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Marx and Political Theory

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The title of this essay is intentionally ambiguous because both sets of issues I propose to consider may conveniently be placed under its heading. I wish to discuss not only Marx's political theory, but also Marx's relationship to the tradition of political theory—or, more precisely, to a particular view of that tradition. Of course, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, these are not separable, but are interrelated subjects, such that a discussion of the one implicitly restates a discussion of the other.

It might be supposed that one ought to address oneself at the outset to the question of whether Marx even has a political theory, since a number of interpreters have claimed that he does not. Alvin Gouldner, for example, writes that "the absence of a fully explicit political theory should be treated as a 'lapse' " in Marx's own thinking, and as "a troublesome difficulty" for later Marxists (1980:315,304).[1] Since, in my view, this critique is formulated from the standpoint of the very conception of the tradition of political theory which Marx criticized and rejected, I shall postpone a consideration of the difficulties alluded to by Gouldner and others until they can be seen in the context of Marx's own confrontation with the tradition of political theory. Instead, I want to begin by sketching the characteristics of what might be called the politics of theorizing. What, according to Marx, are the structuring social conditions under which political theorizing, as a social activity, takes place?

I.

The "empirical premises" from which we begin, Marx writes in *The German Ideology,* are that men produce the means of their own subsistence, that this mode of production "is a definite form of activity of these individuals . . . a definite *mode of life* on their part," and that the nature of this activity "depends upon what they produce and how they produce" (*Collected Works,* hereafter cited as *CW*:V, 31, *cf.* 37). Understanding the mode of production,

This essay is a revised version of a lecture given to the Churchill History Society, Cambridge University. I wish to thank Mark Goldie and the members of the society for inviting me to discuss these issues with them.

[1] On "Marx's failure ever to define his political theory in a systematic way" (Avineri 1969:42), see Anderson (1976:4,11), Kesselman (1982:82), and Milliband (1977:1–2).

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as an expression of social relationship, is, therefore, the starting point for Marx's social thought. It also happens that these individuals produce ideas, language, laws, etcetera, the meaning of which must be understood, according to Marx, as an expression of a definite form of social production.[2] Our conception of history, he declares,

depends on our ability to expound the real process of production, starting out from the material production of life itself, and to comprehend the form of intercourse connected with this and created by this mode of production (i.e., civil society in its various stages), as the basis of all history; and to show it in its action as State, to explain all the different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, ethics, etc., and trace their origins and growth from that basis; by which means, of course, the whole thing can be depicted in its totality (and therefore, too, the reciprocal action of these various sides on one another (Marx and Engels 1965:49–50 [*CW*:V, 53, 154]).

In developing this theoretical framework, Marx argues that it is "the direct relation of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers which reveals . . . the hidden foundation of the entire social construction," the "mode of life" of individuals in a particular society (Marx 1906:III, 919). This division between owners and producers, therefore, represents "the actual physiology" of society, the "starting point" from which "the inner coherence" of the social relationships in that society can be explained (Marx 1969:II, 165–66). Historically, this division between producers and owners develops in the form of social classes, and, within modern capitalist society, it manifests itself as a division between workers and capitalists. The ideas and various "forms of consciousness" produced within capitalist society must therefore be viewed within the context of these class divisions. As Marx observes in *The German Ideology,* there is a group of thinkers within each class, viz., ideologists, who express the ideas and thinking of that class in a more or less systematic fashion (*CW*:V, 60).[3] Finally, class conflict includes ideological conflict between classes, i.e., a division between the form of consciousness of the owners of the means of production and the form of

[2] "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" (*CW*: VI, 166; V, 36–37; XXXVIII, 102).

[3] The fact that each social class, as "a consequence of division of labor" within the class, produces individuals who are preoccupied with the "systematisation" of the thoughts shared by their fellow class members, should not be confused with (1) the role played by the particular social class within society as a whole, or (2) the propensity of those whose occupation is defined in terms of the production of these ideas to assume that the latter can acquire an existence which is "independent" of the social-class relations which produced them (*CW*:V, 99,446–47). Marx's critique of bourgeois ideologists does not require him to maintain the separability of these features because he is attempting to show that *both* elements (1) and (2) are constitutive of the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, as the argument of the text demonstrates, Marx was not so confused as to be unable to recognize that such a division of labor existed between he and Engels and the active agents of the working class who were workers. Nor was the preoccupation with the importance of ideas or categories a disease to which socialist ideologists were immune.

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consciousness of the producers of the means of subsistence in that society. "Thus," Marx writes, "society has hitherto always developed within the framework of a contradiction," which, "in modern times [is] that between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat" (*CW:*V, 432).

Now, as a straightforward account of the sociological-historical premises of Marx's thought, this presentation—though schematic—should pose few difficulties. However, as soon as we transpose these propositions into what I have termed the structuring conditions for political theorizing, we can begin to see why interpretive problems and disagreements regarding Marx's political thought are likely to arise. For, I shall argue, the methodological presuppositions of Marxist political theory must reflect the presence of the class conflict and ideological debate in society. In other words, from a Marxist perspective, the methodological question is, How is it possible to develop a theoretical framework in which the contradictions arising from class conflict are a fundamental aspect of the social reality to be interpreted, and in which the conflict between theoretical explanations of that social reality also constitutes part of the given conditions of theorizing about that society? This problem cannot be resolved—or even addressed—if one employs a model of social science which seeks to formulate universal and objective laws and which claims to be able to accomplish this precisely because its methodological presuppositions are not centrally rooted in social or ideological conflict. Those who claim that Marx's political theory is not "ideological" and class-determined, and who premise this assertion upon a distinction between "science" and "ideology" are, I shall argue, quite mistaken. Moreover, as the argument proceeds, I hope it will become clear why I have begun with the priority of class conflict as the ground of Marx's political thought, rather than with a set of analytical distinctions between "science" and "ideology," or, in Gouldner's words, "scientific" and "critical" Marxism.

Marx spent much of his life formulating a critique of bourgeois political economy because, he explains, its basic concepts and categories "are forms of thought expressing with social validity the conditions and relations of a definite, historically determined mode of production, viz., the production of commodities" (Marx 1906:I, 87). Yet, it should not be forgotten by the social theorist who undertakes to explain the workings of society, Marx warns, that "modern bourgeois society is always what is given, in the head as well as in reality, and that these categories . . . express the forms of being, the characteristics of existence" for members of that society (Marx 1973:106).[4] They appear to be "given" features of our social thought, Marx argues, because they "have already acquired the stability of natural, self-understood forms of social life." This means that "reflection on the forms of human life, hence

[4] The categories which emerge from the social relations of individuals "become fixed concepts in their mind[s]" (*CW:*V, 92).

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also scientific analysis of those forms, takes a course directly opposite to the real development'' of society, because ''reflection begins . . . with the results of the process of development ready to hand'' (Marx 1906:I, 87). These ''forms of social life'' thus already possess a ''fixed'' and ''self-understood'' quality before the individual social theorist attempts, through a ''scientific analysis'' ''to give an account . . . of their content and meaning.'' As Marx puts it in *The Holy Family,* ''the first criticism of any science is necessarily influenced by the premises of the science it is fighting against'' (*CW*:IV, 31).

Marx first confronts the theoretical-practical problems posed in these statements in the 1844 Paris manuscripts. The reason he must do so in that work is that the classical political economists have attempted to provide a scientific analysis of the workings of capitalist society, and Marx proposes to base his own argument upon a ''critical study of political economy'' (*CW*:III, 231). That is, while he is willing to accept political economy as the intellectual product of the political economists as the ''scientific'' theoreticians of the bourgeoisie, Marx is not willing to accept the ''givenness'' of the forms of social life which their scientific analysis presupposes (*CW*:IV, 56,266). When, after presenting the basic categories of political economy and the views of particular political economists, Marx turns to his own critique of them, he explains that ''we have proceeded from the premises of political economy. We have accepted its language and its laws,'' all of which lead to the recognition that society is divided ''into the two classes of property owners and propertyless workers.'' Nevertheless, ''political economy starts with the fact of private property; it does not explain it to us'' (*CW*:III, 270). The ''givenness'' of private property as a social institution thus represents a specific example of a ''self-understood'' premise of social life which is bound to manifest itself in the thought of bourgeois political economists precisely in so far as they are theoreticians of the class of property owners. As Marx declares in *The Holy Family,*

> all treatises on political economy take private property for granted. This basic premise is for them an incontestable fact to which they devote no further investigation (*CW*:IV, 31–32).

As we shall see, this proposition has important implications for an understanding of Marx's conception of political theory.

Marx's direct critique of political economy in the 1844 manuscripts is first set forth in the manuscript on ''alienated labor.'' I do not propose to recount here his substantive argument, which is in any case well known, but one or two points that Marx makes in this manuscript do merit special attention. He establishes that ''alienated labor'' is rooted in ''the process of production.'' Moreover, this production process is necessarily social in its organization. Therefore, Marx argues, alienated labor ''can only be expressed in the real,

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practical relation of man to his fellow men'' in ''the process of production.'' This means that the worker ''produces the relation of other men to his production and his product and . . . so he creates the domination of the non-producer over production and its product'' (Marx 1963:131 [*CW*:III, 279]). Now, in the passage to which I wish to draw particular attention, Marx observes, ''we have until now considered this relation only from the standpoint of the worker and later we shall be considering it also from the standpoint of the non-worker,'' i.e., the capitalist (*CW*:III, 279). When Marx turns to a consideration of this issue, just as the unfinished manuscript on alienated labor breaks off, he establishes two important points: first, what appears from the standpoint of the worker as ''an *activity of alienation* appears to the non-worker as a *condition of alienation,*'' and, second, the worker has a ''real practical attitude'' toward ''the whole system of alienation,'' while the latter appears to the non-worker as part of ''a *theoretical* attitude'' toward society (Marx 1963:134 [*CW*:III, 282]). What accounts for this basic difference in ''attitude'' toward alienated labor?

In the manuscript, Marx argues that ''from the relation of alienated labor to private property it also follows that the emancipation of society from private property, from servitude, takes the political form of the emancipation of the workers.'' And, Marx adds, this means, specifically, an emancipation with respect to ''the relation of the worker to production,'' since all other forms of ''servitude'' in society ''are only modifications or consequences of this relation'' (Marx 1963:132–33 [*CW*:III, 280]).[5] But the ''scientific analysis'' of capitalism from the standpoint of the ''non-worker'' precisely cannot take into its analysis the ''political emancipation'' of the workers in this sense. Therefore, at its best, it offers an account of the ''condition'' of alienation as experienced by workers and generated by the system of production which remains on the level of theory. As Marx puts it, ''political economy has merely formulated the laws of alienated labor'' (Marx 1963:132 [*CW*:III, 280]). Or, again, ''the criticism of political economy from the standpoint of political economy *recognizes* all the essential determinants of human activity, but only in an estranged, alienated form'' (italics added) (*CW*:IV, 50). In short, the social conditions produced by capitalism are ''explained in terms of the interests of capitalists'' (Marx 1963:120 [*CW*:III, 271]).

Marx became aware of this difference in ''attitude'' toward alienation as a result of his personal contact in Paris with various socialists involved with French workers in the struggle to organize a working-class political movement. The importance of this experience to the shift in Marx's thinking, as

[5] ''It is easy to understand the necessity which leads the whole revolutionary movement to find its empirical, as well as its theoretical, basis in the development of private property, and more precisely of the economic system'' (Marx 1963:156 [*CW*:III, 297]).

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expressed in the 1844 manuscripts, has been thoroughly discussed by several scholars elsewhere, and I will not repeat their arguments here (McLellan 1972:201–8,238; Draper 1977:136–38). Nevertheless, it does need to be emphasized that what we have come to recognize as a distinctive body of thought, "Marxism," has its origins from the moment that Marx accepted class conflict as a social fact and began his own study of society from that standpoint. His "critical study of political economy" in the 1844 manuscripts represents the starting point for an analysis of social relationships from the perspective of the proletariat in a class-divided society.

Moreover, Marx believed that the political activities of the French and English working classes constituted in themselves an "argument" for his critique of the philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach and of classical political economy. To Feuerbach's philosophical expression of communism, Marx now counterposed the *activity* of the workers. Feuerbach postulated the "species being" of man, but he provided no political means whereby the communal fellowship presupposed by this concept could be realized in practice (*CW*:III, 354, *cf.* 144; *CW*:IV, 125). Through the political activity of the associations formed by the English and French workers, Marx argued, "man's consciousness of his species and his attitude towards his species" can be realized as "the practical identity of man with man" (*CW*:IV, 39,52,84). Precisely because of their activity, "real communist workers" have an understanding of social reality which all "critical Hegelians" lack (*CW*:IV, 53).

Against the classical political economists, as we have seen, Marx advances the same type of criticism. The furthest extension of their thought reaches only to the contemplation of the human condition, which may be more or less accurately described, but political theory must do more than that; it must recognize itself as an instrument of social change.[6] "Criticism," whether in the form of Hegelianism or as political economy, is an inadequate response to the conditions of capitalist society when compared to

> the *real human activity* of individuals who are active members of society and who suffer, feel, think, and act as human beings. That is why their criticism is at the same time practical, their communism a socialism in which they give practical, concrete measures, and in which they not only think but even more act, it is the living, real criticism of existing society (*CW*:IV, 153).

From the time of writing the 1844 manuscripts, Marx saw that there were *two* "scientific" theories of the capitalist mode of production, advanced by the theoretical representatives of two social classes in conflict, and he argued that "the political emancipation of the workers" from this system of class domination lay at the center of this "theoretical" dispute. What I am arguing is that this political-theoretical division cannot be papered over by *any* analyt-

[6] In the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx argues that "rational solutions" to social problems can be found only through the "practical activity" of individuals (*CW*:V, 3–5).

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ical distinction, e.g., "science" versus "ideology," which purports to place Marx on one side of the truth and his opponents on the other.[7] In addition, while the political conflict between classes is the crucial axis from which an interpretation of the meaning of competing social theories is to be formulated, this does not require, paradoxically, the construction of a systematic political theory, in the generally understood sense of that term. Before taking up that issue, however, something more needs to be said concerning the way in which Marx developed and applied his conception of political theory within the context of the "contradictions" of capitalist society, as revealed to him by his studies and by his own political activity.

Let us begin with a rather clear statement by Marx in *The Poverty of Philosophy:* "Just as the economists are the scientific representatives of the bourgeois class, so the Socialists and the Communists are the theoreticians of the proletarian class" (*CW:*VI, 177). Similarly, in *The German Ideology,* Marx refers to the property owners who stand on one side and the propertyless workers who stand on the other, and, addressing himself to the "literary representatives" of the latter class, he advises: "If, then, the theoretical representatives of the proletariat wish their literary activity to have any practical effect, they must first and foremost insist that all phrases are dropped which tend to dim the realization of the sharpness of this opposition," or which tend "to conceal this opposition" between classes (*CW:*V, 469).[8] It is the objective of communist theoreticians, according to Marx, "to instil into the working class the clearest possible recognition of the hostile antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat" (*CW:*VI, 519). This duty of "the theoretical representatives of the proletariat" to clarify the nature of class conflict does not, however, *necessarily* commit them to undertaking a "scientific analysis" of capitalist society as the only means by which this class-based obligation could be fulfilled. On the other hand, from Marx's viewpoint, it is no part at all of the social role of such representatives to make up out of their own brains a theory about society. The "empirical premises" of Marxism are not to be abandoned merely in order to achieve a practical effect. "One of the most vital principles of communism, a principle which distinguishes it from

[7] Plamenatz (1965:43), for example, asserts, "Marx certainly did not believe that the theories of society serving the interests of classes other than the proletariat were scientific." He is met by Althusser, who adheres to the same proposition, although he approaches the subject from the opposite ideological direction. Both thinkers wish to preserve "science" from its political or ideological contamination. But, as Fetscher (1971:86) rightly observes, "For [Marx] the superiority of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie is not based on the fact that the proletariat has a particularly 'scientific' method of social research at its disposal, but because it is only from the standpoint of the proletariat that the totality of society can be recognized and at the same time overthrown."

[8] In a letter from the Brussels Communist Correspondence Committee, Marx and Engels endorse the need for "cheap. easily understandable books and pamphlets with a communist content," which "must be widely circulated." Through this communist "propaganda," they write, "the antithesis between bourgeoisie and proletariat will be sharpened" (*CW:*VI, 54,56).

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all reactionary socialism,'' according to Marx, ''is its empirical view'' (*CW:*V, 537). As Marx and Engels declare in the *Communist Manifesto,* ''the theoretical conclusions of the Communists . . . merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle . . . going on under our eyes'' (*CW:*VI, 498). Indeed, in *The Poverty of Philosophy,* Marx describes ''science'' in its application to social theories as ''a product of the historical movement'' of this class struggle, so that ''scientific theoreticians'' need only ''to become its mouthpiece'' (*CW:*VI, 177–78).

In his discussion of concrete illustrations of the class struggle, Marx employs the same theoretical framework. Passage of the Ten Hours Act of 1846, he writes, ''was not only a great practical success; it was the victory of a principle; it was the first time that in broad daylight the political economy of the middle class succumbed to the political economy of the working class'' (Marx 1974:79). That there were two class-based ''political economies'' and that ''practical'' confrontations between them was a normal feature of society is one of the ''self-understood'' elements of Marx's social thought. In discussing the middle-class arguments raised against the formation of unions by the workers, Marx observes that ''all these objections of the bourgeois economists are . . . correct from their point of view.'' But, he argues, the workers have practical, political demands which are of greater significance than can be recognized within the framework of these theoretical objections to the role of unions within the economy; the latter ''are the means of uniting the working class, of preparing for the overthrow of the entire old society with its class contradictions.'' And, Marx adds, ''*from this standpoint,* the workers are right'' to organize unions (italics added) (*CW:*VI, 435; Marx 1901:73–74). In *Theories of Surplus Value,* Marx frequently makes it clear that he is employing concepts, such as ''productive labor,'' whose meaning must be understood ''from the standpoint of capitalist production,'' rather than from the standpoint of the worker (Marx 1969:I, 152–53,157–58,163,393). In the chapter on the ''Working Day'' in *Capital,* Marx states this political-theoretical dichotomy most explicitly, but it informs the argument of that work as a whole. From the economic standpoint of the capitalist, the working day is simply the number of hours that an individual labors productively within a particular capitalist enterprise or, speaking more generally, within the economy as a whole. For Marx, however, the answer to the question, ''What is a working day?'' is necessarily a political answer. Hence, ''the determination of what is a working day, presents itself as the result of a struggle, a struggle between collective capital, i.e., the class of capitalists, and collective labor, i.e., the working class.'' In this conflict of ''right against right'' representing two different standpoints with respect to the workings of capitalist society, Marx observes, ''force decides'' the issue (Marx 1906:I, 259,297,327).[9] It is

[9] When ''the bourgeois tells the proletarian that his, the proletarian's human task is to work fourteen hours a day, the proletarian is quite justified in replying in the same language that on the contrary his task is to overthrow the entire bourgeois system'' (*CW:*V, 290; Marx 1901:69).

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precisely this violent political struggle between the two classes over the working day, he declares, which does not enter into the scientific analysis of classical political economy (Marx 1906:III, 967; Marx 1969:II, 406).

Nevertheless, the matter cannot be allowed to rest there, for, while it is true that "the political emancipation of the workers" provides the crucial axis from which theoretical positions are assessed by Marx, the theoretical dimensions of the contending positions cannot be described or reconstructed simply on the basis of an appreciation of this practical component of theorizing. Marx did not disdain the use of reasoned arguments and the appeal to empirical evidence, nor did he reject the general appellation of "scientific" as applied to his own social theory. There must be, therefore, *some* meaningful distinction drawn by Marx between a scientific and a non-scientific theory. It is just because this distinction crosses class lines, however, that the question of where to situate the foundations of one's interpretation of Marx's thought assumes such a crucial importance. The difficulty has always been, on the one hand, to explain how it is possible for science to be applicable to the theories of individuals from different social classes without conceding the universalist standard claimed for it by some social scientists, and, on the other, to demonstrate how it is possible for there to be such a thing as a "scientific" social science if class conflict is as irreconcilable a social phenomenon as some Marxists contend.

Let us start with a consideration of Marx's distinction between "scientific" and "vulgar" political economists. This distinction, Marx explains in *Capital,* divides those economists who have "investigated the real relations of production in bourgeois society," from those political economists whose analysis produces "vulgar economy, which deals with appearances only." (Marx 1906:I, 93n,590; III, 913,951,967). In the three volumes of *Theories of Surplus Value,* Marx repeatedly asserts that David Ricardo is able to make scientific advances in the field of political economy because he focuses upon "the actual physiology of bourgeois society" in the social relations of production. That is, Ricardo takes as his theoretical starting point the division between the owners of the means of production and the producers, and argues that capitalist society must be understood in terms of this division between classes.

> This then is Ricardo's great historical significance for science. . . . the fact that Ricardo exposes and describes the economic contradiction between the classes . . . and that consequently political economy perceives, discovers the root of the historical struggle and development (Marx 1969:II, 166).

For Marx, Ricardo was the "last great representative" of scientific political economy because he "consciously makes the antagonism of class-interests, of wages and profits, of profits and rent, the starting point of his investigations" (Marx 1906:I, 17–18). This view is "scientific," according to Marx, not because it accurately describes this or that empirical phenomenon, but

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because it begins its investigation of social reality upon the only ground capable of providing human beings with a scientific understanding of their social existence. ''Real, positive science,'' Marx argues, must focus upon and explain ''the practical activity [and] the practical process of development of men'' (*CW:*V, 37). This is simply not possible unless one begins with the ''empirical premise'' that ''the mode of production determines the character of the social, political, and intellectual life generally'' within a particular society (Marx 1960:I, 94n). It is this criterion which Marx applies in assessing the theoretical positions represented by German philosophy, French socialism, and English political economy. Only a few representatives within the latter framework meet the test of science as Marx defines it, in that they have presented a ''theoretical expression'' of ''the real movement of society'' (*CW:*IV, 267,276–77), for, ''if you proceed from production, you necessarily concern yourself with the real conditions of production and with the productive activity of men'' (*CW:*V, 518). Adam Smith and, especially, Ricardo have done this, while most economic writers, in Marx's view, have focused their attention upon distribution, exchange, consumption, or some other aspect of economic life which is consequential upon the organization of the ''productive activity'' of individuals.[10]

Thus, Malthus is a superficial political economist, the ''bought advocate'' of the bourgeoisie, and not because he is a spokesman for the class interests of the bourgeoisie—after all, so is Ricardo. Rather, the difference lies in the fact that Malthus is content to begin his theorizing about capitalist society by accepting the givenness of its ''appearances,'' whereas Ricardo conceives the role of theorizing to be bound up with an attempt to discover the root of the problem, which for him resides in the relations of production (Marx 1969:II, 115, 120). Both Ricardo and Malthus are ''theoretical representatives'' of the bourgeoisie, and therefore ideologists for that class, but one of them is, at the same time, ''scientific'' and the other is not. Clearly, then, Marx believes that there are distinctions to be drawn between theoreticians who share the same class-based perspective.

Nevertheless, as this statement implies, they can still be grouped together as ideologists. In the case of the political economists, as was noted earlier, they all accept private property as a basic premise of their theorizing about society. However, the fact that this premise is subjected to a real political challenge through class conflict means that it cannot fulfill its theoretical purpose, namely, to serve as a universal, natural, consensually accepted presupposition of political economy, when the latter is itself seen as a repository of those ''self-understood'' principles which are supposed to explain ''the forms of social life'' for society as a whole. Since ''economists express the relations of bourgeois production . . . as fixed, immutable, eternal cate-

[10] ''The real science of modern economy does not begin, until theoretical analysis passes from the process of circulation to the process of production'' (Marx 1906:III, 396; Marx 1969:I, 45).

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gories,'' every political struggle against the institutions which these categories express challenges the ''fixed'' quality of the theoretical framework (*CW:*VI, 162,202; Engels 1959:40). Yet, political economy's defense of capitalist institutions is not, and, Marx believes, cannot be framed in terms of the historical, transitory character of those institutions, for ''the real science of political economy ends by regarding the bourgeois production relations as merely *historical* ones, leading to higher relations in which the antagonism on which they are based is resolved.'' From this moment, ''the delusion'' of regarding ''the bourgeois mode of production and the conditions of production and distribution which correspond to it'' as the final or absolute economic structure ''vanishes and the prospect opens up of a new society, [a new] economic social formation, to which capitalism is only the transition'' (Marx 1969:III, 429, *cf.*265).

Faced with this dilemma, political economists tend to regard such practical confrontations as ''the antagonisms of class conflict'' as unresolved ''contradictions'' within the *theory* of political economy, or perhaps, more realistically, as part of the given conditions of capitalist society.[11] However, from Marx's standpoint, since these capitalist social relations both develop historically and contain an internal antagonism in the form of the conflict between workers and capitalists, the claims of bourgeois theory, which are predicated upon stability and ''givenness,'' must be subjected to the most serious theoretical criticism during periods of actual social conflict.

> The more the normal form of intercourse of society, and with it the conditions of the ruling class, develop their contradiction to the advanced productive forces, and the greater the consequent discord within the ruling class itself as well as between it and the class ruled by it, the more fictitious, of course, becomes the consciousness which originally corresponded to this form of intercourse . . . and the more do the old traditional ideas of these relations of intercourse, in which actual private interests, etc., are expressed as universal interests, descend to the level of mere idealising phrases, conscious illusion, deliberate hypocrisy. But the more their falsity is exposed by life, and the less meaning they have for consciousness itself, the more resolutely are they asserted, the more hypocritical, moral and holy becomes the language of this normal society (*CW* V:293).

In the preface to the second edition of *Capital,* Marx utilizes this argument to explain the relationship between ''scientific'' political economy and the development of class struggle in England. English political economy, he writes, ''belongs to the period in which the class-struggle was as yet undeveloped.'' Because it carried out its investigations of the economic system

[11] ''[Proudhon] falls into the error of bourgeois economists who regard those economic categories as eternal laws and not as historical laws which are laws only for a given historical development, a specific development of the productive forces. Thus, instead of regarding politico-economic categories as abstractions of actual social relations that are transitory and historical, Mr. Proudhon . . . sees in the real relations only the embodiment of those abstractions'' (*CW:*XXXVIII, 100).

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"within the bounds of the bourgeois horizon," that is, one which regards capitalism "as the absolutely final form of social production, instead of as a passing historical phase of its evolution, Political Economy [could] remain a science only so long as the class-struggle is latent or manifests itself only in isolated and sporadic phenomena." Prior to 1830, that conflict was "forced into the background . . . by the quarrel between industrial capital and aristocratic landed property." But after 1830, when the bourgeoisie began to consolidate its political power and to assert its claims more confidently on behalf of the "interest" of society as a whole, it simultaneously perceived a distinct threat to its own social and political stability in the political activity of the working class. This "sounded the knell of scientific bourgeois economy." From that point on, "the class-struggle, practically as well as theoretically, took on more and more outspoken and threatening forms" (Marx 1906:I, 17–19).[12] In short, as Marx had put it in *The Poverty of Philosophy,* "scientific" political economy had itself emerged from the historical development of the class struggle which it sought to explain (*CW:*VI, 177). However, the increased intensity of the political conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie not only made it more difficult to defend the "eternal" and "abstract" claims of political economy, it virtually guaranteed its "vulgarization," since "in place of genuine scientific research" the defenders of capitalism became increasingly "apologetic" in their attempts to protect capitalism from the "politically dangerous" activities of the working class (Marx 1906:III, 911; Marx 1969:II, 500, 519).

Sometimes, Marx writes, "the economists become conscious of these contradictions," and "they themselves attack private property in one of its particular forms. . . . Adam Smith, for instance, occasionally polemicizes against the capitalists, Destutt de Tracy against the bankers . . . Ricardo against landed property," etcetera. While criticizing the particular forms of private property, they do not, however, reject either the concept or the institution as a fundamental "category of social existence" (*CW:*IV, 33; *CW:*VI, 176–77). Even framing their ideological unity in terms of a commitment to "private property" is a bit misleading, unless one keeps in mind the statement in the 1844 manuscripts that private property, alienated labor, and the conflict between workers and capitalists are interrelated aspects of a "whole system of alienation" (Marx 1963:121 [*CW:*III, 271]).

Among the socialists who want to abolish private property, Marx draws the same distinction, between "vulgar" and "scientific" socialism. His criterion is exactly the same, that is, whether or not "the real relations of production"

[12] "To the degree that economic analysis becomes more profound it not only describes contradictions, but it is confronted by its own contradiction simultaneously with the development of the actual contradictions in the economic life of society. Accordingly, vulgar political economy deliberately becomes increasingly *apologetic* and makes strenuous attempts to talk out of existence the ideas which contain the contradictions" (Marx 1969:III, 501).

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constitutes the theoretical starting point for their understanding of society. In the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, for example, Marx argues that "vulgar socialism" presupposes the "treatment of distribution as something independent of the mode of production and hence . . . the presentation of socialism as primarily revolving around the question of distribution" (Marx 1974:348). Since vulgar socialism begins on this level, it can argue only from the standpoint of a criticism of the consequences produced by capitalist society. Singling out the Gotha Programme's call for fair distribution of the proceeds of production, Marx observes (1974:344),

> What is a "fair distribution?" Do not the bourgeoisie claim that the present mode of distribution is the only "fair" one, and are they not right in their own frame of reference?

By presupposing that there is only one definition of a fair distribution, the formulation of the Gotha Programme overlooks, or obscures, the reality of class conflict in capitalist society, which produces (at least) two "frames of reference." Vulgar socialism commits this mistake because it begins its analysis with the problem of distribution, or the consequences of the capitalist system, rather than with the division between worker and capitalist in the system of production. In thus failing to discover the root of the problem, vulgar socialism, like vulgar political economy, remains a superficial theory. But, from Marx's standpoint, socialism merits the title of "scientific" precisely in so far as it "exposes and describes the economic contradiction between the classes."

With respect to this point, the comparison Marx draws between Pierre Joseph Proudhon and Ricardo is instructive. "Ricardo," Marx writes, "shows us the real movement of bourgeois production," and how surplus value is created. He "takes his starting point from present-day society" and his political economy is therefore "the theoretical expression of the real movement which exists," that is, the economic and political conflict between classes. Proudhon, however, "leaving this real movement out of account," tries "to invent new processes and to achieve the reorganization of the world on a would-be new formula." He "wants to soar as the man of science above the bourgeoisie and the proletarians" by hunting for a "scientific formula" with which to solve the social problems of capitalist society. Hence, Marx argues, "Ricardo's theory of values is the scientific interpretation of actual economic life; Proudhon's theory of values is the utopian interpretation of Ricardo's theory" (*CW:*VI, 123–24,178). Nevertheless, Proudhon is not simply dismissed by Marx, for, unlike the bourgeois political economists, he is willing to challenge their general premise of private property. In discussing Proudhon's *What Is Property?* Marx praises his "provocative defiance" and his "withering criticism" of bourgeois categories. The work expresses a "deep and genuine feeling of indignation" at the appalling conditions created

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by capitalism. All of these characteristics, Marx declares, "electrified readers of *What Is Property?* and produced a great sensation on its first appearance. In a strictly scientific history of political economy the book would be hardly worth mentioning. But sensational works of this kind play their part in the sciences" (Marx 1847:187). The corresponding bourgeois counterpart to Proudhon's *What Is Property?* was, of course, Malthus's *Essay on Population,* a work which also caused a "great sensation" and which owed its tremendous success not to any "scientific" understanding of the economic system, but rather, to its defense of a particular "party interest" (Marx 1906:I, 675n, *cf.* 580n; Marx 1969:II, 117–20; III, 57,61). The reason such works are able to "play their part" is, to restate an earlier point, that they are able to carry out Marx's injunction to sharpen the conflict between classes. A "withering criticism" of bourgeois thought, especially one focused on a key concept such as private property, may have this practical effect even though it is not "strictly scientific" in terms of its understanding of the relations of capitalist production.[13] The same can be said for Malthus's attack on the growth of and the social threat posed by the working class.

Compared to Ricardo, then, Proudhon is not a *scientific* political economist, but he is a *socialist* (Marx 1969:III, 523).[14] Marx's theoretical critique of Proudhon, which, at times, is admittedly devastating and withering in its own right, is framed in terms of the first characterization. Marx's political relations with Proudhon, however, are based upon the second, for it is with Proudhon and his followers, not those of Ricardo, that Marx proposes to form a political alliance in order to advance the interests of the working class. In his letter to Proudhon inviting him to participate on a committee of French and German socialists, Marx suggests that the committee take up both the discussion of "scientific questions" and the supervision of popular publications, that is, "socialist propaganda" (*CW*:XXXVIII, 38). Nor was this conjunction merely a passing phase in Marx's conception of the socialist movement, even as applied to his own writing. Engels, reflecting upon his and Marx's activity during the 1840s, writes that they were "deeply involved in the political movement," but that, at the same time, they "possessed a certain following in the educated world." Thus, Engels remarks, "it was our duty to provide a scientific foundation for our view, but it was equally important for us to win over the European and in the first place the German proletariat to our convic-

[13] In defending Proudhon against the Young Hegelians, Marx notes that he "makes immediately practical demands on society," and that he "write[s] in the interest of the proletarians" (*CW*:IV, 24,41).

[14] In the reference cited, Marx refers to Proudhon as a "superficial socialist." In *The Communist Manifesto* (*CW*:VI, 513), he is listed as a "bourgeois socialist." At other times, he appears as a "utopian socialist," but Marx did not always or consistently regard Proudhon as being a socialist. For a discussion of Marx's variable characterization of Proudhon, see Draper (1978:293–95).

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tion'' (Marx and Engels 1965:11). Marx was fully aware of the tensions between ''scientific attempts to revolutionize a science'' (e.g., political economy) and a ''popular'' appeal to the working class in the form of political propaganda (Marx 1934:24; Marx 1973:56–57).[15] Nevertheless, both objectives could be accomplished if one employed a political theory which was able ''to trace the class struggle in current history, and to prove empirically by means of the historical material'' that ''the economic relations which constitute the material foundation of the present class struggles in society'' have ''directly forced themselves to the front in political conflict'' (*CW*:IX, 197). In this respect, and with reference to the definition offered by Marx, it seems fair to say that *The Communist Manifesto* and *Capital* are both works which ''electrified'' readers in terms of their practical effects while still deserving a mention in any ''strictly scientific history'' of political economy or political theory. This conjunction of science and ideology is a meaningful one to Marx because, as I have tried to show, both concepts are defined in terms of their relationship to class conflict and the social relations of capitalist production. Scientific theory begins from the premise of class conflict, which it seeks to explain, while political theory seeks to clarify or sharpen the opposition between classes. Not only is it possible—though not necessary—for these endeavors to be united in a single work, but also this definition of science and of political theory is available to *both* classes (and their theoretical representatives), whose social relations of production provide the basic structural conditions for social life in capitalist society. It is possible, even likely, therefore, that there will be two ''scientific'' political theories in conflict in capitalist society, although whether at any particular moment, there are, in fact, two such theories is an historically contingent question which refers, ultimately, to the intensity of the practical conflict between the two classes.

With this working definition of the nature and purpose of Marx's political theory, we can turn to a consideration of his relationship to the tradition of political theory. In fact, we are dealing with Marx's critique of bourgeois liberal thought in another form, since his response must be seen as a critique of the way in which the tradition of political theory had come to be viewed in nineteenth-century capitalist society, as well, of course, as a direct attack upon the substantive propositions advanced by liberal political theorists themselves.

II

The first point about liberal political theory which commands our attention is strikingly obvious, namely, how little it has to say about classes or their

[15] Speaking of the forthcoming publication of his *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy,* Marx writes, ''I hope to gain a scientific victory for our party'' (Marx and Engels 1953:62).

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importance to political life.[16] Now this is not true of the tradition of political thought, viewed as a whole, since one can find in Plato, Aristotle, and the political theorists of the Middle Ages not only much detailed material pertaining to social classes, but, more important, the basic presupposition that political theorizing, as a social phenomenon, occurs within a class-structured context. Class, and sometimes class conflict, depending upon the particular theorist, are viewed as structuring conditions for theorizing about politics. With one or two exceptions, this is not the case for liberal political theorists.[17] Marx, therfore, treats this situation as an historical phenomenon to be explained in terms of the specific social conditions which gave rise to this form of political thought. The most important of these conditions in its direct bearing upon liberal political thought was the emergence of the modern state.

In the Middle Ages, Marx argues, "the classes of civil society in general and the . . . classes given political significance were identical," and they "were identical because the organic principle of civil society was the principle of the state" (Marx 1972:72 [*CW*:III, 72]). In this organic sense, every aspect of social life expressed at the same time a definite political relationship. "Property, trade, society . . . are all *political* . . . every private sphere has a political character or is a political sphere" (*CW*:III, 32,165). By comparison, Marx maintains, the distinctive feature of modern society lies in "the separation of civil society and the political state as two fixed opposites, really different spheres" (*CW*:III, 72). This disjuncture between social and political power is for Marx the key to an understanding of the specific characteristics of liberal political thought.[18]

The gradual collapse of the social order which prevailed during the Middle Ages reversed the basic assumptions of political life. Instead of presuming that individuals know their place in society, the presupposition of liberal

[16] On the failure of liberal political theorists to formulate their political positions in terms of direct appeals to existing social classes, see C. B. Macpherson (1962). As I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere, this omission is not the consequence of these theorists' ignorance of classes in any simple epistemological sense of that term (Ashcraft 1978).

[17] Hegel, of course, is one political theorist who does conceptualize society in terms of social classes, but liberals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries rarely chose Hegel as a representative spokesman of *their* beliefs. A better case can be made for John Stuart Mill, who also recognizes the importance of social classes, though the more importance he attributed to this social phenomenon (after the 1840s) the more Mill tended to drift toward (cooperative) socialism as a resolution of this class division. The point I am making is not that "class" as a conceptual category or a sociological reality is for any logically necessary reason excluded from the political theories formulated by liberals, but rather that, as an empirical generalization, it has proven very difficult for liberal political theorists to defend the core elements of liberalism if, as a matter of fact, they begin by accepting the fundamental sociological and theoretical importance of class divisions.

[18] Marx is here following Hegel, echoing the latter's own criticism of liberal thought which tends to fragment or atomize social relations. It is precisely the efforts of Hegel (and earlier, those of Rousseau) to reinstitute the organic links between the individual, the state, and the community, however, which prompted liberals to criticize the "totalitarian" and antiliberal tendencies in the political theories of Rousseau and Hegel.

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political thought is that individuals are assumed not to know what their social relations with others entail in so far as their rights and duties are concerned. There is, if one may borrow a term from a modern version of liberalism, "a veil of ignorance" which obscures the obligations of citizenship in society (Rawls 1971). Hence, from the outset, liberal political theory has been intimately tied to the epistemological problem, viz., how can I know what my political duties are? One function of liberal political theory, therefore, was to provide an answer to this question, but an answer which necessarily (because of the circumstances under which the question itself had arisen) could not be referable to an account of the social relations between members of society.

This point can be rephrased in positive language: the origins of liberal political thought are rooted in the process of social dislocation of individuals. It is erroneous—and certainly unhistorical—to regard the emergence of either the modern state or liberal political theory as the confident expression of an assertive and powerful bourgeoisie, as, that is, a product of a class organized as such (Macpherson 1962). Rather, liberal political theory in its origins expresses the uncertainty of the social status of artisans, tradesmen, small landed gentry, and some merchants within a social order in which the means of production are in the hands of the landed aristocracy.[19] The claims for natural rights, toleration, and equality advanced by liberals (e.g., John Locke, Daniel Defoe, Thomas Paine) did not represent the views of the socially dominant class in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England. In other words, the premise of a disjuncture between social and political power is an element built into liberal political theory from the outset because it was formulated by and for those social groups who were *not* in control of the means of production.

Liberal political theory generalized the conditions of the members of these groups, viewing all men as equal and independent individuals, with no ties of social dependence. These individuals owned their own tools or a plot of land sufficient to provide for their subsistence. They were, in Thomas Hobbes's words, "masterless" men who could "make" a civil society as easily as they could make an object for exchange in the marketplace (Ashcraft 1978:34–35, 57). Yet, they lived in a society in which social and political power was not in their hands, despite the incursions they made from time to time in each of these areas. They thus had to imagine themselves living in a state of nature in which they could exercise such power, a condition which, as contemporaries constantly reminded them, was difficult to reconcile with any known set of

[19] I am refering to the arguments for equality, natural rights, and liberty framed in terms of the concepts of the state of nature, natural law, a community of equal and independent individuals who create government through their consent, etcetera, advanced by the Levellers, whose social composition is described in the text (Haller 1965; Brailsford 1961; Morton 1975; Wolfe 1967). For a discussion of these issues in relation to Locke, see Ashcraft (1980), and my forthcoming book, "Revolutionary Politics and Locke's Two Treatises of Government."

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social relationships, past or present. And, in this imaginary state, it was the function of political theory to postulate the universal abstract juridical duties of all men living in this "natural community."

Political society, in the form of the state, appeared to these individuals as an umpire, an external entity for settling disputes, chiefly about property claims. What they sought from the state, and from political life more generally, was a guarantee of their independence, and some redistribution of rights and privileges. Or, again, to use the language of modern political science, the state was an instrument for "the allocation of scarce resources." These primary assumptions of liberal political thought, taken together, constitute what Marx calls "the presuppositions of private life." Thus, "the abstraction of the *state as such* belongs only to modern times, because the abstraction of private life belongs only to modern times" (*CW*:III, 32,73,113; IV, 113,116).[20]

Nevertheless, the portrayal of liberalism in the literature on political theory as having been guided by an atomistic perspective from the outset is mistaken (Sabine 1961:467–75,525ff.)[21] The primary rights claim advanced by the social groups who produced and supported liberal political theory was a demand for religious toleration. The argument on behalf of this demand presupposed a natural moral "community" of individuals as a prepolitical entity. It is with reference to this community that the concept of the common good was supposed to provide the boundaries and restraints for the state's exercise of political power. Yet, this moral community remained outside the political sphere, since no specific political group or interest could be identified with it.[22] Adam Smith's notion of the invisible hand guiding the outcome of exchanges in the market is a well-known feature of liberalism; much less appreciated is the hand of an invisible moral community which is providentially assumed to guide actions taken in the political arena. Thus, for liberals, the state, at its best, has never appeared as more than a reflection of the natural moral community. Its function is inherently transcendental. The state can never be appreciated as a thing-in-itself, although, in relation to the individual, it remains an external reality.

[20] "The essence of the modern state . . . is based on the unhampered development of bourgeois society, on the free movement of private interest" (*CW*:IV, 123).

[21] This was not, however, Marx's view of seventeenth-century liberal political thought. For him, the conception of "naturally independent autonomous subjects" as the creators of society was a product of the imagination of eighteenth-century thinkers. The latter constructed "an ideal, whose existence they project[ed] into the past" as a means of dealing with "the dissolution of the feudal forms of society" and the emergence of "the new forces of production" since the sixteenth century (Marx 1973:83–84).

[22] When the Levellers posited a natural community of individuals and directed their appeals to "the people" as a collectivity, they could, for a time, identify these notions with the New Model Army. With the demise of the Leveller movement, however, subsequent appeals to "the body of the people" (in Locke's *Second Treatise,* for example) became much more mystical and/or rhetorical, viewed from a sociological perspective.

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"Political life," Marx writes, "seeks to constitute itself as the real species-life of man devoid of contradictions. But it can achieve this only by coming into violent contradiction with its own conditions of life" (*CW*:III, 156). That is, the state attempts to represent the universalized claims of individuals as equal participants in a human community, but in practice, these claims are mediated through political institutions which are shaped by and which serve and protect concrete practical interests which are not, in fact, identical to those of the society as a whole. For Marx, "the state is based on the contradiction between public and private life, on the contradiction between general interests and private interests" (*CW*:III, 198). As liberal political theory has structured the problem, therefore, the state cannot justify on empirical grounds a claim for its actions to be accepted as the embodiment of communal life, although its legitimacy depends upon its advancement of such claims.[23] The consequence, according to Marx, is that the state claims to represent the individual as a communal being, but that individual "is the imaginary member of an imaginary . . . universality" (*CW*:III, 154; V, 46).

Naturally, much more could be said about the nature of liberal political theory, especially in the context of its historical development, but I have tried merely to note some of the elements which, at its birth, established important limitations upon the direction of that development in order to indicate why Marx's critique of liberalism, viewed as a model for political theory, is so radical. For him, liberalism was, from its inception, a superficial political theory, a vulgar characterization of social life, in short, a "political superstition" (*CW*:IV, 121). In a discussion of Hobbes's political theory in *The German Ideology,* for example, Marx contrasts a theory which takes "will" or "consent" to be the basis of political power with one in which "the real basis of the state" is understood in terms of "the mode of production and form of intercourse" arising from it in a particular society. Elsewhere, Marx maintains that to begin a theory about society from the standpoint of the will means overlooking or not taking adequate account of all the "limitations" on the will which constitute the real social existence of individuals (*CW*:V, 329).[24] Hence, such a starting point only makes these theorists less capable of discovering "the source of political evils" in "the present structure of society" (*CW*:III, 199).

The general tendency of interpreters has been to read such statements by Marx, and to regard his theory as a whole, as being reductionist, in that he appears to be uninterested in politics except in so far as it can be reduced to a discussion of economics. I believe this view is mistaken on two counts: first,

[23] For an excellent discussion of this problem in the context of contemporary American capitalism, see James O'Connor (1973).

[24] On the contrary, Marx argues, it is "the sovereign" who is "subject to . . . the will of economic relations" (*CW*:VI, 147).

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the criticism anachronistically sharpens the distinction between politics and economics, which it then applies retrospectively to Marx's thought. Marx's critique, however, is directed against "political economy," which in the nineteenth century was the most *comprehensive* theory of social life produced by liberalism available to him; second, and more important, it is not economics, but class conflict, which is crucial for an understanding of social life, and, as I have tried to show, the function of a political theory according to Marx is to sharpen the opposition between classes, a function which is not reducible to carrying out a "scientific analysis" of political economy.

The real difficulty with liberal political theory (as contrasted with liberal political economy) for Marx was posed by the fact that it treated political life apart from its connection with classes and class conflict. As a political theory, therefore, it had the effect of obscuring, rather than focusing attention upon, the social relations between classes. Moreover, liberal political theory continued to function in this manner long after the socially disorganized conditions prevailing as its inception had disappeared and the organization of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat as social classes had become a feature of obvious importance to political life. The question for Marx, in other words, is not one of grasping *the* relationship between economics and politics, but rather, is there an explanation of the dynamics of political life advanced from the liberal perspective which accords a significant place to the conception of class and/or class conflict? Since this is an historical question, the answer is that there may or may not be such a political theory in existence at a particular time. Twentieth-century post-Weberian political sociology, for example, provides such an axis for a political-theoretical debate with Marxism, though much of what is formally called "political theory" does not, nor did it in the nineteenth century. The absence of "a fully explicit political theory" in Marx's writings is not, as Gouldner would have us believe, the consequence of "an internal theoretical conflict" in Marx's theory; rather, it is the historical consequence of the absence in liberal political theory of any recognition of the reality of social classes and their importance to political life (Gouldner 1980:315).[25]

Or, to put it another way, it is the positive insistence by liberal political theorists upon the autonomy of political theory as a structural ingredient of social life which Marx rejected. He did so not because political activities are not more or less autonomously identifiable within the spectrum of social action, but because the workings of the social system, viewed as a whole, cannot be adequately explained from that standpoint. Marx's critics, includ-

[25] The point, I must insist upon again, is not that liberals are necessarily ignorant of the existence of classes, nor even of the real political problems raised by the control of the economic resources of society by a particular social class; rather, it is the refusal of liberals to conceive of political solutions to any of these problems in terms of the organized efforts of (working) class action, which makes it difficult, from Marx's standpoint, to deal with liberal political theory.

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ing Max Weber, are inclined to interpret this reaction in monocausal terms, that is, the substitution of one set of causal factors (economic) for another (political). What I have argued, however, is that Marx's concern was with the question, How can one theorize about the structural totality of social action and thus take into account *all* the significant features of social life. His answer, to put it bluntly, was that if one accepted the premises of liberal political theory, in which the class relations of production were not accorded primary significance, the theorist could not do so, anymore than one could explain the workings of the capitalist economy if one began with the processes of the circulation or distribution of goods.

Perry Anderson makes the same general criticism of Marx as does Gouldner, namely, his failure to produce "a coherent and developed" politica theory, but Anderson draws a different conclusion from this critique (Anderson 1976:4).[26] For Anderson, this defect in Marx's thought is largely, but not entirely, remedied by Lenin, who "inaugurated a Marxist science of politics." The systematic construction of a Marxist political theory dealing with the tactics of organization, the practical measures of publishing and dispersing propaganda, and so forth, was the work of Lenin, which, according to Anderson, constitutes a "decisive intellectual advance" for Marxist theory (Anderson 1976:11–12). It can hardly be denied that Lenin's political writings fulfilled Marx's admonition to sweep away those phrases which conceal the opposition between classes, but is this reason enough to give a theoretical status to these writings? I do not believe it is, and, in order to elucidate the reasoning underlying this assertion, it is necessary to emphasize an earlier point, namely, Marx's commitment to the "real activity" of the working class as being superior to merely theoretical arguments. The corollary of this point is his belief that his own theoretical insights were grounded in the political activity of the proletariat during the 1830s and 1840s. If we have thus far focused upon the origins and structure of political theory as viewed by Marx, we must now direct our attention to its social function. The question I wish to raise in the final section of the essay, therefore, concerns the nature and status of a "political theory"—including Marx's political theory—in the context of the efforts of the working class to make a political revolution.

III

In so far as political theory was identified in the minds of Marx's socialist allies with a theory of the state, especially one which conceded its autonomous importance, their thought was subject to the same critique Marx levelled against liberal political theorists. In the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, he observed that the German Workers' Party "instead of treating existing soci-

[26] Gouldner (1980:115) cites Anderson's work in support of his position.

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ety . . . as the basis of the existing state it . . . treats the state rather as an independent entity possessed of its own intellectual, ethical, and libertarian bases'' (Marx 1974:354). In Marx's view, ''vulgar socialism'' was capable of committing the same theoretical mistake with respect to politics as was liberalism. The political *practice* of socialism, however, was premised upon class conflict and the advancement of the interests of the working class.

In view of this distinction, Marx's remarks on the Paris Commune are extremely significant for an understanding of his conception of political theory. Marx's writings on the Commune, though certainly not ignored by commentators, are important, not because a particular concept such as ''the dictatorship of the proletariat'' can be extracted from them as a building block for the construction of a systematic Marxist political theory, *pace* Lenin and Perry Anderson. Rather, the important point is that the Commune received Marx's support and praise despite the fact that it was an historical event in which ''Marxists'' did not play a leading role. Nor were the political actors possessed of a ''scientific'' understanding of the basis of the class conflict which their actions nevertheless helped to clarify. This point has not received sufficient emphasis as a matter of importance for understanding Marx's political theory, Marx's response to the Commune being regarded as merely a pragmatic acceptance of the historical fact of the workers' uprising. Twentieth-century interpreters of Marx have, therefore, continued the search for a systematic Marxist theory of politics in order to fill this ''gap'' in Marx's social thought.

What was of chief importance to Marx with respect to the Commune was not its theoretical pretensions, which, in certain specific respects were misguided, but the fact that it was a working-class government. The Commune, he states,

> was a thoroughly expansive political form, while all previous forms of government had been emphatically repressive. Its true secret was this. It was essentially a working-class government, the product of the struggle of the producing class against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labor (Marx 1974:212).[27]

It was ''the first revolution in which the working class was openly acknowledged as the only class capable of social initiative'' with respect to the creation of a form of society superseding capitalism (Marx 1974:214). Thus, even though the Commune was not a Marxist nor even a socialist institution,

[27] Shlomo Avineri's assertion that ''Marx considered the Commune not a working-class affair'' (1969:247) is flatly contradicted by numerous references in both the draft and the final version of *The Civil War in France,* in which Marx repeatedly alludes to and praises the fact that ''the majority of [Commune] members were naturally working men, or acknowledged representatives of the working class'' (Marx 1974:209,216,252,261,272,394).

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it was a genuine expression of the Parisian working class, and "the glorious harbinger of a new society" (Marx 1974:233).[28]

Marx was also impressed by the decentralization of political power by the Communards. "Public functions," he observes, "ceased to be the vital property of the tools of the central government. Not only municipal administration, but the whole initiative hitherto exercised by the state was laid into the hands of the Commune" (Marx 1974:209). Moreover, the Paris Commune was to serve as the model for "the political form of even the smallest country hamlet," in the sense that each local district would administer its own affairs through locally elected assemblies. In place of "the old centralized government" there would be a system of interlocking communal assemblies, representing "the self-government of the producers." As envisioned by this draft plan of the Paris Communards, all of France would be organized into "self-working and self-governing communes" (Marx 1974:210,252,267). In contrast to the liberal view of politics, which Marx identifies with a tendency to establish the state as an autonomous and increasingly centralized institution, something closer to the organic conception of political life characteristic of the Middle Ages had been created by the Communards.[29] As Marx perceives it, it was "a resumption by the people for the people of its own social life." And it was this "reabsorption of the State power by society . . . by the popular masses themselves forming their own force," which evoked his description of the Commune as "a revolution against the *state* itself," rather than a revolt against this or that form of state (Marx 1974:249–50, 211).

From the standpoint of Anderson, Gouldner, and others, the relevant question to be asked is, How was it possible for the workers to have carried out "a revolution against the state itself" in the absence of a "political theory"? Or, to put it another way, What, exactly, is a political theory *for?* For reasons we will consider below, Marx never suggests that a political theory is necessary in order to choose between forms of the state. And, in any case, one could find such theories in the writings of bourgeois political scientists. As Marx observed in 1844, it was possible to discover in the writings of liberal or radical political thinkers criticisms of "a particular form of the state," but these criticisms did not locate "the root of the evil . . . in the essential nature of the state" (*CW*:III, 197, 204). As both the phraseology of this passage and

[28] Writing to a correspondent in 1881, Marx observes that "the majority of the Commune was in no wise socialist, nor could it be" (Marx and Engels n.d.:410). On the other hand, in the first draft of *The Civil War in France*, Marx, while recognizing the nonsocialist character of the Commune, had nevertheless referred to "the loudly proclaimed socialist tendencies of this revolution" (Marx 1974:262).

[29] Marx, however, is careful not to equate the modern organic commune with "a reproduction of the medieval communes." There was, he insists, an important difference between "a reactionary *decentralization*" and a progressive form of decentralization (Marx 1974:211,266).

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the period of its writing suggest, Marx treated the criticisms of particular forms of private property and criticisms of particular forms of the state as being on a par with each other.

The Leninist reply is that the working class must be educated to a socialist consciousness by a revolutionary vanguard. Whatever else may be said about such a viewpoint, it represents, at a minimum, a self-justifying argument for the necessity of political theory viewed as the private property of an elite. Separated from its encasement in the language of Marx, the attraction of a definition of political theory built upon the control of the production and distribution of ideas as the lever for overturning a social system based upon the control and distribution of private property is not readily apparent. The other side of this mystification of private property as theory is, of course, the creation of ''the party,'' whose function it is to preserve this private property, in the same manner in which ''the state'' was instituted for the preservation of private property in liberal political theory. It is precisely this resurrection of the autonomy of ''a political theory,'' *whatever the purposes to which it is put,* I am arguing, which represents a regressive step from the perspective of Marx. Since this point has broader implications than those attached simply to an anti-Leninist viewpoint, and since a rejection of a Leninist position has not deterred twentieth-century Marxists from continuing to search for a Marxist ''political theory'' as a substitute for that suggested by Lenin, it is worthwhile devoting some attention and emphasis to a consideration of the reasons why Marx and Engels rejected the presuppositions which provide the rationale for such an approach.

''We cannot ally ourselves with people,'' they write, ''who openly declare that the workers are too uneducated to free themselves and must first be liberated from above'' (Marx 1974:375). There are three interrelated aspects to this position which I propose to explore briefly and which I shall list in what I take to be their order of ascending importance. First, if political theory, in some form, were necessary to the political liberation of the working class, what would be its relationship to the working-class political movement? This question pertains both to the principles of the theory as an expression of the social consciousness of the working class, as well as to the situation of the theorists themselves vis-à-vis the workers. Second, to what extent, and as a result of what kinds of factors, would such a political theory be exportable from one country to another? Third, is political theory (i.e., a theory about politics) a necessary ingredient of the political emancipation of the working class?

As we have seen, Marx viewed social theories, and especially theories focused upon political-economic problems, as a direct outgrowth of the practical dimensions of the class struggle. Since Marx and Engels applied this proposition to their own theory, as well as to those espoused by their opponents, there is, in addition to the functional division of labor between ide-

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ologists and other members of the class, an organic relationship between theory and practice when the political activity of the class is taken as the axis from which to determine what, exactly, counts as a "theoretical" statement of a class position. In explaining the general relationship "between the political and literary representatives of a class and the class they represent," Marx argues that such individuals are representatives of the class precisely in so far as they are "driven, theoretically, to the same problems and solutions to which material interest and social position drive the latter in practice" (*CW*:XI, 130–31). This statement in itself, does not supply the basis for drawing any distinctions as to the specific origins of the theorists or their ideas, except in the general sense that the latter must have an empirical foundation in the social life of the class. The relationship is more sharply drawn by Marx, however, in his discussion of "sectarianism" and its development within the context of a working-class movement.

> The development of socialist sectarianism and that of the real working-class movement always stand in inverse ratio to each other. Sects are justified (historically) so long as the working class is not yet ripe for an independent historical movement. As soon as it has attained this maturity all sects are essentially reactionary (Marx and Engels n.d.:326).

This distinction is decidedly not framed in terms of any judgment about the theoretical correctness of the contending positions (sect versus movement), but purely in terms of the organizational character of the movement itself. This point is crucial, for, in Marx's view, there is a built-in propensity for sects to define themselves in terms of a claim for theoretical correctness, which then becomes a rationale for their existence. "The sect," Marx states, "sees the justification for its existence and its point of honor not in what it has in *common* with the class movement but in the *particular shibboleth* which *distinguishes* it from the movement" (Marx and Engels n.d.:258). That this particular shibboleth might be the possession of revolutionary consciousness, the correct political theory, or, more generally, education, as well as any number of specific programmatic doctrines seems to me to be evidently included in Marx's argument. He certainly associated sectarianism with "formulas," "recipes," and the attempt to "prescribe the course of the movement according to a certain doctrinaire" theoretical claim (Marx and Engels n.d.:257–58). Sectarianism, in other words, carried with it a tendency toward formulating theoretical positions abstracted from the concrete problems and empirical consciousness which were the constituitive elements of a working-class political movement, and it thus created a division between the sectarian theorists and the politically active masses which was neither functional nor organic in terms of the political objectives the workers set for themselves.

In addition to the tendency to legitimize the distinctive claims of theory over the activity of the workers, sectarianism was generally associated, in the

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minds of Marx and Engels, with a commitment to centralized organization. "Theory" was thus the means by which the theorist emerged as a kind of dictator with respect to the working class as a whole. This is, for example, the analysis Marx applied to Ferdinand Lassalle and his relationship to the German workers' movement. In the course of a long critique, Marx specifically attacks efforts to establish a "*centralist* organization," which he associates with "secret societies and sectarian movements." Marx's objective, to the contrary, is to put "an end [to] all sectarianism," by incorporating the various separately defined positions into a pluralistic "general movement" of the class. He cites the example of the International Workingman's Association to illustrate the importance of a decentralized approach, especially in regard to theoretical positions, to the formation of a workers' movement (Marx and Engels n.d.:257–59). This conception and defense of the International was reiterated several times by Marx in the course of his life, and it is worth quoting from one of these defenses, especially since it is not from that body of Marx's writings which has become widely known. To speak of the International as a centralized organization, Marx argues, "is wholly to misconceive the nature of the International." For, he explains,

> This would imply a centralized form of government for the International, whereas the real form is designedly that which gives the greatest play to local energy and independence. In fact, the International is not properly a government for the working class at all. It is a bond of union rather than a controlling force. . . . The Association does not dictate the form of political movements; it only requires a pledge as to their end. It is a network of affiliated societies spreading all over the world of labor. In each part of the world some special aspect of the problem presents itself, and the workmen there address themselves to its consideration in their own way. . . . The choice of that solution is the affair of the working classes of that country. The International does not presume to dictate in the matter and hardly to advise (Marx 1974:394–95)

This decentralized attitude toward the working-class movement in various countries reflected the International's position on the existence of divergent socialist tendencies within the movement in a particular country. Drawing the contrast between "the fantastic and mutually antagonistic organization of the sects" and the International, Marx and Engels argue that the latter is concerned only with "outlining the major features of the proletarian movement," which are almost entirely summarized by the proposition that the workers must emancipate themselves by overthrowing the capitalist system in favor of socialism. For the rest, the International is committed to "leaving the details of theory to be worked out as inspired by the demands of the practical struggle, and as growing out of the exchange of ideas among the sections, with an equal hearing given to all socialist views in their journals and congresses" (Marx 1974:299).[30]

[30] Compare this and the other statements cited, along with the documents and addresses actually drafted by Marx on behalf of the International, with Leszek Kolakowski's assertion that Marx "wanted the International to become a centralized body that could impose a uniform policy

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As these statements, and particularly those in the citation from Marx, imply, the answer to the second question is that political theories are not exportable from one country to another, even among nations where the level of capitalist development is approximately the same. Speaking on behalf of the General Council of the International, Marx declares:

Since the sections of the working class in various countries have reached different stages of development, it follows that their theoretical opinions, which reflect the real movement, will be equally divergent. . . . Thus it is no part of the functions of the General Council . . . to analyse whether or not it is a genuine expression of the proletarian movement. All we need to know is that it contains nothing counter to the *general tendency* of our Association, in other words, the *complete emancipation of the working class*. . . . Apart from cases in which our Association's general tendency is positively contradicted, it is part of our principles to leave each section free to formulate its own theoretical programme (Marx 1974:280–81).

Later, it was Engels, in his correspondence, who stressed this point. When Marx drew up the rules of the International, Engels observes, he did so "in such a way that *all* working-class Socialists of that period could join it . . . and it was only through this latitude that the International became what it was, the means of gradually dissolving and absorbing all these minor sects" as they presented themselves in the 1860s. And, he asks, "had we from 1864–73 insisted on working together only with those who openly adopted our platform—where should we be today? I think all our practice has shown that it is possible to work along with the general movement of the working class at every one of its stages without giving up or hiding our own distinct position" (Marx and Engels n.d.:476–77).

Not only was it extremely unwise from a practical standpoint to think in terms of exporting a set of political ideas and organizational practices from one country to another, but there could never be, as a matter of principle, *any* single political-theoretical approach to the emancipation of the working class. As Engels puts it,

. . . the immediate goal of the labor movement is the conquest of political power for and by the working class. If we agree on that, the difference of opinion regarding the ways and means of struggle to be employed therein can scarcely lead to differences of principle among sincere people who have their wits about them. In my opinion those tactics are the best in each country that leads to the goal most certainly and in the shortest time (Marx and Engels 1953:251).

There is not the slightest reason to believe that Engels is not here voicing the sentiments of his lifelong colleague. The notion that "vanguardism," or any

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on its sections; he strove to make the whole movement accept the ideological bases he had himself worked out." Having imputed these intentions to Marx, for which he offers no supporting evidence, Kolakowski notes that Marx "failed" to carry out these policies (1978:I, 245). Though Kolakowski might not welcome the association, this was also Lenin's interpretation of Marx's activity within the International, namely, that "Marx hammered out a uniform tactic for the proletarian struggle of the working class in the various countries" (cited in Marx 1938:99). Neither projective interpretation is, in my opinion, supported by the evidence.

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similar claimant to a theoretical approach to the political dimensions of the class struggle, could provide the focus around which socialists could organize and identify themselves in various countries, or that any such set of codified tactics possessed some definitive superiority relative to the "general movement" of the working class and, on that basis, could be exported across national boundaries, would have struck Marx and Engels as being more than slightly ridiculous, not to say politically regressive when viewed in terms of the general advancement of socialism.

Finally, I wish to press the relativistic aspects of this attitude toward the political movement of the working class to their furtherest extension by asking whether a "political theory" in the generally understood sense of the term is a necessary ingredient of Marxist thought. This is not an easy issue to formulate, for a general deflation of the importance of theory can be twisted into a rationale for unthinking political action, terrorism, and a number of other atheoretical political tactics which have characterized twentieth-century Marxism. Nonetheless, I believe that Marx's instructions for the delegates to the Geneva Congress of the International provide a good starting point for a consideration of the problem. It is the objective of the International, he states, "to combine and generalize the *spontaneous movements* of the working classes, but not to dictate or impose any doctrinary system whatever" (Marx 1974:90).[31] As we are dealing with matters of degree in interpreting the meaning of this pronouncement, it is fair to ask how far Marx and Engels were prepared to go in their defense of the spontaneity of working class movements? The answer, I believe, is quite a long way indeed, and certainly further than is reflected in the theory or practice of most twentieth-century Marxists. As Engels observes,

> The masses must have time and opportunity to develop, and they can have the opportunity only when they have a movement of their own—no matter in what form so long as it is *their own* movement—in which they are driven further by their own mistakes and learn through their mistakes (Marx and Engels 1953:163).

These views certainly express Marx's position with respect to his conception of the International.[32] To another correspondent, Engels insists that "it is far more important that the movement should spread" among the working class, "than that it should start and proceed from the beginning on theoretically correct lines. There is no better road to theoretical clearness of comprehension than to learn by one's own mistakes." Moreover, "for a whole large class,

[31] "The Association has not been hatched by a sect or a theory. It is the spontaneous growth of the proletarian movement, which itself is the offspring of the natural and irrepressible tendencies of modern society" (Marx 1974:99).

[32] "The foundation of the International," Marx writes, "was not the work of any set of clever politicians." Nor did it grow out of "any particular creed." Rather, "what was new in the International was that it was established by the working men themselves and for themselves" (Marx 1974:271).

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there is no other road'' to a ''theoretical'' understanding (Marx and Engels 1953:166–67). This viewpoint had been articulated by Engels nearly forty years earlier: ''The people, once thinking for themselves . . . will soon find socialist and revolutionary formulas which shall express their wants and interests far more clearly than anything invented *for them* by authors of systems'' or so-called leaders of the working class (*CW*:X, 35).[33]

Such statements might be read as a rejection of the need for any theory, including Marx's, but the point being made is that the practical dimensions of the class struggle will cast up various socialist ideas and tendencies, articulated by the theoreticians of the proletariat, from which the latter will through its own development and activity be able to determine the path it must follow. Viewed in this light—and not from the standpoint of its theoretical correctness—Marx's socialism counted as one of the authentic tendencies which emerged out of the class struggle, which had become an organic part of the working-class movement. Underlying their repeated endorsement of the emancipation of the working class by and for itself, therefore, was a confidence on the part of Marx and Engels that a large class (proletariat) would find its own way through its spontaneous activity to the theoretically correct position on socialism, no matter how many mistakes it made along the way. This presupposition, I am arguing, is an essential element of the framework within which Marx's favorable commentary on the Commune must be viewed.[34]

In other words, there is no systematic theory of the state in Marx's thought not only because he associated such a theory with the specific historical development of liberal political theory and the presuppositions upon which that theory was based—which obscured an analysis of the real foundations of capitalist society—but also because, for Marx, no such political theory was necessary in order to achieve the abolition of the state itself as a practical expression of the objectives of the working class, as indeed, the Commune had demonstrated. Since a political theory is not to be identified with a theory of ''the state'' as an autonomous institution, nor is it equatable with a particu-

[33] Speaking of the working class in Germany, Engels writes, ''*the masses are far better than almost all their leaders*, and now that the Socialist Law is forcing the masses to make the movement for *themselves* and the influence of the leaders is reduced to a minimum things are better than ever'' (Marx and Engels 1934:419). For a discussion of Marx's views on the relation of intellectuals and other leaders to the working class, see Hal Draper (1978:502–72).

[34] It seems difficult for some commentators to accept that Marx could have supreme confidence in his own theoretical understanding of capitalism and in the historical development of communism and, at the same time, demonstrate a confidence in the ability of the working class to realize the latter through its own political efforts. In the secondary literature, it is frequently asserted that *either* Marx was certain of the correctness of his own theory and he therefore sought to impose it (through dictatorial means) upon the working class, *or* his convictions about the historical inevitability of communism allowed him to discount the importance (and failure) of the spontaneous political efforts of the working class. Though there is nothing inherently implausible about this dichotomy, I do not find it very profound as a psychological or historical approach to the relationship between political theory—including Marx's—and mass political movements.

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lar set of political tactics, nor is it a precondition for the political initiative of the working class viewed as a whole, we may return to the original question and ask, What, exactly, is the function of a political theory within Marx's thought? The answer, I am suggesting, is that Marx displays an essentially anarchistic attitude toward political theory.[35]

This somewhat surprising conclusion helps to explain several important features of Marx's thought. In a situation of anarchism with respect to political theory, the only basis for a political alliance rests upon the practical efforts of those seeking to promote or defend the interests of the working class. Such individuals obviously carry with them theories which may be more or less perceptive in their analysis of class conflict, but so long as they demonstrate a "real practical attitude" towards the "political emancipation" of the working class from the capitalist mode of production, Marx is willing to accept this as a basis for a political movement.[36] Of course, theories are criticized as theories by Marx, but this criticism occurs within a framework in which a political alliance claims a priority. Marx's criticism of other socialists is not framed simply in terms of their agreement with his theory or in terms of some sectarian conception of the "truth"; rather, what is crucial is the extent to which their actions sharpen or obscure the opposition between workers and capitalists. It is, I am arguing, a consequence of the turn towards ideological rigidity taken by twentieth-century Marxism that interpreters of Marx's thought have presupposed the importance of theoretical/ideological differences between Marx and his socialist-anarchist contemporaries which these interpreters have then read back into their accounts of nineteenth-century Marxism. Yet, the evidence of Marx's practice suggests that, unlike most of his modern followers, he was able time after time to put aside these ideological differences in order to bring about a working cooperation amongst all the forces on the political left who were supportive of revolutionary political action undertaken by the working class. The one area in which Marx would accept no compromise, I am suggesting, had to do with the necessity for the practical organization of a workers' political movement, without which the revolution could not be achieved, and not with the homogeneity of beliefs subscribed to by the participants in that movement.

Marx's criticism of Mikhail Bakunin, for example, was that he attempted to give a theoretical status to an "act of will" as a response to capitalism. "Its

[35] I have benefitted from Robert Tucker's discussion of this point (1969:85–91)..

[36] In defending the participation of particular "positivists" in the working-class movement, Marx, for whom Auguste Comte's social theory was both scientifically and politically worthless, insisted that individual positivists were not to be judged according to the "sectarian doctrines" to which they might or might not be subscribers, but rather according to "their personal valour" in siding with the workers and their acceptance of "the forms of working men's class struggle" whether or not it reflected the theoretical position of positivism (Marx 1974:260–61). As Draper notes, citing Marx's application of this test to Louis Blanc, the essential point "was not simply individual ideology but personal commitment to the class movement" (Draper 1978:556).

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economic conditions,'' Marx writes, ''do not exist for him. . . . The *will,* and not economic conditions, is the foundation of his social revolution'' (Marx 1974:334–35). Yet, Bakunin was not alone in his failure to understand the economic conditions of capitalist society. This was not in itself a sufficient reason for Marx to eschew a political alliance with him, nor was it the basis for his celebrated break with Bakunin.[37] The latter arose not from Bakunin's ignorance of the social relations of capitalist production—which, after all, remained relatively unchanged during all the years Marx had known him—but from Bakunin's attempt to create a secret organization within the International. Such an organization, Marx believed, would have the practical effect of destroying the International. As Marx explained in a letter to a friend, it was not the ''farcical'' theoretical program of Bakunin's International Alliance for Social Democracy which was at issue, but rather ''the serious aspect of the affair lay in its practical organization,'' that is, in the fact that ''the Alliance was nothing but an instrument to disorganize the International'' (Marx 1934:103).[38]

What all socialists understand by anarchism, Marx writes in his ''Circular Letter'' directed against Bakunin, is this: As soon as the goal of the proletarian movement, the abolition of classes, has been realized, the power of the state, whose function it is to keep the great majority of the producers beneath the yoke of a small minority of exploiters, will disappear, and governmental functions will be transformed into simple administrative functions. Bakunin, however, reverses these objectives, ''demanding that the International replace its organization with anarchy,'' which, for Marx, would mean the effective destruction of the organization, leaving the working-class movement at the mercy of ''the international police'' and the organized bourgeoisie (Marx 1974:314). The attempt to undermine the effectiveness of an existing political

[37] George Lichtheim (1965:231n) maintains that it was Bakunin's ''pre-scientific'' understanding of socioeconomic relations, ''rather than his personal and political failings,'' which accounts for the conflict between Marx and Bakunin. But, as Draper observes, Marx's ''theoretical'' differences with the Proudhonists, the positivists, and even the Blanquists were far greater than they were with Bakunin (Draper 1978:556n). Nor, as Paul Thomas demonstrates, is the dispute reducible to a difference in the temperaments or personalities of the two men (Thomas 1980:249–340).

[38] Whether or not Bakunin was actually engaged in a conspiracy to wreck the International by creating a secret society to capture control of the organization on his behalf is, as Thomas points out, difficult to prove from the evidence available to us. He does, however, cite from an 1872 letter in which Bakunin characterizes the Alliance as ''a secret society in the heart of the International, to give it a revolutionary organization, to transform it and all the popular masses which exist outside it into a power sufficiently organized to destroy . . . the economic, juridical, religious, and political institutions of the state'' (Thomas 1980:305). That Marx believed these were Bakunin's intentions and that he was acting on this belief in the conflict with Bakunin can hardly be denied. The weight of evidence on this point is overwhelming, as is the paucity of evidence in support of the views which allege personal or theoretical reasons for the break (Marx and Engels 1953:90,98,102–3,110–11; Marx 1974:272–314; Draper 1978:556n, 565n; Carr 1961:445).

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organization of the working class did constitute grounds for a political break with Bakunin, whereas his theoretical ignorance did not.

A second point which follows from Marx's theoretical anarchism with respect to politics is a different view of his own writings on the subject. The *Eighteenth Brumaire, Class Struggles in France,* the *Civil War in France,* and *The Communist Manifesto* have received praise from commentators for the expressive power of language, shrewdness of argument, and attention to historical detail which they display, but none of these tracts is acceptable as an example of *the* work of political theory, which Marx is accused of not having written. Instead, these writings are viewed as "occasional pieces" or works of historical reflection by Marx on particular circumstances. Unless one's conception of political theory incorporates within it that level of abstraction characteristic of liberal political theory which Marx criticized, this seems an odd criticism to make.

On the other hand, if one were to accept an anarchistic approach to political theory, what then would the latter look like? In answering this question, it must be recalled that the reason Marx could agree with the anarchists in their total critique of the state (and of political theory) is that his own conception of political theory was focused upon the social relations of production. Thus, theoretical anarchism for Marx did not mean *no* political theory, but only no political theory in any of its liberal forms, which presupposed a disjuncture between social and political power. Such disjunctures, it must be emphasized, might actually exist during some period of history, but that was simply a matter to be treated directly through an historical analysis; there was no need to reify it as a generalized abstraction. As this statement implies, politics, on this view, has no greater theoretical importance than what can be demonstrated, from "empirical premises" and an empirical analysis, to have been the situation in a specific society at a particular time when seen in the context of the prevailing social relations of production. Quite simply, there is no higher level of political theory or political analysis, according to Marx's conception of political theory. The *Eighteenth Brumaire* and other such writings are not occasional pieces to be sloughed off in anticipation of a Marxist version of the *Social Contract.* Instead, I am arguing, they are the *normal* mode of Marx's treatment of political theory, and they ought, therefore, to supply the model or standard for a Marxist approach to politics and to political theory: once one has demonstrated what, empirically, the connections were in a society between political ideas and actions and the existing social relations of production, one has said everything of importance there is to say about politics in that society.[39]

[39] When Marx writes that "empirical observation must in each separate instance bring out empirically . . . the connection of the social and political structure with production," I take this to be a theoretical statement capable of being realized through the practice of empirical research (*CW:*V, 35).

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I have argued that Marx's conception of political theory is framed in terms of (1) an empirically grounded attempt to explain the workings of the capitalist social system viewed as an historically developed structural totality, and (2) the mobilization of the working class in an effort to overthrow that system. This dualistic conception of political theory supplies the axis of Marx's critical assessment of the classical political economists, other socialists or communists, liberal political theory, anarchists, and other practical allies of the working class. Marx's conception of political theory also establishes the parameters within which his own empirical analysis of political events (e.g., revolutions) was carried out. The result, I believe, is a far more open-ended and empirically rooted conception of Marxism than the one which has generally shaped our view of Marxism during the last hundred years.

This emphasis upon empirical analysis is not made in order to foreclose any options on the truth in Marx's favor. An alternatively framed empirical analysis of a particular society or event, for example, the French Revolution or seventeenth-century English society, may very well exist. Such an explanation may even take into account the role of social classes.[40] It may, and certainly can, be reconciled with the premises of nineteenth- or twentieth-century liberalism. What is theoretically significant about this empirical approach to politics is not, as some liberal political scientists believe, the promise of certainty identified with such an approach. Quite the opposite. What is important is the emphasis it places upon the contingency and indeterminacy of political action. It is precisely this element which is sacrificed and lost when politics is elevated to the level of abstraction demanded by the adherents of the traditional view of political theory, for, as noted at the beginning of this essay, it must be a matter of methodological concern to Marxists to ask how this sense of contingency is to be preserved in one's conception of political theory. If one begins with the premise of class conflict, from which arise conflicting "practical attitudes" and conflicting "scientific theories" concerning the nature of social existence, the resolution of which depends upon political confrontations between the classes, then, I suggest, the answer to this problem is "self-understood."

REFERENCES

Where possible, citations to works by Marx and Engels are to translations contained in the volumes of their *Collected Works* which, at the time of writing this essay, were available. In some instances, preference has been given to other translations, and the corresponding passage in the *Collected Works* is indicated within brackets.

[40] Marx indicated that he had learned a great deal about the importance of social classes in relation to the making of a revolution from his reading of the liberal historians of the French Revolution (Marx and Engels n.d.:86,105).

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