taken up by Lenin, who wrote: 'Marx was the genius who continued and consummated the three main ideological currents of the nineteenth century, as represented by the three most advanced countries of humanity: classical German philosophy, classical English political economy, and French socialism combined with French revolutionary doctrines in general.' 'Karl Marx: A Brief Biographical Sketch with an Exposition of Marxism' (1914), *Collected Works* (Moscow, 1974), xxi 50.]

tive isolation from each other. This provided a concrete meaning for the formulae and popular slogans of the new communist movement. Above all, it enabled it to do more than stimulate general emotions of discontent and rebellion by attaching to them, as Chartism had done, a collection of specific but loosely connected political and economic ends. It directed these feelings to systematically interconnected, immediate, feasible objectives, regarded not as ultimate ends valid for all men at all times, but as objectives proper to a revolutionary party representing a specific stage of social development.

To have given clear and unified answers in familiar empirical terms to those theoretical questions which most occupied men's minds at this time, and to have deduced from them clear practical directives without creating obviously artificial links between the two, was the principal achievement of Marx's theory, and endowed it with that singular vitality which enabled it to defeat and survive its rivals in the succeeding decades. It was composed largely in Paris during the troubled years between 1843 and 1850, when, under the stress of a world crisis, economic and political tendencies normally concealed below the surface of social life increased in scope and in intensity, until they broke through the framework which was secured in normal times by established institutions, and for a brief instant revealed their real character during the luminous interlude which preceded the final clash of forces, in which all issues were obscured once more. Marx fully profited by this rare opportunity for scientific observation in the field of social theory; to him, indeed, it appeared to provide full confirmation of his hypotheses.

The system as it finally emerged was a massive structure, not to be taken by direct assault, containing within its walls resources intended to meet every known weapon in the enemy's possession. Its influence has been immense on friend and foe alike, and in particular on social scientists, historians and critics. It has altered the history of human thought in the sense that after

it certain things could never again be plausibly said. No subject loses, at least in the long run, by becoming a field of battle, and the Marxist emphasis upon the primacy of economic factors in determining human behaviour led directly to an intensified study of economic history, which, although it had not been entirely neglected in the past, did not attain to its present prominent rank until the rise of Marxism gave an impulse to exact historical scholarship in that sphere – much as, in the previous generation, Hegelian doctrines acted as a powerful stimulus to historical studies in general. The sociological treatment of historical and moral problems, which Comte, and after him Spencer and Taine, had discussed and mapped, became a precise and concrete study only when the attack of militant Marxism made its conclusions a burning issue, and so made the search for evidence more zealous and the attention to method more intense.

In 1849 Marx was forced to leave Paris, and came to live in England. For him London, and in particular the library of the British Museum, was 'a convenient agreeable vantage-point for the observation of bourgeois society',[1] an arsenal of ammunition the importance of which its owners did not appear to grasp. He remained little affected by his surroundings, living encased in his own, largely German, world, formed by his family and a small group of intimate friends and political associates. He met few Englishmen and neither understood nor cared for them or their mode of life. He was a man unusually impervious to the influence of environment: he saw little that was not printed in newspapers or books, and remained until his death comparatively unaware of the quality of the life around him or of its social and natural background. So far as his intellectual development was concerned, he might just as well have spent his exile on Madagascar, provided that a regular supply of books, journals and government reports

[1] *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Preface, CW 29: 264.

could have been secured: certainly the inhabitants of London could hardly have taken less notice of his existence if he had. The formative, psychologically most interesting, years of his life were over by 1851: after this he was emotionally and intellectually set and hardly changed at all. He had, while still in Paris, conceived the idea of providing a complete account and explanation of the rise and imminent fall of the capitalist system. His work upon it was begun in the spring of 1850, and continued for some twenty years, with interruptions caused by day-to-day tactical needs and the journalism by which he tried to support his household.

His pamphlets, articles and letters during his thirty years in London form a coherent commentary on contemporary political affairs in the light of his new method of analysis. They are sharp, lucid, mordant, realistic, astonishingly modern in tone, and aimed deliberately against the prevailing optimistic temper of his time.

As a revolutionary he disapproved of conspiratorial methods, which he thought obsolete and ineffective, and liable to irritate public opinion without altering its foundations; instead he set himself to create an open political party dominated by the new view of society. His later years are occupied almost exclusively with the task of gathering evidence for, and disseminating, the truths which he had discovered, until they filled the entire horizon of his followers, and became consciously woven into the texture of their every thought and word and act. For a quarter of a century he concentrated his entire being upon the attainment of this purpose, and, towards the end of his life, achieved it.

The nineteenth century contains many remarkable social critics and revolutionaries no less original, no less violent, no less dogmatic than Marx, but not one so rigorously single-minded, so absorbed in making every word and every act of his life a means towards a single, immediate, practical end, to which nothing was too sacred to be sacrificed. If there is a sense in which he was born before his time, there is an equally definite sense in which he

embodies one of the oldest of European traditions. His realism, his sense of history, his attacks on abstract principles, his demand that every solution must be tested by its applicability to, and emergence out of, the actual situation, his contempt for compromise or gradualism as modes of escape from the necessity of drastic action, his belief that the masses are gullible and must at all costs be rescued, if necessary by force, from the knaves and fools who impose upon them, make him the precursor of the severer generation of practical revolutionaries of the next century; but his rigid belief in the necessity of a complete break with the past, in the need for a wholly new social system as alone capable of saving the individual, who, unfettered by social constraint, will co-operate harmoniously with others, but in the meantime needs firm social direction, places him among the great authoritarian founders of new faiths, ruthless subverters and innovators who interpret the world in terms of a single, clear, passionately held principle, denouncing and destroying all that conflicts with it.

His faith in his own synoptic vision of an orderly, disciplined, self-directing society, destined to arise out of the inevitable self-destruction of the irrational and chaotic world of the present, was of that boundless, absolute kind which puts an end to all questions and dissolves all difficulties; which brings with it a sense of liberation similar to that which in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries men found in the new Protestant faith, and later in the truths of science, in the principles of the great French Revolution, in the systems of the German metaphysicians. If these earlier rationalists are justly called fanatical, then in this sense Marx too was a fanatic. But his faith in reason was not blind: if he appealed to reason, he appealed no less to empirical evidence. The laws of history were indeed eternal and immutable – and to grasp this fact a quasi-metaphysical intuition was required – but what they were could be established only by the evidence of empirical facts. His intellectual system was a closed one, everything that entered was made to conform to a

pre-established pattern, but it was grounded in observation and experience. He was obsessed by no fixed ideas. He betrays not a trace of the notorious symptoms which accompany pathological fanaticism, that alternation of moods of sudden exaltation with a sense of loneliness and persecution which life in wholly private worlds often engenders in those who are detached from reality.

The main ideas of his principal work appear to have matured in his mind as early as 1847. Preliminary sketches had appeared in 1849 and again seven years later, but he was incapable of beginning to write before satisfying himself that he had mastered the entire literature of his subject. This fact, together with the difficulty of finding a publisher and the necessity of providing for his own and his family's livelihood, with its accompaniment of overwork and frequent illness, put off publication year by year. The first volume finally appeared twenty years after its conception, in 1867, and is the crowning achievement of his life. It is an attempt to give a single integrated account of the process and laws of social development, containing a complete economic theory treated historically, and, less explicitly, a theory of history and society as determined by economic factors. It is interrupted by remarkable digressions consisting of analyses and historical sketches of the condition of the proletariat and its employers, in particular during the period of transition from manufacture to large-scale industrial capitalism, introduced to illustrate the general thesis, but in fact demonstrating a new and revolutionary method of historical writing and political interpretation; and all in all it constitutes the most formidable, sustained and elaborate indictment ever delivered against an entire social order, against its rulers, its supporters, its ideologists, its willing and unwilling instruments, against all whose lives are bound up with its survival. His attack upon bourgeois society was made at a moment when it had reached the highest point of its material prosperity, in the very year in which Gladstone in a budget speech congratulated his countrymen on the 'intoxicating augmentation of wealth

and power'[1] which recent years had witnessed, during a mood of buoyant optimism and universal confidence. In this world Marx is an isolated and bitterly hostile figure, prepared, like an early Christian, or a French *enragé*, to reject boldly all that it was and stood for, calling its ideals worthless and its virtues vices, condemning its institutions because they were bourgeois, that is because they belonged to a corrupt, tyrannous and irrational society which must be annihilated totally and for ever.

In an age which destroyed its adversaries by methods not less efficient because they were dignified and slow, which forced Carlyle and Schopenhauer to seek escape in remote civilisations or an idealised past, and drove its arch-enemy Nietzsche to hysteria and madness, Marx alone remained secure and formidable. Like an ancient prophet performing a task imposed on him by heaven, with an inner tranquillity based on clear and certain faith in the harmonious society of the future, he bore witness to the signs of decay and ruin which he saw on every side. The old order seemed to him to be patently crumbling before his eyes; he did more than any man to hasten the process, seeking to shorten the final agony which precedes the end.

[1] *The Times*, 17 April 1863, 7e, cited in Engels, *In the Case of Brentano versus Marx* (1890–1), CW 27: 99–100.