

Georgia Southern University

Digital Commons@Georgia Southern

Political Science and International Studies
Faculty Publications

Political Science and International Studies,
Department of

2020

How the Academy Looks at Marx is all Wrong, the Point However is to Change It

Daniel Skidmore-Hess

Georgia Southern University, danielskidmorehess@georgiasouthern.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/poli-sci-facpubs>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Skidmore-Hess, Daniel. 2020. "How the Academy Looks at Marx is all Wrong, the Point However is to Change It." *Class, Race and Corporate Power*, 8 (1): College of Arts, Sciences & Education at FIU Digital Commons. doi: <https://doi.org/10.25148/CRCP.7.2.008923> source: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol8/iss1/7>
<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/poli-sci-facpubs/372>

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the Political Science and International Studies, Department of at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science and International Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

Class, Race and Corporate Power

Volume 8 | Issue 1

Article 7

2020

How the Academy Looks at Marx is all Wrong, the Point However is to Change It

Daniel Skidmore-Hess

Georgia Southern University, dansh22@hotmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower>



Part of the [Political Theory Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Skidmore-Hess, Daniel (2020) "How the Academy Looks at Marx is all Wrong, the Point However is to Change It," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*. Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

DOI: 10.25148/CRCP.7.2.008923

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol8/iss1/7>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts, Sciences & Education at FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Class, Race and Corporate Power by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

How the Academy Looks at Marx is all Wrong, the Point However is to Change It

Abstract

In what follows, I note how two standard contemporary reference works describe Marx and then contrast those to Marx's "auto-bibliography" which presents a different set of texts as important to the author's self-conception. I then focus on one of the latter set of texts and suggest an approach to understanding Marx that emphasizes his identity as a revolutionary theorist and which, perhaps helps us better understand why he did not give priority to working out a theory of the state in a traditional theoretical manner. At the very least, I hope that this discussion will draw attention to the priority that Marx gave to his revolutionary commitment, a priority that may become neglected when Marxist thought and scholarship is detached from political practice.

Keywords

Marx

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

I - Taking Marx's "Auto-Bibliography" Seriously

Recent decades have witnessed a growing respectability in the way Karl Marx is presented within the academy. With the discovery of the unpublished "early Marx" manuscripts in the 1930s to their translation and dissemination in the 1960s, the "rediscovered" and apparently more humanistic "young" Marx claimed a niche, indeed a very large niche in the humanities and to a lesser extent the social sciences. He became part of the canon, albeit understood as a post-Hegelian philosopher, effectively eclipsing the "classical" Marx, author of "Capital" and co-author of the "Communist Manifesto" whose work had become the official dogma of first socialist and then communist parties and states in a variety of competing and institutionalized interpretations.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to consider each instance of the publication history of the earlier works in detail, it is worth considering how we might look at Marx differently if we look at his work in a more historically grounded way with attention to the choices he made about where and how to invest his intellectual time and energy. In what follows, I note how two standard contemporary reference works describe Marx and then contrast those to Marx's "auto-bibliography" which presents a different set of texts as important to the author's self-conception. In what follows, I then focus on one of the latter set of texts and suggest an approach to understanding Marx that emphasizes his identity as a revolutionary theorist and which, perhaps helps us better understand why he did not give priority to working out a theory of the state in a traditional theoretical manner. At the very least, I hope that this discussion will draw attention to the priority that Marx gave to his revolutionary commitment, a priority that may become neglected when Marxist thought and scholarship is detached from political practice.

The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought entry on Marx describes how he progressed from Hegelianism to communism.¹ This is an accurate account of his progression and no one would dispute that Marx was a serious student of Hegel's philosophy before he was a revolutionary communist. However, an anachronism appears when the Blackwell entry cites Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844) and The German Ideology (1846) as key milestones in this progression. The anachronism of course lies in the fact that these titles were given by editors working with unpublished *nachlass* decades after the author's death. Indeed, when we look even closer at these texts we realize that even the assumption that these early works constitute a set of clearly distinct texts is open to question; "The German Ideology," for example, it turns out is a redaction of texts that may or may not be best understood as a single work.² Terrell Carver puts the matter a bit sharply when he states that "The German Ideology

¹ David T. McLellan (1991) "Marx, Karl" as in. *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought*. David Miller. ed. (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell). 319.

² Terrell Carver. 2013. "The German Ideology Never Took Place." <https://marxismocritico.com/2013/05/06/the-german-ideology-never-took-place/>. Accessed: January 2, 2020.

never took place” but in reading Marx we should keep in mind the extent to which we are reading redacted Marx.

In the Columbia History of Western Philosophy entry on Marx philosopher Tom Rockmore states that “interpretation of Marx’s theory is highly controversial ... to the point that it is probably not possible to provide a neutral statement on Marx’s position. This is due in part to the originality of his ideas; in part to the fact that his later economic writings were published before his earlier philosophical texts (thus fostering a distorted view of the nature and evolution of his theory.)”³ This statement is not entirely true, a number of philosophical texts in which Marx (and Engels) critique the left-Hegelians as well as the work of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon were in fact published between 1843 and 1845. Of course, although the unpublished material gives us a fuller understanding of how Marx’s thought developed in this crucial period, it does not follow that we have a “distorted” view as a result. Indeed, the title of the polemic against Proudhon, The Poverty of Philosophy perhaps tellingly points to the (unpublished) thesis of the young Marx that his project was to change the world rather than interpret it.

The historical Marx was from 1843 onwards in his life by first choice a revolutionary militant. Even his reputation and work in political economy is best understood, in biographical terms, as something that Marx first turned to as a service to the radical workers’ movement and only delved more deeply into this field when he was living in exile with no revolution at hand. But even here, it should be noted that he does not return to the neo-Hegelian work so widely celebrated in academic circles.

In correspondence with Ludwig Kugelmann dated January 30, 1868,⁴ Marx encloses what he refers to as a “biographical notice” which amounts to an annotated “auto-bibliography” as follows:

Karl Marx, doctor of philosophy, born at Trier, 5 May 1818.

1842-43: At first collaborator, then chief editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung* (Cologne). During the period that he edited the paper, it was subject to double censorship, a second censor being appointed by the government in addition to the local censor. Finally suppressed by order of the government. Marx left Germany and went to Paris. In 1844, in Paris, he published with A Rüge the *Deutsch-Französischen Jahrbücher (Franco-German Annuals)*. In addition, *Die heilige Familie. Kritik der kritischen Kritik, gegen Bruno Bauer und Konsorten (The Holy Family: Critique of the Critical Criticism, contra Bruno Bauer and Company)*.

³ Tom Rockmore (1999) "Karl Marx" as in *Columbia History of Western Philosophy*. Richard H. Popkin. ed. (NY: Columbia University Press). 552.

⁴ https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1868/letters/68_01_30.htm consulted 2-2-20

December 1845: Expelled from France by Guizot, at the instigation of the Prussian government, Marx went to Brussels, founded there, in 1846, the Association of German Workers, gave lectures on political economy, wrote for the *Réforme* (Paris), etc...

1847: *Misère de la philosophie. Réponse à la Philosophie de la misère de M Proudhon* (*The Poverty of Philosophy: Reply to M Proudhon's Philosophy of Poverty*); ditto: *Discours sur le libre échange* (*Speech on Free Trade*) and various other pamphlets.

1848: In collaboration with F Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Arrested and expelled from Belgium, invited to France by a letter from the provisional government. Left France in April 1848, founded at Cologne the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* (June 1848 – May 1849). Marx was then expelled from Prussia, after the government had conducted an unsuccessful prosecution against him. Appeared twice in court (the first time to answer a charge against the paper, the second for inciting to rebellion; acquitted both times). Marx's speeches in his own defence were printed in *Two Political Processes* (Cologne).

1849: The last number – printed in red – of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*. Marx went to Paris. Expelled in September 1849 with the choice of being interned in Brittany (Morbihan). Refused and went to London where he is now living.

1850: Published the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung, politisch-ökonomische Revue* (Hamburg).

1852: *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York). *Revelations Concerning the Communist Trial at Cologne*. This edition was confiscated at the German frontier, and a new edition was published in Boston in 1853.

1853-54: *Flysheets against Lord Palmerston*.

1859: *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Berlin).

1860: *Herr Vogt*.

1851-60: Regular contributor to the *New York Daily Tribune* and the *New American Cyclopaedia*.

1861: Went to Berlin after the Amnesty; the Prussian government refused him renaturalisation.

1864: Published for the Central Council of the International Working-Men's Association the *Address to the Working Classes of Europe*.

1867: *Capital*, Volume 1 (Hamburg)

The reader will note that Marx's emphasis is on his published work and that also included here are some polemical works to which later commentators have given scant attention. The work of the activist Marx as editor and journalist is notably emphasized. The turn to critique of political economy is evidenced by the 1859 *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and the first volume of : *Capital* in 1867. Both, as noted, the work of exile.

While Marx does not list the texts that we now refer to as *The German Ideology*, we should note that those manuscripts in "two large octavo volumes" are described in the Preface to his 1859 publication. Therein, Marx states that he and Engels had now been able "to settle accounts with our erstwhile philosophical conscience" and so "abandoned the manuscript to the gnawing criticism of the mice all the more willingly as we had achieved our main purpose – self clarification."⁵ Fortunately, Engels and later Riazanov, among others, preserved much from the mice and we can see in greater detail how Marx worked through critique to arrive at his distinctive conceptions of history and politics. But it should not be overlooked that Marx also here states that the "decisive points of our view were first scientifically, although only polemically, indicated in my work published in 1847 and directed against Proudhon: *The Poverty of Philosophy*."⁶

Years later, at Marx's graveside Engels, collaborator in this work of self-clarification would describe his friend as a "man of science" and stated "but this was not even half the man" and after recounting that "for Marx" science was "a historically dynamic, revolutionary force," Engels went on to state that "Marx was before all else a revolutionist. His real mission in life was to contribute, in one way or another to the overthrow of capitalist society and . . . to the liberation of the modern proletariat."⁷ The critique of political economy is Marx's Plan B in other words and the correspondence with Kugelman illustrates that he re-engages with the revolutionary labor movement when possible, notably with the emergence of the International Working Men's Association. We might also note that Marx left a massive amount of his later

⁵ Karl Marx. 2000 (1859). Preface" to *A Critique of Political Economy*, in David McLellan. ed. *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 2nd edition. 426.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Frederick Engels' Speech at the Grave of Karl Marx, Highgate Cemetery, London. March 17, 1883. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/death/burial.htm>. Accessed: March 24, 2020.

economic work unfinished as well (and here again, it should be noted that there are complex interpretive problems that arise as a result).

Marx's method of critique certainly derives from the philosophical tradition and informs his analyses of political economy but the focus is on praxis whenever possible. Nor is this letter the only time, Marx sums himself up in this manner. Later in the same year, responding to Nikolai Danielson, a would-be Russian translator of Capital, Marx provides "some brief notes on my literary-political activity"⁸ that repeats the titles given to Kugelmann although now he adds more commentary about his (then) recent resurgent activism, as he adds to his credits the "foundation programme of the '**International Working Men's Association**', that is: **Address to the Working People of Europe** and the Rules of the Association, later (1866) definitively sanctioned at the congress of the International Working Men's Association at Geneva. Marx continuously, up to the present, **Member of the General Council of the International Workingmen's Association, and its Secretary for Germany.**"

The contention here that to best understand Marx as he understood himself as a political theorist (his "literary-political activity"), we should turn first to the polemical works he produced in the heat of battle, so to speak, the work he produced analyzing the events of the Revolutions of 1848 and then later the Paris Commune of 1871. In this work we can best see how Marx grappled with concrete issues and indeed we find a much accurate historical purchase on Marx but may in fact make Marx more relevant than the canonized philosopher or economist we learn about in college. In what follows, I examine and discuss one of these crucial "texts" (which is in fact a collection and redaction of the journalism he references in his correspondence) and which I take to better exemplify Marx's political theory, which is best understood as *always first and foremost forged in and by revolutionary practice*.

II - A Misadventure in Revolution: Marx, the Working Class, and the Class Struggles of 1848-1850

The distinctive and indeed audacious quality of Marx's revolutionary thought and practice is well evident in the support for insurrectionary politics that he expresses in those of his writings which focus upon political events and developments during his lifetime. In a set of newspaper articles, collated and published by Engels in 1895 under the title, The Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850 (CSF, hereafter). In this "text," Marx attributes the ultimate defeat of the revolution to the "passivity, and trust in its elected representatives" of the social democratic press that, due to reliance on the constitutional and electoral process, "signed its own death warrant."⁹ Yet, Marx had previously stated, in what later generations have read as the same text, that the French working class "was still incapable of carrying out its own revolution."¹⁰ The ambiguity is

⁸ https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1868/letters/68_01_30.htm

⁹ Karl Marx. 2010 [1850]. "The Class Struggles in France: 1848 to 1850" as in Surveys From Exile. David Fernbach ed. London: Verso. 133.

¹⁰ CSF. 45.

apparent, was the failure of 1848 the “passivity” of the leadership or had the time not yet arrived for the revolution, was it premature?

In CSF, unlike in the Communist Manifesto that he had co-authored with Engels two years previously, Marx portrays the working class as not yet ready for revolution. In describing the failure of the revolutionary insurrection of June 1848, Marx writes “although in Paris the French proletariat possesses enough real power and influence at the moment to spur it to efforts beyond its means, in the rest of France it is crowded together in separate and dispersed industrial centers, and is almost submerged by the predominance of peasant farmers and petit bourgeois.”¹¹ As a result, throughout the texts of CSF Marx describes class alliances between the working class and the peasantry, the petit bourgeoisie, and even the bourgeoisie proper.

Class alliances are necessary due to the relative underdevelopment of French industry (and ergo to the working class as well) and yet also prove to be the undoing of the revolution and the socialist aspirations of the French working class. The peasantry, for example, which Marx sees as in fundamental conflict with dominant financial interest, “sacrificed to bourgeois credit” perceives itself in conflict with the working class due to the taxes imposed on the peasant by the provisional government that also provided limited support to public works program for the urban unemployed, as a result *Jacques le Bonhomme* the clichéd depiction of the peasantry, saw the Parisian worker as “the wastrel who was making himself comfortable at *his* [i.e. Jacques the peasant’s] expense.”¹² The peasantry’s aversion to provisional government would in turn lead it into support for reaction and then massive electoral support for the presidential candidacy of Louis Bonaparte. Whose government, in turn would ally with the party of the landowners and the finance capitalists, interests inimical to the peasantry and subsequently levy taxes to benefit those same interests, taxes that would then turn the peasants left “into the arms of the devil, *socialism*.”¹³ This socialist turn of the peasantry provided a harvest of rural votes for the French left that contributed mightily to its resurgence in the elections of 1850.

In Marx’s account the French electoral left (the “Montagne”) was dominated by petit bourgeois interests and ideas. These “*démoc socs*” as they then came to be known, were in Marx’s account led to “overconfidence” by their largely peasant derived electoral resurgence¹⁴ – they already had and effectively presumed the support of the French working class whose voting pattern was much more consistently left wing. This overconfidence in turn leads to the tragic failure of the social democrats in the face of determined reaction. The underlying mistake then was reliance on a class, the peasantry, who were misled by their adherence to traditional religion that obscured their ability to see their own interest; “the mortgage which the peasant has on heavenly possessions guarantees the mortgage that the bourgeoisie has on the peasant’s possessions.”¹⁵ Indeed, the entrance of the peasantry into alliance with the revolution means the arrival of a force that while at odds with capitalism is so only in a manner contrary to progressive

¹¹ CSF. 46.

¹² CSF. 51.

¹³ CSF. 113.

¹⁴ CSF. 132.

¹⁵ CSF. 86.

politics; “the class – which represents barbarism in civilization.”¹⁶ Marx’s conclusion about the peasantry in these texts is that it is a class that “is absolutely incapable of any revolutionary initiative.”¹⁷ In this regard it is notable that a contemporary historian of the period describes how the “*démoc socs*” in the wake of repressive measures against their organizations in Paris “aimed to broaden their appeal to artisans and rural smallholders” whom they “effectively targeted” in this phase of the revolution.¹⁸

That other erstwhile ally of the working class, the petit bourgeoisie is clearly more capable of ideological and political self-expression, yet follows a somewhat parallel trajectory to that of the peasantry, shifting right, then left and ultimately depicted by Marx as a comic contrast to his tragic protagonist, the working class. In Marx’s account the violent suppression of the working class uprising of June 1848 leaves finance capital in a dominant position, a place it had attained in Marx’s estimation subsequent to the 1830 revolution as well. For the petit bourgeoisie however, “credit proved to be a vigorous and jealous god, driving the insolvent debtor out of his four walls with wife and child, handing his supposed property over to capital The petty bourgeoisie realized with horror that by crushing the workers they had delivered themselves unresisting into the hands of their creditors.”¹⁹ On the one hand, the electoral mainstays of the parliamentary “Montagne” (the “mountain” that styles itself in imitation to the revolutionary Jacobins who sat up on the higher back seats of the left side of the assemblies of the Great French Revolution in and after 1789), the petit bourgeoisie were for Marx the social base of democratic constitutionalism and utopian socialist reformism, but at the end of the day, whilst they “constantly grasped at constitutional possibilities . . . still felt more at home behind the bourgeois republicans [whose platform included working class disenfranchisement and whose rule meant the continued dominance of their creditors] than in front of the revolutionary proletariat.”²⁰ As a result, Marx claims that in mid-1849 when the non- and anti-republican gained the upper hand in parliament, it was the petit bourgeoisie “who were felled” in what Marx describes as “an ineffable comedy” and “not a bloody tragedy between wage labor and capital [as had previously transpired], but a lamentable prison-filling drama acted out between debtor and creditor.”²¹ After a subsequent left turn and its return to parliamentary leadership via the votes of workers and peasants, petit bourgeois democracy meets its demise in confrontation with the representatives of the “party of Order” who meet the Montagne’s “educated humanism” and “arguments based upon a legal foundation” with of “the foundations upon which the law stands – bourgeois property.”²² The power against which the petit bourgeoisie cannot and will not revolt, hence its inability and unwillingness to turn to insurrectionary politics, contrary to the legacy of its Jacobin namesake.

¹⁶ CSF. 72.

¹⁷ CSF. 130.

¹⁸ Geoffrey Ellis. 2000. “The Revolution of 1848-1849 in France.” *The Revolutions in Europe, 1848-1849*. R.J.W. Evans and Hartmut Pogge Von Strandmann eds. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 46.

¹⁹ CSF. 66.

²⁰ CSF. 84-5.

²¹ CSF. 94.

²² CSF. 133.

By contrast the working class, the true heirs of the *sans-culottes*, who provided the barricade fighters of 1830 and 1848 and whom Marx initially describes as “still incapable” of successful revolution, “except in its *imagination*, in its *fantasy*.”²³ Nonetheless, the Provisional Government that the working class helped bring to power in 1848 pursued policies that in Marx’s reckoning left the workers but “either to starve or strike out” in further revolt that constituted “a fight for the destruction or preservation of the *bourgeois* order.”²⁴ As we have seen, the preservation of bourgeois dominance also created conditions under which “the petty bourgeoisie and the peasant class, were obliged to ally themselves with the proletariat, as their own situation became more intolerable and their antagonism to the bourgeoisie sharper.” Indeed, Marx makes a claim with regards to the wider European theater of revolutions at the time to the effect that “the fate of these national revolutions” were “subject to the fate of the proletarian revolution . . . The Hungarian, the Pole, [and] the Italian shall not be free so long as the worker remains a slave!”²⁵ The central role that the working class plays in Marx’s international analysis hinges on its fundamental difference from other classes “the modern revolutionary class” which must come to the “fore [as] a dominant force” and then and only then may “the revolution . . . come into its own.”²⁶ For Marx of course, the rule of the working class would lead to socialism, not that socialism advocated by utopian thinkers and reformist social democrats but rather “this socialism is the *declaration of the permanence of the revolution*, the *class dictatorship* of the proletariat as a necessary intermediate point on the path towards *the abolition of class differences in general*,”²⁷ in other words communism. Hal Draper asserts with regard to this specific portion of the CSF texts and in other texts of the immediate post-1848 period that Marx and Engels arrived at their final formulation of their concept of “permanent revolution,” meaning a revolutionary process that does not become frozen short of the final goals of the revolutionary working class movement; “the revolution must continue on to the proletarian revolution without bogging down in a bourgeois-democratic phase.” As we have seen, “Marx was not cutting the proletarian left loose from class allies . . . but he is reversing the relation of hegemony.”²⁸ In other words, he was shifting from his own earlier understanding that the socialist revolution was conceivable only in the imagination of the workers and their intellectual allies. Instead, Marx had arrived at a revolutionary militant’s understanding that the revolution’s failure was the result of its failure to advance, that there was no historical halfway house available and that without working class hegemony, the denouement of the revolutions of 1848 would necessarily be the rule of a balance of class forces in which capitalism and “the party of Order” remained in power. Yet here again, when closely reading the texts of CSF we find more nuance, more complications than the permanent revolution concept seems to suggest. Marx’s larger conception of history identifies classes as the agents of the change but when his analysis focuses on the concrete realities at hand, he zooms in closer and specifies the salient role of class fractions.

²³ CSF. 57. Marx’s emphases.

²⁴ CSF. 58-59. Marx’s emphasis.

²⁵ CSF. 61.

²⁶ CSF. 74.

²⁷ CSF. 123. Marx’s emphases.

²⁸ Hal Draper. 1978. *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution, volume II: The Politics of Social Classes*. New York: Monthly Review Press. 255.

When examining the dominant and victorious classes, Marx describes the role of class fractions, especially fractions that create political and ideological factions within the ruling classes (bourgeoisie and vestiges of the old landed aristocracy). He describes how under the rule of the “bourgeois monarchy” of Louis-Phillippe (1830-1848) “it was not the French bourgeoisie as a whole which ruled but only one fraction of it – bankers, stock-market barons, owners of coal and iron mines and forests, a section of landed proprietors who had joined their ranks – the so-called *financial aristocracy*. It sat on the throne, it dictated laws in parliament and made official appointments . . . By contrast, “the actual *industrial bourgeoisie* formed part of the official opposition.”²⁹ This business conflict, Marx charts throughout the period and he provides an analysis of how the dynamics specific to French capitalism create what later theorists would doubtless describe as a politics of underdevelopment. The industrial manufacturers, who initially supported the overthrow of the July Monarchy, were unable to establish their political leadership because unlike in England where “industry predominates; in France agriculture. In England industry requires *free trade*; in France, protective tariffs, a national monopoly alongside the other monopolies, French industry does not dominate French production.”³⁰ Hence the politics of debt and the valorization of finance capital that gives rise to the “financial aristocracy” and provides the peculiar economic terrain on which the class struggles in France are played out.

All in all, the thick description of socio-political “variables” provides a rather more complex and complicated picture of the terrain of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary struggle than the broad brushstrokes of the depiction of class polarization and climactic historical drama as set forth in the Manifesto. This highlights an aspect of Marx’s work that is of central concern to this author; Marx’s capacity for switching genres from grand theory to concrete historical narrative. While Marx is certainly not the only revolutionary thinker to do this, one thinks of Tom Paine for instance, it is the case that such genre switching has, for Marx, definite ramifications in so far as his broad theoretical constructions are cast as interpretations of the larger historical process. In CSF, he states for instance, that “a revolution is only possible at a time when *two factors* come into *conflict*: the *modern productive forces* and the *bourgeois forms of production*.”³¹ Notably, in this passage penned in 1850, Marx is already putting forth larger ideas laid out later in his 1859 “Preface” to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy yet within the context, as we have seen, of a contemporary historical narrative that places the efficient causes of political success and failure on the actions of the players on the revolutionary stage. Yet Marx reminds us that the stage is built by historical circumstances and only under certain circumstances can a revolutionary drama be performed. In other words, he effectively articulates between grand theory and concrete historical analysis. One may, of course, question in light of subsequent history, if the European working class circa 1848 in any country could actually not only seize and maintain power but also had the power resources to construct “modern productive forces” in its own image and interests. Indeed, as Marx himself notes in CSF, “French relations of production are determined by France’s foreign trade, by its position on the world market and by the laws of this market; how was France to break these laws without a

²⁹ CSF. 36. Marx’s emphases.

³⁰ CSF. 111. Marx’s emphasis.

³¹ CSF. 131. Emphases Marx’s.

revolutionary European war” that would draw in the hegemon (“despot” in Marx’s terms) at that time of the global economy, England.³² Again later, Marx states that the revolution “will not be accomplished within any national walls. The class war within French society will be transformed into a world war . . . The worker’s task will begin to be accomplished only when the world war carries the proletariat to the fore in the nation that dominates the world market, i.e. England.”³³ Given the dearth of revolutionary activity in England at the time, how then are we to understand Marx’s critique of the lack of revolutionary audacity on the part of contemporary French democrats and socialists?

The position taken here is that when Marx writes in the form of contemporary historical narrative it is the case that he is tracing his broad theory of history as class struggle in the specifics of the history of class struggles; discovering his theory of history as found in history, so to speak. Such an interpretation of Marx’s historical writings presumes a non-contradictory coherence between Marx’s theoretical and historical writings.³⁴ The contrary suggestion being made here, however, is that Marx historical writings (which CSF perhaps specifically best exemplifies!) provide an array of new insights that effectively open up Marx’s general theory to nuances, concrete problems, even paradoxes and certainly ironies. This is not to claim that historical context negates nor does it refute Marx’s general theory. Such a claim would itself be too general! Rather, the idea here is that Marx’s “political theory” is practiced in the form and genre of concrete historical analysis is what allows Marxism to retain its vitality and this is what allows it to avoid intellectual sclerosis. Historical analysis, then should be considered *the preferred mode of historical materialist political theory*. As Terrell Carver has suggested this would be “a way of reading Marx through his ‘historical’ works in which he really gets to grip with political analysis”³⁵ in which the proximity between the act of writing and event is critical to differentiating it from traditional academic history and even the Marxist historiographical tradition, rich as its insights might be; Marx’s politically engaged writing in the form of concrete and contemporary analytical historical narrative is, for lack of a better term, entirely “organic” to his political practice.

In his historical works, Marx writes from the perspective of someone within history, not as the Hegelian sage who awaits at dusk for the avatar of Wisdom’s goddess, instead Marx’s perspective is that chosen by Prometheus, contra Olympian heights, but committed to humanity embedded in its struggles; a mode of writing that is its self, party to those struggles. For Marx has, in his own terms, gone over to the side of the workers. Somewhat paradoxically, however, Marx’s practice shares something with traditional history; he “knows” the outcomes, or at any rate what he claims it must be; “A new revolution is only possible as a result of a new crisis; but it will come, just as surely as the crisis itself.”³⁶ Such is the general principle which to “return to

³² CSF. 45.

³³ CSF. 112

³⁴ This would also facilitate a place for later “orthodox” Marxists from Lenin to Poulantzas to develop the “missing” theory of the State that Marx planned but never wrote. In my view, however, it is no accident that Marx never wrote a grand theory of the state in format of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, for such a theoretical construct would in fact actually be at odds with Marx’s own understanding and approach to the historical process.

³⁵ Terrell Carver. 2002. “Imagery/Writing, Imagination/Politics: Reading Marx through the *Eighteenth Brumaire*,” as in *Marx’s ‘Eighteenth Brumaire’*, Mark Cowling and James Martin, eds. London: Pluto Press. 117.

³⁶ CSF. 131. Marx’s emphasis.

France” as Marx says³⁷ leads to the conclusion of CSF; “until the economic situation has again reached the point where a new explosion blows all these squabbling parties with their constitutional republic sky-high.”³⁸ That explosion came, to be sure, but in the form of the coup of Louis Napoleon and the Second Empire, subsequently analyzed by Marx is the nowadays far more closely studied text of The Eighteenth Brumaire.³⁹

Surely much too much has been written in academic discussions as to whether Marx was an economic determinist who regarded socialism as an historical inevitability as a matter of “scientific” postulation. Or perhaps, Marxism is better reconstructed along ethical lines as a moral commitment to the achievement of a just and democratic socialist society. The dichotomy is a false one, when Marx wrote history, embedded within history, he wrote indeed as some who “knew” what the outcome must be, such was the core of his revolutionary commitment, he could, one might say, *schreiben nicht anders* (write no other), but after all when Marx described the Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850, and then subsequently The Eighteenth Brumaire and yet again (much later) of the Paris Commune in The Civil War in France, he was describing again (and again) a French battlefield upon which socialism, the working class, the revolution had been defeated. However, he writes as a combatant in a war that continues on, even across generations. Indeed, in CSF Marx pens one of his more favorable comments about peasants, specifically the wine-growing peasantry of France of whom he states they “have a kind of historical tradition, which is handed down from father to son” by which they “test the bouquet” of the government by its policy on the taxation of their product.⁴⁰ Marx’s necessity then is the commitment to socialism, it is neither science nor ethics (although it has affinities to both), but is rather the commitment of an intellectual militant who must honestly and rigorously analyze the concrete realities of each and every defeat but for whom ultimate victory is the predicate of all his writing, theoretical and historical.

In 1867 Marx dedicated the first volume of Capital to his late friend Wilhelm Wolff who Marx described there as “protagonist of the proletariat.” This is Marx’s own aspiration and the animation of his work. Beyond the scope of this essay, I would also suggest that better understanding of Marx’s political thought is to be gained by attention to the role of personal commitment, in the terms of intellectual history, a post-Hegelian⁴¹ seeking to overturn the abstract system of Idealist philosophy, returning thereby to the everyday struggles of life, yet still committed to an ultimate purpose. To state this in perhaps a more provocative way, Marx’s radical audacity arises from an abiding revolutionary commitment; once one passes through the gates of revolution, one must see it through to the end. Or as Marx put it a few years later in 1859, quoting Dante,

Qui si convien lasciare ogni sospetto Ogni viltà convien che qui sia morta.’

Here all distrust must be abandoned; here all cowardice must die.⁴²

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ CSF. 142.

³⁹ Karl Marx. 1963 [1852]. The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. New York: International Publishers.

⁴⁰ CSF. 115.

⁴¹ Not entirely unlike Kierkegaard in this regard.

⁴² Karl Marx. 1970 [1859]. “Preface” to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. NY: International Publishers. 23.

Although by then, Marx had lived more than a decade in exile and in describing his commitment to science he remained true to what he written back in 1843; his critique was always turned “not towards itself, but towards problems which can only be solved by one means – practice.”⁴³

⁴³ Karl Marx. 1976 (1843). Contribution to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law [Recht]. Introduction. In Karl Marx & Frederick Engels. Collected Works. Volume 3. 181.