1

Old Gods, New Enigmas

Notes on Revolutionary Agency

In a 1995 interview shortly after the publication of *The Age of Extremes*, Eric Hobsbawm was asked about the future currency of socialist ideas. It depended, he answered, on whether or not a "historic force" would still exist to support the socialist project. "It seems to me the historic force rested not necessarily on the ideas but on a particular material situation … the major problem of the Left being that of *agency*." In face of the declining ratio of variable capital in modern production and thus of the social weight of the industrial proletariat,

> we may well find ourselves back in a different pattern to a society like the one of the pre-capitalist society, in which the largest number of people will not be wage workers—they will be something else, either, as you can see in the large part of the Third World, people who are operating in the gray area of the informal economy, who cannot be simply classed as wage workers or in some other way. Now, under those circumstances, clearly the question is, how can this body of people be mobilized in order to realize the aims which unquestionably are still there and to some extent are now more urgent in form?[1]

Hobsbawm, of course, didn't factor in the shift of global manufacturing to coastal East Asia and the almost exponential growth of the Chinese industrial working class (231 million in 2011) over the last generation, but otherwise the reduction of traditional working-class economic and political power—now including stricken BRICS like Brazil and South Africa—has been indeed epochal.[2] In Europe as well as the United States, the erosion of

industrial employment through wage arbitrage, outsourcing, and automation has gone hand in hand with the precaritization of service work, the digital industrialization of white-collar jobs, and the stagnation or decline of unionized public employment.[3] Revolutionary increases in productivity that a half-century ago, when union contracts regulated the macro-economy, might have been shared with workers as higher wages and reduced hours now simply augur further deterioration of the economic security of the majority. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the American economy in 2013 produced 42 percent more goods and services than in 1998, yet the total hours worked (194 billion) were exactly the same in 2013 as in 1998.[4] Looking at manufacturing per se, its output share of the *real* GDP has remained surprisingly stable since 1960 while its share of employment has plunged since the inauguration of Ronald Reagan. In absolute size, the production workforce, approximately 20 million in 1980, fell to 12 million in 2010, with almost 6 million jobs lost in the 2000s.[5]

“A new system,” André Gorz warned twenty years ago, “has been established which is abolishing ‘work’ on a massive scale. It is restoring the worst forms of domination, subjugation and exploitation by forcing each to fight against all in order to obtain the ‘work’ it is abolishing.”[6] This increased competition for jobs (or at least the perception of such competition) has inflamed working-class resentment against the new credentialed elites and the high-tech rich, but equally it has narrowed and poisoned traditional cultures of solidarity, transforming the revolt against globalization into a virulent anti-immigrant backlash.[7] Traditional social-democratic and center-left parties have universally failed to project alternatives to neoliberal globalization or popularize strategies for creating compensatory high-wage jobs in rust belt regions. Even if the hurricane of neoliberalism were to pass—and there is yet little sign this will happen—the automation, not just of production and routine management, but potentially of half or more of all jobs in the OECD bloc, will threaten the last vestiges of job security in core economies.[8]

Automation, of course, has been an approaching death star for generations, with major debates about technological unemployment in every modern decade. The Cassandras have included Stuart Chase and the Technocracy movement in the early 1930s; Norbert Wiener and Ben Seligman in the 1950s; the Ad Hoc Committee on the Triple Revolution and its prestigious progeny, the National Commission on Technology,

Automation and Economic Progress, in the 1960s; and over the following half-century, hundreds of studies, books, and articles.[9] On the left, Herbert Marcuse and André Gorz argued that since automation was inevitable, it was time to abandon "work-based" Marxism and bid adieu to the proletariat (the title of the latter's 1980 book). But until recently the employment impacts of labor-saving technology have been blunted by new products and industries (typically financed by military spending), the growth of administrative and public-sector jobs, and the relentless expansion of consumer credit and household debt. All evidence, however, now points to the (robo-)wolf actually at the door, especially the doors of low-income workers. The 2016 *Annual Report of the Council of Economic Advisers* warned that fully 83 percent of jobs paying less than $20 per hour face the threat of automation in the near future.[10] As a direct corollary, the "precariat" has a brilliant future.

The replacement of human labor-power by the next generation of artificial-intelligence systems and robots, the so-called "Third Wave" of digital technology, will not exempt industrial East Asia.[11] Indeed, the job killers have already arrived. Foxconn, the world's largest manufacturer, responsible for an estimated 50 percent of all electronic products, is currently replacing assembly workers at its huge Shenzhen complex and elsewhere with a million robots (they don't commit suicide in despair at working conditions).[12] Philips Electronics, for its part, has advertised the debut of robotic production systems that "can make any consumer device in the world," replacing the need for cheap Asian labor. Their prototype is a fully automated plant in Friesland that will eventually replace its sister factory in Zhuhai, near Macau, which employs ten times as many workers.[13] GE, likewise, is pouring billions into the development of an industrial internet or "internet of things" to integrate machines and manufacturing systems with networked sensors and automated design processes using cheap data clouds. Ultimately it hopes to build "virtual twins" of all of its products, allowing engineers to test products before they are built and also letting them feed the virtual model with real-world data to improve performance. In this manufacturing mirror-world, computer-aided design would be replaced by computer-directed design, resulting in further attrition of both engineering and assembly-line jobs in Asia, as well as Europe and North America.[14]

Table 1.1 The Global Job Crisis[15]

Active global labor force (2015)	3 billion
“Vulnerable workers” (informal/unwaged)	1.5 billion
Workers earning less than $5 per day	1.3 billion
Working-age people not in labor market	2.0 billion
Inactive youth (not working or studying)	500 million
Child workers	168 million

In much of the global South, meanwhile, structural trends since 1980 have overthrown textbook ideas about “stages of economic growth,” as urbanization has become decoupled from industrialization and subsistence from waged employment.[16] Even in countries with high recent rates of GDP growth, such as India and Nigeria, joblessness and poverty have soared instead of declining, which is why “jobless growth” joined income inequality at the top of the agenda at the 2015 World Economic Forum.[17] Meanwhile rural poverty, especially in Africa, is being rapidly urbanized—or perhaps “warehoused” is the better term—with little prospect that migrants will ever be reincorporated into modern relations of production. Their destinations are the squalid refugee camps and jobless peripheral slums, where their children can dream of becoming prostitutes or car bombers.

The summation of these transformations, in rich as well as poor regions, is an unprecedented crisis of proletarianization—or, if you prefer, of the “real subordination of labor to capital,” embodied by subjects whose consciousness and capacity to effect change are still largely enigmas. Neilson and Stubbs, using the terminology of Chapter 25 of *Capital*, contend that “the uneven unfolding of capitalism’s long-term contradictory labour-market dynamic is generating a massive relative surplus population, distributed in deeply unequal forms and sizes across the countries of the world. It is already larger than the active army, and is set to grow further in the medium-term future.”[18] Everywhere we look, we are reminded of Marx’s warning: “Since the purpose of productive labour is not the existence of the worker but the production of surplus value, all necessary labour which produces no surplus labour is superfluous and worthless to capitalist production.”[19]

Whether as contingent or uncollectivized labor, as micro-entrepreneurs or subsistence criminals, or simply as the permanently unemployed, the fate of this “superfluous” humanity has become the core problem for twentieth-first-century Marxism. Do the old categories of common sentiment and shared

destiny, asks Olivier Schwartz, still define an idea of “the popular classes?”[20] Socialism, as Hobsbawm warned, will have little future unless large sections of this informal working class find sources of collective strength, levers of power, and platforms for participating in an international class struggle. From the standpoint of classical socialism, there could be no greater historical catastrophe than the disappearance of proletarian agency. “[If] the conception of proletariat as the motive force of the coming social revolution were abandoned,” Karl Kautsky wrote in 1906, “then I would have to admit that I was through, that my life no longer had any meaning.”[21]

It would be a gigantic mistake, however, to conclude, as the post-Marxists have, that the starting point for theoretical renewal must be a funeral for the “old working class.”(“As it stands today, the classical revolutionary subject no longer exists,” declare Srnicek and Williams, and many others.)[22] To put it crudely, it has been demoted in agency, not fired from history. Machinists, nurses, truck drivers, and school teachers remain the organized social base defending the historical legacy of labor in Western Europe, North America, and Japan.[23] Trade unions, however weakened or dispirited, continue to articulate a way of life “based around a coherent sense of the dignity of others and of a place in the world.”[24] But the ranks of traditional workers and their unions are no longer growing, and the major increments to the global workforce are increasingly unwaged or jobless.[25] As Christian Marazzi complained recently, it is no longer easy to use a category like “class composition” “to analyze a situation that is increasingly characterized by the fragmentation of the subjects constituted in the world of employment and non-employment.”[26]

At a high level of abstraction, the current period of globalization is defined by a trilogy of ideal-typical economies: super-industrial (coastal East Asia), financial/tertiary (North Atlantic), and hyper-urbanizing/extractive (West Africa). “Jobless growth” is incipient in the first, chronic in the second, and virtually absolute in the third. We might add a fourth ideal-type of disintegrating societies, caught in a vice of war and climate change, whose chief trend is the export of refugees and migrant labor. In any event, we can no longer rely on a single paradigmatic society or class to model the critical vectors of historical development. Imprudent coronations of abstractions like “the multitude” as historical subjects simply dramatize a poverty of empirical research. Contemporary Marxism must be able to scan the future from the

simultaneous perspectives of Shenzhen, Los Angeles, and Lagos if it wants to solve the puzzle of how heterodox social categories might be fitted together in a single resistance to capitalism.

THE UNIVERSAL CLASS

Even the most preliminary tasks are daunting. A new theory of revolution, to begin with, begs benchmarks in the old, starting with clarification of "proletarian agency" in classical socialist thought. In the first instance, of course, self-consciousness of agency preceded theory. The faith that "labor will inherit the earth" and that "the International will be the human race" did not rest on doctrine but arose volcanically from struggles for bread and dignity. Workers' belief in their collective power to effect radical change, whose deep roots were located in the democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century, was amply ratified by the fears and nightmares of the Victorian bourgeoisie. (Although this is an obvious fact, not a small number of Marx's critics have charged at one time or another that revolutionary agency was nothing more than a metaphysical invention, a Hegelian hobgoblin, foisted upon working masses whose actions were actually dictated by simple utilitarian calculation.)

Summarizing the general view amongst Marxists, Ellen Wood succinctly characterized agency as "the possession of strategic power and a capacity for collective action founded in the specific conditions of material life." I would add that "capacity" is a developable potential for conscious and consequent activity, for *self-making*, not a disposition that arises automatically and inevitably from social conditions. Nor in the case of the proletariat is capacity synonymous with *endowment*, such as the power to hire and fire that a capitalist receives from simple ownership of means of production. Agency in the classical socialist sense also imputed hegemony: the political and cultural ability of a class to institute a transformational project that recruits broad sections of society. "Only in the name of the general rights of society," wrote the young Marx, "can a particular class lay claim to general domination."[27]

Marx's model, of course, was the revolutionary middle class of 1789 whose historical vocation had been so famously heralded by the Abbé Sieyès: "What is the Third Estate? Everything. What has it been hitherto in the

political order? Nothing."[28] By equating the rights of man to the rights of property, and political equality to free economic competition, the great ideologues of revolutionary France translated class interests into a stunning vision of universal freedom. The explicit identification of the bourgeoisie as a revolutionary class, the unique architect of progress and human emancipation, was consequently enshrined in the histories written by the celebrated trio of Restoration liberals—Augustin Thierry, François-August Mignet, and François Guizot ("the bourgeoisie's Lenin").[29] Their interpretation of 1789 as a bourgeois revolution against feudalism, the culmination of centuries of conflict between the nobility and the rising Third Estate, framed contemporary thinking about those events as well as providing a powerful ideological justification for the attenuated liberal revolution of 1830.[30] "As Marx himself freely acknowledged," emphasizes Hobsbawm, "these were the men from whom he derived the idea of the class struggle in history."[31] In effect they had already taken all the preliminary conceptual measurements for a theory of revolutionary agency.

A new Third Estate

Marx's own itinerary can be briefly described. As German idealist philosophy was largely a complex response to 1789, his final break from that philosophy entailed a return to the Revolution and the ongoing battle over its meaning and ultimate destination. The political alignments of the Revolution continued to constitute through the 1840s the principal horizon of the European political imagination, including the Young Hegelians' opposition to Prussian autocracy. As Leopold von Ranke once complained, "the Revolution, which has often been pronounced at an end, seems never to be finished. It reappears in ever new and antagonistic forms."[32] In the case of Marx, he had already in his final days as crusading editor of *Rheinische Zeitung*—the voice of Rhenish liberalism—crossed the line from democratic reformism to a social republicanism in the mode of Jacques Roux and *Les Enragés* of 1793. "Faced with the social question," says Stathis Kouvelakis, "Marx place[d] himself in the tradition of the French Revolution and the project of a 'popular political economy' defended by the Robespierreans, the urban *sans-culottes*, and the most radical wing of the peasant movement: a project centred on subordinating property rights to the right to existence."[33]

From his honeymoon summer of 1843 with Jenny Marx in Spa

Kreuznach through spring 1844, after their move to Paris, Marx immersed himself in an intense study of the historiography of the Revolution, especially the monumental collection of documents annotated and published in forty volumes by the former Saint-Simonians P.-J.-B. Buchez and P. C. Roux.[34] (A portion of his reading notes have been preserved as the *Kreuznach Notebooks*.) His collaborator Arnold Ruge wrote to a friend: "Marx wants to write a history of the Convention and has already done an enormous amount of reading."[35] Although he eventually abandoned the book, his research on revolutionary history was integral to his first important cycle of theoretical work, from the "Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Theory of Right" (1843–44) to *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847). "Setting out to be the Feuerbach of politics [i.e. the critic of Hegel's conception of the state], the young Marx instead wound up sketching the outlines of a critical theory of the French Revolution."[36] This became self-critique to the extent that he now confronted the contradictions in the Jacobin model of "purely political revolution" and radical democracy that he had recently advocated in the Rhineland.

Although everywhere on the continent the unfinished work of 1789 begged resumption, Marx recognized that neither the destruction of absolutism nor the victory of universal suffrage would any longer achieve that egalitarian society of small producers that was the true goal of popular republicanism, much less overcome the alienation of labor and human "species-being" that was the essence of a liberal order based on competition and possessive individualism. Moreover, having enthroned its own special interests in the July Monarchy, the French bourgeoisie "abdicated henceforth the pretension of incarnating a universal ideal of the state, charged with realizing the ultimate ends of humanity."[37] Instead, the rising power of industrial and commercial capital, growing out of the expropriation of small producers by large, confirmed the prescience of the original *sans-culotte* communists, Gracchus Babeuf and Sylvain Maréchal, who had argued that *liberté* could be realized as *égalité* only within a system of common property.

The evidence was ominous and ubiquitous. Warren Breckman, in his highly regarded study of Marx and the Young Hegelians, emphasized that their "receptiveness to French socialism in the early 1840s" was not "merely an expression of their own ideological impasse" but a response to the worsening "pauperism crisis" in Western Europe: "by 1842, many German

intellectuals were acutely aware of the plight of the poor."[38] But Lorenz von Stein, whose detailed account of contemporary French socialist and communist sects excited vivid interest amongst young German radicals like Marx, pointed out that there were really two different species of poverty, one familiar, the other confoundingly novel.

> It is not only the poverty of part of the laboring class, not only impoverishment which hits large sections of the population through industrial changes, but it is the poverty reproduced by industrial conditions from generation to generation within the family which characterizes industrial pauperism. The great differences between mere poverty and pauperism can be clearly seen. Lack of work and income result in poverty, but pauperism is brought about by work and wages. In industrial society, poverty can be coped with through charity; in order to fight pauperism the whole industrial working- and wage-system has to be changed … It is pauperism that has led practical people … to adopt the ideas of socialism.[39]

In other words, only a social revolution that transformed civil society could redress this central paradox of the Victorian age: the radical new misery—Marx called it "artificial poverty"—associated with the growth of unprecedented productive powers. But who would constitute the Steam Age's new Third Estate, its "universal class"?

By the time that Marx and Jenny had moved into 38 rue Vaneau on the Left Bank, there was little doubt about the answer. Like other young radical intellectuals, Marx was electrified by the Chartist movement in Britain, the contemporary revolt of the Silesian weavers, and the dramatic ferment of communist and socialist ideas amongst Parisian artisans and laborers. A new social power was awakening, and Marx, following in the footsteps of Moses Hess, Flora Tristan, and von Stein, nominated the property-less proletariat—a group excluded from, and with no stake in, the traditional system of estates and private property—as the successor to the revolutionary bourgeoisie. Of course, in its original Hegelian swaddling clothes, Marx's proletariat was an abstraction—or, rather, an abstract solution—that emerged from his parallel critiques of French revolutionary history and Hegel's theory of the state. In his Paris writings he simultaneously confronted his former "philosophical conscience" and drew up a balance-sheet of the recent failure of German liberalism. As Kouvelakis points out, "Marx encounters the proletariat at the theoretical and symbolic level before making contact with the real (specifically, the Parisian) workers' movement, because he is looking (literally) for an answer to a pre-existing *political* question (how to conceive the imminent transformation of the crisis into a German revolution)."

The "philosophical proletariat" quickly acquired flesh and blood as Marx engaged with revolutionary artisans in Paris, especially the German tailors and cabinetmakers in the underground League of the Just. (His next-door neighbor was one of its leaders.) "The social text of Paris," observes Lloyd Kramer, "significantly extended his understanding of the other texts that he had read before he went to France."[40] By spring 1844, Marx was openly identifying himself as a communist, and later that summer he broke with Ruge, his co-editor on the ill-fated *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, over the latter's disparagement of the June uprising of weavers in Silesia as a primitive act of desperation with no larger significance. "The German poor," Ruge claimed, "are no wiser than the poor Germans, i.e., nowhere do they see beyond their own hearth and home." Marx answered in a fiery polemic ("Critical Marginal Notes on the article 'The King of Prussia and Social Reform by a Prussian'") that contrasted the "dynamic capabilities" of the proletariat—especially its sophisticated ability to formulate general interests and act upon them—to the "political impotence" of the bourgeoisie:

> Recall the *song of the weavers*, that bold *call* to struggle, in which there is not even a mention of hearth and home, factory or district, but in which the proletariat at once, in a striking, sharp, unrestrained and powerful manner, proclaims its opposition to the society of private property. The Silesian uprising *begins* precisely with what the French and English workers' uprisings *end*, consciousness of the nature of the proletariat … Not only machines, these rivals of the workers, are destroyed, but also *ledgers*, the titles to property. And while all other movements were aimed primarily only against the *owner of the industrial enterprise*, the visible enemy, this movement is at the same time directed against the banker, the hidden enemy.[41]

Marx's intense education in the communist circles of Paris was soon followed by a six-week expedition to Manchester and London in the summer of 1845 (July 12–August 21) with his new collaborator Friedrich Engels, whose *Condition of the English Working Class* was a burning bush on Marx's road to communism. "Engels," Neil Davidson points out, "was among the first commentators to see beyond the existential misery of the British working class—a subject that had already exercised such notably non-revolutionary figures as Thomas Carlyle—to the *potential power* it possessed, and in this he was in advance of Marx himself."[42] Lancashire, of course, was the hearth of the First Industrial Revolution as well as the epicenter of the great movement for the Peoples' Charter. "The Chartist movement," Dorothy Thompson reminds us, "was the movement above all on which Marx and Engels based

their analysis of class consciousness."[43] (Marx's knowledge of Manchester would become increasingly intimate: over the course of his lifetime, according to the *Marx-Engels Chronicle*, he visited Engels twenty-five times, spending a year and a half in the industrial metropolis.)[44]

By 1847 at the latest, his rapidly maturing conception of the proletariat as a revolutionary force differed from that of the utopian or "bourgeois socialists" (Engels's term) in at least three major regards. *First*, as Hal Draper and Michael Löwy have shown in their detailed exegeses of his early writings, Marx eschewed the premise of *instrumental agency*: the workers as mere constituency and brute means for achieving a new society designed by some reformer. Instead, he embraced, as had Flora Tristan even earlier, the interpretation of agency as self-reliance and *self-emancipation* that was advocated in radical artisan circles by the so-called "materialist communists." The most eloquent and fiery exponent of this viewpoint was Théodore Dézamy, a school teacher, former comrade-in-arms of Blanqui, and the chief organizer of the legendary Communist Banquet in Belleville in 1840. In polemics that influenced Marx, Dézamy rejected the Icarian fantasy of reconciliation between the rich and poor, made proletarian unity the highest priority, and scorned his former associate Étienne Cabet for not attending the banquet because "the proletarians were allowing themselves to raise the communist flag on their own, without having at their head some *bourgeois*, some *well-known name*."[45]

Löwy, in his reconstruction of this period, proposes two milestones in Marx's reworking of the idea of self-emancipation. In his "singularly underestimated" *Vorwärts* article, "The King of Prussia and Social Reform" (August 1844), Marx celebrated the uprising of the Silesian weavers and revised his earlier left-Hegelian distinction (in the "Introduction") between philosophy as the active and the proletariat as the receptive force. "Socialism is no longer presented as pure theory, an idea 'born in the philosopher's head,' but as a *praxis* [and] the proletariat now plainly becomes the *active* element in emancipation." A year later, shortly after his expulsion from France, Marx penned *The Theses on Feuerbach*, which Löwy characterizes, following Engels, as "the first of Marx's 'Marxist' writings." The third thesis in particular banishes "condescending saviors" by making the self-education of the proletariat through its own revolutionary struggle the "theoretical foundation" of auto-emancipation. "The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and

rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*." This formulation, Löwy argues, represents nothing less than "the transcendence, the sublation (*Aufhebung*) of the antithesis between 18th-century materialism (changing of circumstances) and Young Hegelianism (changing of consciousness)."[46]

Second, the proletariat—even in its immature or transitional incarnations such as poor artisans and hand workers in unmechanized manufactories—was now the only class with both the political will and radical needs to pursue the struggle for democracy to its conclusion. Marx's stormy experiences as editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung*—whose bourgeois sponsorship collapsed under the first blows of the Prussian censor—had shattered any illusion that the German liberal middle class was capable of leading the movement against the *ancien régime* in the resolute manner of the Third Estate in 1789. Already in the 1844 "Introduction," as Draper, Löwy, and others have emphasized, is the kernel of the theory of "permanent revolution": the German bourgeoisie, deradicalized by its apprehension of the emergent threat of the proletariat, abdicates the battle for a democratic republic; the proletariat, which takes its place en bloc with sections of the petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry, will not halt the revolutionary process with mere achievement of a constitution. In 1848, after his return to the Rhineland as a leader of the Communist League and editor of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, Marx refined his ideas about proletarian leadership in the daily battles to keep the German democratic revolt alive; his subsequent reflections in exile on the German and French events then codified these experiences.

Third, Marx was uniquely pessimistic about contemporary prospects for resisting proletarianization or building an alternative society on artisan–cooperative principles such as advocated by Proudhon and his many followers.[47] The Industrial Revolution, although lived as a catastrophe by millions of contemporary artisans and peasants, was not only creating a property-less class of industrial workers but also developing the productive forces that they would someday seize in order to free all of humanity. History could not be rewound or stopped, but it could be fast-forwarded. The eventual fusion of the proletariat's material interest in common property with the Promethean productive powers created by its labor is the implicit formula in all of Marx's references to emancipatory agency. It clarifies his famous claim that the proletariat was charged not only with its own liberation but with "the categorical imperative to overturn all circumstances in which man is a degraded, a subjugated, a forsaken, a contemptible being."[48]

The missing links

It has always been odd, to put it mildly, that so many critics, beginning with Heidegger's student Karl Löwith, have explained Marx's embrace of proletarian agency as evidence of a stealth Judeo-Christian eschatology underlying his theory of history, rather than the straightforward result of his growing engagement with a workers' movement already infused with the conviction that it could build a new world. Certainly, many of the Paris socialist sects of the 1840s, especially the Icarians, were awash in messianic slogans and evocations of a proletarian Christ, but this was a specifically French reaction to the liberal bourgeoisie's embrace of materialism. There were in fact two camps on the left: the communists, like Dézamy and the neo-Babouvists, who were proud heirs to materialism, and a larger group who rejected the materialist tradition because they identified it with the Directory and the ideology of liberalism. Louis Blanc, the father of the "social workshop" movement and an influential figure in the first stages of the 1848 Revolution, was a particularly ardent advocate of the "religious model." "The secular materialism of the eighteenth-century French *philosophes*," Blanc argued, "produced individualist theories to justify bourgeois rule during and after the French Revolution. French democracy, on the other hand, grew out of a Rousseauistic legacy that opposed the materialistic (individualist) *philosophe* tradition and favored unity, liberty, and the fraternal principles of the Christian gospels."[49]

But whether preached from the gospels or presented as the arduous result of a "critique of the critique," the general figure of *proletarian agency* arose from a substitution of subjects in the classic paradigm of democratic revolution as broadly understood by liberals and radicals alike. Judeo-Christian concepts of emancipation were influential only at the popular level and primarily amongst artisans and poor peasants. But revolutionary socialists became accustomed to moving back and forth between materialist and popular–millenarian representations of revolutionary subjectivity. As Zinoviev, while chairman of the Communist International, once explained:

> The economist critics would say, "So what, in your opinion, is the working class, a Messiah?" To this we answered and answer now: Messiah and messianism are not our language and we do not like such words; but we accept the concept that is contained in them: yes, the working class is in a certain sense a Messiah and its role is a messianic one, for this is the class which will liberate the whole world …. We avoid semi-mystical terms like Messiah

> and messianism and prefer the scientific one: the *hegemonic proletariat*.[50]

The three crucial elements of revolutionary agency—organizational capacity, structural power, and hegemonic politics—received their most careful if non-systematic treatment from Marx in his writings on 1848, discussed in Chapter 2. Thereafter he bade adieu for the most part to French revolutionary history in order to concentrate on his monumental analysis of English capitalism. Although *Capital*, as Bensaïd has emphasized, analyzes structural determinations or preconditions of class consciousness at the level of production (*Volume 1*) and circulation (*Volume 2*), there is no canonical text from his "mature period" that directly addresses agency at the level of concrete social formations.[51] As Lukács famously lamented:

> Marx's chief work breaks off just as he is about to embark on the definition of class [Chapter 52 of *Capital Volume III*]. This omission was to have serious consequences both for the theory and the practice of the proletariat. For on this vital point the later movement was forced to base itself on interpretations, on the collation of occasional utterances by Marx and Engels, and the independent extrapolation and application of their method.[52]

Since Lukács first attempted to rectify this "omission" in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), a trove of Marx's unpublished works and drafts, including *The 1844 Manuscripts, The German Ideology, The Grundrisse*, the *1861–63 Economic Manuscripts*, the important fragment "Results of the Immediate Process of Production" (Chapter 7 of *Capital Volume I*), and the original manuscript of *Capital Volume III*, have been recovered, interpreted, and debated; but the itinerary of the key macro-concepts—class, historical agency, the state, modes of production, and so on—still requires careful exploitation of three very different kinds of sources: explicit philosophical statements (what Étienne Balibar aptly calls "programme texts"), mainly from 1843–47; the politico-strategic narratives written in 1848–1850; and gleanings from the economic manuscripts that extend or modify earlier ideas.[53] But such a reconstruction from fragmentary sources, no matter how exegetically rigorous, should not be construed as the "true Marx." It is simply a plausible, or better, a useful Marx.

Marcello Musto has proposed that Marx's failure to update and systematize his ideas was not just a result of debilitating illness and the constant revision of *Capital*, but an inevitable consequence of "his intrinsic aversion" to schematization: his "inextinguishable passion for knowledge, not

altered by the passing of the years, leading him time and again to new studies; and, finally the awareness he attained in his later years of the difficulty of confining the complexity of history within a theoretical project; these made incompleteness [his] faithful companion."[54] In the same vein, Balibar observes:

> More than other writers, Marx *wrote in the conjuncture*. Such an option did not exclude either the "patience of the concept" of which Hegel spoke, or the rigorous weighing of logical consequences. But it was certainly incompatible with stable conclusions: Marx is the philosopher of eternal new beginnings, leaving behind him *many* uncompleted drafts and projects … The content of his thought is not separable from his shifts of position. That is why, in studying him, one cannot abstractly reconstruct his system. One has to retrace his development, with its breaks and bifurcations.[55]

The most costly of Marx's silences, according to Michael Lebowitz, was the proposed but never written *Wage-Labor*—volume three in the original 1857 plan for "The Critique of Political Economy." "Its absence is at the root of the one-sidedness in the system elaborated in *Capital*," which focuses on "*capital* as a whole." The theory of "*Capitalism* as a whole," however, presumes a counterpart focus "on the worker as a subject who develops through her struggles," which is only weakly developed in *Capital Volume I*. The missing volume, in other words, would presumably have adumbrated a theory of proletarian agency as an integral aspect of this self-making of labor as antagonist of capital. Although sections of Marx's intended volume were incorporated into *Capital Volume I*, and Lebowitz has made a heroic effort to piece together fragments of a two-sided theory of capital and labor, *Wage-Labour* is reconstructible only in part.[56]

Bearing this in mind, the present chapter makes no pretense of being an orthodox exercise in Marxology or a rigorous attempt to deduce the determinations of agency from the unfinished opus of *Capital*—something I regard as impossible. Rather, I make sweeping, even promiscuous use of Lukácsian extrapolation to propose a *historical sociology* conforming to the ideal-type of a socialist working class in the eras of the First and Second Internationals. In particular, I mine our current understanding of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century working-class history—the fruit of hundreds if not thousands of studies since 1960—to highlight the conditions and forms of struggle through which class capacities were created and the socialist project organized itself. Against the simplistic idea (not held by Marx) that socialist

consciousness and the power to change history principally emerge from the economic class struggle, I stress the *overdeterminations* (for instance, of wage struggles by movements for suffrage and vice versa) that Rosa Luxemburg, in her brilliant analyses of the “mass strike,” identified as the most potent generators of class consciousness and revolutionary will.

This reconstruction, moreover, is designed primarily as a comparative matrix for thinking about agency in the radically changed conditions of contemporary class conflict, and it saves for a future work any consideration of the classical counter-arguments against revolutionary agency, the most compelling of which were probably Werner Sombart’s *Why There Is No Socialism in the United States* (1906) and Robert Michels’s *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (1911).[57] I propose, in other words, an idealized, *maximum* argument—presented in the form of theses—for the traditional working class as the gravedigger of capitalism. Imagine, if you will, the proletariat being asked by the World Spirit for a résumé of its qualifications for the job of Universal Emancipator.[58]

Such an enumeration of *capacities* might be amended or extended in various ways, but Marx’s central premise remains: that the sum of these capacities acquired in struggle is a realistic potential for self-emancipation and revolution. The conditions which confer capacity, we should recall, can be either *structural* or *conjunctural*. The first arise from the proletariat’s position in the mode of production; for example the possibility, if nothing more, of organizing mass strikes that shut down production in entire cities, industries, and even nations. The second is limited to historical stages or episodes, and is ultimately transient: as, for example, the stubborn maintenance of informal control over the labor process by late-Victorian engineering workers and ship-builders which survived until the First World War and the adoption of new production methods. The conjunctural can also denote the intersection of unsynchronized histories, such as the persistence of absolutism in the middle period of industrialization, which led in Europe to the potent convergence of suffrage struggles and industrial conflict—not the case in North America.

Moreover, as the careful student of Marx eventually discovers, capitalism’s “laws of motion” come with a lot of fine print. There are few pure determinations or simple secular trends in his historical analyses and economic manuscripts. Indeed, one is tempted to apply Newton’s Second

Law to the accumulation process, since its dynamics often produce tendencies and counter-tendencies at the same time. "The form of the factory," for example, "embodies and therefore teaches capitalist notions of property relations. But, as Marx points out, it can also teach the necessarily social and collective character of production and thereby undermine the capitalist notion of private property."[59] Likewise in *Capital*, the increasing organic composition (capital intensity) of production is indeterminately offset in value terms by the cheapening of capital goods. Similarly, resources can be deployed for alternative, even opposite ends. A thirst for technical and scientific knowledge, for example, is a precondition for workers' control of production, but also serves the ambitions of an aristocracy of labor that hopes one day to become managers or owners. Self-organized proletarian civil society likewise can reinforce class identity in either a subordinate, corporatist sense, as a *subculture* in orbit around bourgeois institutions, or in a hegemonic, anticipatory sense, as an antagonistic *counterculture*.

Furthermore, in focusing on *resources for self-organization and action, as well as the interests that mobilize them and the historical tasks that demand them*, I side-step more abstract debates about social ontology and consciousness as well as recent agency/structure controversies amongst social theorists and historians that Alex Callinicos addresses so well in *Making History*.[60] I also skirt the thorny thickets of crisis theory, although agency is ultimately conditioned by the dynamics of accumulation and inter-capitalist competition. Indeed, it was Marx's brilliant insight that the spiral of the business cycle periodically opens and closes the possibilities for proletarian advance. For example, the boom of the 1850s, ignited by the California gold rush and the opening of the eastern Pacific to global commerce, quieted labor conflict in Britain while inflation and falling real wages in the 1909–13 period kindled class struggle on an international scale.[61] *Capital* gave the "objective conditions" of revolution a new and more powerful meaning in terms of inevitable crises of production and exchange, with balances of class power regulated by unemployment levels. But Marx, whose political and intellectual life spanned the most peaceful era in European history, did not discuss the political economy of war or its role in accumulation on a world scale. This was a major if understandable caesura in the master-plan of *Capital*. It was left to Luxemburg, in her writing on primitive accumulation as an ongoing requirement of valorization, and Lenin, in his articles on state capitalism as exemplified by Ludendorff's German war economy, to visualize

intra-imperialist war as a forcing house of structural change and/or revolutionary opportunity comparable to the greatest financial and trade crises.[62]

Finally, how do we characterize the actual gravediggers? The "classical" proletariat, for the purposes of these notes, is the European and North American working classes, considered in the period 1838–1921.[63] The world of labor, of course, was structurally and socially heterogeneous, including many transitional and contradictory class locations. A crude typology of the metropolitan working classes would include the *formal proletariat* (all property-less wage workers); a *paleo-proletariat* of pauperized artisans; *semi-servile labor*, often regulated by statute, including servants, prisoners and unwaged family workers; the *agricultural proletariat*, many of whom were also poor peasants or farm tenants; and the *core industrial proletariat* (factory workers, miners, and transport workers) The last was objectively socialized by mechanized production—what Marx calls the "real subsumption of labor"—and did not become the true backbone of the labor movement until the 1880s, or even later. The whole class (the formal working class) might be envisioned as a huge power grid, with the core as the chief dynamo, generating resistance to capital and leveraging the weak economic power of other sectors.

It was common in revolutionary literature to speak of "avant-garde detachments" of the proletariat, but the term can be applied in two different ways: (1) those portions of the core working class wielding the most economic power and capable of sustained militancy over long cycles; and (2) specific occupational groups, even with slight economic power, that were distinguished by the prevalence of socialist and anarchist ideas. Until the First World War, printers, bakers, tailors, stone-cutters, cigar-makers, and maritime workers were most likely to incorporate explicitly revolutionary ideologies into their work-group subcultures.[64] In areas like the Pale and Sicily, moreover, village artisans remained a crucial transmission belt between urban radicalism and agrarian discontent well into the twentieth century, and from the 1890s casualized or seasonal workers like dockers, lumberjacks, harvest hands, and building laborers became major constituencies for syndicalism and anarchism.[65] Only after 1916 did revolutionary metalworkers take the helm of the class struggle, and only in the great strikes of the 1930s did the assembly-line proletariat in "Fordist"

factories assume a central role.

THE AGE OF CLASS WAR

Although this chapter is thematically organized, it obviously assumes specific historical patterns of class formation and conflict. "Classes," Daniel Bensaïd wrote, "do not exist as separable entities, but only in the dialectic of their struggle."[66] Thus my notional chronological bookends are the Peoples' Charter of 1838 (a debut) and the so-called March Action of 1921 (a finale). During this short century, artisanal resistance to proletarianization laid the ideological foundations for the movements of their grandchildren, the factory proletariat, while the early dream of a social republic of small producers was transformed into a vision of an industrial republic of workers' councils. Both futures had brief existences: the first as the radical artisanal communes of Paris in 1848 and 1871; the second as the various "soviet" city-states of 1917–19. (Just as the Paris Commune was in many ways the final act of 1848, the anarcho-syndicalist revolution in Barcelona in 1936–37 can be viewed as the encore to Petrograd 1917.) With the failure of the ill-prepared communist insurrection in Saxony in 1921 and general repression of the labor movement in most countries, the Soviet Union was fatally isolated and besieged for a full generation, morphing into an authoritarian social formation unlike anything envisioned in Smolny in October 1917. At the same time, the polarization within the European labor movement between old Socialist and new Communist parties became a permanent barrier to united action. Comintern Marxism, as a result, turned toward historical subjects—anti-colonial movements, "surrogate" proletariats, peasants, the unemployed, Muslims, even American farmers—not encompassed within the original theoretical vision of Marx and Engels.

Periodizing the Class Struggle: 1838–1921

(1) 1838–48: The hothouse proliferation of socialist and communist doctrines amidst mass revolts against proletarianization and industrial poverty. On the continent the typical revolutionary subject was a self-educated artisan fighting for survival in the mass handicrafts on the eve of mechanization. But this was also the decade of Chartism: the first modern working people's