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Source: *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, March 2010, Vol. 57, No. 122, Democracy and Exchange (March 2010), pp. 51-91

Published by: Berghahn Books

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41802465>

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Marx and Engels on Constitutional Reform vs. Revolution

Their 'Revisionism' Reviewed

Samuel Hollander

Abstract: Friedrich Engels, in 1895, reissued Marx's 'The Class Struggles in France 1848-1850' (1850), with an Introduction endorsing peaceful political tactics. We review the primary evidence to bring order to a confusing picture that emerges from a range of conflicting interpretations of the document. Our conclusions are as follows: First, the 1895 Introduction does not signify a new position, considering Engels' recognition over several decades of political concessions by the British ruling class. Secondly, since from the 1840s Marx too had applauded the potential of the 'Social Democratic' route, at least under the appropriate conditions, we may be confident that he would have approved of Engels' Introduction. Thirdly, the case for universal suffrage was to set the foundations for a classless communist system; Engels, we show, would have found unacceptable a Parliamentary system generating a working-class majority unwilling to carry out a communist program, or a working-class electorate choosing to replace the party at the polls.

Keywords: Engels; class struggle; constitutional reform; Marx; revisionism; social democracy; universal suffrage.

Introduction

Friedrich Engels, in 1895, reissued Marx's 'The Class Struggles in France 1848-1850' (1850) with an Introduction endorsing peaceful political tactics and commending the progress made by Social Democracy in Germany by way of the electoral process. One commentator finds that this Introduction shows Engels to have been the 'first Revisionist', or the 'first Social Democrat', in proposing 'that an entirely new mode of the class struggle was necessary, one which utilized universal suffrage and parliamentarianism', a position 'which

Theoria, March 2010

doi:10.3167/th.2010.5712205

he and Marx had denounced over the course of many years' (Elliott 1967: 73-5); indeed, Bernstein's line of reasoning—'In all advanced countries we see the privileges of the capitalist bourgeoisie yielding step by step to democratic organizations' (Bernstein 1961 (1899): xiii)—'seemed to be a continuation of Engels' 1895 "Preface"' (76). Robert Tucker too leaves the impression that Engels introduced a new dimension: 'the Introduction is notable for its hearty approval of the tactics that had evolved in Social Democratic practice in the late nineteenth century' (Tucker 1972: 406). There is even a book entitled *The Tragic Deception* to convey 'the process by which a disciple revises the teachings of a teacher', which represents Engels as 'the first revisionist', who 'was directly responsible for the evolutionism and accommodationism of the Second International' (Levine 1975: xv, 182-3). And Howard and King write, though rather hesitantly, of the 1895 Introduction that it 'is still open to interpretation (as it was read by Bernstein himself) as the first major revisionist text' (Howard and King 1989: 73).

These accounts apparently take for granted that Marx himself was no 'heretic'. As Levine sees it, there was 'a continuity of Marx's thought on the question of revolution', in that '[s]tructural changes in society, total transformations of social relationships were impossible without the use of political violence. Ruling classes did not voluntarily surrender their power' (Levine 1975: 57). This perspective is expressed similarly in yet another account whereby the failure of the French revolutions of 1789 and 1848 led Marx to conclude, with almost no exception, that '[t]he search for a peaceful transformation of capitalism was ... characteristic of utopian socialism' (Harding 1983: 514).

There are other evaluations. Carver represents Engels as a 'democrat' who 'wholeheartedly ... supported, in theory and in practice, national and international movements for representative and responsible government, which I take here as a working definition of democracy' (Carver 1996: 1-2). The same interpretation is applied to Marx; and, for both, not just late in the day. Sowell for his part asserts, with respect to a post-revolutionary regime, that both Marx and Engels 'saw the desirable features of such a government as including universal suffrage and civil liberties—what people today loosely call democracy, and what at the time represented a wide area of agreement with nineteenth-century laissez-faire liberals' (Sowell 2006: 192, see also Sowell 1985: 143-51).

According to Lichtheim, 'as time went on' both Marx and Engels 'adapted themselves' to the trend of modern Social-Democracy, but

Engels went further: ‘by the 1890s it had become the conviction of Engels—Marx was no longer there—that political power resided in the vote, and that a duly elected legislature with a Socialist majority was both an attainable goal and the surest guarantee of victory’ (Lichtheim 1964: 223, 230). Indeed, by 1895 ‘he had fully accepted the democratic viewpoint’ (230n). Avineri points to Marx’s allowances *from early days* for the achievement of proletarian control via universal suffrage; certainly, ‘he never envisaged a violent revolution in England even in his earlier writings’ (Avineri 1968: 217). But he apparently shares Lichtheim’s view that Engels took his revisionism further than had Marx (217n).

Hunley, by contrast, writes of Engels’ ‘alleged reformism’ and rejects social-democratic attributions, concluding that ‘[a]t different times both [Marx and Engels] placed different emphases on the value and need for revolutionary or parliamentary tactics.... None of the positions Engels took after Marx’s death, however, were fundamentally at variance with those Marx had supported in the 1870s. Neither man ever abandoned the idea of revolution; both, in the years after 1848, simply redefined the conditions under which it would take place’ (Hunley 1991: 111; see also Collier 1996). Nimtz commends Hunley (Nimtz 2000: 353n), but takes the argument that no reformist orientation of the social democratic sort can be ascribed to Engels a step further by insisting that he envisaged the parliamentary route as nothing more than a ‘a “gauge” ... to determine when to resort to armed struggle’—citing *The Origin of the Family* (1884; MECW 26: 272)—totally unconcerned was he with ‘winning a majority of the electorate through the elections’ (260-1, 263). The ‘democratic’ component in Nimtz’s title refers specifically to internal Party matters rather than proletarian victory at the polls (258, 266-7, 275, 298).¹ No differences are discerned with Marx.

We shall review the primary evidence to bring some order to the rather confusing picture that has emerged. Our conclusions are as follows: First, the 1895 Introduction does not itself signify a major change in Engels’ attitude considering his recognition, not late in the day but over several decades, of political concessions by the British ruling class in particular, in effect its surrender to the proletariat regarding the suffrage. Secondly, since from the 1840s Marx noted and applauded the potential of the ‘Social Democratic’ route, at least under the appropriate conditions—including national character—Engels was scarcely deviating from the master and certainly not belatedly so. Indeed, some of Marx’s affirmations are quite as strong as

those of Engels in 1895. There was then full opportunity for any serious deviations to emerge between the partners during Marx's lifetime; and, given their absence, we may be confident that he would have approved of Engels' Introduction, especially had he been able to take account of the impressive electoral reforms of 1884-5 in Britain and those in Germany.

Thirdly, while Nimitz goes too far, at least in the British case, when he attributes to Engels an unconcern with the proletariat achieving a parliamentary majority, there are certainly limits to Engels' revisionism. Thus it is misleading to speak of his having in 1895 'fully accepted the democratic viewpoint', since the parliamentary route was only the most effective means—and only under certain conditions—of assuring a 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. And most important, the immediate goal of a parliamentary majority was to establish, or at least set the foundations for, a classless communist system, on which matter there was no compromise; thus Engels would have found unacceptable a Parliamentary system generating a working-class majority unwilling to carry out a Communist program—Engels' support for Universal Suffrage as means to achieve proletarian power presupposes that elected workers tow the party line—or a working-class electorate choosing to replace the party at the polls. Such outcomes would render the 'dictatorship' a contradiction in terms. (See also Kolakowski 2005: 296-7, and Levin 1989: 141.) Furthermore, insofar as our authors justified the use of force to protect the 'dictatorship' once in place—and however achieved—from counter-revolution, there remains some consolation for those traditionalists who view them as red in tooth and claw. (See Collier 1996.)

Evidence from the 1840s: Chartism and Constitutional Reform

A newspaper article by Engels of November 1842 provides a convenient starting point. Here he opines that 'the middle class will never renounce its occupation of the House of Commons by agreeing to universal suffrage'—a main plank of the Chartist programme²—'since it would immediately be outvoted by the huge number of unpropertied ...' ('The English View of the Internal Crises'; MECW 2: 368). There was a possibility that, with time, Chartism might gain some hold 'among educated people'; but this prospect is not to be taken seriously, since the middle class was devoted to 'the preserva-

tion of the *status quo*; in England's present condition, "legal progress" and universal suffrage would inevitably result in a revolution' (369).³ Within very few years the prospect came to be viewed differently.

We note first a reiteration in *The Condition of the Working Class* to the effect that the achievement of the Six Points of the Charter would assure a democratic political structure and 'proletarian law', thereby at least implying a first step in the transformation of society:

Since the working-men do not respect the law, but simply submit to its power when they cannot change it, it is most natural that they should at least propose alterations in it, that they should wish to put a proletarian law in the place of the legal fabric of the bourgeoisie. The proposed law is the People's Charter, which in form is purely political, and demands a democratic basis for the House of Commons. Chartism is the compact form of their opposition to the bourgeoisie. In the Unions and turnouts opposition always remained isolated: it was the single working-men or sections who fought a single bourgeois.... But in Chartism it is the whole working-class which arises against the bourgeoisie, and attacks, first of all, the political power, the legislative rampart with which the bourgeoisie has surrounded itself.... These six points, which are all limited to the reconstitution of the House of Commons, are sufficient to overthrow the whole English Constitution, Queen and Lords included (1845; MECW 4: 517-18).⁴

Furthermore, following a forecast of a worsening of the cyclical pattern and increasing bifurcation of income distribution between an expanding proletariat and 'a few millionaires', Engels proceeds to predict the adoption of the Chartists' demands and a proletarian majority in Parliament achieved by constitutional means—here lies the main difference with 1842; for all that, he nonetheless attaches a 'revolutionary' sequel: 'The commercial crises, the mightiest levers for all independent development of the proletariat, will probably shorten the process [of social transformation], acting in concert with foreign competition and the deepening ruin of the lower middle-class. I think the people will not endure more than one more crisis. The next one, in 1846 or 1847, will probably bring with it the repeal of the Corn Laws [1887: and it did] and the enactment of the Charter' (MECW 4: 581). Precisely '[w]hat revolutionary movements the Charter may give rise to', Engels adds, 'remains to be seen'. But he further opined that, unless delayed by repeal of the Corn Laws, the onset of crisis in 1852-3 would signal 'revolution' apparently of a violent nature. And he adds that '[e]ven the union of a part of the bourgeoisie with the proletariat, even a general reform of the bour-

geoisie, would not help matters', because '[t]he prejudices of a whole class cannot be laid aside like an old coat: least of all, those of the stable, narrow, selfish English bourgeoisie. These are all inferences which may be drawn with the greatest certainty: conclusions, the premises for which are undeniable facts, partly of historical development, partly facts inherent in human nature'. Achievement of proletarian control of Parliament via enactment of the Charter would not therefore, in all likelihood, suffice to prevent a 'war against the rich' which, 'now carried on in detail and indirectly, will become direct and universal. It is too late for a peaceful solution' (582-3).

It is to be noted that Engels expressed himself strongly against gratuitous violence, and even envisaged the Communists exerting a moderating influence: 'The revolution must come; it is already too late to bring about a peaceful solution; but it can be made more gently than that prophesied in the foregoing pages. This depends, however, more upon the development of the proletariat than upon that of the bourgeoisie. In proportion, as the proletariat absorbs socialistic and communistic elements, will the revolution diminish in bloodshed, revenge and savagery.'

In a marginal note to the jointly published *The German Ideology of 1845-6*, Engels writes quite generally of the proletarian acquisition of 'political power' without committing himself to the means, though the constitutional road can by no means be excluded and may even be the more likely intention; and he once again clarifies that such an achievement is only the necessary condition for a total social transformation: '... every class which is aiming at domination, even when its domination, as is the case with the proletariat, leads to the abolition of the old form of society in its entirety and of domination in general, must first conquer political power in order to represent its interest in turn as the general interest, which in the first moment it is forced to do' (MECW 5: 47).

In his 'Communist confession of faith'—the draft program discussed at the First Congress of the Communist League in London in June 1847—Engels objected to 'conspiracies' and to 'deliberate and arbitrary' action based merely on 'will' and 'leadership', (an implicit allusion to Blanqui); at the same time, he again opined that the intransigence of the propertied classes 'in almost all countries' would probably force 'the oppressed proletariat' to revolution:

Question 6: How do you wish to prepare the way for your community of property? *Answer:* By enlightening and uniting the proletariat.

Question 14: Let us go back to the sixth question. As you wish to prepare for community of property by the enlightening and uniting of the proletariat, then you reject revolution? Answer: We are convinced not only of the uselessness but even of the harmfulness of all conspiracies. We are also aware that revolutions are not made deliberately and arbitrarily but that everywhere and at all times they are the necessary consequences of circumstances which are not in any way whatever dependent either on the will or on the leadership of individual parties or of whole classes. But we also see that the development of the proletariat in almost all countries of the world is forcibly repressed by the possessing classes and thus a revolution is being forcibly worked for by the opponents of communism. If, in the end, the oppressed proletariat is thus driven into a revolution, then we will defend the cause of the proletariat just as well by our deeds as now by our words (MECW 6: 96, 101-2).

This is not, however, a statement of the inevitability of revolution in the literal sense even in the case of ‘almost all countries’, and *a fortiori* in that of the unspecified exceptions, where a reform-minded bourgeoisie might render revolution unnecessary. It merely states a certain likelihood.

Engels’ answer to Question 16: ‘*How do you think the transition from the present situation to community of property is to be effected?*’ is vague enough to cover all options: ‘The first, fundamental condition for the introduction of community of property is the political liberation of the proletariat through a democratic constitution’ (102). If this response assumes that the proletariat has taken at least provisional control by way of *literal revolution* then the framing of a ‘democratic constitution’ relates to the post-revolutionary period with the nature of the constitution left an open question, whether, for example, there would be allowed some representation by the bourgeoisie. But recalling the inclusive response to Question 14 (and taking account of at least aspects of the position in 1845), it is quite possible, even likely, that Engels intended by ‘political liberation’ the granting of a ‘democratic constitution’, that is of universal suffrage, by a reform-minded or fearful bourgeoisie—in effect, the granting of the Charter.

Engels drew on his ‘confession of faith’ when composing the Principles of Communism in October 1847—the basis for the Communist Manifesto. In answer to the Question ‘Will it be possible to bring about the abolition of private property by peaceful means?’ (MECW 6: 349), he goes so far as to assert that ‘[i]t is to be desired that this could happen, and Communists certainly would be the last to resist

it'; on the other hand, 'they also see that the development of the proletariat is in nearly every civilised country forcibly suppressed, and that thus the opponents of the Communists are working with all their might towards a revolution' (349-50). A reform-minded bourgeoisie thus might make revolution in the literal sense unnecessary as was indeed the case in a small number of unspecified countries. That Engels had just rehearsed the theme that the industrialisation process generates the numbers, the concentration and thus the power of the proletariat—along with growing discontent in consequence of labour-displacing machinery and the 'depress[ion] of wages to their minimum'—to 'prepar[e] a social revolution by the proletariat' (346), does not necessarily preclude the achievement of political control by constitutional means. Similarly, the negative answer given to Question 17: 'Will it be possible to abolish private property at one stroke?' does not rule out that the 'impending revolution', to which Engels also refers, relates to the establishment of proletarian control by way of the ballot box, which, once in place, would then set about the gradual dismantling of the private-property system: 'No, such a thing would be just as impossible as at one stroke to increase the existing productive forces to the degree necessary for instituting community of property. Hence, the proletarian revolution, which in all probability is impending, will transform existing society only gradually, and be able to abolish private property only when the necessary quantity of the means of production has been created' (350).⁵ To this extent, the prospect of violence expressed in 1845, and this notwithstanding passage of the Charter, seems to be moderated.

Engels' response to Question 18: 'What will be the course of this revolution?'—it provides the October counterpart to Question 16 in June—in fact seems to indicate acquisition of proletarian power by constitutionally-achieved universal suffrage, as in 1845, particularly in the British case, though once again it cannot be positively precluded that 'the political rule of the proletariat' reflects a revolutionary rather than a constitutional outcome:

Answer: In the first place it will inaugurate a *democratic constitution* and thereby, directly or indirectly, the political rule of the proletariat. Directly in England, where the proletariat already constitutes the majority of the people. Indirectly in France and in Germany, where the majority of the people consists not only of proletarians but also of small peasants and urban petty bourgeois, who are only now being proletarianised and in all their political interests are becoming more and more dependent on the proletariat and therefore soon will have to conform to the demands of the proletariat.

Thompson has written that ‘1848 was to see the third and final abortive effort to effect a substantial measure of political reform by way of petitioning Parliament and, in the aftermath of that failure, a number of Chartists’—preeminently Bronterre O’Brien, Ernest Jones and G.J. Harney—‘came to believe that if Chartism was to be made a potent political force once again, it would be necessary to fuse Chartist demands with an economic programme clearly indicative of the kind of social transformation that might be effected once political power has been won’ (Thompson 1998: 111). This program Thompson designates as ‘Chartist Socialism’. But he allows that an integration of Chartist political objectives with an anti-capitalist political economy was, in some measure, already available before 1848 in the writing of O’Brien’ (112). In point of fact, recognition of a Socialist dimension to Chartism is apparent in *The Condition of the Working-Class*: ‘The “Six Points” which for the Radical bourgeois are the beginning and end of the matter, which are meant, at the utmost, to call forth certain further reforms of the Constitution, are for the proletariat a mere means to further ends.... There is no longer a mere politician among the Chartists, even though their Socialism is very little developed...’ (1845; MECW 4: 524). And towards this strand Engels was warmly disposed when, in his *Principles of Communism*, he expresses the willingness of ‘genuine’ Communists to cooperate with ‘democratic socialists’ (1847; MECW 6: 355). It is true that the democratic socialists, in general, are said ‘in the same way as the Communists [to] desire part of the measures listed in Question [18]⁶ not, however, as a means of transition to communism but as measures sufficient to abolish the misery of present society and to cause its evils to disappear’. Nonetheless, in a reiteration of the merits of Communist cooperation with ‘the various democratic parties’, the Chartists are specifically enumerated as worthy partners in the British case:

This attitude differs from country to country. In England, France, and Belgium, where the bourgeoisie rules, the Communists still have for the time being a common interest with the various democratic parties, which is all the greater the more in the socialist measures they are now everywhere advocating the democrats approach the aims of the Communists, that is, the more clearly and definitely they uphold the interests of the proletariat and the more they rely on the proletariat. In *England*, for instance, the Chartists, who are all workers, are incalculably nearer to the Communists than are the democratic petty bourgeois or so-called radicals (356).

Support for cooperation with the Chartists in the light of their orientation regarding political economy in no way detracts from support accorded their political program as encapsulated in the Six Points. And such support is expressed in a warm response towards the election to Parliament of Feargus O'Connor: 'You will judge for yourselves to whom French democracy ought to give its sympathy; to the Chartists, sincere democrats without ulterior motives, or to the radical bourgeois who so carefully avoid using the words *people's charter*, *universal suffrage*, and limit themselves to proclaiming that they are partisans of *complete suffrage!*'—meaningless slogans designed to detract workers from the specific demands of the Charter ('The Chartist Banquet', November 1847; 361).⁷ Again: 'The opening of the recently elected Parliament that counts among its members distinguished representatives of the People's Party could not but produce extraordinary excitement in the ranks of democracy' ('The Chartist Movement', November 1847; 383). And Engels reports favourably a resolution of *The Society of Fraternal Democrats* to support the Chartist agitation: '... the English people will be unable effectively to support democracy's struggle in other countries until it has won democratic government for itself', so that 'our society, established to succour the militant democracy of every country, is duty-bound to come to the aid of the English democrats in their effort to obtain an electoral reform on the basis of the Charter' (384).

A word of caution is advised. While the main object of the Chartist movement was Parliamentary reform, 'agitation' towards that end was not always peaceful or legal, as a convenient Chronological Table of events prepared by Engels in 1886 (MECW 26: 566-77) spells out.⁸ His sympathies are clear, but whether the Charter 'be carried by physical or moral force', as he expressed it retrospectively in 1885, is not the major issue, which is rather the principle of constitutional change to enlarge the electorate ('England in 1845 and 1885', *The Commonwealth*, March 1885: 295).

The Parliamentary route again emerges in a clear-cut declaration of January 1848 favouring universal suffrage to be brought about largely by proletarian effort, for Engels mistrusted bourgeois reformers whose proposals were designed to detract the working class from its primary objective—majority rule and the subsequent reforms that would inevitably follow: 'Were they desirous, as they profess to be, of promoting your welfare, they would aid you to obtain sovereign power' by supporting the People's Charter. 'They well know that if you controlled the legislature, all the reforms they seek—and reforms of

much greater importance—would be forthwith affected. How then can they call themselves your friends, while refusing you the suffrage?’ (‘The Chartist Movement’, January 1848; MECW 6: 466). Universal suffrage attained constitutionally within capitalist arrangement would, however, be an insufficient achievement, the first step only on the road to ‘very definite’ social reform.

Engels reiterated elsewhere at this time that ‘[o]f all countries, England is the one where the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is most highly developed’ (‘On Poland’, December 1847: 389). And ‘the first decisive blow which will lead to the victory of democracy, to the liberation of all European nations, will be struck by the English Chartists’, precisely because it is in England that the class struggle is the most intense—a standard application of the principle of historical materialism whereby modern industry and use of machinery creates ‘a single great class with common interests, the class of the proletariat’, and sets it face to face against ‘a single class the bourgeoisie’; for the aristocracy having lost power in England the ‘struggle’ was ‘simplified’ to the extent that ‘it will be possible to decide it by one single blow’. Now by this—or by the ‘first decisive blow which will lead to the victory of democracy’—is intended nothing more than the achievement of a majority in Parliament by way of the franchise. That the ‘struggle’ would be decided by ‘one single blow’ refers to the circumstance that the proletariat faces the bourgeoisie with no third party—the aristocracy—to complicate matters. It is not a reference to revolution in the literal sense.

America had advanced yet further than England in one respect, for there ‘a democratic constitution has been introduced’ (*Principles of Communism*; MECW 6: 356). And the Communists were advised to cooperate ‘with the party that will turn this constitution against the bourgeoisie and use it in the interest of the proletariat, that is, with the national agrarian reformers’. As for Germany, where the decisive struggle between the bourgeoisie and the absolute monarchy is still to come’, and where ‘Communists cannot count on the decisive struggle between themselves and the bourgeoisie until the bourgeoisie rules’, a strategy of temporary accommodation with the industrial or liberal bourgeoisie is recommended, though ‘they must ever be on their guard’ not to lose sight of the ultimate goal. An article of September 1847, accords the democratic press in Germany the task of showing ‘the inadequacy of the constitutional system that brings the bourgeoisie to the helm ... since the conquest of political power by the proletarians, small peasants and urban petty bourgeoisie is the first

condition for the application of [the] means' whereby 'social oppression can be eliminated'; and also of examining 'the extent to which a rapid realisation of democracy may be expected, what resources the [Communist] party can command and what other parties it must ally itself with as long as it is too weak to act alone' ('The Communists and Karl Heinzen'; MECW 6: 294).

All this points to conquest of political power by the proletariat via the ballot box; only the rapidity of its achievement was in question. That 'democracy' was to be achieved by constitutional means, after which the Communist programme could be put into practice, is further confirmed thus:

Far from starting futile quarrels with the democrats, in the present circumstances, the Communists for the time being rather take the field as democrats themselves in all practical party matters. In all civilised countries, democracy has as its necessary consequence the political rule of the proletariat, and the political rule of the proletariat is the first condition for all communist measures.... Indeed, understandings will be possible concerning many measures which are to be carried out in the interests of the previously oppressed classes immediately after democracy has been achieved, e.g., the running of large-scale industry and the railways by the state, the education of all children at state expense, etc. (299).

Engels' Heinzen paper seems therefore to treat a peaceable transition to proletarian control as a likely prospect, whereas that of June 1847 focused rather more on bourgeois repression that might necessitate revolutionary action.

As for France, Engels refers to the great promise of the democratic reform movement, which had the British model at hand: '[m]ay democrats of all lands follow the same example! Everywhere democracy marches forward. In France, banquet follows banquet in favour of electoral reform; and the movement is developing on such a scale that *it must lead to a happy result*' ('The Chartist Banquet', November 1847: 363). But while reiterating his support for French parliamentary reform, Engels distinguished—as always—between genuine democrats (even if not proletarian), who championed fully-fledged universal suffrage, and 'treacherous' middle-class reformers who paid lip service only to Parliamentary Reform ('Split in the Camp', November 1847: 385-7). These bourgeois radicals 'would under certain circumstances, and with certain restrictions, perhaps, consent to give the people the suffrage; but let them never think of profiting by the gift by passing measures which would essentially alter the actual

mode of production and distribution of wealth—which would, in course of time, give to the entire people the command of the productive powers of the country, and do away with all individual “employers”!’ (‘The “Satisfied” Majority’, January 1848: 440-1). Here Engels insists once again that universal suffrage, achieved constitutionally, would still be a first step only in a process towards the ultimate transition from the private-property system.

* * *

The language of Marx’s *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847) sometimes evokes violent revolution: ‘... is it at all surprising that a society founded on the *opposition* of classes should culminate in brutal *contradiction*, the shock of body against body, as its final *dénouement*?’ (MECW 6: 212). But by the final clash of classes is probably intended the period *after* the proletariat comes to power, such power achieved in the first instance by constitutional means, since Marx looked so positively on trade-union combined with political activity, the legalist Chartists accorded pride of place (as by Engels): ‘The organisation of ... strikes, combinations, and *trades unions* went on simultaneously with the political struggles of the workers, who now constitute a large political party, under the name of *Chartists*’ (210).

The discussion of American conditions is similarly instructive. The United States—where (in the eastern states) universal suffrage actually existed—was more ‘advanced’ even than England and consequently the ‘social’ question even more acute: ‘Nowhere ... does *social* inequality obtrude itself more harshly than in the eastern states of North America, because nowhere is it less disguised by political inequality’ (323). Clearly ‘political equality’ had been achieved in the United States *by constitutional means*, albeit that the ‘social question’ remained unresolved. Moreover, in further commentary early in 1848, Marx opined that the ‘political constitution of North America’—it is this that the Chartists were seeking by their quest for universal suffrage—could not be attained *prematurely* in Belgium or other Continental countries where a ‘great national’ workers’ party did not yet exist; by contrast, the Chartist campaign ‘presupposed a long and arduous unification of the English workers into a class’ (‘The *Débat Social* on the Democratic Association’, February 1848: 539). All of this points distinctly to the prospect of successful constitutional reform enhancing proletarian political power, provided always that the appropriate stage in capitalist development had been achieved.

* * *

We turn to the *Communist Manifesto* itself. Here, as in Engels' *Principles of Communism*, we have an account of the impact of modern industrial development on the proletariat, whose quantitative expansion and coherence are reflected in unionization extending increasingly to the national level and the establishment of a political party (MECW 6: 493). Moreover, intra-bourgeois rivalry domestically—for there were sections 'antagonistic to the progress of industry'—and international rivalry oblige 'appeal to the proletariat ... for its help', thereby drag[ging] it into the political arena'. To be noted more specifically are both the *Manifesto's* hostility towards a variety of 'critical-utopian' socialists of the day, for 'violently oppos[ing] all political action on the part of the working class ...' (517), and its support for the constitutional reform measures proposed by the Chartists in England, the Agrarian Reformers in America, and the Social Democrats in France (518).

We have here clear intimation of a stage entailing *cooperation* between bourgeoisie and proletariat, the former obliged by force of circumstance to contribute to the political advancement of the latter. A comment on Germany the authors again insist that the bourgeoisie is *obliged* to contribute to proletarian political progress, providing the proletariat with the 'weapons' to be used subsequently against the bourgeoisie itself (519, emphasis added).

Certainly we find references in this account to 'open revolution ... where the violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie lays the foundation for the sway of the proletariat' (495). Similarly, the expected 'bourgeois revolution in Germany will be but the prelude to an immediately following proletarian revolution', the Communists 'openly declar[ing] that their ends can be attained only by the *forcible overthrow* of all existing social conditions' (519, emphasis added). This is followed by the most famous of Marxian declarations: 'Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win'. But such declarations are consistent with a forcible overthrow only after the proletariat has achieved political power constitutionally. This certainly holds good of the declarations that 'the immediate aim of the Communists is the ... formation of the proletariat as a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat' (498), and that 'the first step in the revolution of the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of the ruling class, to win the battle of democracy' (504). In fact, these and similar expressions such as those

found in the independent formulations by Engels and Marx, lend themselves readily to such a reading. In sum, both countenanced the possibility of achieving proletarian majority control by constitutional means, as a first step to ‘the final dénouement’.

Evidence from the Early 1850s: Universal Suffrage in France vs. England

We turn now to Marx’s ‘The Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850’ itself. This document of 1850, which constitutes a sort of coroner’s *post mortem* regarding the failure of the June 1848 insurrection, contains a number of important generalizations regarding political matters.

Despite various obstacles in the way of early success, ‘the *proletariat* increasingly organises itself around *revolutionary Socialism*, around *Communism*’, having as its objective ‘common, social production’, and declaring ‘*the permanence of the revolution*, the *class dictatorship* of the proletariat as the necessary transit point to the *abolition of class distinctions generally*, to the abolition of all the relations of production on which they rest, to the abolition of all the social relations that correspond to these relations of production, to the revolutionising of all the ideas that result from these social relations’ (126-7).⁹

Now the French context—analysis of the failures of June 1848—concerns obstacles in the way of a ‘class dictatorship’ initially achieved by *violent* revolutionary activity. For Marx maintained that ‘revolutionary collisions’ could not be avoided, since the ‘big bourgeoisie’ would never tolerate constraints on untrammelled capitalist development. This was apparent in the fact that it reversed itself on the matter of universal suffrage, instituted prior to the 1848-9 uprising, once it came to realise what was truly involved (131). Here the French bourgeois state appeared in its true light—as unable to tolerate genuine legislative reform.

But the inevitable failure of constitutional reform necessitating the ultimate *violent* overthrow of the bourgeoisie reflects specifically an evaluation of French events. In Britain, by contrast, meaningful constitutional progress was still countenanced and indeed represented as an *essential* preliminary for a successful ‘revolutionary’ outcome. To this matter we turn next.

An Engels’ paper of 1850 on the 1847 Factory Act is relevant for us. Here he refers favourably to the workers’ transfer of support from

‘reactionary’ landowning forces to the industrial capitalists, with regard inter alia to extension of the suffrage, a transition based (he suggests) on an ‘instinctive’ perception that they were thereby hastening the development, and thus the ultimate collapse, of the industrial system (‘The English Ten Hour’s Bill’; MECW 10: 298). Moreover, ‘restoration’ of the 1847 Factory Act following its *de facto* annulment was desirable, provided it was enacted under the ‘exclusive political rule’ of the proletariat: ‘The restoration of this Bill can only have any significance now under the rule of universal franchise, and universal franchise in an England two-thirds of whose inhabitants are industrial proletarians means the exclusive political rule of the working class with all the revolutionary changes in social conditions which are inseparable from it’. In a second paper of 1850 on the Factory Acts Engels opined that ‘[t]he working classes, the first day they get political power will have to pass far more stringent measures against over-working women and children than a Ten Hours’ or an Eight Hours’ Bill’; for they had been taught by the *de facto* abrogation of the 1847 bill that ‘*no lasting benefit whatever can be obtained for them by others ... but that they must obtain it themselves by conquering, first of all political power ... and that under no circumstances have they any guarantee for bettering their social position unless by Universal Suffrage, which would enable them to seat a Majority of Working Men in the House of Commons*’ (‘The Ten Hours’ Question’; MECW 10: 274-5).

There is a strong suggestion in all this that Engels had in mind the stage to which the *Communist Manifesto* itself applied (see note 5), when the proletariat would be firmly in control and in a position to dictate a series of ‘revolutionary changes in social conditions’. Articles of 1850 for *The Democratic Review* are further indicative. In April the prognosis for a proletarian revolutionary victory in France was still good: ‘the government, forced to attack universal suffrage will thereby give the people an occasion for a combat, in which there is for the proletarians the certainty of victory’ (MECW 10: 32). But by June, the failure of the proletariat to react to the retraction of universal suffrage is recognised, in a contrast with Britain where universal suffrage once granted could not conceivably be retracted—this, be it noted, because of national character (34). Achievement of universal suffrage in a reformed House of Commons was treated by Engels as amounting to *permanent* proletarian control, the Revolution no less.

A proposed electoral reform bill is described by Engels shortly thereafter as ‘the most important’ of issues before Parliament, albeit

of no direct consequence for the proletariat, affecting ‘solely how much of their political power will be retained by reactionary or conservative classes, i.e., the landed aristocracy, the rentiers, the stock exchange speculators, the colonial land-owners, the shipping magnates and a section of the merchants and bankers, and how much they will surrender to the industrial bourgeoisie, which heads all the progressive and revolutionary classes’ (‘England’, January 1852; MECW 11: 206).¹⁰ Nonetheless, ‘[t]he proletariat, whose independent struggle for its own interests against the industrial bourgeoisie will not begin until such time as the political supremacy of that class is established, the proletariat will in any circumstances also derive some advantage from this electoral reform’ (208).

Marx’s version of the theme takes the matter further. Here ‘the complete annihilation of Old England as an aristocratic country is the end which [the industrial bourgeoisie] follows up with more or less consciousness. Its nearest object, however, is the attainment of a Parliamentary reform which should transfer to its hands the legislative power necessary for such a revolution’ (‘The Chartists’, *New York Daily Tribune*, August 1852; MECW 11: 334). When the industrialists ‘will have conquered exclusive political dominion, when political dominion and economical supremacy will be united in the same hands, when therefore, the struggle against capital [by the proletariat] will no longer be distinct from the struggle against the existing Government—from that very moment will date the *social revolution of England*’ (335). Now since Marx proceeds immediately to the Chartists with particular reference to universal suffrage as synonymous with proletarian political power, it is evidently a constitutional ‘revolution’ that is envisaged: ‘The carrying of Universal Suffrage in England would, therefore, be a far more socialistic measure than anything which has been honoured with that name on the Continent’ (336). Marx closes regarding England: ‘Its inevitable result, here, is *the political supremacy of the working class*’, further confirming our reading of this and equivalent forms of expression encountered throughout our texts.

Marx’s Revisionism in the 1860s and Thereafter

Brief allusions to constitutional reform will be found in Marx’s ‘Inaugural Address to the Working Man’s International Association’ in September 1864. Mention is there made of the effects on British opinion

of the post-1848 events on the Continent, including a weakening of working-class morale such that '[a]ll the efforts made at keeping up, or remodelling the Chartist movement, failed signally.... [N]ever before seemed the English working class so thoroughly reconciled to a state of political nullity' (MECW 20: 10). But this state of affairs had by 1864 been transformed: 'To conquer political power'—one notes the terminology of the *Communist Manifesto*—'has become the great duty of the working classes. They seem to have comprehended this, for in England, Germany, Italy and France there have taken place simultaneous revivals and simultaneous efforts are being made at the political reorganisation of the working men's party' (MECW 20: 12). All this is consistent with approval of renewed participation in legal constitutional processes. And such participation is confirmed by the Third Annual Report (1867) of the Association, signed by Marx for Germany, where Parliamentary Reform is represented as 'an indispensable stepping stone to that complete emancipation of the working classes from the domination of capital.... [T]he Act of 1867 [England] ... is sufficiently comprehensive to enable the working classes to politically combine for class purposes within the precincts of the Constitution, and exercise a direct influence upon the Legislature in matters of social and economical reform, in as far as they affect the labour question' (MECW 20: 432).¹¹

This remarkably moderate formulation focuses quite deliberately on constitutionality and, to that extent and by extension, might be thought to imply that the loss of a working-class majority at the polls would be acceptable as a matter of democratic principle. But this is probably a *non sequitur*. For the focus is on the partially-inclusive Act of 1867, a step only towards fully-fledged universal suffrage assuring a proletarian majority; and this eventuality might have been identified by Marx with *permanent* proletarian control, as (we have seen) it was by Engels.

In an interview accorded *The World* newspaper on 3 July 1871, the general objective of the International is described as '[t]he economical emancipation of the working class by the conquest of political power' and its use in 'the attainment of social ends'. But in England 'the way to show political power lies open to the working class. Insurrection would be madness where peaceful agitation would more swiftly and surely do the work'; in France, by contrast, 'a hundred laws of repression and a mortal antagonism between classes seem to necessitate the violent solution of social war' (MECW 22: 601-2). A further report in *The World* of 15 October spells out the same contrast,

with the failure of the Commune in mind. Required in France, was ‘a proletarian dictatorship ... and the first condition of that was a proletarian army. The working classes would have to conquer the right to emancipate themselves on the battlefield’ (634); but in Britain, the Chartist movement ‘had been started with the consent and assistance of middle-class radicals, though if it had been successful it could only have been for the advantage of the working class. England was the only country where the working class was sufficiently developed and organized to turn universal suffrage to its own proper account’.

Marx’s reference to England as a unique case is misleading. The United States provides a second conspicuous example, as is clear from a speech given at the London conference of the International on 20 September 1871: ‘In America a congress held recently and composed of workers has resolved to deal seriously with the political question and to substitute workers like themselves to represent them, entrusted with defending the interests of their class, for these personalities who make a career out of being politicians’ (616-17). In fact, there were problems of a practical order in England where ‘it is less easy for a worker to enter Parliament. The Members receiving no subsidy, and the worker having nothing but the proceeds of his labour to live on, Parliament is closed to him, and the Bourgeoisie, stubbornly refusing to pay an allowance to Members, knows full well that this is the way to prevent the working class from being represented’ (617). Nonetheless, ‘it must not be thought that it is of minor importance to have workers in parliament’. An example is given from Germany: ‘The governments are hostile to us. We must answer them by using every possible means at our disposal, getting workers into parliament is so much gaining over them’.

Also indicative is a speech of September 1872 on the Hague Congress of the International where Marx commended a Resolution, based on proposals by himself and Engels, regarding ‘the necessity for the working classes to fight the old disintegrating society on the political as well as the social field’ (MECW 23: 254). The Resolution in question was adopted as one of the articles of the Association: ‘This constitution of the working class into a political party is indispensable in order to insure the triumph of the social revolution, and of its ultimate end, the abolition of classes.... The lords of land and the lords of capital will always use their political privileges for the defence and perpetuation of their economical monopolies, and for the enslavement of labour. The conquest of political power has therefore become the great duty of the working class’ (243). As was by

now quite standard, such ‘conquest’ might be attained by ‘peaceful means’, at least in America, England and (perhaps) Holland: ‘We know that the institutions, customs and traditions in the different countries must be taken into account; and we do not deny the existence of countries like America, England, and if I knew your institutions better I might add Holland, where the workers may achieve their aims by peaceful means’ (225).

For all that, Marx concluded ‘that in most countries on the Continent it is force which must be the lever of our revolution; it is force which will have to be resorted to for a time in order to establish the rule of the workers’. France, one might suppose, would fall into this category. But the essay ‘Political Indifferentism’ (1873) against the Proudhonists seems to reflect a reclassification of the French case. Here Marx reverts to his refutation in *Poverty of Philosophy* (1847) of Proudhon’s ‘sophisms against the working-class movement’—alluding to his objections to the union movement—adding a new condemnation in the light of Proudhon’s anarchical *De la capacité politique des classes ouvrières* (1868), a work opposed to all forms of compromise with the State, including political organisation within the law, since, in Marx’s paraphrase, ‘[a]ll peaceful movements, such as those in which English and American workers have the bad habit of engaging, are ... to be despised’ (MECW 23: 392). And such a reclassification is confirmed in a remarkable endorsement of the high potential provided by the constitutional route in France, appearing in his ‘Preamble to the Programme of the French Workers’ Party’ of May 1880 on universal suffrage as ‘instrument of emancipation’ towards the ‘collective appropriation’ of the means of production (MECW 24: 340). This outcome ‘can only spring from the revolutionary action of the producing class—or proletariat—organised into an independent political party’, which organisation ‘must be striven for, using all the means at the disposal of the proletariat, including above all universal suffrage, thus transformed from the instrument of deception which it has been hitherto into an instrument of emancipation’.

This is not to say that Marx eschewed entirely the *language* of violent revolution at this late stage, as in a letter dated early 1881 referring to the ‘fury’ of the masses (22 February 1881; MECW 46: 67). But here Marx is in fact justifying a refusal to be specific about the precise course of future revolutionary developments, warning against any ‘doctrinaire and of necessity fantastic anticipation of a future revolution’s programme [which] only serves to distract from the present struggle’. The future would look after itself. Accordingly, ‘the critical

conjuncture for a new international working men's association has not yet arrived; hence I consider all labour congresses and/or socialist congresses, in so far as they do not relate to the immediate, actual conditions obtaining in this or that specific nation, to be not only useless but harmful' (67). Marx's practical, cautious and non-doctrinaire approach is manifest, at least insofar as concerns the process of acquisition of power by the proletariat.

Engels' Revisionism 1865-93

We turn next to Engels' contribution to 'revisionist' options, over the three decades 1865-93, commencing with observations regarding universal suffrage made in the course of an analysis of the desirable attitude to be adopted by the German Workers' Party towards the Prussian 'military question', preeminently the issue of universal conscription. Engels seems very clear at first glance: 'The more workers who are trained in the use of weapons the better. Universal conscription is the necessary and natural corollary of universal suffrage; it puts the voters in a position of being able to enforce their decisions gun in hand against any attempt at a coup d'état' ('The Prussian Military Question and the German Workers Party', 1865; MECW 20: 67). But the matter is in fact far more complex, for Engels proceeds to a major qualification by specifying that all 'will depend on what kind of aims the workers' party, i.e., that part of the working class which has become aware of its common class interests, is striving for in the interests of that class' (69). Support for universal suffrage was thus conditional on the requirement that those aims be acceptable, as they happened to be in the Prussian case: 'It seems that the most advanced workers in Germany are demanding the emancipation of the workers from the capitalists by the transfer of state capital to associations of workers, so that production can be organised, without capitalists, for general account; and as a means to the achievement of this end: the conquest of political power by universal direct suffrage'. Now this formulation reflects advice offered by Marx, who had objected to an earlier draft which laid out more specific worker demands in France and England as well as Germany, on the grounds that Engels might be misunderstood as recommending a Lassallian reform program (letter to Engels dated 11 February 1865; MECW 42: 86-7). Marx's proposed reformulation, as adopted by Engels, 'doesn't commit you at all, which is all to the good, as later on you

yourself criticise universal suffrage if not accompanied by the requisite conditions’.

Also significant are the tactical gains to be made by playing off the ‘reactionary’ (hereditary nobility) party against the bourgeoisie. The workers’ party is advised to take full advantage of the bourgeoisie’s support (albeit for its own ends) not only of universal suffrage but of freedom of the press and of assembly: ‘The bourgeoisie cannot win political power for itself nor give this political power constitution and legal forms without putting weapons into the hands of the proletariat.... [T]he proletariat will thereby also acquire all the weapons it needs for its ultimate victory. With freedom of the press and the right of assembly and association it will win universal suffrage, and with universal, direct suffrage, in conjunction with the above tools of agitation, it will win everything else’ (‘Prussian Military Question’; MECW 20: 77). Again the key qualification emerges: ‘It is in the interests of the workers to support the bourgeoisie in its struggle against all reactionary elements, *as long as it remains true to itself*. Every gain which the bourgeoisie extracts from reaction, eventually benefits the working class if that condition is fulfilled’. The conditional support for universal suffrage upon a politically reliable workers’ party is apparent.

Bismarck’s 1867 Constitution, which introduced universal suffrage for adult males, is received enthusiastically by Engels in a review of *Capital I*: ‘Universal suffrage has added to our present parliamentary parties a new one, the *Social-Democratic Party*.... It would be foolish to continue to treat the existence, activity and doctrines of such a party with genteel silence in a country where universal suffrage has placed the final decision into the hands of the most numerous and poorest classes’ (210).

Relevant to the foregoing themes is ‘The Housing Question’ (1872). Here Engels attended to efforts by English industrialists to bypass social legislation, such as the 1858 Local Government Act, which legislation is represented as ‘of importance only because in the hands of a government dominated by or under the pressure of the workers, a government which would at last really administer it, it will be a powerful weapon for making a breach in the existing social state of things’ (MECW 23: 361). Presumably a proletarian majority in Parliament would assure the requisite working-class ‘pressure’. Certainly Engels did not preclude at this time a constitutional path to proletarian ‘domination’, insisting (when discussing ‘the spirit of German scientific socialism’) on ‘the necessity for political action by

the proletariat and of its dictatorship as the transition to the abolition of classes and, with them of the state—views such as had already been expressed in the *Communist Manifesto* and since then on innumerable occasions' (370); and we have shown that in the *Manifesto* and elsewhere the constitutional option to arrive at the so-called 'dictatorship' had been recognised. That 'spirit' was the driving force behind the German Social Democratic Party, a genuine proletarian party 'necessarily striving to establish *its* rule, the rule of the working class, hence "class domination"'—'necessarily' in the sense that 'each political party sets out to establish its rule in the state' (372). Here the formation of a proletarian party is envisaged as 'the primary condition of its struggle, and the dictatorship of the proletariat as the immediate aim of the struggle', all reminiscent of the documents of 1847 and 1848 with their allowances for a constitutional path to working-class control. Particularly revealing is the representation in this context of the Chartists as the first 'real proletarian party'.

We should note here a wholly dispirited remark in 1863 'that the English proletariat has declared himself in full agreement with the dominance of the bourgeoisie' (to Marx, 8 April; MECW 41: 465).¹² An article of February 1874 ('The British Elections') takes the constitutional option a major step forward, reflecting allowance for the recent British national elections, the new Parliament being the first elected by secret ballot—a major Chartist demand—and the second elected under the provisions of the 1867 Reform Act, Engels setting out to explain why it was 'particularly the big industrial cities and factory districts, where the workers are now absolutely in the majority, that send Conservatives to Parliament' (MECW 23: 611). That only two working-class MPs were elected reflected the absence of a working-class party, which is accounted for in an extraordinary manner: 'that no separate political working-class party has existed in England since the downfall of the Chartist Party in the fifties ... is understandable in a country in which the working class has shared more than anywhere else in the advantages of the immense expansion of its large-scale industry' (613). It could not have been 'otherwise in an England that ruled the world market'; and certainly not, Engels adds, 'in a country where the ruling classes have set themselves the task of carrying out, parallel with other concessions, one point of the Chartists' programme, the People's Charter, after another'. For two points of the Charter had already become law: the secret ballot and the abolition of property qualifications for the candidates; the third, universal suffrage, had been introduced, at least approximately. Only

annual elections, payment of MPs, and equal electoral areas remained to be fulfilled.

Also contributing to the British experience was the friction between aristocracy and bourgeoisie of which labor was taking full advantage: 'Britain will certainly not experience violent socialist agitations such as occur in other countries, where the ruling classes simply constitute, in relation to the workers, a great, reactionary, compact and inexorable mass. But once the working classes are no longer able to draw any profit from the rival competition between the interests of the landed aristocracy and the interests of the industrial bourgeoisie, because the competition will no longer exist, then we shall have in Britain too the start of the real revolutionary period' ('British Agricultural Labourers', June 1877; MECW 24: 180). 'The social movement in Britain', Engels concluded, 'is slow, it is evolutionist, not revolutionary, but is nevertheless a movement forward'. Indeed, despite the major political (and material) advance within capitalism achieved without direct proletarian representation, Engels still believed that the election of working-class members organised as a party was inevitable. For he goes on to lambaste the 'labour leaders' (chairmen and secretaries of Trades Unions and working men's political societies) for accepting the blandishments of the bourgeoisie in order to acquire a Parliamentary seat for themselves, thereby 'inexcusably' holding back the election of as many as sixty working-class members (614). For all that, the 1874 elections—returning two working-class members and also Irish Home Rule members—had 'indisputably ushered in a new phase in English political development' (616). The behaviour of the labour leaders could only delay, not prevent, the formation of an active proletarian party and its participation in Parliamentary affairs.

Recognition of the willingness of the bourgeoisie to make meaningful concessions to labour emerges again in newspaper articles of 1881; and Engels did not disguise his disappointment at the failure by labour to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the enfranchisement of 'the greater portion of the organised working class' ('Trades Unions', May 1881; MECW 24: 386). For the British unions continued as always to concern themselves exclusively with the achievement of higher wages and shorter hours for their members, whereas 'it is not the lowness of wages which forms the fundamental evil, but the wages system itself', the 'struggle for high wages and short hours' being only a means to the higher end—namely 'the abolition of the wages system altogether'—albeit 'a very necessary and

effective means', considering the political experience gained (387). If the trades unions did not come to this awareness there would inevitably arise 'a general Union, a political organisation of the working class as a whole' to claim 'its full share of representation in Parliament'. 'There is', he concludes, 'no power in the world which could for a day resist the British working class organised as a body' (388). Once again the constitutional route to proletarian power is confirmed. Indeed, '[t]he workpeople of England have but to will, and they are the masters to carry every reform, social and political, which their situation requires' ('A Working Men's Party', July 1881; MECW 24: 406). '[I]t is purely the fault of the workers themselves', he lamented shortly thereafter, 'that they have not had 40 or 50 representatives of their own in parliament since 1868' ('The Abdication of the Bourgeoisie', 5 October 1889; MECW 26: 546).

Engels had no convincing explanation for the absence at this late date of a working man's party—the Independent Labour Party was created only in 1893—especially since (as he puts it in another article) 'the working class has a majority in all large towns and manufacturing districts' ('Two Model Town Councils', June 1881; MECW 24: 396). Even so, the capitalist class had been prepared to surrender much of their legislative power, which fact is attributed simply to *fear* ('Trades Unions', 386).

Recognition of the major advances that had been achieved by labour with the direct support of the industrial bourgeoisie—which had learned 'that the middle class can never obtain full social and political power over the nation except by the help of the working class'—will be found in the important comparative study 'England in 1845 and in 1885' (March 1885; MECW 26: 297). Indeed, 'a gradual change came over the relations between both classes', Engels' illustrations including progressive constitutional legislation: 'The "Abolition of the Property Qualification" and "Vote by Ballot" are now the law of the land. The Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884 make a near approach to "universal suffrage", at least such as it now exists in Germany', where universal suffrage was introduced by Bismarck in 1866; and taking account of prospective legislation the entire Chartist program would be satisfied: 'the Redistribution Bill now before Parliament¹³ creates "equal electoral districts"—on the whole not more unequal than those of France or Germany; "payment of members" and shorter, if not actually "annual parliaments", are visibly looming in the distance—and yet there are people who say that Chartism is dead'. All this is confirmed in the Introduction to *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1892; MECW 27: 299).

A striking observation in correspondence of 1890 relates to the significance of the political dimension in answer to those who, misunderstanding the principle of historical materialism, believed ‘that we deny that the political, etc., reflections of the economic trends have any effect whatsoever on that trend itself’ (27 October 1890; MECW 49: 63). ‘Why’, Engels asks, ‘should we be fighting for the political dictatorship of the proletariat if political power is economically powerless? Might (i.e., state power) is also an economic force!’ Again, the following year: ‘steps of a truly liberating nature will not be possible until the economic revolution has made the great majority of the workers alive to their situation and thus paved the way for their *political rule*.... [I]n 5 or 10 years’ time the various parliaments will look very different from what they do today’ (24 March 1891: 153).¹⁴

‘Revisionist’ comments made in June 1891 on a draft of the German Social Democratic Party programme—the Erfurt programme—are very outspoken, though with exception apparently made for Germany (MECW 27: 226). But Engels was not dogmatic about a German exception to a constitutional option. After all, he had just warned against premature armed action following the excellent results obtained by the Social-Democratic party at the polls early in 1890, making it the second strongest in the German Empire (‘What Now?’ February-March 1890; MECW 27: 10). Again, late in 1891 he expressed his hope in correspondence that ‘[t]here will be strife between the landed nobility and the bourgeoisie, and between the industrial bourgeoisie, which is protectionist, and the men of commerce and a fraction of the industrial bourgeoisie who are free traders. The stability of the administration and of domestic politics will be shattered, in short there will be movement, struggle, life, and our party will reap all the rewards. If events take this turn, our party will be able to come to power round about 1898’ (2 September 1891; MECW 49: 235-6). All this occurred without revolutionary action. Similarly: ‘Represented by two deputies and one hundred thousand votes from 1866, when universal suffrage opened up to it the doors of the Reichstag, today it has 35 deputies and a million-and-a-half voters, a figure which none of the other parties reached in the elections of 1890.... [T]his party today has reached the point where it is possible to determine the date when it will come to power almost by mathematical calculation’ (‘Socialism in Germany’, 1892; MECW 27: 239-40). And he appealed for restraint—the constitutional option ‘working so well for us’—provided at least that the authorities did not turn to violent

repression (240-1). As for the French, they were ‘increasingly following in the footsteps of the Germans and learning to make use of universal suffrage instead of inveighing against it’ (23 August 1892; MECW 49: 508). By late 1893 he felt able to assert that the trend to universal suffrage throughout Western and Central Europe was unstoppable: ‘Once the ball is rolling, the impulsion will communicate itself to all around it, and thus one country will immediately affect its neighbour’ (MECW 50: 202; cf. 206, 212).

By the early 1890s Engels’ enthusiasm for the progress of Parliamentary reform in Britain knew no bounds: ‘Up till now progress has been splendid and Gladstone will have to capitulate to the workers. Most important of all are the political measures, namely the extension of the franchise for working men by implementing what is presently on paper and which would increase the Labour vote by 50 per cent, the curtailment of the duration of Parliament (now seven years!) and the payment of electoral expenses and MP’s salaries out of public funds’ (to Bebel, 9 February 1893; MECW 50: 104). The Liberals, he concluded—alluding not only to the franchise but to ‘a whole number of juridical and economic measures for the benefit of workers’—‘recognise that, to make sure of governing at the present time, they can do nothing but increase the political power of the working class who will naturally kick them out afterwards’ (25 February 1893; 114). In fact, the same held true of the Conservatives who would have to ‘win the working-class vote by political or economic concessions’; both parties ‘cannot help extending the power of the working class, and hastening the time which will eliminate both the one and the other’ (115).

The 1895 Introduction to The Class Struggles in France

There remains to consider the 1895 Introduction to ‘The Class Struggles in France 1845-1850’, so often represented as marking a major ‘revisionist’ *break-away* from Marx (above, pp. 51-2). Any such reading collapses in the face of the facts that have emerged above: firstly, Marx’s own adoption of a ‘revisionist’ perspective in the 1860s and 1870s, rehearsing a theme already present in the late 1840s; and secondly, Engels’ own ‘revisionism’ emerging a little later in the 1870s and thereafter, also reiterating declarations dating to the earlier period. In fact, the 1895 Preface itself recalls that ‘*The Communist Manifesto* had already proclaimed the winning of universal suffrage,

of democracy, as one of the first and most important tasks of the militant proletariat...' (MECW 27: 515). Let us then examine the 1895 document in its own right.

Engels there expressed his admiration for Marx's 'first attempt'—in 'The Class Struggles in France' published in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* (discussed above, p. 65)—to apply his materialist conception of history by 'trac[ing] political events back to effects of what were, in the final analysis, economic causes' (MECW 27: 506). There is a problem with this retroactive view. For it goes on to ascribe to Marx a belief in early 1850 in the prospect of an imminent and successful proletarian revolution, whereas in fact he had then attributed the collapse of the uprising of June 1848 to the fact that industry—and with it a self-conscious proletariat force—had not yet achieved an appropriate level of development implying a lengthy process ahead (MECW 10: 116-17). Engels did, however, at least allow a change in outlook emerging shortly thereafter in the joint article 'May to October [1850]' (numbers 5-6 of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, Autumn 1850; MECW 10: 490-532). Whereas originally 'there was still the expectation of an early new upsurge of revolutionary vigour, the historical review written by Marx and myself ... breaks with these illusions once and for all' (MECW 27: 507-8). Specifically, the joint contribution expressed the realisation that 'at least the *first* chapter of the revolutionary period was closed and that nothing was to be expected until the outbreak of a new world economic crisis. For which reason we were excommunicated, as traitors to the revolution...' (510). Yet experience since 1850 had proven even this modified position to have been faulty in that 'the state of economic development on the Continent at that time was not, by a long way, ripe for the elimination of capitalist production' (512). With the exception of England and select Continental centres, the general establishment of 'big industry' and with it an organised proletariat, was only achieved subsequently: '[History] has proved this by the economic revolution which, since 1848, has seized the whole of the Continent ...'; it is, he goes on, 'precisely this industrial revolution which ... has created a genuine bourgeois and a genuine large-scale industrial proletariat and has pushed them into the foreground of social development'.

Yet Engels was far from justifying *revolution* in the transformed environment. For experience 'has not merely dispelled the erroneous notions we then held; it has also completely transformed the conditions under which the proletariat has to fight. The mode of struggle of 1848 is today obsolete in every respect ...' (510). Engels pointed to

opportunities for working within the system to achieve proletarian gains, in effect declaring war on the followers of Blanqui who denounced legalist or constitutional procedures of arriving at a proletarian dictatorship. In elaborating this theme special attention is given to the impact of universal suffrage, especially in the case of Germany since its introduction in 1866 (515). Indeed, '[w]ith this successful utilisation of universal suffrage ... an entirely new method of proletarian struggle came into operation, and this method quickly took on a more tangible form.... [T]he bourgeoisie and the government came to be much more afraid of the legal than of the illegal action of the workers' party, of the results of elections than of those of rebellion' (516).

Engels does not actually specify which *social* gains had been or might be obtained by labor via the franchise, focusing rather on the 'astonishing growth of the [Social Democratic] party', which reflected 'the intelligent use which the German workers made of the universal suffrage introduced in 1866', such as obliging the abrogation of Bismarck's 'Anti-Socialist Law' of 1878 (514-15). He does however cite Marx's 'Preamble to the Programme of the French Workers' Party' of May 1880 on universal suffrage as 'instrument of emancipation' (516); and the full passage, it will be recalled (above p. 70), makes clear the ultimate object of the exercise—a 'collective appropriation' of the means of production, that 'can only spring from the revolutionary action of the producing class—or proletariat—organised into an independent political party', which organisation 'must be striven for, using all the means at the disposal of the proletariat, including above all universal suffrage, thus transformed from the instrument of deception which it has been hitherto into an instrument of emancipation'.

Engels, it may be added, points out that in France universal suffrage had long existed but 'had fallen into disrepute through the way it had been abused by the Bonapartist government. After the Commune [1870-71] there was no workers' party to make use of it' (515). Nonetheless, there had been progress along the legislative route; for even in France, with an insurrectionary tradition dating back a century, 'the Socialists are realising more and more that no lasting victory is possible for them unless they first win the great mass of the people, i.e., the peasants in this instance. Slow propaganda work and parliamentary activity are recognised here, too, as the immediate tasks of the party' (520-1). In Germany, the prospects were much brighter and the proletariat might achieve entirely by legal means,

and as early as 1900, a parliamentary majority ‘beyond the control of the prevailing governmental system’, and ‘before which all other powers will have to bow, whether they like it or not’—here we have, be it noted, one application of the celebrated ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’—cautioning only that no excuse should be given to the capitalist State to take repressive action and hold up the process (521-2). The conclusion is quite remarkable: ‘The irony of world history turns everything upside down. We, the “revolutionaries”, the “overthrowers”—we are thriving far better on legal methods than on illegal methods and overthrow. The parties of order, as they call themselves, are perishing under the legal conditions created by themselves’ (522).

Summary and Conclusion: Limits to Constitutional Revisionism

The constitutional option, we have shown, emerges unmistakably long before 1895. How are we to account for the common enough neglect or playing down of this fact in many of the commentaries? The rhetoric of ‘revolution’ and ‘dictatorship’ has done much to disguise the revisionism apparent throughout the range of Marx-Engels documents extending over nearly half a century. In particular, whereas the ubiquitous term ‘revolution’ seems to suggest *violent* transition, it is frequently intended to convey ‘social revolution’ achieved by constitutional means. The rhetoric of the *Communist Manifesto*—‘Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution’—is most misleading, bearing in mind that this same document expressed strong support for the constitutional movements in Britain and America (and at this time in France) whereby ‘the conquest of political power by the proletariat’—or ‘win[ning] the battle of democracy’—would be achieved (above, p. 65). As Marx himself put the matter in 1852, the ‘inevitable result’ of universal suffrage in England ‘is the political supremacy of the working class’ (p. 67); or in 1871: ‘Insurrection would be madness where peaceful agitation would more swiftly and surely do the work’ (p. 68-9); or in 1872 that the ‘conquest’ of political power might be achieved by ‘peaceful means’ (p. 70); or yet again in 1880 that proletarian political activity even in France must include all means, ‘including above all universal suffrage’ (p. 70).

There is nothing then particularly novel in Engels’ 1895 ‘Introduction’ to *The Class Struggles in France* in this respect. This, of course, is not to say that Marx or Engels positively excluded violent revolu-

tion in the achievement of proletarian control—only that much depended on ruling circumstances, including the stage in national development achieved, the cyclical phases, and even national character and custom (pp. 66, 70). The contrast between Britain and France after the failures of June 1848 is sharply drawn, for in the one case the constitutional option is promising and, in the other, violence alone would sooner or later have to be resorted to achieve proletarian control (p. 65). Certainly, some expressions—especially regarding the worsening of cyclical instability in consequence of capitalist development—suggest violent revolution. *Capital* itself yields several striking instances: ‘Force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one’ (MECW 35: 739); ‘The knell of capitalist private property sounds...’ (750). The same holds true at a much later date, as is clear from the letter of early 1881 where Marx writes of mounting proletarian ‘fury’ (above, p. 70). All the more important then is it to be fully alert to the allowances that proletarian power might be achieved by constitutional means; and that universal suffrage might be the ‘instrument of emancipation’ towards the ‘collective appropriation’ of the means of production (p. 70).

Quite clearly, Engels’ flexibility regarding practical policy reflects tactics in a general sense of the term: ‘[T]he first objective of the labour movement’, he wrote to a correspondent in 1893, ‘is the conquest of political power for and by the working class. Once we are agreed on that, differences of opinion between upright men, in full command of their wits, as to the ways and means of struggle are unlikely to give rise to a dispute over principles’, concluding that ‘[i]n my view the best tactics in any given country are those which lead most quickly and surely to the goal’ (14 March 1893; MECW 50: 119). In evaluating reformist proposals relating to hours and minimum wages Engels was concerned not to commit the Party in any definitive way, implying tactical concerns with a vengeance (3 March 1895: 454). But beyond this, his insistence in 1895 on legality as the route to proletarian power was a tactical matter in the literal sense, reflecting allowance for recent advances in military technology which gave the advantage in any violent encounter to the armed forces of the state (Introduction to *The Class Struggles*; MECW 27: 517). But here he steps back somewhat from his moderate position by going on to ask: ‘Does that mean that in the future street fighting will not longer play any role? Certainly not. It only means that the conditions since 1848 have become far more unfavourable for civilian fighters and far more favourable for the military’ (519). He points out that throughout

Continental Europe including Russia, and in Latin countries, ‘the German example of utilising the suffrage, of winning all posts accessible to us, has been imitated’, but he adds: ‘Of course, our foreign comrades do not in the least renounce their right to revolution ...’ (520-1). He also adds a veiled warning that the government might, even without the excuse provided by illegal action, take repressive action: ‘Breach of the constitution, dictatorship, return to absolutism ...’ (523); but he leaves the matter open: ‘If, therefore, you break the constitution of the Reich, Social-Democracy is free, and can do as it pleases with regard to you’ (523). ‘You shoot first, *messieurs les bourgeois*’ is how he expressed the warning in 1892 (‘Socialism in Germany’; MECW 27: 241).

To Engels’ distress, his qualifications were omitted from the excerpts from the 1895 Introduction published by *Vorwärts*, the organ of the SPD: ‘I was amazed to see today in the *Vorwärts* an excerpt from my ‘Introduction’ that had been *printed without my prior knowledge* and tricked out in such a way as to present me as a peace-loving proponent of legality *quand même*’ (1 April 1895; MECW 50: 486). And he further explained: ‘I preach these tactics only for the *Germany of today* and even then with many *reservations*. In France, Belgium, Italy, Austria, such tactics could not be followed as a whole and, for Germany, they could become inapplicable tomorrow’ (3 April 1895; 490).

Engels evidently found himself in a dilemma. But it is not one that emerged for the first time in 1895. For example, so conciliatory is Engels’ position in *The Labour Standard* for 1881 in terms of what had been achieved by way of the Parliamentary process, and what might be achieved if only the working class was willing to become more active on the political front, that one is left wondering whether anything at all is left of the ultimate Communist objective. There is, after all, nothing very radical in his appeal ‘to give the working classes a turn for the next twenty-five years’—in place of the ‘absolute reign’ of the Manchester School Free Trade doctrinaires—since ‘they could not manage worse’ (‘Cotton and Iron’, *The Labour Standard*, July 1881; MECW 24: 414). In fact, one might be led to suppose so total a commitment to Parliamentary principles that even a reversal of a working-class majority at the polls would be tolerated: ‘give the working classes a turn ...’, is all that is demanded. Similarly, in 1891 Engels proposed to Kautsky a modification to a draft programme to the effect that ‘what [the proletarians] need for their economic struggles and their organisation as a militant class is a measure

of political freedom and equal rights that will grow with their success' (28 September 1891; MECW 49: 240), which is scarcely very radical.

Were these observations a reflection of Engels' considered position, rather than of temporary dejection in the light of immediate prospects, his fears at being misrepresented would be difficult to comprehend. In fact, two considerations must be taken into account. Firstly, Engels never turned his back on the conditional character of his support for universal suffrage as expressed in 1865, conditional that is on a proletarian majority toeing the party line (above, p. 71). Of high significance in this context is a private circular letter dated 17-18 September 1879, signed by Marx and Engels but written by Engels, addressed to several leaders of the German Social Democratic Party (Bebel, Liebknecht, Bracke, and others) protesting at the voting behavior of a Reichstag party member, Max Kayser, possibly with the authorization of a faction of the party members (MECW 45: 397-401). Kayser's offence was to have voted for indirect taxes (in support of protective tariffs) against the party program, and for granting Bismarck funds against party tactics (399). Engels' position is enunciated in the course of his rejection of criticisms by Eduard Bernstein and others, of Carl Hirsch, who in his short-lived newspaper *Die Laterne* had condemned Kayser along these lines. Hirsch had every right to condemn Kayser, Engels insisted, or 'has German Social-Democracy indeed been infected with the parliamentary disease, believing that, with the popular vote, the Holy Ghost is poured upon those elected, that meetings of the faction are transformed into infallible councils and factional resolutions into sacrosanct dogma?' (400). Pace Nimtz (2000: 255-9), this episode is not evidence of Engels' hostility towards universal suffrage and parliamentary activity as a means to achieve proletarian control, but rather points to insistence on 'party discipline' by the proletarian party.

Secondly, his concern can be appreciated as reflecting an unshaken commitment to the ultimate objective of a proletarian 'dictatorship'—however achieved—namely a control economy in a classless society. All this goes back to the 1840s where a 'democratic constitution' is favored as the best means, in some circumstances, to that specific end (above, p. 57). In 1881 we find repeated the familiar proposition that 'it is not the lowness of wages which forms the fundamental evil, but the wages system itself' (above, p. 75). Insistence on 'common ownership' as final objective will be found reiterated in Engels' correspondence of the 1890s. One letter to a German correspondent emphasises the 'gradual' nature of the prospective transition, initially 'socialisation' of large industrial and agricultural establishments and

thereafter that of the entire economy (21 August 1890; MECW 49: 18-19). Again, current proposals relating to expropriation of land in Germany would not suffice: ‘so long as the propertied classes remain at the helm, nationalisation never abolishes exploitation but merely changes its form’ (24 March 1891: 152).

At the same time, it is true, Engels objected that Kautsky’s proposed designation for the forthcoming Erfurt Congress of bourgeois opponents as ‘one reactionary mass’—a Lassallian phrase—entirely neglected the major reformist measures, illustrated by the extended franchise in Britain: ‘Take the Englishmen of the two official parties who have vastly extended the suffrage and brought about a fivefold increase in the number of voters, who have evened out the size of constituencies and introduced compulsory and improved schooling, who at every session still vote not only for bourgeois reforms but also for one concession after another in favour of the working man—their progress may be slow and sluggish but nobody can condemn them out of hand as “one reactionary mass”’ (14 October 1891: 262). But these reforms—and others that the bourgeoisie might propose even after the ‘revolution’ (implying thereby proletarian political control)—have to be understood as taking place within a system that was in the process of disintegration, though with a hint of doubt with respect to the final outcome in England: ‘... we have no right to present a tendency in gradual process of realisation as an already accomplished fact, the less so in that in England, for example, such a tendency will *never* quite get to the point of becoming a fact. Come the revolution over here, the bourgeoisie would still be prepared to introduce all sorts of minor reforms, though by then it would be quite pointless to insist on minor reforms in a system that was in the process of being overthrown’ (262). To Engels’ delight, Kautsky obliged and removed the offending phrase (letter to Kautsky, 25 October 1891: 273).

The correspondence of the 1890s does express disappointment with the slow awakening of a proletarian ‘consciousness’, particularly in Britain. But here too will be found further evidence that Engels’ revisionism never diluted the final objective of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, namely to set in motion a program designed to assure a total social transformation. Engels’ 1895 evaluation of the significance of the joint contribution to the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* (above, p. 78) runs along these lines precisely:

What gives our work quite special significance is the fact that it was the first to express the formula in which, by common agreement, the workers’

parties of all countries in the world briefly summarise their demand for economic transformation: the appropriation of the means of production by society. In the second chapter, in connection with the ‘right to work’ ... it is said [MECW 10: 78]: ‘but behind the right to work stands the power over capital; behind the power over capital, the *appropriation of the means of production*, their subjection to the associated working class and, therefore, the abolition of wage labour, of capital and of their mutual relations’ (MECW 27: 508-9).

In evaluating the extent of Engels’ revisionism, account must also be taken of the fact that he addressed as an immediate problem the provision of skilled personnel to operate the new system to be set in place once proletarian power had been achieved. One indication will be found in the letter of 21 August 1890, with a revealing reference to what the Stalinists were to call ‘wrecking’: ‘Admittedly we are still short of technicians, agronomists, engineers, chemists, architects, etc., but if the worst comes to the worst we can buy them, just as the capitalists do, and if a stern example is made of a traitor or two—of whom there will assuredly be some in such company—they will find it in their interest to cease robbing us’ (MECW 49: 18-19). The mention of the ‘stern example’ that might have to be made of ‘a traitor or two’ amongst the specialist personnel required by socialist industry, raises once again the question of legitimate violence. In the event of a ‘premature’ acquisition of proletarian power, a ‘reign of terror’ would have to be unleashed to deal with sabotage by the professional *élite*: ‘If ... we come to the helm prematurely and as a result of war, the technicians will be our principal opponents and will deceive and betray us at every turn; we should have to inaugurate a reign of terror against them and would lose out all the same. This is what *always* happened to the French revolutionaries, if on a smaller scale; even in everyday administration they had to leave the subordinate, really operative, posts to their former reactionary incumbents—men who hampered and paralysed everything’.

A reign of terror, in the preceding eventuality, would however not succeed: ‘we ... would lose out all the same’. But this case is not an isolated exception, since there are more general allowances for violent means to protect a proletarian ‘dictatorship’ (whether initially achieved via the ballot box or revolution) against reactionary counter-revolution, which suggests a further qualification to Engels’ revisionism. For example, there is his early warning—based on the French experience of 1830—that ‘the enemy once beaten’ still remains a danger (‘The Reform Movement in France’, Nov. 1847; MECW 6: 381).

A reference to the maintenance of proletarian achievements ‘by force of arms’ in ‘The Communists and Karl Heinzen’ (Sept.-Oct. 1847: 295) makes this point explicitly. Similarly: ‘if the victorious party does not want to have fought in vain, it must maintain this rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionaries’ (‘On Authority’, 1872-3; MECW 23: 425). The particular significance of this feature emerges when we consider the implications for the proletarian state: ‘since the state is merely a transitional institution of which use is made in the struggle, in the revolution, to keep down one’s enemies by force, it is utter nonsense to speak of a free people’s state’—as in a draft of the Gotha Programme; ‘so long as the proletariat still *makes use* of the state, it makes use of it, not for purpose of freedom, but of keeping down its enemies and, as soon as there can be any question of freedom, the state as such ceases to exist’ (18-28 March 1875; MECW 45: 64).

A later letter, which alludes to ‘armed revolution’ in the event that the bourgeoisie reverts to force against a constitutionally-elected working-class majority, confirms in a striking manner Engels’ support for the ‘slower and more boring’ path to proletarian power rather than literal revolution, but also points out that such an achievement would probably encourage ‘the rulers to overthrow legality’, signaling the opportune moment for ‘armed [counter] revolution’:

Do you realise now what a splendid weapon you in France have had in your hands for forty years in universal suffrage; if only people had known how to use it! It’s slower and more boring than the call to revolution, but it’s ten times more sure, and what is even better, it indicates with the most perfect accuracy the day when a call to armed revolution has to be made; it’s even ten to one that universal suffrage, intelligently used by the workers, will drive the rulers to overthrow legality, that is, to put us in the most favourable position to make the revolution (12 November 1892; MECW 50: 29).

This text is taken by Nimitz as evidence against ‘all of the social democratic efforts to make [Engels] a reformist’, since Engels—so runs this argument—‘leaves no doubt ... that elections under capitalism were only a means a “gauge”, the best in his opinion, to determine when to resort to armed struggle’ (2000: 261). But it is essential to this interpretation that Engels be wholly unconcerned with achieving a proletarian majority in parliament, whereas the passage and corresponding passages in our text, point to universal suffrage as the means of achieving proletarian control via the polls; it is to

counter reactionary efforts to overthrow the legal authority that violence is justified.

In taking this line Engels was following a precedent set by Marx. Thus a first draft of 'The Civil War in France' (1871) represents the Commune in Paris and other great towns as having achieved provisional proletarian power (in this case, of course, by non-Parliamentary means) subject to the prospect of reaction and consequentially of defensive counter-attack (MECW 22: 491). Marx there opines that reactionary outbreaks would be only sporadic once communist organisation had achieved national status and, he hints, not even unwelcome: 'The Communal organisation once firmly established on a national scale, the catastrophes it might still have to undergo, would be sporadic slaveholders' insurrections, which, while for a moment interrupting the work of peaceful progress, would only accelerate the movement, by putting the sword into the hand of the Social Revolution'. Violent means of maintaining power once achieved are certainly not ruled out.

It must be allowed that certain of Engels' pronouncements appear to justify preventive 'revolutionary' activity against efforts to abolish universal suffrage by reactionaries fearful of the mere prospect of a proletarian majority. For example: 'A new Anti-Socialist Law can only strengthen the party in proportion to the individual existences it destroys. Anyone who has got the better of Bismarck need have no fear of his successor... If Caprivi does away with universal suffrage he will destroy a great empire, namely that of the Hohenzollerns' (19 July 1893; MECW 50: 168). The 1895 Introduction adopts a similar position (above, p. 80). But such an eventuality does not efface a preference for arriving at a proletarian 'dictatorship' by way of appeal to the electorate under some, increasingly relevant, conditions.¹⁵

There is a further qualification. It is that while Engels, in his final years, seems to have countenanced a peaceful transformation of society in Germany, 'like all Marxists at all times, he considered the peaceful, or even gradual perspectives in some countries in the general context of a world situation in which the 'old-fashioned' revolutionary developments of some regions—Engels thought of Russia—would react back upon the non-revolutionary ones' (Hobsbawm 1964: 341n). We encounter an instance of this perspective in Engels' criticisms of Bernstein in 1879 (above, p. 83): 'If, therefore, the 5-600,000 Social-Democratic voters, 1/10 to 1/8 of the total electorate ... have sense enough not to beat their heads against a wall and attempt a "bloody revolution" with the odds of one to ten, this is sup-

posed to prove that they will, for all time, continue to *deny* themselves all chance of exploiting some violent upheaval abroad, a sudden wave of revolutionary fervour engendered thereby, or even a people's *victory* won in a clash arising therefrom!' (MECW 45: 404).¹⁶ And an Afterword in 1894 to his 'On Social Relations in Russia' (1875) repeats the point in question (MECW 27: 453).

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Notes

1. The democratic component in Nimitz's title refers at key junctures to internal Party matters (Nimitz 2000: 258, 266-7, 275, 298), notwithstanding that his Preface defines democracy in standard liberal terms as the 'institution of "universal suffrage", the "responsibility of the state apparatus to the elected parliament", and the acquisition of civil liberties' (vii). But were Engels indeed disinterested in the achievement by the proletariat of a parliamentary majority, as Nimitz insists, it is difficult to see how he (and Marx) can be represented as contributing to the 'democratic breakthrough' in the literal, i.e., liberal, sense of the expression. King, who does read Nimitz as making out a case for Engels and Marx as 'consistent and thoroughgoing democrats', not surprisingly finds that Nimitz undermines such a position as he proceeds (King 2002: 220).
2. The *People's Charter*, published on 8 May 1838, consisted of six clauses: universal suffrage for men at 21 years of age, annual elections to Parliament, secret ballot, equal constituencies, abolition of property qualifications for candidates and salaries for Members. Petitions for the Charter were rejected by Parliament in 1839 and 1842, and in 1847-8 the Chartists renewed a mass campaign.
3. *The Holy Family*—formally a joint production but largely by Marx—represents the Chartist movement as 'the political expression of public opinion among the workers' (1844-5; MECW 4: 15).
4. Drawing on this passage, Saville rightly observes that although '[t]he acceptance of parliamentarianism was unquestioned' even by radical representatives of the Chartists, nevertheless the movement 'took it for granted, without being at all

precise in elaboration, that the achievement of the Six points—the democratisation of the political structure—would be the first major step towards a new kind of political structure’ (Saville 1987: 213-14).

5. The *Communist Manifesto* and the *Principles of Communism* upon which it is based assume Proletarian control or ‘democracy’, and outline the measures to be undertaken including reduction of the private sector; i.e., they are relevant to a stage preceding fully-fledged public ownership and central control.
6. The ‘measures’ referred to in the response to Question 18 (MECW 6: 350-1) are almost identical to the *Communist Manifesto* proposals.
7. For a vignette of O’Connor as Chartist leader, see Saville (1987: 212-13). O’Connor was not a socialist (215).
8. Engels’ ‘Chartist Agitation’, however, written at the time of the events, refers to wholly legal protest meetings and petitions, one of which extending to moderate land reform (1847; MECW 6: 412-14).
9. This is apparently the first use by Marx of the term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’.
10. Russell’s 1852 bill was in fact aborted and shortly afterwards a second reform bill was also withdrawn.
11. Gladstone’s Reform legislation of 1866 was designed to enfranchise the ‘respectable’ urban working class. It was defeated. But Disraeli’s 1867 Reform Act went much further, enfranchising nearly 60 per cent of adult males in the boroughs, thereby adding 1.12 millions to the existing UK electorate of 1.4 millions. The first election under the new provisions took place in 1868 and the second in 1874.
12. I surmise that Engels’ pessimism reflected the effective collapse of the Chartist movement with economic prosperity after 1848 and the moderation shown by ex-Chartists and radicals, who looked to the Liberal party to support their aims, now limited to household suffrage.
13. Engels was referring to the Third Reform Act of 1884 which extended the household and lodger franchise from the boroughs to the countryside, enfranchising nearly 70 per cent of males in the counties and nearly doubling the voting population of the United Kingdom and Ireland from just over three million men in 1883 to almost six million in 1885. The radical 1884 legislation was supplemented by the Redistribution of Seats Act of 1885.
14. Engels opined at this time, more specifically, that ‘[i]f one thing is certain, it is that our party and the working class can only come to power under the form of a democratic republic. This is even the specific form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the Great French Revolution has already shown’ (‘A Critique of the Draft Social-Democratic Programme of 1891’; MECW 27: 227).
15. Even the passage in *The Origin of the Family* upon which Nimtz places all the weight for his case (Nimtz 2000: 260; above, p. 53) can be read as referring to the achievement of a Parliamentary majority by an independent and self-consciously proletarian party, and a warning to the opposition that such a majority presaged the end of capitalist arrangement:

... the possessing class rules directly through the medium of universal suffrage. As long as the oppressed class, in our case, therefore, the proletariat, is not yet ripe to emancipate itself, it will in its majority regard the existing order of society as the only one possible and, politically, will form the tail of the capitalist, class, its extreme Left wing. To the extent, however, that this class

- matures for its self-emancipation, it constitutes itself as a party of its own and elects its own representatives, not those of the capitalists. Thus, universal suffrage is the gauge of the maturity of the working class. It cannot and never will be anything more in the present-day state; but that is sufficient. On the day the thermometer of universal suffrage registers boiling point among the workers, both they and the capitalists will know where they stand (MECW 26: 272).
16. See also Marx and Engels, Preface to the second Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto* (1882; MECW 24: 426); and Engels, Afterword to 'On Social Relations in Russia' (1894; MECW 27: 433).

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MECW refers to the English-language *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, published jointly in fifty volumes (1975-2004) by Lawrence and Wishart, London; International Publishers, New York; and Progress Publishers and the Institute of Marxism-Leninism (subsequently the Russian Independent Institute of Social and National Problems), Moscow. Specific references are given in the text, and are therefore not listed below.

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