

9 Marx's life at the time of the *Grundrisse*

Biographical notes on 1857–8

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The date with the revolution

In 1848 Europe was shaken by a succession of numerous popular insurrections inspired by the principles of political freedom and social justice. The weakness of a newly born workers' movement, the bourgeoisie's renunciation of these ideals, which it had initially shared, the violent military repression and the return of economic prosperity generated the defeat of the revolutionary uprisings everywhere, and the powers of reaction firmly regained the reins of state governments.

Marx supported the popular insurrections on the daily *Neue Rheinische Zeitung. Organ der Demokratie*, of which he was founder and chief editor. From the newspaper columns he carried out an intense activity of agitation, supporting the causes of the insurgents and urging the proletariat to promote 'the social and republican revolution' (Marx 1977: 178).¹ In that period he lived between Brussels, Paris and Cologne, and travelled to Berlin, Vienna and Hamburg as well as many other German cities, establishing new connections to strengthen and develop unfolding struggles. Because of this relentless militant activity, he was issued expulsion orders first from Belgium, then from Prussia, and when the new French government under the presidency of Louis Bonaparte demanded that he leave Paris, he decided to move to England. He arrived there in the summer of 1849, at the age of 31, to settle in London. Initially convinced that it would be a short stay, he ended up living there, stateless, for the rest of his life.

The first years of his English exile were characterised by the deepest poverty and ill health that contributed to the tragic loss of three of his children. Although Marx's life was never easy, this period was certainly its worst stage. From December 1850 to September 1856 he lived with his family in a two-bedroom dwelling, at 28 Dean Street in Soho, one of the poorest and shabbiest neighbourhoods of the city. The inheritance gained by his wife Jenny von Westphalen, with the death of her uncle and her mother, unexpectedly gave them a glimmer of hope and enabled him to settle his many debts, retrieve his clothes and personal objects from the pawnshop, and relocate to new premises.

In the autumn of 1856, Marx, his wife and their three daughters Jenny, Laura and Eleanor, with their loyal maid Helene Demuth – who was an integral part of the family – moved to the northern suburbs of London, at 9 Grafton Terrace,

Kentish Town, where the rent was more affordable. The house, where they stayed until 1864, was built in a recently developed area bereft of beaten paths and connections to the centre, and enveloped in darkness at night. But they finally lived in a real house, the minimal requirement for the family to retain ‘at least a *semblance* of respectability’ (Jenny Marx 1970: 223).²

In the course of 1856 Marx completely neglected the study of political economy but the coming of an international financial crisis suddenly changed this situation. In a climate of deep uncertainty, which turned into widespread panic thus contributing to bankruptcies everywhere, Marx felt that the right time for action had come again and foreseeing the future development of the recession, he wrote to Friedrich Engels: ‘I don’t suppose we’ll be able to spend much longer here merely watching’ (Marx to Engels, 26 September 1856, Marx and Engels 1983: 70). Engels, already infused with great optimism, predicted a scenario for the future in this way:

This time there’ll be an unprecedented day of wrath; the whole of Europe’s industry in ruins ... all markets over-stocked, all the upper classes in the soup, complete bankruptcy of the bourgeoisie, war and disorder to the nth degree. I, too, believe that it will all come to pass in 1857.

(Engels to Marx, 26 September 1856, Marx and Engels 1983: 72)

By the end of a decade that had seen the reflux of the revolutionary movement, and in the course of which Marx and Engels were prevented from actively participating in the European political arena, the two started to exchange messages with renewed confidence in future prospects. The long-awaited date with the revolution now seemed much closer, and for Marx this pointed to one priority above all: resuming his ‘Economics’ and finishing it as soon as possible.

Fighting misery and diseases

In order to dedicate himself to work in this spirit Marx would have needed some tranquillity, but his personal situation was still extremely precarious and did not allow him any respite. Having employed all the resources at his disposal in the relocation to a new home, he was short of money again to pay the first month’s rent. So he reported to Engels, who lived and worked in Manchester at the time, all the troubles of his situation:

[I am] without prospects and with soaring family liabilities. I have no idea about what to do and in fact my situation is more desperate than it was five years ago. I thought that I had already tasted the quintessence of this shit, but no.

(Marx to Engels, 20 January 1857, Marx and Engels 1983: 93)

This statement deeply shocked Engels, who had been sure that after the move his friend would finally be more settled, so in January 1857 he spent the money received from his father for Christmas to buy a horse and pursue his great

passion: fox-hunting. However, during this period and for his whole life, Engels never denied all of his support to Marx and his family, and, worried about this difficult juncture, he sent Marx £5 a month and urged him to count on him always in difficult times.

Engels' role was certainly not limited to financial support. In the deep isolation Marx experienced during those years, but through the large correspondence exchanged between the two, Engels was the only point of reference with whom he could engage in intellectual debate: 'more than anything I need your opinion' (Marx to Engels, 2 April 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 303). Engels was the only friend to confide in at difficult times of despondency: 'write soon because your letters are essential now to help me pluck up. The situation is dire' (Marx to Engels, 18 March 1857, Marx and Engels 1983: 106). Engels was also the companion with whom Marx shared the sarcasm solicited by events: 'I envy people who can turn summersaults. It must be a great way of ridding the head of bourgeois anger and ordure' (Marx to Engels, 23 January 1857, Marx and Engels 1983: 99).

In fact uncertainty soon became more pressing. Marx's only income, aside from the help granted by Engels, consisted of payments received from the *New York Tribune*, the most widely circulated English language newspaper at the time. The agreement on his contributions, for which he received £2 per article, changed with the economic crisis that had also had repercussions on the American daily. Aside from the American traveller and writer Bayard Taylor, Marx was the only European correspondent not to be fired, but his participation was scaled down from two articles per week to one, and – 'although in times of prosperity they never gave me an extra penny' (Marx to Weydemeyer, 1 February 1859, Marx and Engels 1983: 374) – his payments were halved. Marx humorously recounted the event: 'There is a certain irony of fate in my being personally embroiled in these damned crises' (Marx to Engels, 31 October 1857, Marx and Engels 1983: 198). However, to be able to witness the financial breakdown was an unparalleled entertainment: 'Nice, too, that the capitalists, who so vociferously opposed the "right to work", are now everywhere demanding "public support" from their governments and ... hence advocating the "right to profit" at public expense' (Marx to Engels, 8 December 1857, Marx and Engels 1983: 214). Despite his state of anxiety, he announced to Engels that 'though my own financial distress may be dire indeed, never, since 1849, have I felt so cosy as during this outbreak' (Marx to Engels, 13 November 1857, Marx and Engels 1983: 199).

The beginning of a new editorial project slightly eased the desperation. The editor of the *New York Tribune*, Charles Dana, invited Marx to join the editorial committee for *The New American Cyclopædia*. Lack of money drove him to accept the offer, but he entrusted most of the work to Engels in order to dedicate more time to his research. In their division of labour between July 1857 and November 1860, Engels edited military entries – i.e. the majority of the ones commissioned – whilst Marx compiled several biographical sketches. Although the payment of \$2 per page was very low, it was still an addition to his disastrous finances. For this reason Engels urged him to get as many entries from

Dana as possible: 'We can easily supply that amount of "unalloyed" erudition, so long as unalloyed Californian gold is substituted for it' (Engels to Marx, 22 April 1857, Marx and Engels 1983: 122). Marx followed the same principle in writing his articles: 'to be as little concise as possible, so long as it is not insipid' (Marx to Engels, 22 February 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 272).³

Despite efforts, his financial situation did not improve at all. It actually became so unsustainable that, chased by creditors he compared to 'hungry wolves' (Marx to Engels, 8 December 1857, Marx and Engels 1983: 214), and in the absence of coal for heating during the cold winter of that year, in January 1858 he wrote to Engels: 'if these conditions persist, I would sooner be miles under the ground than go on vegetating this way. Always being a nuisance to others whilst, on top of that, being constantly tormented by personal trifles becomes unbearable in the long run' (Marx to Engels, 28 January 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 255). In such circumstances he also had bitter words for the emotional sphere: 'privately, I think, I lead the most agitated life imaginable... For people of wide aspiration nothing is more stupid than to get married, thus letting oneself in for the small miseries of domestic and private life' (Marx to Engels, 22 February 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 273).

Poverty was not the only spectre haunting Marx. As with a major part of his troubled existence, he was also affected at the time by several diseases. In March 1857 the excessive labour done at night gave him an eye infection; in April he was hit by toothache; in May he suffered continuous liver complaints for which he was 'submerged in drugs'. Greatly enfeebled, he was incapacitated and unable to work for three weeks. He then reported to Engels: 'in order that my time should not be entirely wasted I have, in the absence of better things, been mastering the Danish language'; however, 'if the doctor's promises are anything to go by, I have prospects of becoming a human being again by next week. Meanwhile I'm still as yellow as a quince and vastly more irritated' (Marx to Engels, 22 May 1857, Marx and Engels 1983: 132).

Shortly afterwards a much graver occurrence befell the Marx family. In early July Jenny gave birth to their last child, but the baby, born too weak, died immediately after. Bereaved once more, Marx confessed to Engels: 'in itself, this is not a tragedy. But ... the circumstances that caused it to happen were such to bring back heartrending memories [probably the death of Edgar (1847–55), the last child he lost]. It is impossible to discuss this issue in a letter' (Marx to Engels, 8 July 1857, Marx and Engels 1983: 143). Engels was highly affected by this statement and replied: 'things must be really hard for you to write like this. You can accept the death of the little one stoically, but your wife will hardly be able to' (Engels to Marx, 11 July 1857, Marx and Engels 1983: 143).

The situation was further complicated by the fact that Engels fell ill and was seriously hit by a glandular fever, so he could not work for the whole summer. At that point, Marx was in real difficulties. Without his friend's entries for the encyclopaedia, he needed to buy time, so he pretended to have sent a pile of manuscripts to New York, and that they had been lost in the post. Nonetheless, the pressure did not decrease. When the events surrounding the Indian Sepoy

rebellion became more striking, the *New York Tribune* expected an analysis from their expert, without knowing that the articles concerning military matters were in fact the work of Engels. Marx, forced by the circumstances to be temporarily in charge of the 'military department' (Marx to Engels, 14 January 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 249)⁴, ventured to claim that the English needed to make a retreat by the beginning of the rainy season. He informed Engels of his choice in these words: 'it is possible that I'll look really bad but in any case with a little dialectics I will be able to get out of it. I have, of course, so formulated my words as to be right either way' (Marx to Engels, 15 August 1857, Marx and Engels 1983: 152). However, Marx did not underestimate this conflict and reflecting on its possible effects, he said: 'in view of the drain of men and bullion which she will cost the English, India is now our best ally' (Marx to Engels, 14 January 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 249).

Writing the *Grundrisse*

Poverty, health problems and all kind of privations – the *Grundrisse* was written in this tragic context. It was not the product of research by a well-to-do thinker protected by bourgeois tranquillity; on the contrary, it was the labour of an author who experienced hardship and found the energy to carry on only sustained by the belief that, given the advancing economic crisis, his work had become necessary for his times: 'I am working like mad all through the nights at putting my economic studies together so that I may at least get the outlines (*Grundrisse*) clear before the deluge' (Marx to Engels, 8 December 1857, Marx and Engels 1983: 217).

In the autumn of 1857, Engels was still evaluating events with optimism: 'the American crash is superb and will last for a long time... Commerce will again be going downhill for the next three or four years. Now we have a chance' (Engels to Marx, 29 October 1857, Marx and Engels 1983: 195). Thus he was encouraging Marx: 'in 1848 we were saying: now our moment is coming, and in a certain sense it was, but this time it is coming completely and it is a case of life or death' (Engels to Marx, 15 November 1857, Marx and Engels 1983: 200). On the other hand, without harbouring any doubts about the imminence of the revolution, they both hoped that it would not erupt before the whole of Europe had been invested by the crisis, and so the auspices for the 'year of strife' were postponed to 1858 (Engels to Marx, 31 December 1857, Marx and Engels 1983: 236).

As reported in a letter from Jenny von Westphalen to Conrad Schramm, a family friend, the general crisis had its positive effects on Marx: 'you can imagine how high up the Moor is. He has recovered all his wonted facility and capacity for work, as well as the liveliness and buoyancy of spirit' (Jenny Marx to Schramm, 8 December 1857, Marx and Engels 1983: 566). In fact Marx began a period of intense intellectual activity, dividing his labours between the articles for the *New York Tribune*, the work for *The New American Cyclopædia*, the unfinished project to write a pamphlet on the current crisis and, obviously, the *Grundrisse*. However, despite his renewed energies, all these undertakings

proved excessive and Engels's aid became once more indispensable. By the beginning of 1858, following his full recovery from the disease he had suffered, Marx asked him to return to work on the encyclopaedia entries:

sometimes it seems to me that if you could manage to do a few sections every couple of days, it could perhaps act as a check on your drunkenness that, from what I know of Manchester and at the present excited times, seem to me inevitable and far from good for you ... because I really need to finish off my other works, that are taking up all my time, even if the house should come falling on my head!

(Marx to Engels, 5 January 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 238)

Engels accepted Marx's energetic exhortation and reassured him that, after the holidays, he 'experienced the need of a quieter and more active life' (Engels to Marx, 6 January 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 239). Nonetheless, Marx's greatest problem was still lack of time, and he repeatedly complained to his friend that 'whenever I'm at the [British] Museum, there are so many things I need to look up that it's closing time (now 4 o'clock) before I have so much as looked round. Then there's the journey there. So much time lost' (Marx to Engels, 1 February 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 258). Moreover, in addition to practical difficulties, there were theoretical ones:

I have been ... so damnably held up by errors in calculation that, in despair, I have applied myself to a revision of algebra. Arithmetic has always been my enemy, but by making a detour via algebra, I shall quickly get back into the way of things.

(Marx to Engels, 11 January 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 244)

Finally, his scrupulousness contributed to slowing the writing of the *Grundrisse*, as he demanded of himself that he keep on searching for new confirmations to test the validity of his theses. In February he explained the state of his research to Ferdinand Lassalle thus:

Now I want to tell you how my Economics is getting on. The work is written. I have in fact had the final text in hand for some months. But the thing is proceeding very slowly, because no sooner does one set about finally disposing of subjects that have been the main object of years of study, than they start revealing new aspects and demand to be thought out further.

In the same letter, Marx regretted once again the condition to which he was doomed. Being forced to spend a large part of the day on newspaper articles, he wrote: 'I am not master of my time but rather its slave. Only the nights are left for my own work, which in turn is often disrupted by bilious attacks or recurrences of liver trouble' (Marx to Lassalle, 22 February 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 268).

In fact, illness had violently befallen him again. In January 1858 he communicated to Engels that he had been in cure for three weeks: 'I had exaggerated working at night – only keeping myself going with lemonades and a large quantity of tobacco' (Marx to Engels, 14 January 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 247). In March, he was 'very sickly again' with his liver: 'the prolonged work by night and, by day, the numerous petty discomforts resulting from the economical conditions of my domesticity have recently been cause of frequent relapses' (Marx to Engels, 29 March 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 295). In April, he claimed again:

I've felt so ill with my bilious complaint this week, that I am incapable of thinking, reading, writing or, indeed, doing anything save the articles for the *Tribune*. These, of course, cannot be allowed to lapse since I must draw on the curs *as soon as possible* to avoid bankruptcy.

(Marx to Engels, 2 April 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 296)

At this stage of his life Marx had completely given up political organised and private relations: in letters to his few remaining friend he disclosed that 'I live like a hermit' (Marx to Lassalle, 21 December 1857, Marx and Engels 1983: 225), and 'I seldom see my few acquaintances nor, on the whole, is this any great loss' (Marx to Schramm, 8 December 1857, Marx and Engels 1983: 217). Aside from Engels' continuous encouragement, the recession and its expansion worldwide also fed his hopes and goaded him into carrying on working: 'take[n] all in all, the crisis has been burrowing away like a good old mole' (Marx to Engels, 22 February 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 274). The correspondence with Engels documents the enthusiasm sparked in him by the progression of events. In January, having read the news from Paris in the *Manchester Guardian*, he exclaimed: 'everything seems to be going better than expected' (Marx to Engels, 23 January 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 252), and at the end of March, commenting on recent developments, he added: 'in France the bedlam continues most satisfactorily. It is unlikely that conditions will be peaceful beyond the summer' (Marx to Engels, 29 March 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 296). And whilst a few months earlier he had pessimistically stated that:

After what has happened over the last ten years, any thinking being's contempt for the masses as for individuals must have increased to such a degree that '*odi profanum vulgus et arceo*'⁵ has almost become an imposed maxim. Nonetheless, all these are themselves philistine states of mind, that will be swept away by the first storm.

(Marx to Lassalle, 22 February 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 268)

In May he claimed with some satisfaction that 'on the whole the present moment of time is a pleasing one. History is apparently about to take again a new start, and the signs of dissolution everywhere are delightful for every mind not bent upon the conservation of things as they are' (Marx to Lassalle, 31 May 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 323).

Similarly, Engels reported to Marx with great fervour that on the day of the execution of Felice Orsini, the Italian democrat who had tried to assassinate Napoleon III, a major working-class protest took place in Paris: ‘at a time of great turmoil it is good to see such a roll-call take place and hear 100,000 men reply “present!”’ (Engels to Marx, 17 March 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 289–90). In view of possible revolutionary developments, he also studied the sizeable number of French troops and warned Marx that to win it would have been necessary to form secret societies in the army, or, as in 1848, for the bourgeoisie to stand against Bonaparte. Finally, he predicted that the secession of Hungary and Italy and the Slavic insurrections would have violently hit Austria, the old reactionary bastion, and that, in addition to this, a generalised counter-attack would have spread the crisis to every large city and industrial district. In other words, he was certain that ‘after all, it’s going to be a hard struggle’ (Engels to Marx, 17 March 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 289). Led by his optimism Engels resumed his horse-riding, this time with a further aim; as he wrote to Marx:

Yesterday, I took my horse over a bank and hedge five feet and several inches high: the highest I have ever jumped ... when we go back to Germany we will certainly have a thing or two to show the Prussian cavalry. Those gentlemen will find it difficult to keep up with me.

(Engels to Marx, 11 February 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 265)

The reply was of smug satisfaction:

I congratulate you upon your equestrian performances. But don’t take too many breakneck jumps, as there will be soon more important occasion for risking one’s neck. I don’t believe that cavalry is the speciality in which you will be of the greatest service to Germany.

(Marx to Engels, 14 February 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 266)

On the contrary, Marx’s life met with further complications. In March, Lassalle informed him that the editor Franz Duncker from Berlin had agreed to publish his work in instalments, but the good news paradoxically turned into another destabilising factor. A new cause of concern added to the others – anxiety – as recounted in the umpteenth medical bulletin addressed to Engels, this time written by Jenny von Westphalen:

His bile and liver are again in a state of rebellion.... The worsening of his condition is largely attributable to mental unrest and agitation which now, after the conclusion of the contract with the publishers are greater than ever and increasing daily, since he finds it utterly impossible to bring the work to a close.

(Jenny Marx to Engels, 9 April 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 569)

For the whole of April, Marx was hit by the most virulent bile pain he had ever suffered and could not work at all. He concentrated exclusively on the few

articles for the *New York Tribune*; these were indispensable for his survival, and he had to dictate them to his wife, who was fulfilling 'the function of secretary' (Marx to Engels, 23 April 1857, Marx and Engels 1983: 125). As soon as he was able to hold a pen again, he informed Engels that his silence was only due to his 'inability to write'. This was manifest 'not only in the literary, but in the literal sense of the word'. He also claimed that 'the persistent urge to get down to work coupled with the inability to do so contributed to aggravate the disease'. His condition was still very bad:

I am not capable of working. If I write for a couple of hours, I have to lie down in pain for a couple of days. I expect, damn it, that this state of affairs will come to an end next week. It couldn't have come at a worst time. Obviously during the winter I overdid my nocturnal labours. *Hinc illae lacrimae*.⁶

(Marx to Engels, 29 April 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 309)

Marx tried to fight his illness, but, after taking large amounts of medicines without drawing any benefit from them, he resigned himself to follow the doctor's advice to change scene for a week and 'refrain from all intellectual labour for a while' (Marx to Lassalle, 31 May 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 321). So he decided to visit Engels, to whom he announced: 'I've let my duty go hang' (Marx to Engels, 1 May 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 312).

Naturally, during his 20 days in Manchester, he carried on working: he wrote the 'Chapter on Capital' and the last pages of the *Grundrisse*.

Struggling against bourgeois society

Once back in London Marx should have edited the text in order to send it to the publishers, but, although he was already late, he still delayed its draft. His critical nature won over his practical needs again. As he informed Engels:

During my absence a book by Maclaren covering the entire history of currency came out in London, which, to judge by the excerpts in *The Economist*, is first-rate. The book isn't in the library yet. . . . Obviously I must read it before writing mine. So I sent my wife to the publisher in the City, but to our dismay we discovered that it costs 9/6d, more than the whole of our fighting funds. Hence I would be most grateful if you could send me a mail order for that amount. There probably won't be anything that's new to me in the book, but after all the fuss *The Economist* has made about it, and the excerpts I myself have read, my theoretical conscience won't allow me to proceed without having looked at it.

(Marx to Engels, 31 May 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 317)

This vignette is very telling. The 'dangerousness' of the reviews in *The Economist* for family peace; sending his wife Jenny to the City on a mission to deal

with theoretical doubts; the fact that his savings was not enough even to buy a book; the usual pleas to his friend in Manchester that required immediate attention: what can better describe the life of Marx in those years and particularly what his 'theoretical conscience' was capable of?

In addition to his complex temperament, ill health and poverty, his usual 'enemies' contributed to delay the completion of his work even further. His physical condition worsened again, as reported to Engels: 'the disease from which I was suffering before leaving Manchester again became chronic, persisting throughout the summer, so that any kind of writing costs me a tremendous effort' (Marx to Engels, 21 September 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 341). Moreover, those months were marked by unbearable economic concerns that forced him constantly to live with the 'spectre of an inevitable final catastrophe' (Marx to Engels, 15 July 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 328). Seized by desperation again, in July Marx sent a letter to Engels that really testifies to the extreme situation he was living in:

It behoves us to put our heads together to see if some way cannot be found out of the present situation, for it has become absolutely untenable. It has already resulted in my being completely disabled from doing any work, partly because I have to waste most of my best time running round in fruitless attempts to raise money, and partly because the strength of my abstraction – due rather, perhaps, to my being physically run down – is no longer a match for domestic miseries. My wife is a nervous wreck because of this misery.... Thus the whole business turns on the fact that what little comes in is never earmarked for the coming month, nor is it ever more than just sufficient to reduce debts ... so that this misery is only postponed by four weeks which have to be got through in one way or another ... not even the auction of my household goods would suffice to satisfy the creditors in the vicinity and ensure an unhampered removal to some hidey-hole. The show of respectability which has so far been kept up has been the only means of avoiding a collapse. I for my part wouldn't care a damn about living in Whitechapel [the neighbourhood in London where most of the working class lived at the time], provided I could again at last secure an hour's peace in which to attend to my work. But in view of my wife's condition just now such a metamorphosis might entail dangerous consequences, and it could hardly be suitable for growing girls.... I would not with my worst enemy to have to wade through the quagmire in which I've been trapped for the past eight weeks, fuming the while over the innumerable vexations that are ruining my intellect and destroying my capacity for work'.

(Marx to Engels, 15 July 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 328–31)

Yet despite his extremely destitute state, Marx did not let the precariousness of his situation triumph over him and, concerning his intention to complete his work, he commented to his friend Joseph Weydemeyer: 'I must pursue my goal at all costs and not allow bourgeois society to turn me into a money-making machine' (Marx to Weydemeyer, 1 February 1859, Marx and Engels 1983: 374).

Meanwhile, the economic crisis waned, and soon enough the market resumed its normal functioning. In fact, in August a disheartened Marx turned to Engels: 'over the past few weeks the world has grown damned optimistic again' (Marx to Engels, 13 August 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 338); and Engels, reflecting on the way the overproduction of commodities had been absorbed, asserted: 'never before has such heavy flooding drained away so rapidly' (Engels to Marx, 7 October 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 343). The certainty that the revolution was around the corner, which inspired them throughout the autumn of 1856 and encouraged Marx to write the *Grundrisse*, was now giving way to the most bitter disillusionment: 'there is no war. Everything is bourgeois' (Marx to Engels, 11 December 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 360). And whilst Engels raged against the 'increasing embourgeoisement of the English proletariat', a phenomenon that, in his opinion, was to lead the most exploitative country in the world to have a 'bourgeois proletariat alongside the bourgeoisie' (Engels to Marx, 7 October 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 343), Marx held onto every even slightly significant event, until the end: 'despite the optimistic turn taken by world trade [...] it is some consolation at least that the revolution has begun in Russia, for I regard the convocation of "notables" to Petersburg as such a beginning'. His hopes were also set on Germany: 'in Prussia things are worse than they were in 1847', as well as on the Czech bourgeoisie's struggle for national independence: 'exceptional movements are on foot amongst the Slavs, especially in Bohemia, which, though counter-revolutionary, yet provide ferment for the movement'. Finally, as if betrayed, he scathingly asserted: 'It will do the French no harm to see that, even without them, the world moved' (Marx to Engels, 8 October 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 345).

However, Marx had to resign himself to the evidence: the crisis had not provoked the social and political effects that he and Engels had forecast with so much certainty. Nonetheless, he was still firmly convinced that it was only a matter of time before the revolution in Europe erupted and that the issue, if any, was what world scenarios the economic change would have provoked. Thus he wrote to Engels, giving a sort of political evaluation of the most recent events and a reflection on future prospects:

We can't deny that bourgeois society has for the second time experienced its sixteenth century, a sixteenth century which, I hope, will sound its death knell just as the first flattered it in its lifetime. The real task of bourgeois society is the creation of the world market, or at least of its general framework, and of the production based on the market. Since the world is round, it seems to me that the colonisation of California and Australia and the opening up of China and Japan would seem to have completed this process. The difficult question for us is this: on the continent the revolution is imminent and will immediately assume a socialist character. Will it not necessarily be crushed in this little corner of the earth, since the movement of bourgeois society is still in the ascendant over a far greater area?

(Marx to Engels, 8 October 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 347)

These thoughts include two of the most significant of Marx's predictions: a right one that led him to intuit, better than any of his contemporaries, the world scale of the development of capitalism; and a wrong one, linked to the belief in the inevitability of the proletarian revolution in Europe.

The letters to Engels contain Marx's sharp criticism of all those who were his political adversaries in the progressive camp. Many were targeted alongside one of his favourites, Pierre Joseph Proudhon, the main figure of the dominant form of socialism in France, whom Marx regarded as the 'false brother' communism needed to rid itself of (Marx to Weydemeyer, 1 February 1859, Marx and Engels 1983: 374). Marx often entertained a relationship of rivalry with Lassalle, for instance, and when he received Lassalle's latest book *Heraclitus, the Dark Philosopher*, he termed it as a 'very silly concoction' (Marx to Engels, 1 February 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 258). In September 1858, Giuseppe Mazzini published his new manifesto in the journal *Pensiero ed Azione* [*Thought and Action*], but Marx, who had no doubts about him, asserted: 'still the same old jackass' (Marx to Engels, 8 October 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 346). Instead of analysing the reasons for the defeat of 1848–9, Mazzini 'busies himself with advertising nostrums for the cure of ... the political palsy' of the revolutionary migration (Marx 1980: 37). He railed against Julius Fröbel, a member of the Frankfurt council in 1848–9 and typical representative of the German democrats, who had fled abroad and later distanced himself from political life: 'once they have found their bread and cheese, all these scoundrels require is some blasé pretext to bid farewell to the struggle' (Marx to Engels, 24 November 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 356). Finally, as ironic as ever, he derided the 'revolutionary activity' of Karl Blind, one of the leaders of the German émigrés in London:

He gets a couple of acquaintances in Hamburg to send letters (written by himself) to English newspapers in which mention is made of the stir created by his anonymous pamphlets. Then his friends report on German newspapers what a fuss was made by the English ones. That, you see, is what being a man of action means.

(Marx to Engels, 2 November 1858, Marx and Engels 1983: 351)

Marx's political engagement was of a different nature. Whilst never desisting from fighting against bourgeois society, he also kept his awareness of his main role in this struggle, which was that of developing a critique of the capitalist mode of production through a rigorous study of political economy and ongoing analysis of economic events. For this reason during the 'lows' of the class struggle, he decided to use his powers in the best possible way by keeping at a distance from the useless conspiracies and personal intrigues to which political competition was reduced at the time: 'since the Cologne trial [the one against the communists of 1853], I have withdrawn completely into my study. My time was too precious to be wasted in fruitless endeavour and petty squabbles' (Marx to Weydemeyer, 1 February 1859, Marx and Engels 1983: 374). As a matter of

fact, despite the flood of troubles, Marx continued to work, and he published his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy: Part One* in 1859, for which the *Grundrisse* had been the initial testing ground.

Marx ended the year 1858 similarly to previous ones, as his wife Jenny recounts: '1858 was neither a good nor a bad year for us; it was one where days went by, one completely like the next. Eating and drinking, writing articles, reading newspapers and going for walks: this was our whole life' (Jenny Marx 1970: 224). Day after day, month after month, year after year, Marx kept working on his oeuvre for the rest of his life. He was guided in the burdensome labour of drafting the *Grundrisse* and many other voluminous manuscripts in preparation for *Capital* by his great determination and strength of personality, and also by the unshakeable certainty that his existence belonged to socialism, the movement for the emancipation of millions of women and men.

Notes

- 1 Translations quoted in the article are the work of the author.
- 2 According to Marx's wife, this change had become absolutely necessary: 'as everyone was becoming a philistine, we could not keep living like *bohémien*s' (Jenny Marx 1970: 223).
- 3 Although they included some interesting remarks, the articles for the encyclopaedia were defined by Engels as 'purely commercial work ... that can safely remain buried' (Friedrich Engels to Hermann Schlüter, 29 January 1891, Engels 2002: 113).
- 4 In the MECW edition, this letter is mistakenly dated 16 January 1858.
- 5 Tr.: 'I hate and shun the vulgar crowd' (Horace 1994: 127).
- 6 Tr.: 'Hence, those tears' (Terence 2002: 99).

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