

Chapter 2

Marx's Radical Turn

Abstract Marx's early writings display the change in his direction. The 1844 *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts* argue that private ownership of the means of production is an expression of estrangement from other human beings and from our own shared human nature. Before long, Marx is attacking philosophical materialism for its failure to engage in active struggle against class division and oppression. Yet he also rejects the individualistic solutions of the libertarian Max Stirner. Out of these debates arises the concept of 'revolutionary praxis' that informs his later political thinking. *The German Ideology* presents an approach to history that identifies the source of change within the economic 'base' of society. At the same time, Marx recognises that elements of the 'superstructure' such as education may sometimes run ahead of the economic process. Working in partnership with his friend Friedrich Engels, he writes the *Communist Manifesto*, a fiery call for the overthrow of class divisions.

Keywords Karl Marx • Max Stirner • Alienation • Historical materialism • Uneven development • Praxis

2.1 Introduction

When the *Rheinische Zeitung* was suppressed, Marx went to live in Paris. Leaving Germany was the beginning of radical changes in his outlook. The first writings to follow are known as his 'Paris' or 'Economic-Philosophical' manuscripts. They represent a change in his thinking, a further development of the new focus on social problems. Marx now sees political issues as defined not by a struggle for individual rights, but by class division and oppression. He engages in dialogue with other radical alternatives, mostly utopian, and polemicalises against all forms of philosophical idealism.

The *Manuscripts* centre on the concept of *alienation*, drawn from Feuerbach's critique of Christianity but relocated in the social and political sphere. Like

Feuerbach, Marx assumes a common human essence that makes possible our feelings of sympathy and love towards others. He is particularly concerned with the human capacity to interact with the external world through work—that is, an activity that engages with nature to produce an object that satisfies some human need. His target of criticism in these texts is a social system that separates us from our own productive activity and its outcomes, making these something alien and thus leaving us deprived of what should be a part of ourselves. At first sight, this looks like a consequence of private ownership of the means of production, which compels non-owners to sell their labour power in order to live. On the contrary, Marx writes: ‘although private property appears to be the reason, the cause of alienated labour, it is rather its consequence’ (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 3, p. 279). Because we are estranged from our own activity, we are also estranged from its products. To complete the picture, he describes what non-alienated labour would be like: it would enable us to see our products as ‘so many mirrors in which we saw reflected our essential nature’ (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 3, p. 228).

Often overlooked in the 1844 *Manuscripts* is a strong element of materialism, not entirely identifiable with Feuerbach's version. Labour is identified with ‘the subjectivity of *objective* essential powers, whose action, therefore, must also be something *objective*. An objective being acts objectively, and he would not act objectively if the objective did not reside in the very nature of his being’ (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 3, p. 336). Another theme in the *Manuscripts* that points to Marx's later thought is communism, a social system that provides an alternative to private property. His first remarks on the subject are highly philosophical. They repudiate ‘crude communism’, which simply turns the state or community into a kind of capitalist owner for whom everyone is a labourer. Genuine communism, in contrast, is a positive reappropriation of the human essence. Marx boldly presents this concept as the solution to a broad range of philosophical problems.

This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man—the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 3, p. 296).

Soon he was to take a very different view of socialism, in part through working closely with Frederick Engels, who had made a study of the English working class during his first period in Manchester and saw the issues in far more down-to-earth terms.

Marx's stay in Paris was a short one, since the Prussian government's hostility followed him around. Expelled from France at the beginning of 1845, he left with his wife and newborn daughter for Belgium. In Paris he had become closer to Moses Hess, known through the *Rheinische Zeitung*. Hess was possibly the first outright socialist Marx had met in person, even if his socialism was the philosophical kind satirised in the *Communist Manifesto* as ‘true socialism’. The following three years in Brussels confirmed the course Marx would follow. He began to mix

with trade unionists and working-class socialists for the first time. Just as importantly, he formed his lifelong friendship with Frederick Engels.

The two men first met when Engels visited Cologne on his way to Manchester, but did not get to know each other until spending time together in Paris in 1844. It was then that their working partnership formed. Its basis was a common outlook, but just as importantly, they formed an effective team, even if their backgrounds and personalities were different. Both were Rhinelanders, but Engels came from Elberfeld in the industrial northern region, where his father was a factory owner. His lifestyle was always a middle class one, especially in Manchester, where he mixed with the industrial bourgeoisie and even joined in their pastimes: when Marx arrived for a visit in 1864, Engels was out fox hunting (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 42, p. 63). When asked by his daughter for his motto, Marx responded with a saying often linked with Descartes: *De omnibus dubitandum*: ‘Everything [is] to be doubted’. Engels’ less high-minded response was ‘Take it aisy [*sic*]’.

The initial period of joint work was very productive. Together they wrote two books detailing the theoretical errors of their former Berlin friends, *The Holy Family* and *The German Ideology*. Then came *The Communist Manifesto*, a work that builds on the strengths of both men, starting from an early draft by Engels alone but adding in Marx’s literary flair. After that, they tended to work on individual productions, but with continual interaction. In the 1850s Marx gained a regular income by writing on current affairs for the *New York Herald Tribune*. Some articles were supplied to him by Engels, and it is hard to see much contrast except in subject matter. Engels was proud of his early military experience (the Marx family nicknamed him ‘General’) and covered military matters, leaving Marx to deal with politics. Both also contributed short entries on military subjects to the *New American Cyclopaedia*. Engels’ later commentaries on *Capital* show his clear grasp of Marx’s theoretical position, good enough to give advice on its presentation. Still, it is evident that in his major work in political economy, Marx was on his own.

2.2 The Debate with Materialism

Education and the individual person are discussed in the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, a short sketch of Marx’s general philosophy, apparently written in 1845 although not published until much later. The title was added by Engels because most, although not all, of the ‘theses’ deal with Ludwig Feuerbach and develop a consistent critique of his materialism. This is signalled by the opening passage:

The chief defect of all previous materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that things, reality, sensuousness are conceived only in the form of the *object*, or of *contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism the *active* side was set forth abstractly by idealism—which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct

from conceptual objects, but he does conceive objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 5, p. 3).

Marx was familiar with the materialist tradition, since his doctoral thesis had been on its earliest figures, Democritus and Epicurus. He argues that throughout its history, materialism has failed to recognise one side of human experience. It has based its claims—about the reality of the world, for example—on ‘contemplation’ alone. The word used is *Anschauung*, a frequent expression in German philosophy from Kant onwards but hard to translate into English: the most common rendering is ‘intuition’. It refers to any experience in which something is immediately *given* to us. This covers perception and also imagination in which, as Kant puts it, we ‘give ourselves’ the object. An image is only in our minds, but still in some sense ‘there’. We call intuitions ‘empirical’ when they involve *sensation*, which tells us that the object is something real. In contrast, space and time are regarded by Kant as ‘pure’ intuitions, ideal rather than real and yet still given, rather than constructed in our minds.

Feuerbach places great emphasis on sensory experience as well as feeling and emotion, claiming that these are what put us in touch with the outside world, including other people. Marx approves of all this, as far as it goes. But he argues that it leaves out something important: what he calls ‘the *active* side’. That is not a mere oversight on Feuerbach’s part, but a difference of opinion on the meaning of activity. Marx cites a passage in *The Essence of Christianity* in which Feuerbach argues that as human beings, we are in harmony with the world when we contemplate it and construct our theories in imagination.

When, on the contrary, man places himself only on the practical standpoint and looks at the world from thence, making the practical standpoint the theoretical one also, he is in disunion with nature; he makes nature the abject vassal of his selfish interest, of his practical egoism (Feuerbach 1957, p. 113).

Feuerbach suggests that this is the attitude of Judaism, passed on to Christianity, which retains the same belief in providence and miracles—what he calls ‘egoism in the form of religion’. If we judge by ‘On the Jewish Question’, Marx may agree. But he denies that all human activity is like this—that is, driven by selfish motives. Moreover, he argues that this prejudice gives idealism an excuse to present itself as the only philosophy that makes room for human creativity and freedom. Yet as Marx points out, the idealist is thinking of activity only as working with ideas, not with real, sensible things.

What sort of activity is missing from this debate? Marx describes it in several ways: as ‘objective’, ‘sensuous’, ‘revolutionary’ and ‘practical-critical’. In the 1844 *Manuscripts*, objective and sensuous activity is the kind that produces material objects. This is later called ‘living labour’. All living things interact with their environment and so maintain their own life processes, but human beings also maintain the forms of things outside themselves (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 28, p. 285). This purposeful behaviour is an expression of our own common nature, although under conditions of alienation we are prevented from seeing

ourselves in our products. If labour were a free activity, it would be a different story.

In my production I would have objectified my individuality, its specific character, and therefore enjoyed not only an individual manifestation of my life during the activity, but also when looking at the object I would have the individual pleasure of knowing my personality to be objective, visible to the senses and hence a power beyond all doubt (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 3, p. 227).

This is not self-interest in the narrow sense Feuerbach has in mind—in fact, it is consistent with his emphasis on shared experience. But how does it address the dilemma that Marx is concerned with here? Presumably by including a critical element: hence, the further description ‘practical–critical’.

What that means emerges in the Third Thesis, which bears directly on education, provided the word is used in a wide sense, to include all of the influences that determine human development. Marx raises the question: are we just passive recipients of these influences, or do we somehow interact with them and thereby determine our own development? His reply centres on a well-known remark: ‘the educator must be educated’. The whole passage is rather longer:

The materialistic doctrine of the changing of circumstances and education forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator himself must be educated. It must therefore divide society into two parts, one of which is raised above it. The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and human activity or self-changing can only be grasped and rationally understood as *revolutionary praxis*.

This is a very concentrated passage, and the implications are enormous. Marx starts out by referring to what he calls the ‘materialistic doctrine’ about education, and then goes on to criticise that theory. This might seem strange. Marx calls himself a materialist, and yet here we find him attacking materialism. In fact, what he is criticising is one particular version of materialism, the kind typical of the French philosophers of the eighteenth century. Let us look more closely at their ideas and Marx’s response to them.

These writers proposed a radically new theory of human nature. They argued that the development of the individual person was entirely determined by social circumstances, so that all the contrasts we observe between one person and another—in personality, abilities and knowledge—are due to differences in their environments. This led them to put great emphasis upon education, where the word ‘education’ refers not just to formal instruction or schooling but to all the influences acting on the individual. In *The Holy Family*, Marx summarises the doctrines of the French materialist Helvétius: ‘The natural equality of human intelligences, the unity of progress of reason and progress of industry, the natural goodness of man, and the omnipotence of education, are the main features in his system’ (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 4, p. 130). The British social and educational reformer Robert Owen took over these doctrines, proclaiming that ‘the character of man is, without a single exception, always formed for him: that it may be, and is chiefly, created by his predecessors: that they give him, or may give

him, his ideas and habits, which are the powers that govern and direct his conduct' (Owen 1970, p. 140).

The materialists wanted to use education as a means of social reform. Human beings, they thought, were basically selfish. Yet with a well-designed education, people could learn that their well-being is best furthered by joining together in ensuring the general social good, rather than by seeking their separate interests. These more enlightened individuals would form a different kind of community, leading to the disappearance of most, if not all, of the evils of present social life.

Marx disagrees completely. He rejects this approach because, as he explains, it 'forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator himself must be educated'. In saying this, he is making a telling objection to the materialist approach on what are really *logical* grounds. The theory talks about using education for social reform. But in making this suggestion, it is assuming the existence of some person (the 'educator') who controls the environment which in turn determines the development of newer generations. Marx thinks that the materialist theory is not entitled to make any such assumption. In fact, it is contradicting itself by doing so, because the existence of such an 'educator' is inconsistent with the deterministic premises of this standpoint. Having given society total power over individual development, one can hardly go on to talk about some individual opportunity for intervention within the social process. Hence, Marx's conclusion: that this theory divides society 'into two parts', one of which paradoxically stands above society itself.

So, what is his alternative? Marx says practically nothing about what he means by 'revolutionary praxis'. The expression is introduced to resolve the dilemma by positing a mode of activity that changes the acting person as well as the surrounding circumstances. But perhaps we can go a step further, by bringing these closer together. More specifically, each aspect is 'mediated' by the other. That is, we change ourselves by means of changing our circumstances, and vice versa. What would praxis have to be like to match this description? Marx does not explain further in the 'Theses'. Still, clues are found in his writing of the time, and especially in his dialogue with Max Stirner, as we shall see shortly.

The last of the Theses on Feuerbach is the aphorism quoted earlier: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it'. Here, Marx reasserts the conclusion of his critique of the Hegelian school: philosophy cannot solve its own problems. It is likely to go on forever with the same debates unless it shifts ground and turns into social and political activity—that is, into the 'praxis' of the earlier theses.

2.3 The Debate with Max Stirner

One final look at the Berlin 'Free Ones' is in order at this point. Membership of the group changed over time. Marx went to Cologne, Bauer returned from Bonn, and Engels arrived from Elberfeld and joined the group. Another new member was

Johann Kaspar Schmidt, better known by his pen-name, Max Stirner. A decade older than Marx and Engels, he had once attended Hegel's lectures at Berlin University, but poverty and family responsibilities prevented him from completing a doctorate. While teaching in a girls' school, Stirner worked on a statement of his radically individualistic philosophy, published in 1844 as *The Ego and His Own* (Stirner 1963/1973). Marx seems never to have met Stirner, but Engels knew him well, and must have told Marx about his personality. References in their letters suggest a certain fondness for Stirner, but this did not prevent Marx from adopting the same one-sidedly negative attitude in print as he did with all their old Berlin associates.

We need to look at Stirner's philosophy of rebellion and Marx's response to it. But another reason for attention to Stirner is that he wrote on education from a teacher's standpoint. It is true that his 1834 essay 'Ueber Schulgesetze' (On school legislation) is tame stuff (Stirner 1834). It treats the school's role as defined wholly by the relation between teacher and pupil, and explains that children are to acquire religion, academic knowledge and morality through their interactions with these models of adult feeling, thinking and willing. Stirner's ideas had moved on by 1842, when he published two articles in the *Rheinische Zeitung*, on which Marx was working (and whose editor he was soon to become). In one of these, Stirner argues that the tension between art and religion, as rival approaches to the ideal, can only be resolved by philosophy. The other essay introduces the standpoint of *The Ego and His Own*. Its tone is more polemical, as the title signals: 'The false principle of our education'.

Stirner addresses a current debate over schooling. The classical ideal of an education based on ancient cultures was under challenge from those who saw the modern school as preparing learners not for university study, but for working lives in commerce and industry. These 'realists' proposed a curriculum including modern languages and practical skills, especially related to science and technology. A recent author had proposed a *Konkordat* (that is, peace treaty) between 'school' and 'life'—and, by analogy, between these rival models of schooling. Who could object to a combination of humanism with realism, one aiming at mastering the heritage of the past, the other at achieving freedom and independence within the present world? Stirner does, and goes on to accuse both sides of false beliefs about the aims of education.

What humanism and realism have in common, he argues, is that they treat knowledge as a possession—either ornamental or useful, as the case may be. That is a typical philosophical view. But what is needed, Stirner asserts, is educators who are 'more than philosophers'. We must give up thinking of knowledge as something that belongs to us and which therefore holds us back, like all possessions. 'Proper knowledge perfects itself when it stops being knowledge and becomes a simple human drive once again—the will'. Echoing Feuerbach's call for a return from abstract thought to life, Stirner states his own goal for education:

If it is the drive of our time, after freedom of thought is won, to pursue it to that perfection through which it changes to freedom of the will in order to realise the latter as the principle of a new era, then the final goal of education can no longer be knowledge, but the will

born out of knowledge, and the spoken expression of that for which it has to strive is: the personal or free man (Stirner 1842).

Such true individuals are not produced by the school. If they exist at all, it is in spite of education. So, what is the alternative? The realists are right in wanting a practical education, but genuine practice is not getting on in life by accommodating oneself to the demands of society. The natural curiosity of children is regarded as something to be encouraged and developed, Stirner says—why not their equally natural wilfulness? He wants an education which will encourage a spirit of rebellion and creativity, a school in which the teacher is a colleague (*Mitarbeiter*). Adults must renounce their authority over children and treat them as equals. Thus, Stirner concludes, we do not need a harmony between education and life, but a complete unity of the two—a slogan that prefigures the later ‘deschoolers’.

Could it be that Marx, who published this essay on education in his newspaper, was in sympathy with some of its arguments? It is noticeable that he makes no mention of it in his lengthy criticism of *The Ego and His Own* and its sequel, a reply to several reviewers, including Ludwig Feuerbach. He certainly agrees with Stirner's claim that philosophy must somehow be ‘overcome’ and replaced by something different. As we will see, however, from that starting point their paths diverge.

The Ego and His Own is a personal manifesto rather than a philosophical treatise. Rambling and repetitive, it is also constantly provocative and often brilliant. Stirner has one main idea: the only thing that can matter to me is myself. Everything else he has to say is a consequence of this premise. The book opens dramatically with a declaration of absolute independence. There is nothing higher than the individual that could make justified claims on him or her: no causes, no vocations, no ideals and no values. Freedom, truth, justice—all are summarily dismissed as *not my concern*. After all, Stirner argues, God and humanity are concerned only with themselves, so why should not I be the same? Freedom is not enough, since it is only negative: we can achieve it by getting rid of things. Stirner has his own word for what is really needed: ‘ownness’. The presentation of this theme is structured by tracing the course of a typical human life. The child is realistic, the youth is idealistic, but the adult must be egoistic. In both cases, the third stage is not so much a synthesis of the first two as a repudiation of both in favour of the value of self-interest and ‘ownness’.

Education is a recurring theme in *The Ego and His Own*. Stirner couples priests and schoolmasters as authorities who impose sweeping demands on the free individual in the name of some ideal conception of the purpose and meaning of life. Stirner attacks the progressive thinkers who advocate universal education. ‘Not enough that the great mass has been trained to religion, now it is actually to have to occupy itself with “everything human.” Training (*Dressur*) is growing ever more general and more comprehensive’ (Stirner 1963/1973, p. 326). People are expected to ‘dance to the pipe of schoolmasters and bear-leaders’. But this is simply replacing the authority of priests with other authorities.

Stirner insists again and again: there is nothing that human beings ought to do to develop themselves, no model to live up to. His positive message is one of a spontaneous

exercise of natural powers. Rather than striving to attain some goal in life, we should take the lilies of the field as our model:

The flower does not follow the calling (*Berufe*) to complete itself, but it spends all its forces to enjoy and consume the world as well as it can—it sucks in as much of the juices of the earth, as much air of the ether, as much of the sun, as it can get and lodge. The bird lives up to no calling, but it uses its forces as much as is practicable; it catches beetles and sings to its heart's delight (Stirner 1963/1973, p. 326).

He is opposed not just to Feuerbachian humanism, with its appeal to a normative essence of humanity, but also to the critical use of Hegelianism, which uses philosophical concepts to judge and condemn present realities such as the political state. Stirner however does not believe in vocations, including so-called ontological vocations: we have no obligation to realise any human essence.

There is a sharp contrast with Marx here, crucial for their philosophies of education. Stirner's shafts against socialism and communism are deftly aimed. Communism wants us all to work hard, he suggests, since it sees labour as the human 'calling'. There is some truth in this, but irony as well, given the close association between the work ethic and capitalism. According to Marx, the 'great historical mission' of capitalism is fulfilled when 'by the strict discipline of capital to which several generations have been subjected, general industriousness has been developed as the universal asset of the new generation' (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 28, p. 250). In a future society, he argues, people may well work for shorter hours, but they will feel a *need* to work which is not just for the sake of satisfying other needs. Marx believes in free activity, but understands this as work, and is scornful of what he regards as an idle notion of play, even where children are concerned. As we shall see, this attitude shows up in his proposals for school reform, especially in the content of the curriculum.

Marx's view of Stirner as a formidable challenger is evident in the hundreds of pages used to deal with him in *The German Ideology*. This is something of an intellectual show trial. Stirner has to be wrong not just on main points but in every detail, and passages where he seems to make some good point must be explained as quite wrong when read properly. At times Marx's criticism is fair enough: he knows more about Democritus and Epicurus than Stirner does, for instance. But he relies heavily on sarcasm and personal put-downs, and even labels Stirner as a 'schoolteacher': Marx does not forget who has the doctorate.

The substantial charge running through Marx's critique is that Stirner treats human life as determined by beliefs (mostly false ones about the 'human essence') and ignores the real conditions and social relations that, as Marx puts it, 'had to take the form—insofar as they were expressed in thoughts—of ideal conditions and necessary relations' (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 5, pp. 183–184). So Marx agrees with Stirner that most people's ideas about themselves and the society they live in are mistaken, but he thinks that Stirner does not see where the solution lies, and so is in the end as much a prisoner of philosophical abstraction as those he is criticising.

A crucial difference is that Stirner is profoundly anti-political. He is against political parties, since they simply replicate the authority of the state on a smaller

scale by imposing conformity on their members. Accordingly, he distinguishes between revolution and 'rebellion' or 'insurrection' (*Empörung*, a word that literally means 'rising up'). Revolution means an overturning of conditions, but rebellion is driven by our discontent with ourselves and has wider change only as a further consequence. After all, Stirner reasons, if we no longer participate in the system, it will collapse of its own accord. 'Now, as my object is not the overthrow of an established order but my elevation above it, my purpose and deed are not a political or social but (as directed towards myself and my ownness alone) an egoistic purpose and deed' (Stirner 1963/1973, p. 316). The difference is explained in more detail:

Revolution and insurrection must not be looked upon as synonymous. The former consists in an overturning of conditions, of established condition or status, the state or society, and is accordingly a *political* or *social* act; the latter has indeed for its unavoidable consequence a transformation of circumstances, yet it does not arise from it but rather from men's discontent with themselves... It is not a struggle against the established, since, if it prospers, the established collapses of itself; it is only a working forth of me out of the established. If I leave the established, it is dead and passes into decay. Now, as my object is not the overthrow of an established order but my elevation above it, my purpose and deed are not a political or social but (as directed toward myself and my ownness alone) an *egoistic* purpose and deed (Stirner 1963/1973, p. 316).

In response, Marx starts from Stirner's remark that 'a society cannot be turned into a new one as long as those of whom it consists and who constitute it remain as of old' (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 5, p. 214). Certainly they are dissatisfied with themselves, he agrees, but what does that mean?

Dissatisfaction with oneself is either dissatisfaction with oneself within the framework of a definite condition which determines the whole personality, e.g. dissatisfaction with oneself as a worker, or it is moral dissatisfaction. In the first case, therefore, it is simultaneously and mainly dissatisfaction with the existing relations; in the second case—an ideological expression of these relations themselves, which does not at all go beyond them, but belongs wholly to them (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 5, p. 378).

Working-class revolutionaries have no intention of remaining the sorts of people they are. 'They know too well that only under changed circumstances will they cease to be "as of old," and therefore they are determined to change these circumstances at the first opportunity. In revolutionary activity the changing of oneself coincides with the changing of circumstances' (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 5, p. 214).

The last statement is almost identical with the conclusion of the Third Thesis on Feuerbach, and the surrounding text spells out the meaning of 'praxis' more clearly. Marx is emphasising a critical thinking which is also *self-critical*. However, this is not the self-criticism that leads people to blame themselves for poverty or discrimination. In the Sixth Thesis, Marx asserts that the 'human essence' is not an abstraction located within each individual person, but the totality of social relations (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 5, p. 7). Hence, he does not accept the disjunction between individual and group interests that the utilitarians take for granted. These tensions result from particular social arrangements—in particular, from private property and class divisions—and so would no longer

exist as problems in a different kind of society. By arguing in this way, Marx and Engels think they can distance themselves from ‘morality’, or at least from the version of morality that sees social existence as a *problem* for the individual person, rather than as the necessary setting for achieving a fully human existence. If their remarks on socialism here seem utopian, it must be remembered that they also see opportunities in the here and now for anticipating the future through engaging in ‘revolutionary praxis’, not only as social groups but also as individuals.

2.4 The Birth of Historical Materialism

In their first joint production, *The Holy Family*, Marx and Engels distance themselves from the Young Hegelians, with Bruno Bauer as the main target. The disputes involve a degree of mockery, but are not deeply hostile. Despite Marx’s polemics against Bauer, they got on well together when Bauer visited him in London ten years later. It is a pity that *The Holy Family* was published rather than *The German Ideology*, because it is the longer work that contains key pointers to what would later be labelled ‘Marxism’. It begins with a firm statement of the authors’ commitment to philosophical realism:

The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions of their life, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity. These premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 5, p. 31).

The introduction goes on to outline the theory later known as ‘historical materialism’. It centres on a distinction between the ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ of society. The base is where a society maintains its existence by material production, and the way it does this is taken to determine what happens elsewhere. The model is contrasted with a rival picture which Marx and Engels clearly think is very common: that what happens in society is determined by ideas and concepts. Later Marx summed up his theory in this way:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 29, p. 263).

Some important points need to be noted here. First of all, the ‘base’ contains two elements: the forces of production (that is, the tools and machines that produce the things people need in everyday life) and the relations of production (that is, the

circumstances that determine who owns and controls these things). In contrast, the social superstructure is quite diverse: it includes law, science, religion and philosophy. Now comes a crucial claim: that forces and relations of production can match one another or come into conflict.

At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or—this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms—with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 29, p. 263).

When such conflict becomes insoluble within the existing social structure (Marx and Engels call this a ‘contradiction’), the outcome is social revolution. They claim to have several examples from past history, but the most important is evidently the rise of capitalism, which is closely tied to changes in material production from handicrafts to manufacture and then to the large-scale use of machinery.

It was not long before Marx came to see that a simple economic explanation would seldom work for political and social changes over a shorter term. In his analysis of Louis Bonaparte's 1851 seizure of power in France, he offers a more subtle account of state power, suggesting that in certain circumstances the state apparatus may seem to achieve an independence that allows it to be controlled by some group or even a single individual without any evident class identity. Yet he goes on to argue that this status is only apparent: ‘the state power is not suspended in mid air’ (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 11, p. 186). In this case, Louis Bonaparte was able to challenge the power of the middle class because he had the support of other classes—above all, the rural peasantry—and on that basis could claim (speciously, on Marx's view) to represent the French people as a whole.

The need for caution in applying the base/superstructure model is emphasised again in Marx's 1857–1858 drafts for *Capital*, which introduce the theme of ‘unequal’ (or ‘uneven’) development.

The unequal development of material production and e.g. art. In general, the concept of progress is not to be taken in the usual abstract form. With regard to art, etc., this disproportion is not so important and not so difficult to grasp as within practical social relations themselves, e.g. in culture. Relation of the United States to Europe. However, the really difficult point to be discussed here is how the relations of production as legal relations enter into uneven development. For example, the relation of Roman civil law (this applies in smaller measure to criminal and public law) to modern production (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 28, p. 46).

What is meant by ‘culture’ here? The German word is *Bildung*, and so another translation could be ‘education’, especially given the contrast with culture in the usual sense: ‘art, etc’. That reading also makes better sense of what follows: ‘Relation of the United States to Europe’. We know from elsewhere that Marx considered public education in the United States to be more advanced than education in Britain, France and Germany, even though the American economic system was at that time not as advanced as those countries (Small 2005, pp. 146–147).

So it provides a good illustration of his point: the development of the cultural ‘superstructure’ may run ahead of its economic base—or, for all we know, lag behind it. This is not too surprising where artistic, philosophical and religious life is concerned. We do not expect these to develop in close parallel with material production, because they are not what Marx is calling ‘practical social’ activities. In sharp contrast is law. Here he wonders how any modern nation can still have a legal system based on ancient Roman law (which Marx had to study as a university student, one might recall). Given these two extreme cases, we can see that education lies somewhere in between. That is the basis on which Marx is able to advance proposals for school reform. He can acknowledge the limits to what can be achieved within a capitalist society, yet still look for opportunities for an education that runs ahead of the present state of things. In [Chap. 4](#), we will see how he does this in more detail.

2.5 The Communist Manifesto

In 1847 Marx and Engels joined a small group of exiled German radicals which was about to change its name from ‘League of the Just’ to the more militant ‘Communist League’. They were invited to prepare a general statement of its objectives. The two men seized the opportunity to put their own stamp on the party’s official philosophy and objectives. Printed in February 1848, their text became a classic statement of political philosophy.

The *Manifesto of the Communist Party* makes a sharp break from its ‘League of the Just’ background by taking a hard-headed approach to politics. Gone is any suggestion of a secret society avoiding public attention. Rather, the *Manifesto* declares that ‘the Communists disdain to conceal their aims’. Missing too are rebellious poses, utopian visions and idealistic slogans such as ‘All men are brothers’. Instead, Marx and Engels set out to ground their assertions and proposals in the reality of social change.

The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered by this or that would-be universal reformer. They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes (Marx and Engels [1975–2005](#), vol. 6, p. 498).

The *Manifesto* opens with a bold statement of its most basic premise: ‘The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles’. Different societies have contained different kinds of classes, defined in terms of their economic position. What follows in the first section is a survey of the historical developments that have led to modern society. It is the story of one class’s rise to supreme economic and political power: the ‘industrial middle class’.

Anyone reading just the opening pages of the *Manifesto* might see it as a celebration of capitalism. The bourgeoisie, we are told, has brought about revolutionary changes in every area of society. ‘It has accomplished wonders far surpassing

Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals'. It has brought about new and improved means of communication and transport, creating a world market and thus a world community. And most of all, it has greatly increased human productivity and created great wealth. But how has it achieved this? Part of the answer involves radical changes in both the means and relations of production. As Adam Smith had explained, labour becomes simplified with the use of machinery and an advanced division of labour. People no longer work for themselves, but as members of a society in which everyone depends on everyone else. The worker is no longer tied to a particular occupation, but is expected to learn new kinds of labour as technology gives rise to new industries.

Yet none of these changes are specific to a capitalist system. Marx always separates means of production such as machinery from the social relations that determine their use in a particular society—that is, who owns them and gets the benefit and who exercises power over their use. 'Machinery is no more an economic category than the ox who draws the plough. The present *use* of machinery is one of the relations of our present economic system, but the way in which machinery is exploited is quite distinct from the machinery itself' (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 38, p. 99). The crucial point is this: whereas the worker uses tools, machinery uses the worker in this context. Here we see the intersection between form of production and social relations of production at its most intense. Marx is committed to saying that only in a capitalist system does the machine become the subject and the worker the means.

Above all, the *Manifesto* emphasises that capitalism is a revolutionary force. It promotes constant innovation and expansion in society's forces of production. The effects of this imperative extend throughout every level of society. Capitalism undermines all the older beliefs, customs and values:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 6, p. 487).

Picking up the themes of Marx's 1844 *Manuscripts*, the *Manifesto* asserts that capitalism has reduced all social relations to the simple economic relation of buying and selling. Such passages have a startling ambiguity. Do the authors approve of all this cultural destruction? At one moment they mock the old conventions as delusions that humanity is well rid of, using expressions like 'philistine sentimentalism', and in the next they condemn their replacement by economic relations best expressed in the impersonal language of money. What that brings about is, in fact, a new superstition, in its own way more insidious than the old ones. It is what Marx later calls the 'fetishism of commodities'.

One of the achievements of capitalism that Marx values most is its tendency to disregard national boundaries. ‘The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization’. This has implications for culture as well as commerce.

In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 6, p. 488).

After a dozen pages celebrating the achievements of the bourgeoisie, Marx and Engels change their tone, and a darker side of the picture emerges. These developments are admirable by themselves, yet in the social conditions of capitalism their benefits are distributed very unfairly. In fact, such accomplishments act against the interests of the working class by reinforcing the power of the bourgeoisie, although they could be used in a very different way, to promote the general good.

But is that likely to happen? What could bring about such a revolution? As Marx likes to put it, the middle class is like the sorcerer’s apprentice who cannot control the powers he has summoned up. The capitalist system is liable to economic cycles that alternate between periods of rapid expansion and sharp downturns leading to periods of stagnation or recession. As these economic swings become greater, short-term solutions no longer work. The great problem that capitalism’s ruling class now faces is just the one identified in Marx’s base/superstructure model: a mismatch between the social relations of production and the forces of production that they are supposed to manage. To explain the consequences of this crisis, a new historical actor is now introduced into the story: the working class.

This class has been brought into being by capitalism, which needs a large supply of workers, especially in the cities where large-scale industry is located. Even here Marx and Engels find something to praise: the bourgeoisie ‘has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life’ (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 6, p. 488). Now attention turns to the condition of the working class, in order to show why it is crucial to the fate of capitalism in crisis. The *Manifesto* describes the progressively sharper division of society into two directly opposed classes: those who own the means of production and those who own nothing but their ability to labour, which they are forced to sell in order to go on living. So the argument of the first section comes to a dramatic conclusion, by identifying the latest version of the class conflicts that have characterised all past societies. Other social classes have been absorbed into the working class, or simply faded away. They are no longer actors in the historical drama. ‘Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat

alone is a really revolutionary class'. The revolution that the proletariat alone is capable of will have a unique character: the outcome must be a classless society, since there are no remaining options for the rule of one class over others.

The next section introduces the communist movement and claims it to be the only political force capable of speaking and acting on behalf of the working class as a whole. The central principle of communism is 'abolition of private property'. That needs explanation, because what is meant is not personal possessions but *capital*—that is, property that is used to maintain the economic power of one class over another. If anything, Marx says elsewhere, capitalism is hostile to the first kind of property, because it needs a class that owns nothing but its own ability to labour. Here another typical Marxian theme is introduced: in bourgeois society, capital is a power in its own right, which controls living human beings.

The *Manifesto* goes on to rebut other objections to communism: that it abolishes morality and religion, the family and patriotism. Its response is a vigorous counterattack: all these have already been destroyed by capitalism and replaced by market forces. The section concludes by listing a set of ten demands that it says will be carried out in the first phase of a social revolution. They include various exercises of state power, designed to eliminate the free hand that capitalism has managed to acquire. One of these demands is: 'Free education for all children in public schools. Abolition of children's factory labour in its present form. Combination of education with industrial production, &c., &c.' (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, vol. 6, p. 505).

The third and fourth sections of the *Communist Manifesto* are less important for today's readers. They contain polemics against other factions of the period, few of later interest. For example, the 'true socialists' (none is named, but the titles cited point to Moses Hess) are accused of dressing up French socialism with German philosophical terminology. Allies in Paris, Marx and Hess had fallen out over leadership issues when Marx moved to Brussels, and remained at odds from then on (although twenty years later, Hess was supportive of Marx's *Capital*). Readers might not realise that the ridicule directed against phrases such as 'alienation of the human essence' is just as applicable to Marx's own writing of the Paris period—or, for that matter, to his dialectical treatment of value in the 1859 *Contribution*, toned down in the first volume of *Capital*, and further still in its second edition.

After all this, the *Manifesto* ends by returning to its main theme with a ringing call to revolution: 'The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win'.

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