

PHILOSOPHY BY OTHER MEANS?

DICK HOWARD

ABSTRACT: I attempt to show that Marx was driven by a systematic philosophical goal expressed already in his doctoral dissertation and present throughout his mature political economic theory as well as in his practical political writings. I reconstruct this systematic – and critical – philosophical adventure in order to suggest that *it is as philosophy that Marx's work retains its political bite today*. In the process, I propose a reinterpretation of Marx's political theory that, once again, is traced through the entirety of Marx's corpus. The young Marx criticized Hegel's separation of the political from society; he then attempted to reduce the political sphere to civil society; the theory of alienated labor was elaborated as a theory of political economy that replaced the political; but in the end, when all three volumes of *Capital* and the unpublished *Grundrisse* are considered systematically, Marx sees capitalism as threatened ultimately by its inability to reflect politically on its own presuppositions, and hence its limits.

Keywords: Marx, Hegel, communism, systematic philosophy, genesis and normativity, phenomenology and logic, critical theory, alienation, political economy, politics, revolution, philosophy of history, democratic theory, democracy.

Political Philosophy after 1989

Paradoxically, after 1989 Marx's political philosophy can be read not only as philosophical but also as political. If Marxism is not (in Sartre's phrase) the "unsurpassable horizon of our times," it remains a rigorous confrontation with modernity and a challenging attempt to understand its novelty. This is because, despite Marx's intention to provide a theory of the revolutionary proletariat that would serve for the praxis of that world historical agent, he was and remained a philosopher; despite his critique(s) of idealism, Marx remained in its spell. Indeed, this philosophical intention ultimately vitiates his attempt to surpass philosophy by its own means in the practice of political revolution. By reclaiming the critical potential of Marx's text from a tradition of commentary that belongs to a world in which we no longer live, we can gain new insight into the way a certain form of economic "liberalism" has apparently triumphed precisely by

I should like to thank Eric Cavallero for his considerable assistance in editing and developing the version of this essay that appears here. An earlier, longer version was published as *Marx: Aux origines de la pensée critique* (Paris: Michalon, 2001).

denying its own political nature. Its conception of the individual and of individual rights as naturally given rather than as dependent on the prior choice of a political framework is put into question by Marx's mature economic theory. Yet that same economic theory unintentionally calls into question the philosophical premises that guided Marx to that point. These premises must be reclaimed in order to make sense of Marx's potential contribution to our self-understanding in the contemporary world.

Marx's work in its entirety can be seen as an attempt to do philosophy by other means. While his early passage from philosophy to political economy attempted to go beyond Hegel's view that Reason or Spirit governs the course of world history, Hegel's scheme remained the foundation of the new theory. The dialectical process – in which a subject seeks to actualize itself in the world, finds that its manifestation or appearance is inadequate to its own essence, returns to itself enriched from the experience, and sets out once again to find a superior and more adequate actualization – recurs in each of the phases of Marx's development. The 1843 discovery of the proletariat as the key to overcoming Hegel's "merely political" theory became the foundation of a new phase, in which Marx tried to articulate a materialist philosophy for which Revolution became the subject of political History. As in Hegel, two sides had to be examined. A phenomenology that describes the appearing forms of the historical subject had to be joined to a logic that explains the necessity that underlies these appearances. But the account remained only theoretical; it was not adequate to the practical role toward which Marx's efforts were oriented.

The 1848 revolution in France forced Marx to confront these limitations of his theory. The successive political appearances that progressed from the political revolution of February to the (failed) social revolution of June and then to the stalemated republican compromise confirmed Marx's account. But the economic logic that he assumed would lead to the next stage proved inadequate. Confronted with Bonaparte's seizure of power, Marx was forced to recognize another logic – that of politics. The coexistence of two logics forced Marx to expand his categorical framework.

The first volume of *Capital* completes this phase of Marx's work. Now the philosophical subject whose actualization he attempts to explain is the history of the relations of production, a history that is supposed to culminate in the overcoming of the inherent contradictions of capitalism. But the history of economic relations cannot be reduced to a quasi-mechanistic determinism; such a reduction ignores the social-normative dimension that the logic of Marx's systematic ambitions requires. An adequate account of the development of productive relations must supplement the phenomenological and logical moments of the analysis with an account of the genesis and normativity of the phenomena that are being analyzed.

The categories of genesis and normativity were implicit in Marx's early attempts to go beyond the Hegelian paradigm. Genesis designates the practice by which something comes into being; normativity refers to the frame-

work within which that phenomenon enters into legitimate relations with other entities. An adequate account must not only describe the phenomena and their dialectical necessity; it must also show how that necessity is historically concretized in the form of normative demands that impel the genesis of new phenomena. Although Marx abandons this categorial framework for a misguided economic reductionism, the categories of genesis and normativity offer an illuminating perspective on the central role of the commodity form in *all three* volumes of *Capital*. With this shift in perspective, *Capital's* subtitle – “A Critique of Political Economy” – acquires a contemporary relevance. Marx’s trajectory is now seen to pass from a critique of the separation of the political from the socioeconomic, through a reductionist attempt to show that political economy represents “the anatomy of civil society” – and the realization of “philosophy by other means” – on to a critique of the separation of the economic from the political and a recognition of the proper place of the political. This trajectory permits a reinterpretation of the utopian revolutionary vision of the unpublished manuscript of 1857 known as the *Grundrisse*, showing that the “other means” for realizing philosophy cannot replace the philosophical project. Realized philosophy is neither the idealist nor the materialist end of philosophy.

Political theory after 1989 finds itself in an absurd situation where a humanity defined by its quest to overcome the dictates of blind nature accepts as natural – and even glorifies – a set of artificial and harmful restrictions of its freedom, denying the creative autonomy of its own reason and subordinating it to the dictates of market forces whose political premises it denies. Yet, if there is one theme that Marx emphasized from the beginning to the end of his work, it is the fact that humanity’s own production – be it the mechanisms of the market, the unintended consequences of its social relations, or the science that has apparently subordinated nature to its own “one-dimensionality” – has become alien and must be reclaimed. This quest remains his most valuable and enduring legacy. By recapturing the sense of Marx’s original project, as philosophy and as political philosophy, it becomes possible to reclaim that legacy and to rejoin the historical project that took form when the Greeks discovered that philosophy and democratic politics implied one another mutually. Rereading Marx, taking seriously his philosophical attempt to do philosophy by other means, has contemporary political implications – though not those claimed by pre-1989 Marxists of whatever stripe.

I. From Philosophy to Political Economy

A. *Realizing Hegel*

Marx’s trajectory began, and concluded, in a conflictual embrace with Hegel. Marx joined with the “Young,” or “Left,” Hegelians in opposing the heirs of the Master, to whom the contemporary label *right* does an injustice.

What distinguished the orthodoxy of Hegel's heirs was their insistence that philosophy constitutes a *system*, a totality whose content is expressed in Hegel's famous aphorism in the preface to the *Philosophy of Right*: "What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational." Marx's earliest work did not, however, give up on the systematic philosophical project. A note to his doctoral dissertation indicates his intent. Marx's editors have accurately entitled this note "*das philosophisch-werden der Welt als weltlich-werden der Philosophie*" – the becoming-philosophical of the world as the becoming-worldly of philosophy. The qualification "as" must be emphasized. The aphorism claims that the world will only become philosophical, i.e., rational and autonomous, insofar as philosophy abandons its speculative separation from that world. It indicates as well that when the world has become philosophical in this sense, philosophy will thereby have become worldly, i.e., material and sensible. Marx's aim is not simply philosophical; it is programmatic while remaining oriented toward the systematic demand that philosophy and world, genesis and normativity, phenomenology and logic must be integrated in our understanding.

To avoid the reproach that he is proposing a voluntarist philosophy of the will – what the leader of the orthodox Hegelians, Gans, had called a merely subjective and thus arbitrary freedom – a double claim had to be established: (a) it had to be shown that philosophy *as philosophy* could realize itself only by becoming worldly; philosophy could be systematically complete and normatively necessary only through this turn to the world; and (b) it had to be demonstrated that the world *as world* could be stripped of its accidental immediacy to become rationally actual by becoming adequate to the demands of philosophy. Only this doubly systematic imperative explains how material conditions dependent on external forces could generate conditions that permit their autonomy. Expressed in the metaphorical language of the will that Marx sometimes adopted, the world had to strive to become philosophical, just as philosophy had to strive to become worldly. In contemporary philosophical terms, the genetic material moment has to be shown to be also normative, in the sense of being driven by a normative goal; and the normative philosophical moment must on its side be genetic, in the sense of impelling this transformation. This aphorism of the young Marx forms the kernel of his entire philosophical, and political, development.

B. Criticizing Hegel

Marx's unpublished line-by-line "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the State" (1843) has two primary aims. The first is to refute claims for the autonomy of the political sphere – only then could philosophy's turn to the social world be systematically justified, that is, justified by the demands of philosophy's own systematic ambitions. The second aim of the critique is expressed in the published essay of the same year, the "Introduction to a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*," which asserts that insofar as

Hegel's theory is an accurate reflection of actual German society, its refutation provides a "critique of the *oeuvres incomplètes*" of his own society, that is, of the not-yet-rational world to which philosophy is shown to relate uncritically.¹ A further reason to reread this manuscript is that here Marx develops a critical concept of democracy, whose apparent replacement by the self-realization of the revolutionary proletariat will concern us later.

Marx criticizes Hegel's political idealism for its inversion of subject and object. "Hegel makes all the attributes of the contemporary European constitutional monarch into absolute self-determination of the *will*. He does not say that the will of the monarch is the final decision, but rather the final decision of the will is – the monarch" (OM, 6). Marx inverts this claim: the monarch "is sovereign in so far as he represents the unity of the people, and so he himself is just a representative. . . . The sovereignty of the people does not derive from him, but he from it" (OM, 7). In this way, Marx can affirm that democracy is "the generic constitution. Monarchy is a species, and indeed a poor one. Democracy is content and form. Monarchy *should* be form only, but it adulterates the content" (ibid.). As content and form, democracy is thus philosophy made worldly and the world made philosophical; it "is the resolved mystery of all constitutions" (ibid.). But the nature of democracy is not explained further; how can it be at once social and a human product and at the same time political and universally valid? Marx's critique of the speculative nature of Hegel's state is only normative, however; the genetic component has to be developed explicitly. That is then the next step.

The modern individual described by Hegel's theory is caught between the public and private spheres, between bureaucratic and social imperatives. There is an opposition between the formal universality of the state and the material existence of the individual. To realize his nature as a citizen, man must abandon his civil life, withdrawing into his abstract universality bereft of any particular content. But Marx notes that this is historically a progress; it entails the abandonment of that medieval "democracy of unfreedom" (OM, 11) where the individual was defined by membership in a particular estate. This transformation was brought about under the absolute monarchy, which came into being alongside, or as the cause of, the triumph of the bureaucracy. What social differences remained were eliminated by the French Revolution, which in turn made distinctions among men purely social, private, and without consequences for political life. But this political life was now separated from civil society. At this point, when civil society has become private, social distinctions no longer have any universal or normative legitimation; they appear changeable, accidental, external to the individual, and in principle arbitrary. But this,

¹ Citations from Joseph O'Malley's edition of the *Early Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) are given in parentheses, as OM, followed by a page number, here OM, 62. I have occasionally modified the translation but have always given the English source in OM.

interjects Marx in a sort of note to himself for further development, should be developed in the discussion of Hegel's treatment of civil society (OM, 18). From the point of view of the state, and of democracy, what counts is that this emancipation from determination by his estate liberates the individual from the medieval "*animal history* of human kind, its zoology" (OM, 19). But this liberation turns into its opposite: "It separates man's *objective* being from him, as something merely *external* and material. It does not consider the content of man to be his true actuality." But, interjects Marx again, this too is left for the discussion of civil society (OM, 19f.).

Why did Marx never write his critique of Hegel's theory of civil society? The answer is suggested by his discussion of universal suffrage. Hegel's objection to democracy was that it has no form; the participation of all as equals is possible only through abstraction from all particular content (as Marx noted). Instead, Hegel used the concrete material determinations of the estates (and guildlike corporations) to ensure that all interests found representation. Marx rejects this anachronism. He wants to draw out the positive potential as well as the critical implications of universal suffrage. Voting is said to permit civil society to raise itself to political existence as its true and universal form of existence. Granted, this form of existence is an abstraction, but Marx sees it as at the same time the dialectical transcendence of that abstraction. In voting, civil society makes its political existence into its true existence, and by this very gesture makes its civil existence inessential. Separated from one another, the interdependent opposites dissolve. "The *reform of voting* is therefore, within the *abstract political state*, the demand for the *dissolution* of this state, but also the *dissolution of civil society*" (OM, 27). This dialectical conclusion fulfills the two systematic goals: (1) it explains the genesis of the democracy whose normative legitimation Marx had provided at the outset of his analysis; and (2) it is a critique of the separation of the political sphere from actual society that also – importantly – criticizes the basis of that separation as rooted in the self-alienated structure of civil society itself. The conditions for philosophy's becoming worldly thus coincide with the conditions for the world's becoming philosophical. The overcoming of the abstract political state shows the self-alienated character of its foundation in civil society. It remains to find within civil society the key to overcoming this self-alienation.

Democracy as the "resolved mystery of all constitutions" would soon be replaced by the proletariat as the solution to "the riddle of history." What is the relation of these two proposals? If Hegel's idealism was criticized for its uncritical accommodation to the existing world, for mystifying the real by embedding it in a normative system of rationality of which material reality is but an appearance, Marx will have to show how the analysis of the existent world contains within itself a contradiction that explains why the world strives toward philosophy as philosophy opens itself to the

world. Hegel's theory of the modern state presented the culmination and completion of his political theory; Marx's critique of Hegel's idealist program leads him to invert the path, moving from the political toward its material foundation. But what is at issue for Marx is more than simply a materialist "inversion"; Marx's claim is also historical in two important senses. Hegel's state-theory recognized and explained the existent *political* structures of his time, and showed why they were necessary to the progress of modernity over the Middle Ages. But the inconsistencies in the theory when confronted with modern *social* conditions implied that history had not yet ended, and that the imperatives of philosophy remained to be realized. That is why Marx noted that the critique of the political illusion opens the path toward the analysis of civil society.

C. Revolution Replaces Spirit as the Foundation of the New Philosophy

Marx's first essay in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, "On the Jewish Question," develops the implications of his critique of the "merely political" emancipation that seeks to replace monarchy with a republic. While the revolution that overthrew monarchy constituted a truly political state independent of civil society, that revolution simultaneously dissolved civil society into egoistic individuals relating to one another externally. But the merely "political revolution dissolves civil life into its constituent elements without revolutionizing these elements and without subjecting them to critique" (OM, 49). As a result, the rights of man serve to consecrate what is often called "possessive individualism." As rights to equality, liberty, security, and property, these victories over monarchy serve only to protect man as an "isolated monad, withdrawn into himself" (OM, 45). They guarantee the right to exist as a "*limited* individual limited unto himself" (ibid.), whose freedom becomes "the right of private property" (ibid.), whose "security" is guaranteed by a legal "equality," whose empty formality means that it protects the actual inequality existing in civil society (OM, 46). But Marx does not stop with this reductionist critique of the rights of man.

Despite its call for material social change, "On the Jewish Question" also argues that the separation of political from social life makes true democracy impossible. To overcome this division, alienated monadic individual egoism must be replaced by "generic being" (*Gattungswesen*). This critique is *normative*; it refigures the analysis of "alienation" developed in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. But philosophy as normative must acquire a genetic efficacy, a power to impel transformative action and thus to become worldly. This has not yet been demonstrated. At best, Marx could claim to have shown how philosophy becomes worldly *and* why the world must (ideally) become philosophical; he has not shown that philosophy becomes worldly *as* the world becomes philosophical. This may explain why he does not return to his positive evaluation of the advance of the modern state over the "democracy of unfreedom" to

consider the positive aspects of the new rights won by the revolution. His second essay in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, the “Introduction to a Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*,” continues the systematic philosophical critique.

Marx now “declares war” on a world that is “beneath all critique” but remains “an object of the critique just as the criminal who is under the level of humanity is still the object of the executioner” (OM, 59). The occasion for this “war” was suggested by the normative critique of religious alienation, which must be supplemented by the “irreligious critique” whose ground is “man makes religion” (OM, 57). Critique is now “no longer an end in itself but simply a *means*” (OM, 59). Its task is suggested by the active protest (rather than simple alienation) that forms the genetic moment of the critique. As a means, critique “must make these petrified relations dance by singing before them their own tune” (492). This metaphorical characterization of the critical task was suggested by a letter that Marx published in the same journal, in which he insisted “reason has always existed, but not always in a rational form.”² This genetic moment cannot be separated from its normative complement. This is clear in Marx’s critique of two “parties” seeking German liberation, each of whom accomplishes the opposite of what it intends. The “practical party” demands the negation of philosophy and concentrates on the world. But “[y]ou cannot transcend [*Aufheben*] philosophy without actualizing it” (OM, 62). The “theoretical party” is equally one-sided, concentrating on the “critical struggle” without seeing that it too exists in the world. It “thought that it could actualize philosophy without transcending it” (OM, 63). Once again, the world’s becoming philosophical must be understood as philosophy’s becoming worldly.

This context explains the philosophical role of the proletariat and Marx’s turn to political economy as the way to do philosophy by other means. Normatively, “[t]he critique of religion ends with the doctrine that man is the highest being for man, hence, with the categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions in which man is a degraded, enslaved, contemptible being” (OM, 64). Genetically, “[t]heory is only actualized in a people inasmuch as it is the actualization of their needs. . . . It is not sufficient that thought should seek its actualization; actuality must itself strive toward thought” (OM, 65). The two moments come together when “a particular class by virtue of its particular situation undertakes the universal emancipation of society” (OM, 67). This demands “the formation of a

² This “Exchange of Letters” among Marx, Ruge, Bakunin, and Feuerbach is cited here from the *Frühe Schriften* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1962), p. 448. Two other passages from the exchange should be noted. “We do not,” writes Marx, “face the world in a doctrinaire fashion, declaring ‘Here is the truth, kneel here.’ We merely show the world why it actually struggles; and consciousness is something the world must acquire even if it does not want to.” And, at the end of the letter, Marx notes, “Mankind does not begin any *new* work but completes its old work consciously” (ibid., 449, 450).

class with radical chains,” which is “a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, . . . of a sphere which has a universal character because of its universal suffering and which claims no particular right because no particular wrong but unqualified wrong is done to it; a sphere which can invoke no historical title but only a human one; a sphere, finally . . . which, in a word, is the complete loss of humanity and can only redeem itself through the complete redemption of humanity. This dissolution of society as a particular Estate is the proletariat” (OM, 69, italics omitted). The key to this first formulation of the demand for proletarian revolution lies in the notion of the *formation* of such a class. The proletariat is not simply the poor; Marx insists that the poverty of the proletariat is “artificially produced” (ibid., *künstlich produzierte Armut*). The demonstration of the necessity of this artificial production falls to political economy.

After introducing the proletariat as the genetic material basis for revolution, Marx turns to the normative moment necessary to his systematic account. “As philosophy finds in the proletariat its material weapons, so the proletariat finds in philosophy its spiritual weapons, and once the lightning of thought has struck in this naive soil of the people the Germans will complete their emancipation and become men” (ibid.). Philosophy thus becomes worldly *as* the world becomes philosophical in the revolutionary proletariat. Marx repeats his systematic intention at the conclusion of his argument: “The head of this emancipation is philosophy, its heart is the proletariat. Philosophy cannot be actualized without the transcendence [*Aufhebung*] of the proletariat; the proletariat cannot be transcended without the actualization of philosophy” (OM, 70). The philosophical problem, however, lies in Marx’s metaphorical appeal to the “lightning of thought” that is supposed to awaken the proletariat to its normative vocation. The metaphor refers to what later came to be called “class consciousness.” But the concept itself remains to be analyzed – normatively in the second of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, genetically in the third manuscript. The philosophical result of this systematic claim for the proletarian revolution is that *Revolution replaces Spirit as the Subject whose process of appearance and self-recognition was the foundation of the Hegelian system.*

The first of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* uses long excerpts from classical political economy to demonstrate the “artificial formation” of the proletariat by capitalist economic relations. Political economy presupposes the existence of private property rather than asking about its systematic political presupposition, which now takes the form of alienated labor. By showing the mutual dependence of private property and alienated labor, Marx illustrates the genesis of an internally contradictory socioeconomic relation that is at war with its own premise, and thus open to the weapon of immanent critique. But this first manuscript breaks off before drawing conclusions, and the second manuscript seems to recognize

that the task could not be accomplished by genetic means alone. The presence of a contradiction does not necessarily mean that it will be overcome. Hence, the second manuscript returns to the opposition between alienated labor and private property, proposing this time a normative account.

At first, alienated labor and private property relate to one another positively; the action of each (unintentionally) improves the lot of the other. Capital's search for greater profit increases social productivity, while labor's demand for better wages and conditions forces capital to invent more efficient machines. This positive relation appears to make the interests of labor and capital identical; yet each also comes to recognize that its relation to the other also implies that it is dependent on something external to itself. Each then seeks to affirm its independence: capital becomes exploitative, while labor engages in industrial struggle. But both strategies are fatally flawed, since the two *are* related to one another, and the pretense to act independently works against what each nonetheless *is*. This leads to a third stage, in which the two poles collide – and where Marx's manuscript breaks off, unable to say more about the forms this normative collision would generate. This normative account conceptualizes the “lightning of thought” that would make the proletariat conscious of its revolutionary destiny. It complements the genetic account of the first manuscript.

The third and longest of the *Manuscripts of 1844* confirms Marx's inverted Hegelianism while proposing a method for doing philosophy by other means and justifying his passage from philosophy to political economy. Marx argues that the “greatness” of Hegel's *Phenomenology* is due to his having understood the positive, creative function of labor.³ However, since Hegel was concerned only with mental labor, he neglected the negative side (the alienation) that prevents actual labor from realizing itself. Adopting other means, Marx proposes to actualize what Hegel propounded only in thought. “The entire so-called world history,” explains Marx, “is only the creation of man through human labor and the development of nature for man” (607). New needs are generated in this process; these needs become normative demands that spur the process forward. The panorama that emerges shows “how the history of industry . . . is the open book of man's essential powers” (602). The relation that in the first manuscript entailed a contradiction between alienated labor and private property now becomes positive as society and its laboring subjects are enriched. The opposition between subject and object is overcome; “natural science will lose its abstract tendency and become the basis of human science” (604). This claim clarifies the result expected from the clash of opposites in the incomplete second manuscript. The concept of communism is presented as “the completed naturalism = humanism and . . . the completed humanism = naturalism,” and as such it is “the true resolution of the

³ The 1844 manuscripts are cited in my translation from the Cotta edition; parentheses indicate the page numbers, here 645.

conflict between man and nature and between man and man” (593f.). With this Communist solution in view, Marx has accomplished the passage from philosophy to political economy; philosophy has become worldly in that new and modern science of political economy which reflects on a world that is, apparently, becoming philosophical.

A final citation from the third manuscript provides a cautionary note before turning to the new means for doing philosophy. Communism “is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution” (ibid.). The phrase is familiar; Marx had used a similar formulation when describing *democracy* as “the resolved mystery of all constitutions” (OM, 7). Its reappearance here suggests that the first phase of Marx’s political theory has been completed; he has rid himself of the illusory separation of the political that vitiated Hegel’s theory of the modern state. The price to be paid for this philosophical liberation remains to be calculated. If the political economy with which Marx replaces philosophy becomes separated from the other social relations, as in the Hegelian idealism of the state, the price may be too high. Marx will have to show that, and how, his new theoretical standpoint makes room also for the revolutionary democratic practice of politics that Marx had pointed to as “the modern French” alternative to merely political transformation (OM, 10). The need to make room for politics would become clear with the outbreak of the 1848 revolution.

II: From Political Economy to Politics

A. *Economics and the Proletariat*

An illustration of the normative dimension of Marx’s critique of the “artificial formation” of the proletariat is suggested by the claim in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* that the opposition between the propertied and those who lack property is an “indifferent opposition,” whereas the clash of capital and labor presents a truly dialectical opposition that must develop toward a resolution (590). This distinction is justified by a sketch of the development of political economy as it becomes scientific. The mercantilists saw the objective essence of wealth in precious metals, becoming thereby “fetishists, Catholics.” Adam Smith – whom Engels had called “the Luther of political economy” – made labor the essence of wealth, thus introducing a subjective dimension. But this labor was abstract, free of all individual qualities, and able thereby to overthrow earlier modes of production because it was universal, while they were only particular, and thus limited. This development culminated with Ricardo, whom his contemporaries accused of amoralism because he described the conflict of capital and labor openly. Those who followed Ricardo were forced to become apologists, for the reality behind the abstract labor that constitutes wealth was a negative principle – abstract man considered only in the formal universality of his being, as a worker. The resulting figure recalls the form of alienation encountered in religious consciousness; like religion,

political economy claims a normative universality that it cannot justify. Marx's critique has to find the foundation of this alienation so that his own normative dialectical critique can be realized.

The theory of alienated labor provides the necessary genetic complement. Marx analyzes four aspects of the worker's condition as wage laborer. (1) He is alienated from his product; the more he produces, the less he receives; the product in which he has invested his labor belongs to another, is external to him, and exercises a power over him – much as in religious alienation, where the more power is attributed to god, the less remains for man. (2) The worker is alienated from nature, which is necessary for the objectification of his labor, and for the reproduction of his own life. Nature has become a commodity; the worker depends on the capitalist to provide him with it – to work on, and to consume. As a result, he is alienated in the act of production; his labor does not belong to him, does not permit his self-affirmation, and constrains his freedom. (3) Since labor has become merely a means, the worker is reduced to the status of an animal; the consciousness and freedom specific to man is denied him. In this way, the worker is alienated from his own generic being; he is not free to become that which he is. (4) It follows that the worker is alienated from other men. Since the relation of man to man (and, in the third manuscript, to woman [592]) is the index of man's relation to himself, to his world, and to his own activity, alienation reaches its pinnacle here. The conclusion of this analysis of alienated labor is radical. Reformers like Proudhon who want to raise wages produce only better paid slaves. Wage labor must be abolished. But this is a return to the normative standpoint; it explains *that* the system of capitalist relations must be overthrown, but it does not show *how* this can take place. Indeed, Marx's manuscript breaks off inconclusively soon after this argument is proposed. Before returning to the different path offered by the third manuscript, we need to look at the economic grounds of Marx's political hope.

Marx's economic theory prior to 1848 did not build on that unity of philosophy and the proletariat, of normativity and genesis. The published form of the lectures on "Wage Labor and Capital" (the lectures were presented in Brussels in 1847 but not published until April 1849) begins by claiming that the defeats of 1848 show that however remote a renewal of class struggle may appear, the political forms have been tried; it is time to return to the economic logic that grounds bourgeois rule and proletarian slavery. Not all labor is wage labor, insists Marx, nor is capital a transhistorical reality. "A Negro is a Negro. He only becomes a slave in certain relations. A cotton-spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton. It becomes capital only in certain relations."⁴ These relations are social relations. Not

⁴ Citations from "Wage Labor and Capital" are from David McLellan, ed., *Karl Marx, Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), indicated by DM and a page, here 256.

every sum of commodities or exchange values is capital. Capital comes to exist “[b]y maintaining and multiplying itself as an independent social power, that is, as the power of a portion of society, by means of its exchange for direct, living labor. The existence of a class which possesses nothing but its capacity to labor is a necessary prerequisite of capital” (DM, 257). This means that capital is the domination of accumulated past labor over the direct living labor of the proletariat.

Marx does not draw from his argument any conclusions that bear on political strategy or that suggest a course of political action. His concern is to establish the inevitable necessity that the proletariat overcome the economic system in which it is confined. The expected economic crisis will be the catalyst for renewed class struggle, which Marx wants to show is vain if it is not total. In his 1847 polemic against Proudhon, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx draws the normative political implication of this economic analysis. The proletariat is “already a class over against capital, but not yet for itself.” The genetic complement is said to be found “[i]n the struggle” (DM, 214). But this voluntarism needs to be justified in its turn; the genetic cannot stand alone. A reconciliation of the economic and the political perspectives was suggested in the third of the *Manuscripts of 1844*: the insertion of the logic of the economy into a conception of history. The success of this approach depends on one difference between the analysis of alienated labor in 1844 and the simple economic logic of “Wage Labor and Capital.” The alienation analyzed in 1844, and at the outset of “Wage Labor and Capital,” presents a phenomenology of the abstract *individual* worker, whereas the economic logic of wage labor concerns labor as a *social* relation that – like the proletariat – is an “artificial formation.”

Economics and History

The communism described in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* is the product of “the entire movement of history” (594, cf. 618). The communist revolution – like Hegel’s Spirit – plays a teleological role as the realization of the revolutionary subject. Marx’s phenomenological premise is that “the entire so-called world history is only the creation of man through human labor and the development of nature for man” (607). Whereas he would underline the negative effects of increasing industrialization in “Wage Labor and Capital,” in 1844 he stressed that “the history of industry and the present objective nature of industry is the open book of man’s essential powers, the sensibly present human psychology” (602). He rejects what he calls “crude” or “leveling” communism whose notion of equality is based on a “return to the unnatural simplicity of the poor and wantless man who has not gone beyond private property nor even yet achieved it” (592). Communist man’s relation to his objects will no longer be “one-sided,” a possession for use as a means to an externally given end; as in his earlier vision of democracy, Marx describes communist possession

as “all-sided” (598). In this way, the “development (*Bildung*) of the five senses is the work of all past world history.” As a result, “the fully constituted society produces man in this entire wealth of his being, produces the rich, deep, and entirely sensitive man as its enduring actuality” (602). The antagonism of wage labor and capitalism must be overcome not by returning to a simpler past but by using the achievements of the present to transcend it.

The objective development of capitalism prepares this communist future in which “in the place of the political and economic wealth and poverty steps the rich man and the rich human need” (605). But while capitalism prepares this possible future, it does not produce it merely by the logic of its own breakdown and demise. The metaphorical “lightning of thought” has not been explained. Marx must explain concretely why communism is not merely a normative ideal to which reality must adapt but also represents the “real movement of history,” which is its genetic complement. Only then will communism not be susceptible to the critique Marx levels against the idealism of “merely political” solutions. But because such ideals do play a role in history, he has to explain “the production of consciousness,” showing how circumstances make men as much as men make circumstances. This is the task Marx takes up in *The German Ideology*.⁵ The production of consciousness and the production of capitalism are historically interdependent.

The subtitle of Marx’s explanation of the emergence of capitalism is significant: “natural (*naturwüchsig*) and civilized instruments of production and forms of property” (GI, 65). “Civilized” production is the product of human activity – which, however, turns against its producers in the alienated form of capital. The workers who produce capital are subordinated to its dictates; their autonomy is reified in its instrumentalities. However, the proletariat can also truly “civilize” production, because it has no particular class interests whose interference would prevent the generalization of the new productive forces. Marx’s analysis is oriented toward the demonstration that in producing capitalism, the proletariat has produced the means of its own liberation. The philosophical anthropology that forms the framework of the analysis – tracing the successive phases of economic development that have led to capitalism and its “ideological” self-representation – articulates a dialectic whose three phases begin with production, pass through its objectification as external and subject to determinations that were not intended by the conscious producers and become barriers to them, until finally there occurs a negation of this externality in the communist revolution whose abolition of (externally determined) labor liberates an autonomous humanity. The problem with this dialectical logic is suggested by Marx himself, however, when he asserts that revolution is

⁵ Citations from this text are taken from the German, published in the *Marx-Engels-Werke*, vol. 3, and are indicated in the text as GI followed by a page number, here 35.

necessary not only because that is the only way to overthrow the ruling class but also “because the class *overthrowing* it can only succeed through a revolution in ridding itself of the muck (*Dreck*) of the ages and become thus capable of a new grounding of society” (GI, 70). It is not simply the production of capitalist social relations that makes the proletariat capable of inaugurating truly human history. The metaphorical “lightning of thought” remains to be explained.

B. Economics and Philosophy

The importance of *The German Ideology* lies in its attempt to situate the processes and relations of the capitalist economy in the context of a history that demonstrates, materially, the progress of humanity toward its own emancipation. At times, Marx seems to think that an *immanent critique* of the historical process that produced capitalism could point also to the latent normative potential for transcending that social formation (sometimes on material-logical grounds, sometimes on anthropological-phenomenological ones). At other times, his critique seems intended more to enlighten the potential revolutionary subject about its own situation, following the insistence in the 1843 “Exchange of Letters” that “consciousness is something it must acquire even if it does not want to.” On yet other occasions, Marx’s materialism becomes less a critique and more a positivist reductionism pointing to a mechanically functioning productivity logic of history. In each case, the critique seeks to explain the passage to action, as social transformation or political change. The account circles around two poles suggested by the distinction between a phenomenological and a logical account of the “lightning of thought”: in the former, the proletariat must see through the world of appearance and understand the logic of its situation; in the latter, the proletariat must become aware of its own practice and reappropriate the conscious production of its social life. In the one case, the world becomes philosophical; in the other, philosophy becomes worldly. The challenge is to unite the two poles.

The *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845) provide another illustration of the ambiguity of Marx’s conception of philosophy at the conclusion of his discovery of the primacy of political economy. The second paragraph of the third thesis, which posed the question “Who will educate the educator?”, describes “revolutionary practice” as “[t]he coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing.” In other words, “revolutionary practice” would realize Marx’s demand that philosophy become worldly *as* the world becomes philosophical. This claim permits Marx to avoid the voluntarism that is apparently suggested by the famous eleventh thesis, that the philosophers have only understood the world, whereas the point is to change it. By contrast, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) brings together the strands followed to this point in a different manner. What is remarkable there is Marx’s ability at once to sing a hymn to the progress brought about by capitalist civilizing processes and

to denounce their nefarious effects. The contradiction between the forces and relations of production develops while stripping the veils from past traditions and fixed relations. “All that is solid melts in the air” as capitalism continues its self-revolutionizing process. In the end, the worker is brought face to face with his lot. But the concept of alienated labor is not invoked to explain the next step. Instead, Marx introduces the activity of the communists. They are not a separate party; they have no separate interests, nor do they seek to impose (as “schoolmasters”) their own sectarian ideas. They are distinct from other working-class parties only because they “have the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.” The apparent modesty of this distinction (“only”) hides a remarkable leap: *Marx has returned to the idealism of Hegel*. This is a confirmation of the trajectory that we have followed to this point; in effect, *Revolution has replaced Spirit to become the philosophical subject of History*.

III. From Politics Back to Political Economy

A. *The Phenomenology of Politics*

The realization of the Revolution-as-Subject-of-History must unite the normative and the genetic moments that guided Marx’s analysis. The philosopher has the phenomenological task of following this subject’s appearing forms in order to recognize and articulate the logic of their manifestation. The revolution of 1848 in France provided a practical illustration, since the political revolution of February was followed by an attempted social revolution in June. The introduction to *Class Struggles in France* (1850) thus asserts that a victory in February would have been in fact a defeat. It would have been that “merely political” revolution that Marx had criticized in his youth. The apparent failure in June, by unifying the enemies of the proletariat, made possible the emergence of a truly revolutionary party. While the demand for a “social republic” revealed the “secret of 19th century revolution,” its abstraction from class antagonisms presupposed an illusion of *fraternité* that had to be destroyed.⁶ The “specter of communism” that Marx had recently invoked in the introduction to the *Manifesto* could become reality only if this phenomenological movement culminates in the self-consciousness of the proletariat.

But the proletariat is not alone on stage; Marx has to explain also the appearances and illusions of bourgeois politics. He now must treat the state as a “power,” rather than criticize its impotence. This implies that “society” is not a homogeneous body needing only to be liberated from politics to realize its essential nature; the economic analysis that sought to actual-

⁶ Citations from the English translation in *Political Writings*, vol. 2 (New York: Penguin, 1992), are indicated in the text as CSF, followed by the page number, in this case, 47.

ize philosophy by other means thus needs a political supplement. But the status of the political in Marx's analysis is ambiguous. The phenomenology of revolution that he describes in *Class Struggles in France* concludes with an affirmation of the priority of the logic of revolution, proclaiming, "The Revolution is Dead, Long Live the Revolution" (CSF, 62). This is why the politics Marx describes is a politics of illusion. Succeeding classes come to power only to be caught between their claims to universality and the particularity of their own interests. The first victim of this illusion was the proletariat, whose decisive role in February led it to "lower the red flag before the tricolor" in the belief that the social republic could be achieved peacefully (CSF, 46). At the same time, however, the bourgeois republic showed itself for what it truly is: a state whose purpose is to perpetuate the rule of capital. By losing its illusions, the proletarian defeat is a victory. But this complicates the situation; there are now three moments in Marx's phenomenology: the imperatives of the political sphere, the claims of particular interest, and the omnipresent logic of the "specter" that haunts the political stage. In the strategic maneuvering and the shifting class alliances that characterized the drama of 1848, the republic became the political form to which all parties had to appeal, despite their differing goals. It was the political form in which their contradictory interests could coexist. The imaginary republic thus acquired political reality.

The republic is of course only a political form; the real business of society continues on its own. Had the monarchist factions recognized their real interests rather than dreaming of political restoration, they would have seen that their old division as representatives of landed and financial interests no longer existed. Both monarchial factions benefited from the national debt, which the Party of Order continued to increase, in its defense of the state against society. Only the manufacturers were opposed, but their economic weakness at this stage of the development of French capitalism meant that they could intervene politically only in alliance with the proletariat. February had taught them the danger of this, and so they were forced to support the Party of Order. The political situation appeared hopeless. Marx predicted stalemate, with the Party of Order and Bonaparte joining together against their common enemy, the people, "until the new economic situation has again reached the point where a new explosion blows all these squabbling parties with their constitutional republic sky-high" (CSF, 142). This economic crisis would produce the objective destruction of the illusion of the political that the phenomenological progression described by Marx had produced on the side of the revolutionary subject. The unity of the two moments would mean that revolution was not only possible; it could now become actual.

B. The Logic of Politics

The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon (1852) – the pamphlet in which Marx sought to explain the failure of his revolutionary predictions – repeats

many of the insights developed in *Class Struggles*, but adds new elements to his theory of the political. The best known, presented in the preface to the second edition (1869), repeats the reductionist economist error, suggesting that a stalemate in the class struggle permits the rise to power of a mediocre individual like Bonaparte. The political can achieve an autonomous position, independent of the economic infrastructure, only in such exceptional conditions – whose very exceptionality seems to confirm the general validity of a reduction of the political to the economic. From the standpoint of Marx’s systematic theoretical goals, this claim is inadequate. It neglects the persistence of the theme of the Revolution-as-the-Subject-of-History. Marx’s phenomenological critique of the illusion of the political has to be supplemented by a logical critique of political illusions. This goal explains the use of theatrical metaphors in his analysis; the political is the stage on which illusion must appear, and the failure to understand this element of politics dooms its practitioners. *This* is the political signification of “Bonapartism”; understanding it was the key to Bonaparte’s seizure of power, just as failure to understand it doomed his opponents, leaving the field to the revolutionary proletariat.

The different logical foundations of bourgeois and proletarian revolutions entail different phenomenological appearances. “Bourgeois revolutions . . . storm quickly from success to success. They outdo each other in dramatic effects; men and things seem set in sparkling diamonds and each day’s spirit is ecstatic. But they are short-lived; they soon reach their apogee.”⁷ In contrast, the proletarian revolutions “constantly engage in self-criticism, and in repeated interruptions of their own course. They return to what has apparently already been accomplished in order to begin the task again . . . ; they shrink back again and again before the indeterminate immensity of their own goals, until the situation is created in which . . . the conditions themselves cry out: *Hic Rhodus, hic salta*” (ibid.). This self-critical proletarian project implies that no objective or economic determination ensures success. The political process is not simply superstructural or illusory, and the theatrical metaphors are more than simply metaphorical.

The need to understand the logic of politics arises from the failure of the phenomenological account of *Class Struggles*. Marx expected that the passage through the series of political appearances that followed the February revolution would be complemented by the intervention of economic crisis. This infrastructural logic that explains the succession of political forms was separate from the political appearances themselves. The *18th Brumaire* offers a logic of politics that is immanent in the political, so that Marx can conclude that “this parody of the empire was necessary to free the mass of the French nation from the burden of tradition and

⁷ Citations from the English translation in op. cit. are indicated in the text as 18th, followed by the page number, in this case, 150.

to bring out the antagonism between the state power and society in its pure form" (18th, 244). This does not mean that the economic is irrelevant, but it implies that its place has to be evaluated from within a political logic that must be accounted for in its own terms. The phenomenology of political illusion was presented from the participant's perspective; its logic has now to be analyzed from the standpoint of the observer. That external analyst, as was implicit in *Class Struggles*, is none other than the proletariat, that specter whose defeat in June meant that it "passed into the *background* of the revolutionary stage"(18th, 154).

More is at stake than just political illusions; Marx analyzes also the illusion of politics. The problem is to understand the relation of these two analyses. Marx notes the irony that, having deified the sword, the bourgeoisie came to be ruled by it; that, after destroying the revolutionary press, it has lost its own; that, after sending spies and closing the popular clubs, it finds its salons are now watched by the police. This tactic may have protected its purse, but it cost it "the appearance of respectability" (18th, 235). Napoleon's coup replaced the parliamentary force of words with force sans words, destroying the illusion of politics. But Marx's explanation does not appeal only to economic interest. "The opposition between the executive and the legislative expresses the opposition between the nation's heteronomy and its autonomy" (18th, 236). The origin of this antipolitical executive power has to be explained. Its source is the triumph of the absolute monarchy over feudalism, a triumph that centralizes power in the state. The French Revolution took this a step further; and the first Napoleon, and his restored successors, perfected the system.

The result is the kind of political alienation the young Marx had denounced in the Hegelian state. "Every *common* interest was immediately detached from society, opposed to it as a higher, *general* interest, torn away from the self-activity of the individual members of society, and made a subject for governmental activity" (18th, 237). Indeed, the parliamentary republic's attempts to ward off the specter of revolution led it to further centralization. "All political upheavals have perfected this machine instead of smashing it," concludes Marx (18th, 238). Bonaparte's coup completes the separation of the state machine from society; the political illusion has now its proper logical foundation.

The crucial step added by *The 18th Brumaire* is this analysis of the role of the absolute state and its successors in creating the conditions necessary for the rise of bourgeois relations of production. In his earlier writings, Marx assumed that the transition from feudalism to capitalism took place according to a sheerly economic logic defined by the contradiction between the growing forces of production and the outdated relations of production. While this model is present in *Capital*, the use of state-sponsored force, the legislative enactment and executive intervention, is clearly more important to the explanation of capitalism's origin. Marx's analysis of the illusion of the political and of political illusions seems to have led

him to abandon his previous theory of the Subject of History. His earlier studies had led to the assumption that Revolution replaced Hegel's Spirit. Now political experience had taught him that it is not sufficient to trace the phenomenological process by which revolutionary appearances superseded one another until they came to coincide with their essence. The triumph of world capitalism had defeated the bourgeois political revolution after the latter had defeated the social republic. Changing his standpoint meant that Marx had to find a different Subject. Not capital – which is only an appearance – but capitalist relations, as reflected in the mirror of the commodity form, became the new standpoint from which to show how the actualization of philosophy as the making philosophical of the world can realize philosophy by other means.

C. *The Capitalist Economy as Political Subject*

Marx published only the first volume of *Capital* (1867), whose subtitle was the “theory of the immediate production process.”⁸ Marxists had this account alone on which to base their political understanding, even though – as the subtitle alerts the philosophical reader – “immediacy” is only the first form of appearance and does not reveal the essence that makes it possible. On the other hand, the subtitle also stresses the productivist aspect of Marx's argument. Yet it is only at the end of chapter 5, after the lengthy formal analysis of the commodity form and the general description of capital's logic, that Marx poses his own *hic Rhodus, hic salta* and then at the end of chapter 6 proposes to leave the “Eden of the innate rights of man” and to witness a change “in the physiognomy of our *dramatis personae*.”⁹ The theatrical metaphor and the demand to leap to a new perspective are familiar from *The 18th Brumaire*. Their presence here suggests that Marx has changed not his method but rather its object. The phenomenology of appearing forms and the logic that governs their necessary articulation continue to concern him. But the new theory of political economy will join together these moments that had remained side by side as separate texts in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. The commodity form – uniting use-value and exchange-value – becomes the basis of their unity.

The full development of the commodity form as realized capitalism comes at the end of volume 1 (ch. 25) as the “General Law of Capitalist Accumulation.” But this “law” leads neither to socialism nor to revolution;

⁸ Encouraged by the economic crisis of 1857, Marx wrote a draft of his entire theory in 1857; this manuscript, which became available only in 1953, under the title *Grundrisse . . .*, supports the interpretation of Marx's economic theory as a whole that will be offered here. The failure of the crisis of 1857 to lead to revolutionary action may explain why the preface to the 1859 publication of *Toward a Critique of Political Economy* returns to the more determinist and reductionist theory that Marx developed in *The German Ideology*.

⁹ Citations from the Penguin edition (1976) are indicated in the text by volume and page number, here 1, 280.

at best, it shows that capitalism leads to increasing misery among an increasing part of the population. That may incite sympathetic readers to reject the capitalist system, while the presentation of “Original Accumulation” that follows justifies the rejection by a critique of apologists who claim that capitalism is something natural. But this would not fulfill the systematic requirements that have guided Marx’s critical and philosophical theory.

The economic theory developed in volume 1 of *Capital* can be explained relatively simply once one accepts the labor theory of value. Marx presupposes that capitalism functions fairly: all commodities are sold at their (exchange) value, which is determined by the amount of average socially necessary labor contained in each of them; this includes the labor necessary to produce all of their components, raw materials, aliquot value of machinery consumed, and labor added. The trick, and the source of surplus value, is that one commodity involved in the process of production is the worker, who is purchased as the commodity called “labor-power.” The worker’s exchange-value is determined, like that of any other commodity, by the amount of average socially necessary labor necessary to reproduce him (and his family). But as opposed to other commodities, purchased for their use-value and consumed privately, the “consumption” of labor-power consists in putting it to work. And it can be put to work for a longer period of time than is necessary to reproduce it. The excess that results goes into the pocket of the capitalist, who has fairly purchased a commodity on the market and used it freely.

This economic description is at first formal: it follows the appearance of capital as money goes through a cycle at the end of which more money results. In its immediacy, this appearance of profit making as dominating all social relations within capitalist society explains nothing. Just as the biologist cannot begin with the immediacy of the human body, so the political economist must find the “cell form” that permits the explanation of the phenomena that concern him. This cell form is the commodity. Commodities have not only use-values – which are inherently subjective, personal, and thus not comparable with one another – but also exchange-values, which as socially established appear to define the economic sphere as objective and measurable. If a coat is regularly exchanged for a given amount of cloth, we assume that something equal is being exchanged on both sides, something shared by both commodities. It appears at first that this property shared by both commodities is money; but the value of money itself can change – for example, at the beginning of the capitalist era with the discovery of Latin-American gold. This is where the labor theory of value enters. The “labor” incorporated in a commodity is average socially necessary labor; it is not the concrete labor of the particular tailor who produced the coat that is exchanged. *Capital* thus presents an economic theory of the social relations that engender this process.

The social production process of capitalism is based on a series of

commodity exchanges. The capitalist appears immediately as a person having the money needed to buy means of production (machinery and raw materials, as well as the labor-power to work them). These means of production have to be found in a free market, which is not the case in, for example, feudal society. Not only must restrictions on the use of the land and its products be eliminated; guild rules that regulate production must be overcome as well. Most important, however, is the emergence of the free worker, whose “freedom” is due to his separation from the land and the community that formerly ensured his subsistence; this “freedom” leaves him no choice but to sell his labor-power on the market. Marx’s reconstruction of the historical process by which these necessary commodities came onto the market can be left aside. What is crucial is, first, this means that capitalism is a historical creation rather than a natural development inherent in human social relations; and, second, for the theory as simply economic, it is the purchase of the commodity labor-power that permits the capitalist to realize surplus-value. *This historical specificity of capitalism is what makes the economic theory implicitly a political theory.* At the same time, one sees here how Marx presents his earlier theory of alienated labor in a new guise. The concrete and particular labor that any worker does counts not for itself but only as the abstractly universal form of average, or general, socially necessary labor.

The crucial arguments are found in part 4, “The Production of Relative Surplus-Value.” They trace the process by which capitalism becomes not simply an economic system for the production of surplus-value but a political relation that divides society into two opposed yet mutually interdependent classes: those who own the means of production and those who must sell their labor-power in order to maintain their physical existence. The alienated labor of the worker gives birth to an independent social formation that destroys its own historical preconditions and reproduces its new capitalist mode of existence at ever-higher levels. The process begins with what Marx calls the “formal subsumption” of the worker under capitalism, at first through simple cooperation in which formerly autonomous artisan producers are brought together for the accomplishment of a single task. While each may work with the same tools and in the same manner as before, the combined result is increased productivity. However, since it was the outlay of the capitalist which brought them together, it appears that “capital” is responsible for this benefit and that the (relative) surplus-value that ensues rightfully belongs to the capitalist. This is of course only an appearance, since it is the joint labor of the workers that has produced the surplus, which has been alienated from them to the pocket of the capitalist. Nevertheless, workers as well as capitalists (and their apologists) are taken in by the appearance, which is indeed a progress over patriarchal, political, or religious forms of exploitation that existed previously. Still dependent, labor is nonetheless freed from bonds imposed by force.

The illusion grows in the next stages, when the capitalist introduces first

a division of labor into the workshop and then, on the basis of this division of labor, begins to modify the production process itself. The development of what Marx calls “manufacture” occurs here. As the labor process is increasingly divided, the workers’ tools are modified, rendered more efficient, and adapted to new types of production. At this point, it also becomes possible for science to enter into an increasingly rationalized production process, which is adapted to its formal and mathematical reason, and whose development is in turn encouraged by the rationalized production process that no longer depends on accidental human skills. Once again, the alienated illusion arises that attributes the new gains to the “genius” of the capitalist or to his managerial skills. The contribution of the workers is neglected; they are paid simply for their labor-power – whose value decreases as work becomes simplified, and the skilled are replaced by unskilled, or by women and children.

The division of labor and the advance of manufacturing production make the workers’ formal subsumption under capital a “real subsumption.” The worker cannot produce without selling his labor-power to the capitalist. The small artisan who seeks to maintain the old ways that ensured his independence finds himself undersold by more-efficient capitalist manufacture. And whereas the manufacturing worker still needs skill to work with the new and more-adapted tools, a further shift occurs with the advance to “machinery and large scale industry.” The specificity of the machine lies in the fact that it has incorporated into itself the tools formerly used by the worker, such that the worker is transformed from the agent of production to simply a cog in the functioning of a machine that, increasingly, seems capable of running on its own. With this, the process of alienation is complete; the worker’s subjectivity as agent has been transferred to “capital,” which now appears in the form of gigantic, interconnected machinery.

From this description of the complete alienation of the working class through its real subsumption under capital, it is difficult to see how this class could become the agent of world historical transformation that was the basis of Marx’s earlier theories. The economic has replaced the political as the locus for a change that the self-contained production process seems to exclude by its very (artificial) nature.¹⁰ To be sure, Marx does maintain, even in volume 1, that “the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation and exploitation grows; but with it grows the revolt of the working class, a class constantly increasing in numbers, and trained, united and organized by the very mechanism of capitalist production” (1, 929). At this point, a contradiction emerges between capitalism’s monopoly and the

¹⁰ It is only in volume 3 that Marx develops this observation into a “law of the tendency of the rate of surplus-value to fall,” because only then does he introduce competition among the capitalists that blinds them to the need to maintain the social formation on which their profits are based. That is when the “artificial” domination by the economic takes on a different connotation, that of being historically specific and thus transitory.

relations of production to which it has given birth. “The integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated” (ibid). This “inevitable” revolution is justified in a final footnote that is simply a self-citation from *The Communist Manifesto*. However, it is difficult to reconcile this revolutionary expectation with the strictly economic description of the working class presented in volume 1. Yet its presence explains why an economic determinism came to dominate among those who took volume 1 of *Capital* to represent Marx’s final theoretical statement. Philosophy here has become “worldly” as “the inexorability of a natural process”; it is not clear how this makes the economic world that Marx has described “philosophical.” Indeed, if it is only natural (*naturwüchsig*), then it is not rational or civilized.

IV. From the Critique of Political Economy to the Discovery of the Political

A. Critique as Immanent

The persistence of Marx’s systematic theoretical goal in *Capital* is suggested by a letter he wrote to Lassalle (in 1857) that describes his economic theory as “a presentation, and through the presentation a critique of that which is presented.”¹¹ By starting from the commodity form as the unity of use- and exchange-value, Marx is able to present a phenomenology of capitalism, whose foundation is this commodity logic. In this way, he can show the necessary illusions into which the apologists of capitalism are led.¹² The difficulty, however, is that this dialectic can slide over into a kind of reductionist positivism that is typified by Marx’s frequent recourse to metaphors of revolutionary midwives lessening the birth pangs of a society pregnant with its own future. It can also transform revolution into evolution, as when Marx favorably cites in the postface (1873) to the second edition a Russian reviewer’s comparison of his work to “the history of evolution in other branches of biology” (1, 101). This neglects the role of consciousness, the realization of philosophy through the lightning of thought.

If capitalism is an economic process whose development ultimately makes obsolete its own presuppositions at the same time that it produces the conditions for new, truly human relations, it must be a theory of social relations that *only appear* to be economic. The opening theme of *The Communist Manifesto* has not been abandoned: all history is a history of class struggle. The economic development described in volume 1 as if it were simply the evolution of alienated labor determined by the logic of

¹¹ “Eine Darstellung, und durch die Darstellung eine Kritik derselben.”

¹² This systematic intent is evident in the amount of space Marx devotes to explaining not just that, but also how and why, the economists were led to err. The fourth volume of *Capital*, “Theories of Surplus-Value,” is essential to Marx’s project: his systematic demonstration is complete only if he can show the necessity of these illusions.

commodity relations does not function on its own. The process that led to the “real subsumption” of labor was the result of struggles by workers to better their wages and conditions, which Marx describes in an eighty-page chapter entitled “The Working Day.” The relative success of such struggles has to be seen as one of the factors driving capitalism constantly to modernize its work conditions in order to ensure the subordination of the workers. Those who doubt the revolutionary potential of the proletariat make the same errors as the economic apologists of the capitalists: they look only at the side of exchange-value. This prevents them from recognizing the “civilizing” element of capitalism as doubly conflictual, producing advances in the forces of production but also inciting progress on the side of the workers. Marx’s immanent dialectic avoids one-sided reductionism. And by recognizing this doubly “civilizing” aspect of capitalism, it avoids the temptation to idealize or romanticize precapitalist conditions.

The immanent critique of the commodity form, and of the social relations that it presupposes and reproduces, explains why Marx considered his theory both a presentation of the immanent logic of capitalism and a critique of that logic. A passage from the *Grundrisse* that introduces the notion of alienated labor into the economic theory in a way only implicit in *Capital* makes clear the role of the immanent critique: “The recognition [*Erkennung*] of the products as its own, and the judgement that its separation from the conditions of its own realization is improper – forcibly imposed – is an enormous [advance in] awareness [*Bewusstsein*] itself the product of the mode of production resting on capital and as much the knell of its doom as, with the slave’s awareness that he *cannot be the property of another*, with his consciousness of himself as a person, the existence of slavery becomes a merely artificial, vegetative existence, and ceases to be able to prevail as the basis of production.”¹³ It is not economic exploitation but the alienation of the human from what he can become – in the case of developed capitalism, what he has become through its conflictual “civilizing” process – that leads to the overthrow of capitalism.

The immanent critique thus restates Marx’s philosophical problem while avoiding dead ends that, unfortunately, are also present in Marx’s text. The immanent critique does not only or principally condemn capitalism in its own productivist terms – stressing its inefficiencies, the costs resulting from its need to hire overseers in order to discipline rebellious workers, or its indifference to the ecological results of production oriented only to exchange-value. It does not only or principally denounce capitalist exploitation and the immiseration of the working class but starts from the assumption of a fairly functioning capitalist system in order to develop its critique. It is not only or principally moral or rhetorical criticism that hopes to awaken sympathetic souls to the good cause. It is not only or principally

¹³ Citations from the Vintage edition (New York, 1973) are indicated as Gr, followed by a page number, here (Gr, 463).

a theory of crises whose result is the destruction and devaluation of productive capacities and workers' lives. It is not even only or principally a critique of the domination of the commodity form and the subsumption of all spheres of life to the domination of its logic. Rather, critique as immanent seeks to reveal what capitalism's "civilizing" function has *also* created: the socialized worker, a use-value that is abusively reduced to an exchange-value. In this, the project of *Capital* is not different from the task that Marx set himself in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. The difference lies in the nature of the political project that emerges from *Capital* once we go beyond "the immediate production process" and look at the reproduction of capitalism as a system of social relations. It will be clear that Marx does not reduce the political to the logic of the economic. His goal is to show that capitalist economic relations presuppose a theory of the political. Capitalism's inability to understand that presupposition condemns it.

B. *Capitalism as Political*

Volume 2 of *Capital* analyzes the circulation process through which capitalist relations are reproduced. The account traces the metamorphoses through which a produced commodity finds a buyer who acquires its use-value by paying the equivalent of its exchange-value; the money thus acquired finds on the market the machinery, raw materials, and labor-power necessary to begin the production process whose result will put the capitalist in possession of a new commodity, which will in its turn trace the same cycle. The importance of this analysis for political theory is suggested by an unpublished chapter, "The Results of the Immediate Production Process," which explains the transition to volume 2. As often in his manuscripts, when he is groping for the proper formulation of his questions, Marx has recourse to Hegelian language. While the immediate production process began with money and commodities as preconditions, at the end of the cycle these have now been *posited* as capital. This means that the nature of the ingredients in production is changed; use-value is transformed when it is put to work by the capitalist; it is now relevant only as exchange-value, such that the work of the worker is only apparently the production of a product, since what counts as reality in capitalism is the valorization (*Verwertung*) of the means of production. The "real subsumption" of the worker under capital has now become inscribed in the process of capitalist reproduction. The domination of past labor over the present, the subordination of living labor to objectified value, and the inversion of producer and the object produced first seen in *religious* alienation are now part of the process of capital's self-realization.¹⁴ Capital is value existing for itself and maintaining itself. "In the labor-process looked at purely for

¹⁴ Citations from the English translation printed as an appendix to volume 1 of *Capital* are indicated as R followed by a page number, here R, 990.

itself the worker utilizes the means of production. In the labor-process regarded also as a capitalist process of production, the means of production utilize the worker . . . the labor-process is the *self-valorization process* of objectified labor [i.e., of capital] through the agency of living labor” (R, 1008). What was in itself or potentially capitalism at the outset of the process has now become for itself or actual because it reproduces its own conditions of existence as capitalist.

This self-positing of capitalist relations and their reproduction transforms the economic process of immediate production into a *political* process of social reproduction. For itself, capital is simply self-valuating value whose purest and most absurd form is described in volume 3 of *Capital* as interest-bearing capital – money that immediately produces more money, as if no social mediations were necessary. Capitalism takes itself to be the universal mode of productive relations; but its denial of its own preconditions makes it only a particular, historically situated mode of human production. Thus, even though it is a particular, each capital unit takes itself as an end in itself. The resulting competition at first has positive effects; it leads to the development of the forces of production, the increasing application and development of science, and the creation of a more versatile socialized worker. But these benefits concern the use-value of capitalism (and of competition); and the capitalist – capital personified and possessing a will – is concerned with exchange-value. The paradox that emerges is that capital as self-reproducing value posits itself as particular in the person of each capitalist and yet posits also the general social relations that permit it to maintain itself. As posited, capitalist social relations imply a *political* dimension; but as particular, none of the competing capitals can take this dimension into account. This explains why, in *The 18th Brumaire*, the bourgeoisie would be willing to abandon its political role in order to preserve its economic power.

Marx does not develop this political dimension of capitalism in the posthumous volumes 2 and 3 of *Capital*. Rather, volume 3 presents an economic demonstration of the “law of the tendential fall in the rate of profit” that is often said to imply the necessity of a breakdown (*Zusammenbruch*) of capitalism. Yet the chapter that follows the presentation of this law presents six “counteracting factors” that could limit the law’s effects – including more intense exploitation of labor, reduction of wages below their value, and the presence of a relative surplus population – but not the effects of class struggle and their effect on the working day. Granted, the further “development of the law’s internal contradictions” asserts that “the true barrier to capitalist production is capital itself” (3, 358). But this lapidary phrase need not be read as demonstrating an *economic* contradiction. Although the rate of profit may fall, profit can still be made, surplus-value extracted. The problem lies in the realization (*Verwertung*) of this surplus-value, or profit; and that depends on the sphere of circulation, where capitalist social relations have to be reproduced. The

spheres of economic reproduction and social reproduction exist, notes Marx, independently in time and in space, and in theory.¹⁵ As the rate of profit falls, the drive for accumulation by each competing capitalist continues; the market must be expanded constantly, following “a natural law independent of the producers and ever more uncontrollable. The internal contradiction seeks resolution by extending the external field of production. But the more productivity develops, the more it comes into conflict with the narrow basis on which the relations of consumption rest” (3, 353). And, adds Marx, “[i]t is in no way a contradiction, on this contradictory basis, that excess capital coexists with a growing surplus population” (ibid.). The contradiction may be occasioned by the dominance of the particular mode of capitalist production; but its effects are felt at the level of human social reproduction, whose political implications are not developed by Marx.

The attribution to Marx of a theory of necessary economic breakdown leaves open the question why volume 3 continues for more than six hundred pages after the formulation of the “law” that is supposed to foretell capitalism’s demise. What is the status of these considerations of commercial capital, interest-bearing capital, and the forms of rent on land? A purely economic interpretation is possible. It would show that, from the standpoint of the logic of capital, these phenomena are remnants of an earlier period that have become barriers in the present. But such a criticism of capitalism’s irrationality remains on capital’s own, economic, terrain. It is productivist in its logic, and leaves no place for conscious political intervention. And it neglects the earlier explanation of the “absurdity” of interest-bearing capital that forgets social mediations.

The final part of volume 3, “The Revenues and Their Sources,” opens the space for a more political interpretation. Marx criticizes the so-called Trinity Formula for being a historical reification that identifies each of the factors of production with its owner, claiming thereby to explain the source of the revenues of each. His explanation of the origin of this “bewitched and distorted world” in the capitalist relations of production is familiar. At first, with the struggle to limit the working day, the proletariat knows immediately that it is being exploited. But with the development of relative surplus-value, the “growth of the forces of social labor . . . appear[s] in the immediate labor process as shifted from labor to capital. Capital thereby already becomes a very mystical being” (3, 966). Then, in the sphere of circulation, the conditions of production are left behind; it now appears that surplus-value is not simply realized but actually produced in circulation. Volume 2 unveiled the actuality behind this appearance, but it

¹⁵ This thesis, stated in the first part of chapter 15’s discussion of the “internal contradictions” of the law, is not consistently maintained. The other claim is that relations of production determine relations of distribution. In fact, both theses can be maintained if care is taken to distinguish capitalist relations of production based on exchange-value from social relations based on human-value or use-value.

neglected the role of competition; this explains why capitalism's true nature remains veiled for its agents.

When competition was introduced in volume 3, its lawful results (in the form of the technical calculations of real prices and the average rate of profit) were engendered only behind the backs of the individual agents. The mystification reappears at a still deeper level "as the capital fetish, value creating value, so it now presents itself once again in the figure of interest-bearing capital as its most estranged and peculiar form" (3, 968). Finally, a part of surplus-value appears to be completely asocial, bound "rather with a natural element, the earth, [and now] the form of mutual alienation and ossification of the various portions of surplus value is complete" (ibid.). The attribution of revenues to land, labor, and capital "completes the mystification . . . the reification of social relations" (3, 969). Thus, "[i]t is also quite natural . . . that the actual agents of production themselves feel completely at home in these estranged and irrational forms of capital . . . for these are precisely the configuration of appearance in which they move, and with which they are daily involved" (ibid.). To demystify this consciousness is not, however, to show the possibility of overcoming the social relations that gave rise to it. The question of political agency, or the role of class struggle, remains open.

The domination of capital over labor is "essentially different from authority on the basis of production with slaves or serfs." A theory of domination is of course a political theory, based on the notion of authority. Thus, capital's authority and legitimacy depends on the social relations of production, which create the illusion that it is capital that produces the constant amelioration of the productive apparatus; the capitalists acquire this authority as "personifications of the conditions of labor vis-à-vis labor itself, not . . . as political or theocratic rulers" (3, 1021). But the competition among the many capitals means that "the most complete anarchy reigns among the bearers of this authority" (ibid.). The individual capitalist imagines himself to be autonomous, thinking that he could reproduce his relations of production on his own. Yet his profit is the result of a historically specific process of social distribution. But, cautions Marx, to criticize only the relations of distribution is "still timid and restrained" and does not see that these relations correspond to a particular form of production (3,1023). Valid change will come only through crisis, which is now defined as "the contradiction and antithesis between, on the one hand, the relations of distribution, hence also the specific historical form of relations of production corresponding to them, and on the other hand, the productive forces, productivity, and the development of its agents" (3, 1024, my stress). Clarification of the last clause might be expected from the next, and final, chapter, which presents Marx's theory of classes. However, the manuscript breaks off before that theory is developed.

The attempt to clarify the place of the political in the economic theory of *Capital* permits an interpretation of what Marx's theory of classes may

have intended. By becoming a commodity, the productive worker is involved in the paradoxical structure of alienation through which capitalism develops its “civilizing” process. In principle, this productive worker has become “all-sided” and “rich in needs,” just as has capital. Considered from the standpoint of use-value, he has retained and developed his own human needs. It is this that makes him in principle a political agent, capable of transforming not only the relations of distribution but also those of production. Considered as human, rather than as a commodity or as exchange-value, he sees what the capitalist, caught in his illusions and a prisoner of competition, is unable to see: that capital “is the existence of social labor . . . but this existence as itself existing independently opposite its real moments – hence itself a *particular* existence apart from them” (Gr, 471). The imperative of the class struggle is to overcome this particularity that claims falsely to be the natural, and thus universal, mode of human productive relations.

C. *Politics and Class Struggle*

The place of the political in Marx’s economic theory apparently inverts the relation between the political and the social that he had criticized in Hegel’s theory of the state. Rather than the political as the locus of change, the domination of capital appears to mean that the economic has become the locus and agent of change. From this perspective, Marx’s later work would be a critique of the economic illusion parallel to his early critique of the political illusion. This does not contradict the assertion that the agency of change lies in the developed human capacities of the working class, considered not in its alienated existence as wage labor but from the perspective of its noncapitalist humanity. The challenge is to establish the proper relation between these two aspects of Marx’s theory of the political. Marx never developed this theory, but two essays from the 1870s suggest what he might have had in mind. The first, *The Civil War in France* (1871), develops his phenomenological analysis of politics in the land of the political illusion. The second, the *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875), on the program of the German Workers Party, contains Marx’s most general statement on the political process that would move beyond the logic of economic capitalism. Taken together, these essays are a reprise of the phenomenological and logical moments of Marx’s analysis.

The Civil War in France was presented to a meeting of the General Council of the International on May 30, 1871, two days after the defeat of the Paris Commune. Marx now insisted that the salvation of France depended on the proletariat, whose regeneration was “impossible without the revolutionary overthrow of the political and social conditions that had engendered the Second Empire” (200).¹⁶ The tool for that overthrow had

¹⁶ Citations from the English translation in the Penguin edition, *Political Writings*, vol. 3, are given in the text as CWF followed by a page number, here CWF, 200.

been discovered by the Communards themselves. Marx's description of the Commune presents it as the complete negation of existent political institutions. A new political form was necessary because "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes" (CWF, 206).

It appears at first that Marx sees the positive "working" existence of the Commune as a form of direct democracy. It suppressed the standing army and made public officials responsible and revocable, with short terms of office paid at workers' wages. It eliminated the separation of executive and legislative functions, in effect uniting particularity with universality. The church was disestablished, and its role in education – which would now be free for all – was eliminated. The judiciary was made elective and revocable, and thus "divested of that sham independence which had but served to mask their abject subservience to all succeeding governments" (CWF, 210). Decentralization was achieved by the imperative mandate that ensured that "universal suffrage was to serve the people, constituted in communes, as individual suffrage serves every other employer in the search for the workmen and managers of his business" (ibid.). But this sudden reduction of politics to business recalls a terrible phrase of the later Engels, adopted by Lenin: the government over men is replaced by the administration of things.¹⁷ The administration of "things" and the reification by which exchange-value comes to dominate capitalist relations are uncomfortably close to one another. Marx does not allude to this difficulty, which implies the need to look more closely at the political innovation of this revolutionary Commune.

Marx's description of the "true secret" of the Commune is ambiguous. On the one hand, it is "essentially a working-class government, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class," while on the other hand, it is "the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labor" (CWF, 212). The first clause implies that Marx saw the Commune as the realization of direct democracy; the second suggests that the role of this political form is to permit the (phenomenological) class struggle to develop to its full dimension, to recognize itself for what it is for itself, to free itself from the mystifications of commodity fetishism. The two clauses need not be contradictory, so long as the capacity for direct democracy proposed by the first clause is not assumed to be already prepared under capitalism and simply waiting to be liberated by the revolutionary midwives. A democratic government that makes possible the struggle to realize the economic emancipation of labor can permit a process of political learning through which the working class becomes conscious of its own human potentiality.

This was what Marx had in mind in the *German Ideology* when he

¹⁷ Engels's phrase is cited by Lenin in "State and Revolution," in *Selected Works*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1960), p. 314.

talked about class struggle as necessary to eliminate “the muck of the ages.” In this sense, “[t]he great social measure of the Commune was its own working existence” (CWF, 217), which “did not pretend to infallibility, the invariable attribute of all governments of the old stamp. It published its doings and sayings, it initiated the people into its shortcomings” (CWF, 219). This fits the picture of the Commune as a political form that permits the working class to learn to understand its capacities in the process of realizing its own potential. This interpretation is confirmed when Marx insists that the working class has “no ready-made utopias to introduce *par décret du peuple*. They know that in order to work out their own emancipation and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economic agencies, they will have to pass through long struggles through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men.” But the next sentence casts some doubt on the political interpretation I have been pursuing: “They have no ideals to realize, but to set free the elements of the new society with which the old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant” (CWF, 213). The creative potential of the political sphere appears to succumb to a reductionist vision of immanent critique.

The concluding section of *The Civil War in France* does little to clarify the ambiguous relation between direct democracy, economic determinism, and the invention of the “political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labor.” Although there are passages that lend credence to the deterministic viewpoint, the political interpretation is not excluded. The Commune is said to be the political form “at last discovered,” just as democracy, and then the proletariat, were said by Marx in earlier writings to be solutions to the “riddle of history.” As usual, if we turn to Marx’s “first draft,” we find that he again uses more Hegelian language. His reconstruction of political centralization underlines the state’s “supernaturalist sway over real society” (CWF, 247).¹⁸ The Commune’s revolution against “this supernaturalist abortion of society” (CWF, 249) and against the alienation that makes “administration and political governing . . . mysteries, transcendent functions only to be trusted to the hands of a trained caste . . . absorbing the intelligence of the masses and turning them against themselves . . .” (CWF, 251) is “the *political form of the social emancipation . . . of labor*” (CWF, 252, Marx’s emphasis). Here, direct democracy is rejected as realizing immediate social emancipation: the Commune “is *not* the social movement of the working class and therefore of a general regeneration of mankind, but the organized means of action. The Commune does *not* do away with class struggles . . . but affords the rational medium in which that class struggle can run through its different phases in the most rational and humane way” (*ibid.*, my emphasis). Granted, other phrases in the draft are more economic, and a few

¹⁸ From the first draft, p. 247.

also point toward direct democracy as a solution. However, if the Commune is the discovery of “the political form of social emancipation,” the *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875) should provide confirmation.

Marx develops the political importance of the economic distinction between use-value and exchange-value, between labor in capitalist society and human labor, in his critique of the theories of Ferdinand Lassalle, which had been incorporated into the program of the German Workers Party. Its assertion that because labor is the source of all wealth and culture, and since it can be performed only in and through society, all members of society have a right to its products, is true – Marx admonishes – only in capitalism. If there were cooperative ownership of the means of production, then labor would no longer be the measure of the value of what is produced, and relations of distribution would not be governed by commodity exchange. The source of the error is not only theoretical; the Gotha Program’s proposals deal not with communist society “as it has developed on its own foundations” – as it has posited itself and as it reproduces itself through a dialectical process of class struggle and overcoming of opposition – but with a society that still bears the “birth marks” of capitalism.¹⁹ As a result, equality seems to demand that each individual receive from society what he has contributed in terms of labor time. But this is a capitalist form of equal right; it treats the individual as a worker, as exchange-value, and neglects all other aspects of his work and life needs. Even though there is no class inequality, as all are workers, this form of equal distribution becomes de facto a right to inequality; the supposed universal application of equal rights views human beings as they exist under capitalism: as wage laborers, abstract commodities, not as unique persons having a value that is human and independent of the commodity market.

Marx’s solution is well known: in the advanced phase of communism, when the antithesis between intellectual and physical labor is overcome, and “when labor is no longer just a means of keeping alive, but has become a vital need, when the all-round development of individuals has also increased their productive powers and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly – only then can society cross the narrow horizon of bourgeois right and inscribe on its banner: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs” (Gotha, 347). Marx’s adoption of this slogan of the utopian followers of Saint-Simon and Fourier is surprising. To think that the political problem of equality could be solved by the leap beyond social scarcity is philosophically a petition of principle. On the other hand, the suggestions in *Capital* that explain how the worker as human – not as exchange-value – develops new, “civilized” capacities could be invoked to explain Marx’s “utopianism.” From a different point

¹⁹ Citations from the English translation in *Political Writings*, vol. 3, are indicated as Gotha followed by a page number, here Gotha, 346f.

of view, a passage in the *Critique of the Gotha Program* that recalls an earlier citation from the *Grundrisse* (Gr, 463) suggests the value Marx places on political autonomy. “It is as if,” he writes, “among slaves who have finally got behind the secret of slavery and broken out in rebellion, one slave, still the prisoner of obsolete ideas, were to write in the program of the rebellion ‘slavery must be abolished because the provisioning of slaves in the slave system cannot exceed a certain low minimum’ ” (Gotha, 352).

The *Critique of the Gotha Program* was written by a political revolutionary for strategic reasons. But class struggle also played a role for Marx as political philosopher. His mature economic theory analyzes the conditions in which that “artificial” revolutionary proletariat whose historical role was discovered in 1843 is formed; but the other necessary moment, designated by the metaphor of the “lightning of thought,” is still not explained. Marx’s critique of capitalism’s creation of a world regulated by the logic of exchange-value could no longer assume, after what transpired from 1848 to 1851, that revolution is the Subject of History. The Subject whose logical appearances are analyzed in *Capital* is capitalist-social-relations-reified-in-the-commodity, whose use-value as laboring humanity remains a silent spectator to the “civilizing” development of the capitalist economy, just as the proletariat was the absent presence haunting the political illusions whose logic was traced in *The 18th Brumaire*. The realization of Marx’s systematic philosophical project demands that this other moment become for itself, consciously and actually, what capitalism has made it potentially. The logic of the commodity form developed in *Capital* is only the appearance of a deeper reality, which is the class struggle between labor and capital. What happens if this appearance is transcended? The *Critique of the Gotha Program* gave only a negative answer: the reign of real equality will *not* be inaugurated immediately, individual difference will remain – and the place of politics as the conscious regulation of social relations will persist, along with the need to continue to do philosophy in order to understand, justify, and critique the choices that have to be made.

V. *Philosophy by Other Means*

If Marx’s mature theory represents “philosophy as worldly,” it remains incomplete without its complementary moment. The problem of “the world as philosophical” reappears explicitly at different points in the *Grundrisse*. Although the distribution of life chances in a given society appears to be the result of historical accident, the fact that all societies must reproduce themselves means that relations of production are determinant. But this does not make them causally determinant in a materialist framework; they express a relation that, while it may appear as a unitary force, is nonetheless the result of social interaction. Societies must reproduce the social relations that make them the specific society that they are.

This framework permits the reintroduction of the category of genesis (in the form of the reproduction process) and normativity (in the form of the relations that get reproduced). Neither can exist in isolation. Thus Smith and Ricardo are criticized for presupposing the individual as agent of production rather than recognizing that prior to the eighteenth century the collectivity was the subject and the individual only its appearing form (Gr, 84). Private interest as the apparent basis of social relations emerges with the dissolution of communal societies; with the development of the money-form it becomes the abstract bond uniting society. The private individual and the monetary bond are historical products “whose universality produces not only the alienation of the individual from himself and from others, but also the universality and the comprehensiveness of his relations and capacities” (Gr, 162). This contradictory unity must, again, undergo “dissolution.”

Once more a solution is offered in the claim that, stripped of its bourgeois form, wealth is only “the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces etc., created through universal exchange. . . . The absolute working out of his creative potentialities, with no presuppositions other than the previous historic development” (Gr, 488). But this resolution lacks mediation. The genesis of the primacy of the relations of production must be explained and its normative status clarified. Property, which was originally simply man’s relation to nature as the objective form of his subjective existence, undergoes a *political* development that must be explained. The category *property*, in other words, is not naturally given, but rather is posited in a political process. We can set aside, for present purposes, Marx’s reconstruction of the process by which the communal and collective forms of ownership typical of earlier societies gradually break down, liberating the individual. The result of this process is that the individual appears as the free worker who brings himself to the market as the only commodity he owns. The political process is transformed into an economic system, whose “dissolution” can apparently be understood in economic terms.

To be complete, the argument for the necessary dissolution of capitalism must have four distinct moments corresponding to the genetic and the normative expressions of use-value and exchange-value. From the side of capital, the demonstration must show (1) that it develops use-values whose realization is blocked by its one-sided stress on exchange value; and (2) that even on its own terms it produces economic crises caused by the pressure of competition that drives it beyond its own limits. This dual contradiction must be accompanied on the side of labor by the demonstration (3) that “civilizing” processes occur within the alienation of capitalist production that produce a new “wealth” of needs and capacities that are the basis of a new form of social relations; and (4) that the labor theory of value is made obsolete by economic development itself, such that alienated labor can no longer reproduce capitalist social relations. Enough has been said

about the economic problems in capitalism's self-realization; while it will not break down on its own, its crisis-ridden process of reproduction is clear. The other three moments are developed in a brief but lucid – even prophetic – account of fully realized capitalism at the beginning of Notebook 7 of the *Grundrisse*. While its arguments explain Marx's expectation in the *Critique of the Gotha Program* that, in the second phase of communism, "the springs of wealth" will flow freely, they also suggest the need to reconstruct a normative notion of the political that can replace capitalism's "obliteration" of that domain.

The complete development of capital takes the form of modern industry based on machinery. In these conditions, it is not the "direct skillfulness" of the worker but "the technological application of science" that is the crucial productive force (Gr, 699). At first, this appears to produce a "monstrous disproportion between the labor time applied and [the value of] its product" (Gr, 705). And "the human being comes to relate more as watchman and regulator of the production process itself," inserting "the process of nature, transformed into an industrial process, as a means between himself and inorganic nature, mastering it" (ibid.). From the standpoint of exchange-value, the worker simply stands at the side of the process; he is present "by virtue of his presence as a social body." But *this is where the process inverts itself*. "It is, in a word, the development of the social individual which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth." And, Marx continues, "*the theft of alien labor time on which present wealth is based is a miserable foundation in the face of this new one*" (ibid., Marx's emphasis). This account goes beyond the abstract individualist view of alienated labor formulated in 1844. Its economic premises have philosophical consequences.

Beginning from the side of labor (4) the development of productivity by the application of science that makes nature work for man means that labor time ceases to be the measure of value. Production based on exchange-value breaks down of its own accord. The growth of the power of social production increases the disposable time available to society, which first falls to the capitalists and their class. But as this disposable time grows, it becomes clear that "real wealth is the developed productive power of all individuals. *The measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labor time, but rather disposable time*" (Gr, 708, my stress). Capitalism contains a "moving contradiction" that leads it to reduce labor time to a minimum even while postulating labor time as the measure and source of wealth. Further, (3) since work has become supervisory and regulatory, the worker recognizes that "the product ceases to be the product of isolated direct labor; rather it is the combination of social activity that appears as the producer" (Gr, 709). Individual labor has now become social labor – as producing not exchange-value but use-value. In addition, "[f]ree time – which is both idle time and time for higher activity – has naturally transformed its possessor into a different subject, and he then enters into the

direct production process as this different subject” (Gr, 712). But (2) capital seeks to limit the new human possibilities in accord with its own concept of wealth. If it succeeds, this will lead to surplus production that cannot be sold, and necessary labor will be interrupted because the surplus labor already produced cannot be realized as capital. Finally (1) its normative orientation to exchange-value may slow the development of new productive techniques because it refuses to admit the priority of “[t]he free development of individualities, and hence not the reduction of necessary labor time so as to posit surplus labor”; as a result it does not see that “the general reduction of the necessary labor of society to a minimum . . . then corresponds to the artistic, scientific etc. development of the individuals in the time set free, and with the means created, for all of them” (Gr, 706). The four moments necessary for the transcendence of capitalism *on its own basis* are now present. What does this tell us about Marx’s final vision?

The communist “world as philosophical” portrayed in the *Critique of the Gotha Program* was based on a post-scarcity utopia whose economic possibility has now been made concrete. What will follow this “self-dissolution” of capitalism? Earlier in the *Grundrisse*, Marx criticized Smith’s conception of work as a curse, tranquillity as happiness. “It seems quite far from Smith’s mind that the individual, ‘in his normal state of health, strength, activity, skill, facility,’ also needs a normal portion of work, and of the suspension of tranquillity” (Gr, 611). Smith does not see what Marx had called in 1844 “the greatness of Hegel’s phenomenology”: that overcoming obstacles is a liberating activity, and that external aims are “stripped of the semblance of merely external natural urgencies, and become posited as aims which the individual himself posits – hence as self-realization, objectification of the subject, hence real freedom, whose action is, precisely, labor” (ibid.).

Marx’s alternative vision is heroic, and troubling. It implies that “labor which has not yet created the subjective and objective conditions for itself . . . in which labor becomes attractive work, the individual’s self-realization,” is unfree. Freedom is not “mere fun, mere amusement, as Fourier . . . conceives it.” Truly free work, such as musical composition, is “at the same time precisely the most damned seriousness” (ibid.). Material productive work becomes free only “when its social character is posited,” made explicit and reproduced consciously; and “when it is of a scientific and at the same time general character, not merely human exertion as a specifically harnessed natural force, but exertion as subject, which appears in the production process not in a merely natural, spontaneous form, but as an activity regulating all the forces of nature” (Gr, 612). This return to the vision of the third of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* is inconsistent with Marx’s critique of capitalism, which was based ultimately on capitalism’s necessary failure to recognize itself as political, because the blinding effect of competition leads each capitalist to universalize his particular interest. His postcapitalist “world as philosophical” appears to

make a virtue out of that necessity, returning to the young Hegelian premises from which he began. The goal here seems in effect to be a direct or transparent democracy with no place for individual difference or particularity.

The source of the difficulty seems to lie in Marx's critique of the political illusion and the illusion of politics. The systematic argument for the dissolution of capitalism began from two mutually interdependent poles, capital and labor, each of which was itself marked by the duality of the commodity form. The use-value of capital produced conditions in which the basis of its existence as exchange-value (the labor theory of value) was negated; on the other hand, its orientation to exchange-value led it to produce cyclical crises. Meanwhile, the exchange-value of labor-power was negated by the new working conditions (automation, science) that at the same time created the free time and social working conditions in which human values replaced exchange-values as defining the condition of the worker.

This dual contradiction of mutually interdependent poles and the self-dissolution of this contradiction can be seen retrospectively in the analyses of *Class Struggles in France* and *The 18th Brumaire* that led Marx to return to the study of political economy. The political state and the society were related in terms of political illusions and the illusion of politics; politics could not achieve the social revolution that was nonetheless inevitable. But Marx did return to politics, both in *The Civil War in France* and in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*. Insofar as the Commune was *not* a direct democratic solution but rather provided only the framework in which class struggle could be waged, politics retained its autonomy. And insofar as the *Gotha Program* admitted that even in a postcapitalist society individuals will not be all equal and problems of social distribution will remain, the political retains a normative role that provides the framework in which social relations can be generated and reproduced consciously.

Marx never thematized the place of the political in his mature theory. The reconstruction of his path suggests that he passed from a critique of the separation of the political from society to a social analysis that reduced the autonomy of the political, to a political economic theory that replaced the political, and finally to a recognition that the absence of the political from the capitalist economy condemned that mode of social relations because it was unable to understand its own presuppositions and therefore its own limits. This interpretation makes use of the philosophical moments of genesis and normativity, and the methodological moments of phenomenology and logic, in order to show that the systematic attempt of the young Marx to unite "the world's becoming philosophical *as* philosophy's becoming worldly" led to an idealism that ultimately denies to both philosophy and the world the autonomy that Marx sought.

But this idealism is no different from the one confronting the post-1989 world, which wants to replace political choice by the "natural necessity"

of the market. As I noted in my introductory remarks, rereading Marx – supposedly the prophet of economic determinism – as a philosopher makes clear the *political* nature of this choice made unconsciously by our contemporaries. The economy is not neutral; social relations are not natural but historically produced; and whatever our vision of the Good Society, its justification can be in the end only political. As a “Critique of Political Economy,” *Capital* is not a guidebook to running a society; it is the demonstration of the political presuppositions that underlie economic choices. *Capital* is a critique of the political presuppositions that, because they are unable to admit their own political nature, permit the economy to dominate modern society as if politics were no longer necessary or even possible. Marx does not tell us what to do; we learn from him a lesson different from his intention: if we do not learn to think politically, we shall be subjected to a system of which we, like it or not, are the authors. We too will in the end remain alienated.

Department of Philosophy
SUNY at Stony Brook
Stony Brook, NY 11794–3750
USA
richard.howard@sunysb.edu

References

- Howard, Dick. 1977. *The Marxian Legacy*. Revised 1989. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lenin, Vladimir Illitch. 1960. *Selected Works*. Volume 2. Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House.
- Marx, Karl. 1962. *Werke*. Volume 3. Berlin (East): Dietz.
- . 1962. *Frühe Schriften*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- . 1973. *Grundrisse*. New York: Vintage.
- . 1977. *Selected Writings*. Edited by David McLellan. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 1990–1992. *Capital*. Three volumes. London: Penguin.
- . 1992. *The Revolutions of 1848*. Volume 1 of *Political Writings*. London: Penguin.
- . 1992. *Surveys from Exile*. Volume 2 of *Political Writings*. London: Penguin.
- . 1992. *The First International and After*. Volume 3 of *Political Writings*. London: Penguin.
- . 1994. *Early Political Writings*. Edited by Joseph O’Malley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.