



Marx's Critique of German Social Democracy: From the International to the Political Struggles of the 1870s

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I. THE LIMITED PARTICIPATION OF THE GERMANS IN THE INTERNATIONAL WORKING MEN'S ASSOCIATION

The workers' organizations that founded the International Working Men's Association in 1864 were something of a motley. The central driving forces were British trade unionism and the mutualists, long dominant in France but strong also in Belgium and French-speaking Switzerland. Alongside these two components, there were the communists, grouped around the figure of Karl Marx, elements that had nothing to do with the socialist tradition, such as the followers of Giuseppe Mazzini, and some groups of French, Belgian and Swiss workers who joined the International with a variety of confused theories, some of a utopian inspiration. The General Association of German Workers—the party led by followers of Ferdinand Lassalle—never affiliated to the International but orbited around it. This organization was hostile to trade unionism and conceived of political action in rigidly national terms.

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In 1865, the International expanded in Europe and established its first important nuclei in Belgium and French-speaking Switzerland. The Prussian Combination Laws, which prevented German political associations from having regular contacts with organizations in other countries, meant that the International was unable to open sections in what was then the German Confederation. The General Association of German Workers—the first workers’ party in history,¹ founded in 1863 and led by Lassalle’s disciple Johann Baptist von Schweitzer—followed a line of ambivalent dialogue with Otto von Bismarck and showed little or no interest in the International during the early years of its existence. It was an indifference shared by Wilhelm Liebknecht, despite his political proximity to Marx. Johann Philipp Becker tried to find a way around these difficulties through the Geneva-based “Group of German-speaking Sections”.

While Liebknecht did not understand the centrality of the international dimension for the struggle of the workers’ movement, Marx also had deep theoretical and political differences with von Schweitzer. In February 1865 he wrote to the latter that “the aid of the Royal Prussian government for co-operative societies”, which the Lassalleans welcomed, was “worthless as an economic measure, whilst, at the same time, it serve[d] to extend the system of tutelage, corrupt part of the working class and emasculate the movement”. Marx went on to reject any possibility of an alliance between the workers and the monarchy:

Just as the bourgeois party in Prussia discredited itself and brought about its present wretched situation by seriously believing that with the “New Era” the government had fallen into its lap by the grace of the Prince Regent, so the workers’ party will discredit itself even more if it imagines that the Bismarck era or any other Prussian era will make the golden apples just drop into its mouth, by grace of the king. It is beyond all question that Lassalle’s ill-starred illusion that a Prussian government might intervene with socialist measures will be crowned with disappointment. The logic of circumstances will tell. But the honour of the workers’ party requires that it reject such illusions, even before their hollowness is punctured by experience. The working class is revolutionary or it is nothing.²

¹ At this time, the German party had about 5000 members.

² Karl Marx to Johann Baptist von Schweitzer, 13 February 1865, quoted in Karl Marx, “Marx to Engels, 18 February 1865,” in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 42: 96.

The critique of state socialism was a common theme in Marx's political reflections during that period. A few days after the letter to Schweitzer, he suggested to Engels that the position of the Lassalleans in Germany was akin to the "alliance of the 'proletariat' with the 'government' against the 'liberal bourgeoisie'" which the two of them had firmly opposed in 1847.³

Marx's critique to the policy of German social democracy continued in 1866. In the *Instructions for Delegates of the Provisional General Council*, prepared for the Geneva congress, Marx underlined the basic function of trade unions against which not only the mutualists but also certain followers of Robert Owen in Britain and of Lassalle in Germany had taken a stand. Lassalle advocated the concept of an "iron law of wages", which held that efforts to increase wages were futile and a distraction for workers from the primary task of assuming political power in the state. Marx wrote:

This activity of the Trades' Unions is not only legitimate, it is necessary. It cannot be dispensed with so long as the present system of production lasts. On the contrary, it must be generalized by the formation and the combination of Trades' Unions throughout all countries. On the other hand, unconsciously to themselves, the Trades' Unions were forming centres of organization of the working class, as the mediaeval municipalities and communes did for the middle class. If the Trades' Unions are required for the guerrilla fights between capital and labour, they are still more important as organized agencies for superseding the very system of wages labour and capital rule.

In the same document, Marx did not spare the existing unions his criticism. For they were "too exclusively bent upon the local and immediate struggles with capital [and had] not yet fully understood their power of acting against the system of wages slavery itself. They therefore kept too much aloof from general social and political movements".⁴

In September 1868, Marx returned to the question of state socialism. In a letter to Engels, he suggested that what von Schweitzer had described the previous month in Hamburg at the congress of the General Association of German Workers as the "summa of Lassalle's discoveries"—that is, state credit for the foundation of productive associations—was "literally copied

³Karl Marx, "Marx to Engels, 18 February 1865," in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 42: 97.

⁴Karl Marx, "Resolutions of the Geneva Congress (1866)," in *Workers Unite! The International after 150 Years*, ed. Marcello Musto (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 86.

from the programme of French Catholic socialism”, inspired by Philip Buchez, which went back to “the days of Louis-Philippe”.⁵

Instead, strong opposition to the government would have been good for the social struggle: “The most essential thing for the German working class is that it should cease to agitate by permission of the high government authorities. Such a bureaucratically schooled race must undergo a complete course of ‘self help’.”⁶

In a letter to Schweitzer, Marx set out at greater length his differences with the Lassallean tendency. The first question was his opposition to the strategy of “state aid versus self-help”, which Buchez, the leader of Catholic socialism, had used against the genuine workers’ movement in France, and on the basis of which Lassalle himself had later made “concessions to the Prussian monarchy, to Prussian reaction (the feudal party) and even to the clericals”. For Marx, it was essential that the workers’ struggle should be free and independent. “The main thing is to teach [the worker] to walk by himself”, especially in Germany, where “he is regulated bureaucratically from childhood onwards” and believes in the authority of superiors.

The other significant area of disagreement was the theoretical and political rigidity of Lassalle and his followers. Marx criticized the comrade with whom he had been in touch for many years, on the grounds that “like everyone who claims to have in his pocket a panacea for the sufferings of the masses, [Lassalle] gave his agitation, from the very start, a religious, sectarian character”, and, being the founder of a sect, “he denied all natural connection with the earlier movement, both in Germany and abroad”. Lassalle was guilty of the same error as Proudhon—that of “not seeking the real basis of his agitation in the actual elements of the class movement, but of wishing, instead, to prescribe for that movement a course determined by a certain doctrinaire recipe”. For Marx, any “sect seeks its *raison d’être* and its *point d’honneur* not in what it has in common with the class

⁵ Karl Marx, “Marx to Engels, 19 September 1868,” in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1988), 43: 105.

⁶ Karl Marx, “Marx to Engels, 26 September 1868,” *ibid.*, 115. Although he declined an invitation to the Hamburg congress, Marx nevertheless found some signs of progress. To Engels he remarked: “I was glad to see that the starting points of any ‘serious’ workers’ movement—agitation for complete political freedom, regulation of the working day and international co-operation of the working class—were emphasised in their programme for the congress. [...] [I]n other words, I congratulated them on having abandoned Lassalle’s programme”, Karl Marx, “Marx to Friedrich Engels, 26 August 1868,” *ibid.*, 89–90.

movement, but in the particular shibboleth distinguishing it from that movement".⁷ His opposition to that kind of politics could not have been clearer.⁸

In the fight against state socialism, Marx also took issue with Liebknecht. After one of his speeches in the Reichstag in summer 1869, Marx commented to Engels: "The brute believes in the future 'state of democracy'! Secretly that means sometimes constitutional England, sometimes the bourgeois United States, sometimes wretched Switzerland. He has no conception of revolutionary politics."⁹

What disappointed Marx most was that in the North German Confederation, despite the existence of two political organizations of the workers' movement—the Lassallean General Association of German Workers and the Marxist Social Democratic Workers' Party of Germany—there was little enthusiasm for the International and few requests to affiliate to it. During its first three years, German militants virtually ignored its existence, fearing persecution at the hands of the authorities. The weak internationalism of the Germans ultimately weighed more heavily than any legal aspects, however, and declined still further when the movement became more preoccupied with internal matters.¹⁰

The unification of Germany in 1871 confirmed the onset of a new age in which the nation state would be the central form of political, legal and territorial identity. This placed a question mark over any supranational body that required its members to surrender a sizeable share of their political leadership. At the same time, the growing differences between national movements and organizations made it extremely difficult for the General Council of the International to produce a political synthesis capable of satisfying the demands of all. Anyway, after the end of the International, in September 1872,¹¹ Marx continued to criticize the path of German Social Democracy any time he had a chance.

⁷ Karl Marx, "Marx to Johann Baptist von Schweitzer, 13 October 1868," *ibid.*, 133–5. The actual letter has been lost, but fortunately Marx preserved his draft.

⁸ Cf. also Marcello Musto, *Another Marx: Early Writings to the International* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), esp. chapters 7, 8 and 9.

⁹ Karl Marx, "Marx to Engels, 10 August 1869," in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1988), 43: 343.

¹⁰ Cf. Jacques Freymond, ed., *Études et documents sur la Première Internationale en Suisse* (Geneva: Droz, 1964), x.

¹¹ Cf. Marcello Musto, "Introduction," in *Workers Unite!*, esp. 42–51.

II. AGAINST THE “GOTHA PROGRAMME” AND THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC DEVIATION

At the end of 1874, Marx learned from the papers that the General Association of German Workers, founded by Ferdinand Lassalle, and the Social Democratic Workers’ Party, linked to Marx, intended to unite into a single political force. Marx and Engels were not consulted about the merits of the project, and it was only in March that they received the draft programme of the new party.¹² Engels then wrote to August Bebel that he could not “forgive his not having told us a single word about the whole business”,¹³ and he warned that he and Marx could “never give [their] allegiance to a new party” set up on the basis of Lassallean state socialism.¹⁴ Despite this sharp declaration, the leaders who had been active in building what would become the Socialist Workers’ Party of Germany (SAPD) did not change their positions.

Marx therefore felt obliged to write a long critique of the draft programme for the unification congress to be held on 22 May 1875 in the city of Gotha. In the letter accompanying his text, he recognized that “every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programmes”.¹⁵ But in the case of “programmes of principles”, they had to be written with great care, since they set “benchmarks for all the world to ... gauge how far the party [has] progressed”.¹⁶ In the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875), Marx inveighed against the numerous imprecisions and mistakes in the new manifesto drafted in Germany. For example, in criticizing the concept of “fair distribution”, he asked polemically: “Do not the bourgeois assert that present-day distribution is ‘fair’? And is it not, in fact, the only ‘fair’ distribution on the basis of the present-day mode of production?”¹⁷ In his view, the political demand to be inserted into the programme was not Lassalle’s “undiminished proceeds of labour”¹⁸ for every worker, but the transformation of the mode of production. Marx

¹² Frederick Engels, “Engels to August Bebel, 18–28 March 1875,” in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1991), 60.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁵ Karl Marx, “Marx to Wilhelm Bracke, 5 May 1875,” in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1991), 70.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1989), 24, 84.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

explained, with his customary rigour, that Lassalle “did not know what wages were”. Following bourgeois economists, he “took the appearance for the essence of the matter”. Marx explained:

Wages are not what they appear to be, namely the value, or price, of labour, but only a masked form for the value, or price, of labour power. Thereby the whole bourgeois conception of wages hitherto, as well as all the criticism hitherto directed against this conception, was thrown overboard once for all and it was made clear that the wage-worker has permission to work for his own subsistence, that is, to live only insofar as he works for a certain time gratis for the capitalist (and hence also for the latter's co-consumers of surplus value); that the whole capitalist system of production turns on increasing this gratis labour by extending the working day or by developing productivity, that is, increasing the intensity of labour power, etc.; that, consequently, the system of wage labour is a system of slavery, and indeed of a slavery which becomes more severe in proportion as the social productive forces of labour develop, whether the worker receives better or worse payment.¹⁹

Another controversial point concerned the role of the state. Marx maintained that capitalism could be overthrown only through the “revolutionary transformation of society”. The Lassalleans held that “socialist organization of the total labour arises from the state aid that the state gives to the producers' co-operative societies which the state, not the worker, calls into being”.²⁰ For Marx, however, “cooperative societies [were] of value only insofar as they [were] the independent creations of the workers and not protégés either of governments or of the bourgeois”²¹; the idea “that with state loans one can build a new society just as well as a new railway” was typical of Lassalle's theoretical ambiguities.²²

All in all, Marx observed that the political manifesto for the fusion congress showed that socialist ideas were having a hard time penetrating the German workers' organizations. In keeping with his early convictions,²³ he

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 93.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

²² *Ibid.*, 93.

²³ See Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law,” in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 3, where he writes, concerning “the antithesis of state and civil society”, that “the state does not reside in, but outside civil society” (*ibid.*, 49). “In democracy, the state as particular is merely particular. The French have recently

emphasized that it was wrong on their part to treat “the state as an independent entity that possesses its own intellectual, ethical and libertarian bases”, instead of “treating existing society as ... the basis of the existing state”.²⁴ By contrast, Wilhelm Liebknecht and other German socialist leaders defended their tactical decision to compromise on the programme, on the grounds that this was necessary to achieve a unified party.²⁵ Once again, Marx had to face up to the great difference between choices made in Berlin and in London; he had already remarked on it in relation to the scant involvement of German organizations in the International Working Men’s Association.²⁶

During the spring of 1875, Marx continued working on the studies he needed for some outstanding sections of *Capital*. At the same time, he reworked parts of Johann Most’s popular compilation of extracts from Volume I, with a view to the printing of a second edition.²⁷ Between mid-May

interpreted this as meaning that in true democracy the state is annihilated. This is correct insofar as the political state ... no longer passes for the whole” (ibid., 30).

²⁴ Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 94.

²⁵ In the calmer waters of 1877, Engels returned to the argument in a letter to Liebknecht: “The moral and intellectual decline of the party dates from the unification and could have been avoided had a little more caution and intelligence been shown at the time” (Frederick Engels “Engels to Wilhelm Liebknecht, 31 July 1877,” in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1991), 45, 257). Years later, Liebknecht recalled that “Marx, who could not survey the condition of things from abroad as well as we in Germany, would not hear of such concessions.” And he claimed: “That I did not make a wrong calculation in this respect has been brilliantly demonstrated by the consequences and the successes.” In McLellan, *Karl Marx: Interviews and Recollections* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1981), 48.

²⁶ After the printing of the programme ratified at Gotha, Engels noted that “not a single critical text” appeared in “the bourgeois press”. Had there been one, it might have noted “the contradictions and economic howlers ... and exposed ... [the] party to the most dreadful ridicule. Instead of that the jackasses on the bourgeois papers have taken this programme perfectly seriously, reading into it what isn’t there and interpreting it communistically”. He went on to stress that “the workers [were] apparently doing the same” and that this had “made it possible for Marx and himself not to disassociate [themselves] publicly from the programme” (Frederick Engels, “Engels to August Bebel, 12 October 1875,” in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1991), 45: 98). Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme* was published only in 1891, the year in which the Erfurt programme, much closer to his own principles, was adopted. Cf. Boris Nicolaevsky and Otto Maenchen Helfen, *Karl Marx—Man and Fighter* (London: Methuen, 1936), 376, who argued: “The split, which Marx regarded as inevitable, [did not] occur. The Party remained united, and in 1891, at Erfurt, adopted a pure Marxist programme.”

²⁷ Johann Most, *Kapital und Arbeit: Ein Populärer Auszug aus “Das Kapital” von Karl Marx* (Chemnitz: G. Rübner, n.d. [1873]). The second edition came out in 1876.

and mid-August, he composed another manuscript for Volume III, "The Relationship between Rate of Surplus-Value and Rate of Profit Developed Mathematically" (1875),²⁸ and in September he was animated once again by the desire to progress as much as possible in his writing of *Capital*, Volume II.

In the early months of 1876, having received new books and publications with statistics about Russia, Marx engaged in further systematic research into the social-economic changes taking place there. His study, in 1870, of *The Situation of the Working Class in Russia* (1869)—a work by the economist and sociologist Vassilii Vassilievich Bervi, known by the pen name N. Flerovsky—had also given him the political motivation to delve deeper into the reality of the country.²⁹ Marx's reading in the mid-1870s also included a little book entitled *Revolutionary Conservatism* (1875) by the Slavophile thinkers Yuri Samarin and Fyodor Dmitriev, and several volumes of the *Proceedings of the Tributary Commission* from 1872 to 1873.

During this period, there were significantly less social struggles and Marx, whenever his health allowed, dedicated himself to new theoretical questions. He took the opportunity to expand his range of interests to areas he had little explored before. In the spring, he turned his attention to physiology, both botanical and human. In addition, he planned to read new books on subjects of major interest such as agronomy, landownership and credit, again after he had finished his studies for the completion of *Capital*.

From the middle of March, Marx returned to his research on forms of collective property. Among the texts he summarized by the end of the year were the very important *History of the Village Order in Germany* (1865–66) by the historian and statesman Georg Ludwig von Maurer, an *Essay on the History of Landownership in Spain* (1873) by the lawyer and minister Francisco de Cárdenas Espejo, and *Common Abodes of the South Slavs* (1859) by the writer and politician Ognjeslav Utješenić.

His new research endeavours were interrupted by the summer break, which his physical problems had made a necessity rather than a diversion. Also, in the autumn of 1876, Marx suffered from several complicated health

²⁸ Karl Marx, "Mehrwertrate und Profitrate mathematisch behandelt," in MEGA² (Berlin: Dietz, 2003), II/14: 19–150.

²⁹ In a letter dated 12 February 1870, Marx wrote to Engels that Flerovsky's "book shows incontestably that the present conditions in Russia are no longer tenable, that the emancipation of the serfs of course only hastened the process of disintegration, and that fearful social revolution is at the door", Karl Marx, "Marx to Engels, 12 February 1870," in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1988), 43: 429–30.

issues. Despite these tribulations and the constant work pressure from many sides, Marx made a major effort to find a publisher for the German version of *Histoire de la Commune de 1871* (1876) by the French journalist and Communist Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray.³⁰ Between September and the end of 1877, he invested time and energy in revising the translation of what he called “the first authentic history of the Commune”.³¹

III. POLITICAL BATTLES AT AN INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

Despite adversities and poor health, Marx continued to follow all the major political and economic events attentively and critically, attempting to envisage the new scenarios to which they might give rise and how these would affect struggles for the emancipation of the working class.

At the beginning of 1877, Jenny von Westphalen communicated to Sorge that her husband was “deeply in the Eastern question and highly elated by the firm, honest bearing of the sons of Mohammed vis-à-vis all the Christian humbugs and hypocritical atrocity mongers”.³² In April, Tsar Alexander II declared war on Turkey in pursuit of his expansionist aims, using the pretext of the rebellions against Constantinople by Christians living in the European territories of the Ottoman Empire.

Marx had already been active against the British Liberals’ support for Russia: between February and March, together with the journalist Maltman Barry, he had written three short articles—“Mr. Gladstone and Russian Intrigue”, “Mr. Gladstone” and “The Great Agitator Unmasked”—which were printed in Barry’s name in *The Whitehall Review* and *Vanity Fair* (and later in various local English, Scottish and Irish papers).³³ Marx

³⁰For a recent edition in English, see Prosper Olivier Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune of 1871* (St. Petersburg, FL: Red and Black Publishers, 2007).

³¹Karl Marx, “Marx to Wilhelm Bracke, 23 September 1876,” in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1991), 45: 149. The English translation was done by Eleanor, who at the time, against her father’s wishes, was emotionally attached to the French revolutionary.

³²Jenny Marx, “Jenny Marx to Friedrich Adolph Sorge, 20 or 21 January 1877,” *ibid.*, 45: 447. The main reference was to the British Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone, author of the highly successful pamphlet *The Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East* (London: William Ridgway, 1876), who, like “all the freemen and stillmen and merry-men”, had depicted the Russians as “civilizers” (*ibid.*).

³³See Maximilien Rubel, *Bibliographie des œuvres de Karl Marx* (Paris: Rivière, 1956), 193. Also, of interest here are two letters to Liebknecht (4 and 11 February 1878), composed in the form of articles, which the Social Democrat leader eventually published in an appendix to the second edition of his pamphlet *Zur orientalischen Frage oder Soll Europa kosakisch werden?* (Leipzig: Commissions, 1878).

reported to Engels that many papers had “shied away” and that the deputy editor of *Vanity Fair* feared a “libel action”.³⁴ To Sorge, he wrote with satisfaction that “English parliamentarians in the Commons and the Lords ... would throw up their hands in horror if they knew that it was the Red Terror Doctor, as they call me, who had been their *souffleur* during the oriental crisis.”³⁵

Marx was critical of Bracke, however, since in his view “the workers’ press concern[ed] itself too little with the oriental question, forgetting that the government’s politics gamble wantonly with the lives and money of the people”.³⁶ With excessive optimism, he wrote to Sorge: “That crisis marks a new turning-point in European history.” He thought that Russia had “long been on the verge of an upheaval” and hoped that the Turks might “advance the explosion ... through the blows they have dealt ... to the Russian army and Russian finances”. “This time”, he concluded, “the revolution will begin in the East, hitherto the impregnable bastion and reserve army of counter-revolution”.³⁷ Engels reiterated this conviction to the editor of the Italian paper *La Plebe*, Enrico Bignami: “Once Russia has been spurred to revolution, the whole face of Europe will change. Until now, Old Russia has been the great army of European reaction. It acted as such in 1789, in 1805, in 1815, in 1830 and in 1848. Once this army is destroyed—we shall see!”³⁸

When it became clear in February 1878 that the Russians had been victorious, Marx regretted the fact in a letter to Liebknecht, repeating that defeat would not only have “greatly expedited social revolution in Russia” but also brought about “radical change throughout Europe”.³⁹ Nevertheless, buoyed up by his confident expectations at the time, he predicted to the English Chartist and publicist Thomas Allsop that there would soon be a “succession of wars, which w[ould] precipitate the Social

³⁴ Karl Marx, “Marx to Engels, 7 March 1877,” in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1991), 45: 209.

³⁵ Karl Marx, “Marx to Friedrich Adolph Sorge, 27 September 1877,” *ibid.*, 277–8.

³⁶ Karl Marx, “Marx to Wilhelm Bracke, 21 April 1877,” *ibid.*, 223.

³⁷ Marx, “Marx to Friedrich Adolph Sorge, 27 September 1877,” 278.

³⁸ Frederick Engels, “Letter to Enrico Bignami on the General Elections of 1877, 12 January 1878,” in Marx and Engels, *Lettere 1874–1879* (Milano: Lotta Comunista, 2006), p. 247. This letter was lost and the only parts we know are the ones included by Bignami in an article he published on *La Plebe* on 22 January 1878.

³⁹ Karl Marx, “Marx to Wilhelm Liebknecht, 4 February 1878,” in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1991), 45: 296.

Crisis and engulf all the so-called Powers, those sham-powers, victors and vanquished—to make room for a European Social Revolution”.⁴⁰ In a letter he sent to Engels in September, the horizon was similar: “Nothing Russia and Prussia ... can now do on the international stage can have other than pernicious consequences for their regime, nor can it delay the latter’s downfall, but only expedite its violent end.”⁴¹

From time to time, Marx had to concern himself again with the International Working Men’s Association, in order to defend its name and to recall the esteem that its political line still enjoyed. In July 1878, in answer to George Howell—an old member of the organization who had become a reformist trade-unionist—Marx pointed out in an article for *The Secular Chronicle* that what had gained the International “a worldwide reputation and a place in the history of mankind” was not “the size of its finances”, as Howell had slanderously argued, but “the strength of its intellect and its abundant energy”.⁴²

Marx also continued to trust in developments on the other side of the Atlantic. In July 1877, he noted in a letter to Engels “the first outbreak against the associated capital oligarchy that has arisen since the Civil War”; it would “of course, be suppressed”, but it might “well provide a point of departure for a serious workers’ party in the United States”.⁴³ Britain, on the other hand, was a country about which the two friends no longer had any illusions. In February 1878, Marx wrote to Liebknecht that “the English working class had gradually become ever more demoralized, as a result of the period of corruption after 1848, and finally reached the stage of being no more than an appendage of the great Liberal Party, i.e., of its oppressors, the capitalists”.⁴⁴ In a letter to Eduard Bernstein, Engels was even more realistic: “A genuine workers’ movement in the continental sense is non-existent here”; there might still be strikes, “victorious or otherwise”, but “the working class makes no progress whatsoever” as a result of them.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Karl Marx, “Marx to Thomas Allsop, 4 February 1878,” *ibid.*, 299.

⁴¹ Karl Marx, “Marx to Engels, 24 September 1878,” *ibid.*, 332.

⁴² Karl Marx, “Mr. George Howell’s History of the International Working-Men’s Association,” in MEGA² (Berlin: Dietz, 1985), I/25: 157.

⁴³ Karl Marx, “Marx to Engels, 25 July 1877,” in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1991), 45: 251.

⁴⁴ Karl Marx, “Marx to Wilhelm Liebknecht, 11 February 1878,” *ibid.*, 299.

⁴⁵ Frederick Engels, “Engels to Eduard Bernstein, 17 June 1879,” *ibid.*, 361.

IV. THE CRITIQUE OF “ARMCHAIR SOCIALISM”

Marx never lost sight of the main political developments in Germany. After the major tensions surrounding the Gotha congress had passed, he continued his attempts to orient the Socialist Workers' Party of Germany in an anti-capitalist direction. However, other tendencies were developing that would create fresh occasions of conflict. From 1874 Eugen Dühring, an economics professor at Berlin University, began to receive significant attention from Party intellectuals. Articles in support of his positions appeared in *Der Volksstaat* (The People's State), which had been the organ of the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Germany. Therefore, having been asked by Liebknecht to get involved, and having listened to Marx's view that it was necessary “to criticize Dühring without any compunction”,⁴⁶ Engels decided to write a full-scale critique of the German positivist. This task, which extended from late 1876 until July 1878, ended in the book *Anti-Dühring* (1877–78), whose publication was preceded by excerpts in the columns of *Vorwärts* [Forward], the daily paper of the Socialist Workers' Party of Germany born out of the Gotha fusion congress.⁴⁷

Marx played an active part in the *Anti-Dühring* project: in the winter of 1877, he wrote the key chapter “On ‘Critical History’”, both on Engels's behalf and in his own name, conceiving it as a response to attacks contained in Dühring's *Critical History of Political Economy and Socialism* (1871). Marx shows that “by value Herr Dühring understands five totally different and directly contradictory things, and, therefore, to put it at its best, himself does not know what he wants”. Moreover, in the German economist's book, the “‘natural laws of all economics’, ushered in with such pomp, prove to be merely universally familiar, and often not even properly understood, platitudes of the worst description”.⁴⁸ The “sole explanation” he gives of “economic facts” is that “they are the result of

⁴⁶ Karl Marx, “Marx to Engels, 25 May 1876,” *ibid.*, 119.

⁴⁷ On the importance of this text, see Karl Kautsky, “Einleitung,” in *Friedrich Engels' Briefwechsel mit Karl Kautsky*, ed. Benedikt Kautsky (Vienna: Danubia, 1955), 4, where the German Party theorist recalls that no book did more to advance his understanding of socialism. H.-J. Steinberg, showed that “both Bernstein, who studied *Anti-Dühring* in 1879, and Kautsky, who did the same in 1880, became ‘Marxists’ through reading that book,” in *Sozialismus und Deutsche Sozialdemokratie* (Hannover: Verlag für Literature und Zeitgeschehen, 1967), 23.

⁴⁸ Frederick Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 25: 242.

‘force’, a term with which the philistine of all nations has for thousands of years consoled himself for everything unpleasant that happens to him, and which leaves us just where we were”.⁴⁹ For Marx, Dühring does not try to “investigate the origin and effects of this force”, and, when compelled to elucidate the capitalist exploitation of labour, he “first represents it in a general way as based on taxes and price surcharges” à la Proudhon, then “explains it in detail by means of Marx’s theory of surplus-labour”. The result is totally implausible: “two totally contradictory modes of outlook, ... cop[ie]d down without taking his breath”.⁵⁰

In the elections of January 1877, the Socialist Workers’ Party of Germany won nearly half a million votes, raising its share above 9 per cent. But despite this success, the state of the party continued to trouble Marx. Writing to the German doctor Ferdinand Fleckles, he ridiculed the “short pamphlet” entitled *The Quintessence of Socialism* (1879) of sociologist Albert Schäffle as “fantastic, truly Swabian ... picture of the future socialist millennium as ... the kingdom come of your cosy petty bourgeois”.⁵¹ In this context, when asked by the journalist Franz Wiede to take a prominent role in founding a new review, Marx commented to Engels: “It would certainly be very nice if a really scientific socialist periodical were to appear. This would provide an opportunity for criticism and counter-criticism in which theoretical points could be discussed by us and the total ignorance of professors and university lecturers exposed, thereby simultaneously disabusing the minds of the general public.”⁵² In the end, however, he had to accept that the shortcomings of its contributors would have precluded “the prime requirement in all criticism”: that

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Karl Marx, “Marx to Ferdinand Fleckles, 21 January 1877,” in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1991), 45: 190. Few years later, in a letter to Karl Kautsky, Engels wrote of the numerous inaccuracies and misunderstandings that the German economist Albert Schäffle and other “armchair socialists [*Kathedersozialisten*]” displayed in relation to Marx’s work: “to refute, for example, all the monstrous twaddle which Schäffle alone has assembled in his many fat tomes is, in my opinion, a sheer waste of time. It would fill a fair-sized book were one merely to attempt to put right all the misquotations from *Capital* inserted by these gentlemen between inverted commas”. He concluded in peremptory fashion: “They should first learn to read and copy before demanding to have their questions answered”, Frederick Engels, “Engels to Karl Kautsky, 1 February 1881,” in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1992), 46: 56.

⁵² Karl Marx, “Marx to Friedrich Engels, 18 July 1877,” in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1991), 45: 242.

is, “ruthlessness”.⁵³ Marx also directed sharp comments against *Zukunft* [Future], deriding its “endeavour to substitute ideological catch-phrases such as ‘justice’, etc., for materialist knowledge [and ...] to peddle phantasms of the future structure of society”.⁵⁴

In October, Marx complained to Sorge of a “corrupt spirit” spreading in the party, “not so much among the masses as among the leaders”.⁵⁵ The agreement with the Lassalleans had “led to further compromise with other waverers”. In particular, Marx had no time for “a whole swarm of immature undergraduates and over-wise graduates who want[ed] to give socialism a ‘higher, idealistic’ orientation”. They thought they could substitute for its “materialist basis” (which “calls for serious, objective study if one is to operate thereon”) a “modern mythology with its goddesses of Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity”.⁵⁶

What lay behind these criticisms was never feelings of jealousy or rivalry. Marx wrote to the journalist and parliamentarian Wilhelm Bloss that he did not “care a straw for popularity”, reminding him that “such was [his] aversion to the personality cult that at the time of the International, when plagued by numerous moves ... to accord [him] public honour, [he] never allowed one of them to enter the domain of publicity”, nor “ever repli[ed] to them, save with an occasional snub”. This attitude had sustained him ever since the political commitments of his youth, so that when the Communist League was born in 1847, he and Engels had joined “only on condition that anything conducive to a superstitious belief in authority be eliminated from the Rules”.⁵⁷ His only concern had been, and continued to be, that the nascent workers’ organizations

⁵³ Ibid. Engels was certainly in agreement with Marx about this. As he put it in a letter to the zoologist Oscar Schmidt, “ruthless criticism ... alone does justice to free science, and ... any man of science must welcome [it], even when applied to himself”. Frederick Engels, “Engels to Oscar Schmidt, 19 July 1878,” *ibid.*, 314.

⁵⁴ Karl Marx, “Marx to Wilhelm Bracke, 23 October 1877,” *ibid.*, 285.

⁵⁵ Karl Marx, “Marx to Friedrich Adolph Sorge, 19 October 1877,” *ibid.*, 283. Steinberg had convincingly demonstrated the theoretical eclecticism among German Party activists at the time. “If we take the mass of members and leaders,” he wrote, “their socialist conceptions may be described as an ‘average socialism’ composed of various elements. The view of Marx and Engels that the Party’s ‘shortcomings’ and theoretical ignorance and insecurity were the negative consequence of the 1875 compromise was only an expression of the Londoners’ warnings about members coming out of the General Association of German Workers,” Steinberg, *Sozialismus und Deutsche Sozialdemokratie*, 19.

⁵⁶ Marx, “Marx to Friedrich Adolph Sorge, 19 October 1877,” 283.

⁵⁷ Karl Marx, “Marx to Wilhelm Bloss, 10 November 1877,” *ibid.*, 288.

should not blur their anti-capitalism and—in the manner of the British labour movement—adopt a moderate, pro-bourgeois line.⁵⁸

A major event in the late 1870s was the attempted assassination of Kaiser Wilhelm I by the anarchist Karl Nobiling in June 1878. Marx's reactions were later recorded by Kovalevsky: "I happened to be in Marx's library when he got news of [the] unsuccessful attempt. ... [His] reaction was to curse the terrorist, explaining that only one thing could be expected from his attempt to accelerate the course of events, namely, new persecutions of the socialists."⁵⁹ That was precisely what ensued, as Bismarck used the pretext to introduce the Anti-Socialist Laws and get them adopted by the Reichstag in October. Marx commented to Engels: "Outlawing has, from time immemorial, been an infallible means of making anti-government movements 'illegal' and protecting the government from the law—'legality kills us'."⁶⁰ The debate in parliament took place in mid-September, and Bracke sent Marx the stenographic record of the Reichstag sessions and a copy of the draft legislation. Marx planned to write a critical article for the British press⁶¹ and began to compile extracts and notes for that purpose. In a few pages, he outlined the difference between the mass Socialist Workers' Party of Germany and the anarchists: the former constituted "the genuine historical movement of the working class; the other ... a phantom of a dead-end youth intent on making history, [which] merely shows how the ideas of French socialism are caricatured in the declassified

⁵⁸Two years later, Engels wrote in similar vein to Bebel: "You know that Marx and I have voluntarily conducted the defence of the party against its opponents abroad throughout the party's existence, and that we have never asked anything of the party in return, save that it should not be untrue to itself." Using diplomatic language, he tried to get comrades in Germany to understand that, although his and Marx's "criticism might be displeasing to some", it might be advantageous to the party to have "the presence abroad of a couple of men who, uninfluenced by confusing local conditions and the minutiae of the struggle, compare from time to time what has been said and what has been done with the theoretical tenets valid for any modern proletarian movement", Frederick Engels, "Engels to August Bebel, 14 November 1879," *ibid.*, 420–1.

⁵⁹McLellan, *Karl Marx—Interviews and Recollections*, 131.

⁶⁰Karl Marx, "Marx to Engels, 17 September 1877," in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1991), 45: 322. Marx wrote the final clause in French—*la légalité nous tue*—harking back to the words used by Odilon Barrot, briefly prime minister in 1848–49 under Louis Bonaparte, in a speech he gave to the Constituent Assembly in January 1849 that defended the outlawing of "extremist" political forces.

⁶¹Marx, "Marx to Engels, 24 September 1878," 332.

men of the upper classes”.⁶² In rebutting the argument of the Prussian interior minister, August Eulenburg, that the workers’ aims were violent, he made his position quite clear:

The objective [is] the emancipation of the working class and the revolution (transformation) of society implicit therein. An historical development can remain “peaceful” only for so long as its progress is not forcibly obstructed by those wielding social power at the time. If in England, for instance, or the United States, the working class were to gain a majority in Parliament or Congress, they could, by lawful means, rid themselves of such laws and institutions as impeded their development. [...] However, the “peaceful” movement might be transformed into a “forcible” one by resistance on the part of those interested in restoring the former state of affairs; if (as in the American Civil War and French Revolution) they are put down by force, it is as rebels against “lawful” force.⁶³

For Marx, then, the government was “seeking to suppress by force a development it dislike[d] but could not lawfully attack”. That, necessarily, was “the prelude to violent revolution”—“an old story which yet remains eternally true”, he added, quoting Heinrich Heine (1797–1856).⁶⁴

In a letter to Sorge from September 1879, Marx described the new tendencies emerging in the German party. He stressed that people like the publisher Karl Höchberg, “nonentities in theory and nincompoops in practice”, were “seeking to draw the teeth of socialism (which they have rehashed in accordance with academic formulae) and of the Party in particular”.⁶⁵ Their aim was “to enlighten the workers, ... to provide them, out of their confused and superficial knowledge, with educative elements” and, above all, “to make the party ‘respectable’ in the eyes of the philistines”. They were, he concluded, “poor counter-revolutionary windbags”.⁶⁶ With subtle humour, he suggested that Bismarck had “done a lot of good not to himself, but us”, by imposing selective silence in Germany and allowing such windbags “a chance of making themselves plainly heard”.

⁶² Karl Marx, “The Parliamentary Debate on the Anti-Socialist Laws (Outline of an Article),” in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1989), 24: 247.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁶⁵ Karl Marx, “Marx to Friedrich Adolph Sorge, 19 September 1879,” *ibid.*, 413.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

In a French police report from London, an agent claimed that, “following the death of Lassalle, Marx [had become] the undisputed leader of the German revolutionaries. If the socialist deputies in Germany [were] the official leaders, the divisional commanders, Marx [was] the chief of the general staff. He devised the battle plans and watch[ed] over their implementation”.⁶⁷ In reality, Marx’s criticisms of the party often went unheeded, and from his study in London he observed “the depths” to which “parliamentary representatives” had “already been brought by parliamentarism”.⁶⁸

Another polemical focus was the question of who should edit the new journal of the Socialist Workers’ Party of Germany, *Der Sozialdemokrat* [The Social Democrat], publication of which began in Zurich in September 1879. Marx and Engels, disagreeing with the proposed stance of the paper, felt obliged to send another letter (drafted by Engels) to Bebel, Liebknecht and Bracke. In this “Circular Letter” (1879), as it became known, they denounced the growing consensus in the party behind the positions of Höchberg, the main source of finance for the undertaking. He had recently published an article in the *Jahrbuch für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* [Annals for Social Science and Social Policy], a reformist journal under his direction, in which he called for a return to the Lassallean spirit. In his view, the Lassalleans had given birth to a political movement open “not only [to] the workers but all honest democrats, in the van of which [should] march the independent representatives of science and all men imbued with a true love of mankind”.⁶⁹

For Marx, all these were views he had firmly rejected since his early years and the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848). The “Circular Letter” underlined the dangers of one of Höchberg’s statements: “In short, the working class is incapable of emancipating itself by its own efforts. In order to do so it must place itself under the direction of ‘educated and propertied’ bourgeois who alone have ‘the time and the opportunity’ to become conversant with what is good for the workers.” In the view of this “representative of the petty bourgeoisie”, then, the bourgeoisie was “not to be combated—not on your life—but won over by vigorous propaganda”.⁷⁰ Even the decision to defend the Paris Commune had

⁶⁷ Enzensberger, *Gespräche mit Marx und Engels*, 490.

⁶⁸ Marx, “Marx to F. Sorge, 19 September 1879,” 413.

⁶⁹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “Marx and Engels to August Bebel, Wilhelm Liebknecht and Wilhelm Bracke (“Circular Letter”), 17–18 September 1879,” in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1991), 45: 402.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 403.

allegedly “put off people otherwise well-disposed towards” the workers’ movement. In conclusion, Engels and Marx noted with alarm that Höchberg’s objective was to make “the overthrow of the capitalist order ... unattainably remote” and “utterly irrelevant to present political practice”. One could therefore “conciliate, compromise, philanthropize to one’s heart’s content. The same thing applie[d] to the class struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie.”⁷¹ The disagreement was total.

Marx’s tenacious opposition to what he called the “armchair socialist ruff-raff”⁷² was akin to his view of those who confined themselves to empty rhetoric, however concealed beneath radical language. Following the launch of the journal *Freiheit* [Freedom], he explained to Sorge that he had reproached its editors not for being “too revolutionary” but for having “no revolutionary content” and “merely indulg[ing] in revolutionary jargon”.⁷³ In his view, both these positions, though stemming from very different political tendencies, were no danger to the existing system and ultimately made its survival possible.

Marx’s idea of socialism was very different from State socialism and reformism that emerged in the German Social Democratic Party and that became hegemonic after the foundation of the Second International. The Marx revival under way today will be much more effective if Marx’s writings are re-examined for an understanding not only of how capitalism works but also of the failure of socialist experiences until today. It goes without saying that we cannot today simply rely on what Marx wrote a century and a half ago. Nor should we lightly discount the content and clarity of his analyses or fail to take up the critical weapons he offered for fresh thinking about an alternative society to capitalism.

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⁷¹ Ibid., 406.

⁷² Marx, “Marx to Sorge, 19 September 1879,” 412.

⁷³ Ibid., 411. Cf. Frederick Engels to Johann Philipp Becker, 10 April 1880,” in MECW (New York: International Publishers, 1992), 46: 7: “*Freiheit* [wants] to become, by hook or by crook, the most revolutionary paper in the world, but this cannot be achieved simply by repeating the word ‘revolution’ in every line.”

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