Notwithstanding a surge of interest marking its 150th anniversary, these are difficult times for the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, and especially for the class politics of proletarian revolution that it advocates.\(^1\) The great, inescapable fact about the *Communist Manifesto* is that, a century and a half later, the call to arms issued by Marx and Engels has yet to be taken up in even a single working class revolution in a developed capitalist society. The international Communist movement which claimed the *Manifesto* for its own, and shaped world politics throughout this century, is now all but defunct; its great goal unrealized; its tangible successes crushed, compromised, or attenuated. Yet even before 1989 it had seemed hard to reconcile the *Manifesto*'s striking imagery of European powers haunted by the spectre of communist emancipation with the reality of industrial capitalist societies. Even those who credit its message often view the *Manifesto* itself as a document belonging to history.

Nowhere in the advanced capitalist world has the working class organized more than ephemeral moments or minuscule movements of revolution, a failure that has constituted a recurring challenge to Marxist thought, from the First International through the second New Left of the 1970s. Again and again, over more than a century, Marxists have been pressed to rethink the *Manifesto*'s basic call for proletarian revolution. If, on the one hand, reformists always jumped at a chance to abandon as “unrealistic” and “divisive” the politics of class struggle, revolutionary socialists, on the other hand, have inescapably been faced with the question of “what is to be done” due to the failure of revolution to occur. By the 1990s, with the imperfect achievements of revolutionary socialism succumbing to seemingly triumphant capitalism, while most surviving parties of the left rushed to embrace the agenda of capital, even those deeply convinced by Marx's call for class politics often found it hard not to see the *Manifesto* as in some way problematic.\(^2\)

There is in fact much that is wrong in the *Manifesto*—but not its class analysis of capitalist society, or its call for revolutionary change through the struggle of the working class. The problems that do exist, however, are sufficiently central to much of what has habitually been taken to constitute Marxism (though not actually to the real
core of Marx's thought), that there will undoubtedly be much resistance to admitting them. The revolutionary project of the *Manifesto* can and must be revindicated, but this will require a new historical materialist understanding of the history both of capitalism itself, and of socialism as a movement within it. The most basic error in the *Manifesto* lies in the location it claims for itself in the history of capitalist society. It trumpeted in 1848 not only the need for an end to the era of capitalism, but the very hour of that end. Instead, it must be recognized to have been a harbinger of class struggle still to come in a long capitalist epoch only then emerging. The proletarian revolution was not delayed by economism, hegemony, or some combination of conjunctural factors in 1848, or even in the decades that followed—its hour was never then at hand.

In a profound sense, Marx was ahead of his time, but the mistake was not just one of timing. It is true that his error of historical judgement, and the many misplaced expectations that followed from it, can in part be attributed to the astonishing acuity of Marx's insight into the nature of capitalism, at time when the thing itself had yet to achieve full development even in its homeland. This will be argued below. Still, a far more immediate and consequential cause of the error lay in the fundamental misunderstanding that Marx shared with his contemporaries as to the causes and significance of the French Revolution, and the politics to which it gave rise.

The issue of the French Revolution is in no way tangential to the *Manifesto*. The text provides a substantial, heroic account of it, as a *bourgeois* revolution, clearing away archaic social, political and economic impediments to capitalist society and forging a unified state. This account of 1789 was integral to the message that the proletarian revolution was at hand in 1848. Yet this conception of the French Revolution as a bourgeois revolution was not, in fact, a product of Marx's own historical materialist analysis. Instead, it belongs to a current of liberal historical thought which was incorporated by Marx alongside, and in implicit contradiction with, his own historical materialist ideas—ideas derived from his truly original critique of the liberal ideology of political economy.

Like Robert Brenner and Ellen Meiksins Wood, I have argued that the contradiction between Marx's historical materialist critique of political economy, and his acceptance of the prevailing liberal views on the role of classes in historical progress, has had a distorting effect on Marxist accounts of the origins of capitalism and the history of pre-capitalist societies. This claim poses an obvious challenge to much of what is accepted as orthodox Marxist thought. But advocating class struggle to end capitalist society does not require—indeed will not allow—the defence of every aspect of Marx's work as if it had the same validity as his sustained analysis of capitalist social
relations. It is possible that arguments about pre-capitalist class society and the origins of the French Revolution seem remote and overly academic to many Marxists, reinforcing a disinclination to call Marx's judgements into question. Yet, because a liberal ideological conception of the French Revolution has been responsible for misconstruing not only the date, but even the nature of proletarian revolution, the mistake made in the Manifesto has had a far from academic impact on strategies for class struggle. It is time, then, for a rethinking of the French Revolution not only in its own terms, but especially in relation to the socialist project of the Manifesto.

The issues of the French Revolution resonate throughout the letters and articles Marx wrote during the 1840s. After the defeat of Napoleon, which was also a defeat of Jacobinism in particular and liberalism in general by the forces of reaction, the politics of the Revolution continued to define politics in the nineteenth century. Following, respectively, the July Revolution of 1830 and the Reform Bill of 1832, France and England clearly embraced moderate sorts of liberalism. Both constitutional monarchies, they kept the popular forces of democracy at bay, as well as the radical nation-building of the Jacobins, while attending to the needs and claims of resurgent trade and emergent industrialization. The Orleanist monarchy was emblematic. Its chief minister in the 1840s was the liberal historian Guizot, who had trumpeted from the Sorbonne the cause of the bourgeoisie as the fount of historical progress in Europe, which he identified in the English Civil War, in 1789, and of course in the new regime.

Most of Europe in 1848 was governed instead by reactionary states, where even the most anaemic liberalism remained subversive and revolutionary. Yet opposition was widespread. The generally Francophile and liberal Rhineland of Marx's birth particularly chafed under the Prussian monarchy imposed on it by the Holy Alliance, but throughout Europe there were many who concurred at least in Guizot's view of 1789. A good number went further. Disdaining the moderate liberalism of Guizot, they looked instead beyond the early days of the French revolution to embrace a Jacobin radical republicanism, or the egalitarian and participatory democracy of the sans-culottes, or even the socialism of Babeuf's Conspiracy of Equals. While there was no shortage of adherents to the reactionary party of order, everywhere there were liberals, republicans, democrats, and socialists—all of whom measured each nation's historical progress in relation to the high water mark of the French Revolution. In most of Europe, a revolution on at least the terms of 1789 seemed possible, and more radical revolutionary ideas abounded.

There was nothing remotely novel about the account of the French Revolution in the Communist Manifesto. Throughout his writing before the Manifesto, Marx took for granted that his audience shared his
understanding that the Revolution had been made by a historically progressive bourgeoisie against the reactionary forces of aristocracy and absolute monarchy. He expected his audience to recognize German burghers to be of a type with, if relatively less developed and more timid than, the French bourgeois of 1789. Progress had been cast in terms of the class agency of the bourgeoisie by a distinguished line of historians, of whom Guizot was only the most notorious, and Marx and Engels presumed a familiarity with these ideas, always crediting them as the principal achievement of liberal historiography. It was, in fact, specifically this liberal conception of the historical project of bourgeois revolution that in 1843 provided Marx with his initial context for confronting the inadequacies of current political ideas based on even radical rereadings of Hegel's synthesis of liberalism with the Prussian absolutism, as advanced by Bruno Bauer and others.

Before his exposure to political economy, there is no sign in Marx's thought of the specifically capitalist working class. As a journalist, Marx had been concerned with social and political struggles, yet his concern with the “backwardness” of Prussia contrasted it particularly with the liberal societies of France and England, a contrast focussed primarily on achievements credited to the French Revolution. And as a radical—certainly among the most radical thinkers and activists of the day—Marx had been preoccupied with both political movements and developments in radical philosophy that were directly traceable to the politics of the French Revolution.

Through the critique of political economy, however, Marx acquired a completely new foundation for the communist project, one grounded firmly in the specific character of capitalist society. While the nature of capitalism as a system was clear to Marx from his reading of the political economists, on the basis of the logic inherent in its organizing principles, it is the presumption that this analysis was already germane to the social conditions existing in the Europe of his day that must be doubted. Indeed, it is clear that Marx's analysis of the historical conjuncture instead remained mostly concerned with European political movements and political philosophies that were fundamentally non-capitalist in origin. The Manifesto itself very problematically combines the latter with the former, and it is for this reason that it misinterprets struggles that were coincident with the very inception of capitalist society in Europe to be signs of the imminent demise of that society.

*English Capitalism and the Continent*

It is the idea that capitalism was already well-developed in the Europe of 1848, and that Marx or anyone else in Germany (or France) was familiar with it from direct experience, that must be challenged. Hegel was familiar
enough with political economy to give his conception of civil society a superficially Smithian character. And yet it is striking that where Smith's *Wealth of Nations* argued against the "Continental system" of corporatist regulation, and in favour of self-regulation by the market, Hegel took the persistence of corporate bodies to be essential to the functioning of civil society, and relied upon the state to rise above the real antagonism of particular interests in civil society, not least through non-market regulation. It is not that Hegel transcended the particularism of capitalist society, anticipating something like twentieth-century social democracy; nor did he have in mind only the normal functions of a capitalist state in meeting needs unmet by the market. Rather, Hegel's take on civil society reflects a fundamentally pre-capitalist perspective, one which accords to trade a central place, but still presupposes the necessity of normative social regulation by the state. Such a normative, corporatist approach to social and economic regulation is in fact characteristic of pre-capitalist states—and it is precisely this sort of regulation that capitalism in principle does without, and against which Smith argued. The anti-normative, unregulated, “anarchic” character of capitalism is central to political economy, and fundamental to Marx's critique of it. As Karl Polanyi recognized, social regulation by the market was the unique, if socially disastrous, distinguishing principle of the “great transformation” that constituted the emergence of capitalism. Yet it is clear in reading Hegel that he just did not “get it” when it came to capitalist political economy. The same is true of Saint-Simon, whose *Catechism of the Industrialists* proposed to provide a new normative framework of social regulation to replace the old moral order that seemed to have been rendered obsolete by the industrial order proposed by political economy. Social thinkers on the Continent, at the time of the French Revolution and in the decades that followed, did not “get” capitalism because it never developed there indigenously. It only began to spread there following the Revolution, from England, where it did develop.

Marx had no basis for recognizing the specific character of the capitalist working class until after he was introduced to it by Engels's critique of political economy. For all the popular struggles, strikes, and even organized socialist movements that had existed since 1789, neither a capitalist society nor a significant capitalist working class yet existed in either France or Germany. The politics with which Marx had been concerned to this point were not, in fact, the politics of capitalism. Nor did the bourgeoisie yet have a discernibly capitalist character, more than fifty years after they took to the political stage in the Revolution.

This is a particularly difficult point for many Marxists to accept, but the crucial fact about the French
Revolution from a historical materialist perspective is that neither it, nor its whole range of politics—Liberal, Jacobin or even Socialist—had to do with capitalism. A substantial body of Marxist scholarship now argues, following Robert Brenner, that contrary to prevailing social, economic and historical theories that have origins in specifically liberal ideas, capitalism did not originally develop in Europe as a whole, but uniquely in England.  

In England, and England alone, a peculiar historical dynamic—tied to the common law that developed under royal auspices after the Norman Conquest, and associated especially with a uniquely English experience of enclosures—led to the emergence of agrarian capitalism. Nothing like this early modern transformation of English agrarian society occurred anywhere else in Europe. During the early modern period, trade everywhere grew to unprecedented levels. But trade is not capitalism. Beneath the burgeoning commercial sector, eighty to ninety percent of all social production, and at least a comparable proportion of the total surplus appropriated by owners of property, was agricultural in origin. Throughout France and Germany at the time of the Revolution, the whole of this agriculture remained characterized by the social relations of traditional peasant production. Peasants worked the land according to rules laid out in custom, reproducing themselves on the land while producing surplus in the form of both rent and taxes, collected by the owners of land and what Robert Brenner has called “politically constituted property,” in the form of state offices and residual feudal obligations.

England, by contrast, had acquired substantial geopolitical power, based primarily on the wealth produced by “improved” agriculture on large tenant-farms, which enclosure had consolidated and turned into autonomous units of production. Capitalist tenant-farming brought an astonishing growth in agricultural productivity through characteristically capitalist processes, as access to the means of production was made ever more market-dependent. Innovation in production progressively reduced the need for labour, while increasing output. The owner of capital, rather than the collective rural community, came to determine what would be produced, and how, through enclosure and the extension of private property rights—first over the use of land, then over commodified labour-power.

English agrarian capitalism provided more and better food, more cheaply, and with fewer workers. This came, of course, at the cost of lost security in the land; wrenching dislocation for much of the population; lost control over work by those who laboured; and the plain and simple immiseration of a growing mass of people. In the process of this dramatic social transformation, roughly from 1450 through the Industrial Revolution, the manorial English gentry remade themselves into a capitalist landlord class, adopting their tenant-farmers as junior partners.
The tenant-farmers were themselves capitalists proper, gaining access to the land only through the market in leases, and hiring the dispossessed as labourers, as and when needed. Only with the rapid growth of industrial forms of production based on the same capitalist principles during the first half of the nineteenth century did the landlord and capitalist classes, recognized as distinct in classical political economy, really begin to merge.14

There are three crucial claims emerging from Brenner's analysis. First, that capitalism developed in, and through the transformation of, agriculture, not in the growth of urban-based trade or workshops. Second, that capitalism developed through a specific historical process connected with the unique English experience of enclosures (a complex phenomenon having more to do with the suppression of common rights and collective control over land use, than with hedging fields, consolidating holdings, or even dividing common woodland and pasture). Third, that capitalism led to the radical transformation of non-agricultural sectors in the Industrial Revolution only after the radical transformation of agriculture, which included an Agricultural Revolution. If this analysis is correct, the development of trade or industry on the Continent prior to the spread of novel forms of capitalist production during and after the Industrial Revolution simply cannot be taken as a sign of actual, nascent, or latent capitalist development. Capitalist development cannot ever be taken for granted, but must instead be demonstrated and explained. The mere growth of pre-capitalist forms of trade and industry can never explain their transformation into capitalism. Only if Brenner's account is proved wrong, can anything to do with the bourgeoisie, trade, workshops, cottage industry, or even commercial agriculture, in France or Germany, be said to reflect the development of capitalism proper—prior to whatever point it can be shown that production in those societies underwent transformation through the influence of English capitalist social relations.

Already in the eighteenth century, there were those in Europe who recognized that something significant was in process in England. Yet, even if they had been able to understand precisely what (and, it is clear from the cases of Hegel and Saint-Simon, as also the French Physiocrats before them, that generally they did not), it would have been no simple thing to set in motion a transformation of the very basis of wealth and power in class society. Given the non-capitalist agrarian production on which class society throughout Europe was based (notwithstanding the important role of trade in distributing surplus), it is hardly surprising that it was not agrarian capitalism that spread from England to transform the world. Rather, it was only the industrial form of capitalist production, which emerged at the end of the eighteenth century and gathered force in the early nineteenth, that began to spread abroad.
Where the prevailing “bourgeois paradigm,” as Ellen Wood has called it, would have it that capitalism developed in cities across Europe, forming a basis for the rising bourgeoisie to challenge the landed aristocracy, this was simply never the case. Recognizing the origins of capitalism in the transformation of English agriculture through a unique historical process, and contrasting the form of legal and economic relations that emerged there with those found elsewhere, one must conclude there is not the slightest hint of specifically capitalist social relations anywhere in the agrarian, commercial, or industrial sectors of the Continent in 1789.

The English people resisted the imposition of capitalist property rights and the tyranny of the market as well as they could, and managed to preserve certain customary rights through the whole of the eighteenth century, and into the nineteenth. Still, it clearly cannot be said that in 1800 England was a peasant society—whereas equally clearly France, Germany, Italy, and Spain still were. As late as the 1840s, these countries had only begun, with enormous variation in both forms and rates, to undergo the profound changes associated with the introduction of industrial capitalism. And rather than being the last stage of a great social transformation, in these countries industrial capitalism marked the very beginning. Where England eliminated its peasantry in the process through which capitalism came into being, the “peasant problem” was elsewhere a mark of the late introduction of capitalist production through industry, even in Europe, to say nothing of the rest of the world. Over the course of more than a century—indeed, after World War II peasants still constituted a huge proportion of the population in both Italy and France—Europe would continue to be transformed by industrial capitalist development.

There was, therefore, no more than the very beginnings of a capitalist working class in Continental Europe during the 1840s. Only slowly were competition and the logic of capital accumulation, conveyed through international trade, bringing about dramatic social change through the introduction of new, capitalist forms of industrial production, and extending the structure of capitalist social relations over existing sectors of trade and industry. From the work of E. P. Thompson, we know how long and difficult the transformation of traditional forms of industry was even in England, where laws, market structures and other social relations had long been given a capitalist stamp through the development of agrarian capitalism.

Other European societies had certainly seen extensive redevelopment of trade relations since the Dark Ages, though only since the Revolution had France achieved anything like the unified national market enjoyed by agrarian capitalist England, and Germany was still a welter of autonomous principalities. The resurgence in trade
had also brought about a revival of Roman law, so while property relations in land generally had nothing like the
capitalist character of the English Common Law, there was sufficient legal basis for capitalist industrial relations to
take hold. There had, of course, been urban artisanal workers and day labourers, as well as mine and foundry
workers, and others engaged in cottage industry, long before the social relations of production began to be
transformed by English capitalism. In pre-capitalist European societies, however, such labour was structured in the
traditional forms of corporatist organization that Hegel still favoured, such as guilds. Even after the Revolution
abolished guilds along with the other forms of “privilege,” in the first half of the nineteenth century French industrial
workers characteristicly organized themselves through such informal but well-defined corporate forms as the
compagnonnages.

As William Sewell has shown, from 1789 through 1830, and on past 1848, most French workers engaged
not only in their daily life and labour, but also in confrontations with their employers, and even in revolutionary
politics, through such corporatist bodies. What has tended to distort our understanding of workers in this period
(outside of England, though even there we have had much to learn from Thompson), has been the presumption that
the context for their struggles should be understood to have been that of established capitalist society. Once we
recognize that capitalism had not developed on the Continent, that 1789 was not about the ascendency to power of a
capitalist bourgeoisie, but had been a struggle over the form of the state in a society characterized by “politically
constituted property,” we also can accept that the popular struggle for democracy, social justice, and even social
equality that emerged in the course of the French Revolution likewise belonged to a context of pre-capitalist class
relations.

Liberalism and Revolution in Pre-Capitalist Europe

The typical Marxist view associates liberalism, as ideology, and socialism, as oppositional class struggle,
directly with capitalism. Yet, while it is true that capitalist relations of production wholly transformed English
society during the early modern period, only later, in its industrial form, did capitalism spread to continental Europe.
Far from being the ascendant moment of a rising capitalist bourgeoisie, overturning the domination of a declining
and reactionary feudal aristocracy, the French Revolution began fundamentally as a civil war within an entirely non-
capitalist ruling class comprising both nobles and bourgeois. The class relations of the absolutist ancien régime were
based upon the extraction of both rent and taxes from the peasantry, through combinations of ownership of land,
possession of privileged monopolies and rights of jurisdiction, and ownership of offices in the state. While no longer truly feudal in character, there is otherwise much to be said for Perry Anderson's description of the absolutist state as a sort of “redeployed and recharged” system of pre-capitalist class exploitation. The bourgeoisie, however, belonged in its entirety to this dominant class of proprietors, with no more than a small minority of perhaps ten percent engaged in trade. Nowhere in all the commercial relations of these merchants, even in the handful of large industrial concerns, was there to be found the slightest evidence of the transformation of production based on capitalist relations of commodified labour-power and the subordination of the labour process to the logic of capital accumulation.

Far from being opposed classes, the French noblesse and bourgeoisie both depended upon possession of non-capitalist forms of property, and differed fundamentally only with respect to the possession of noble status, as such. Indeed, those bourgeois who acquired sufficient wealth—mostly through expanding trade, especially with the colonies—almost invariably acquired nobility as well, purchasing those state offices that conferred it. Only after the aristocracy—the leading ranks of the office-holding nobility—finally compelled the monarchy to acknowledge their role and power within the state by calling the Estates General, did conflict emerge between nobles and bourgeois over whether noble status itself should be ensconced in the still to be determined constitution. State offices and the practice of law were the major source of income for a majority of the bourgeoisie, and there was an immediate outcry on behalf of the Third Estate against the pretensions to privileged political power of the First and Second Estates, setting in train a polarizing political dynamic which eventually led to the people of Paris rising up, in the name of the Nation, to defend the rebellious bourgeois deputies.

Capitalism, then, played no role in the origin or politics of the French Revolution. Liberalism, however, did: the political mobilization of the bourgeoisie, against the monopolization of state power (and potentially state offices) by those possessing aristocratic privilege, was accomplished precisely by articulating liberal political principles. Liberal conceptions such as civic equality, representative government, and the rule of law, coincided neatly with the bourgeoisie's direct social interest in limiting, and ultimately abolishing, the role of privileged personal status in connection with the state. Such liberal ideas had first clearly emerged in England in the previous century, where a civil war had instead pitted two sections of a wholly capitalist ruling class against each other over the extent to which it was permissible and safe to limit royal authority, while asserting the individual rights and freedoms of the
Those, like Locke, who then advocated liberal government by and for the propertied in the belief it need not (as the royalists feared) fall prey to the democratic aspirations of the people, have been well vindicated. Only late in the nineteenth century would anything like democratic government, limited to men and effectively constrained by its representative character, become established in England—and not even then would the state's support for and furtherance of the rights of property be seriously threatened. As Ralph Miliband argued in *The State in Capitalist Society*, there is still every reason to recommend the *Manifesto*'s view that “[t]he executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.”

Yet it is only the modern capitalist state that actually has the character of serving the whole of the propertied class, with seeming disinterest to other than their common affairs. States in pre-capitalist societies were directly implicated in the extra-economic surplus appropriation that distinguish these societies from capitalism, as Marx explicitly recognized in the *Grundrisse and Capital*. Marx and Engels's use of the word “bourgeoisie” in the *Manifesto* and elsewhere therefore begs the question. Taken as a synonym for “capitalist ruling class,” the term serves them well in the critique of political economy. Likewise in their political writing, the term is meaningful in referring to the owners of commercial, financial and industrial—but also landed—property. When, however, can these two meanings actually be said to coincide? In England, there never really was a “bourgeoisie”: the gentry became capitalist landlords and eventually merged with the industrial capitalists made rich by the transformation of the non-agricultural economy. The nobility and bourgeoisie in France, by contrast, fought over the constitution of the state in 1789 because of its crucial role in surplus appropriation, which made it far more than merely a committee for managing the affairs of the propertied. The state was itself a form of property.

Because, however, the term entered political parlance through liberal accounts of the French Revolution, its usage ignored the real social grounding of the bourgeoisie in owning politically constituted property, and gave to them an ideologically-constructed connection to commerce as the source of historical progress. This emphasis on the link between a minority of the bourgeoisie and what was taken to be the historically progressive role of trade provided a justification for their struggle with the nobility. The real difference between bourgeoisie and nobility lay simply in noble status itself (so long as state offices remained open to both, there was in fact no class difference between these groups). Members of the nobility, however, derogated their privileged status if they engaged in
demeaning labour or commerce (other than in the exalted form of goldsmithing). Already, long before the
Revolution, in England and France alike, the prevailing liberal conception of historical progress was conceived in
terms of a sequence of distinct stages based on particular modes of subsistence—first hunting; then pastoralism; next
agriculture; and finally “commerce.” Only by adapting this widely-accepted liberal historical conception to portray
the bourgeoisie as a heroic and progressive force for social development, driven to revolution by a declining but
fiercely reactionary aristocracy seeking to protect an outmoded social order, did they become particularly associated
with trade. Already during the course of the Revolution the idea emerged that the struggle between the bourgeoisie
and the aristocracy marked a passage from the dominant class in agriculture, to the dominant class of the era of
commerce. Barnave wrote an account in these terms while awaiting execution, in 1795. While it was not itself
published until the 1840s, the key elements in the idea of bourgeois revolution enjoyed wide currency by the end of
the Napoleonic period.

This liberal conception of bourgeois revolution, justifying the political struggle against entrenched political
privilege, built upon a variety of ideas that emerged through the cross-fertilization of political, historical and
economic concepts between England and France (and Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, etc.) throughout the early
modern centuries, a period when their societies were actually diverging. This might seem paradoxical, but there is a
solid foundation for such cross-fertilization in the remarkable continuity of the issues addressed by political theory in
different forms of class society, characterized as they all are by the dominance of private property, but immediately
in conjunction with the organization of political power in the form of the state. The central problem for ruling classes
over the whole of Western history since ancient Greece has been the problem of “who rules”: what balance in the
constitution of the state is required both to protect free men of property from tyranny, and to ensure that the state can
preserve enough “good public order” that they may continue to enjoy their property at the expense of others. The
issues of absolute royal power versus constitutional rule emerged in both France and England during the early
modern period, but the differences between the class relations of politically constituted property, and agrarian
capitalist class relations, led to significant corresponding differences in conception.

In a similar vein, both capitalist and non-capitalist forms of class society have considered which policies of
the state are most conducive to public well-being, conceived primarily in relation to the rights and enjoyment of
property. It is not so surprising, then, to find that the term “political economy” seems first to have emerged in
France, associated with the principle of harnessing private greed to the furtherance of the supposed public good, since such a principle is not specifically capitalist in character. In England, however, it was proposed as early as 1547 that free trade in grain would lead to higher profits, with the effect of stimulating increased production, and that this in turn might solve the problem of unemployment for those dispossessed of their land through enclosure—which seems to reflect a specifically capitalist form of political economy, advocating the growth of the “Trinity” of landlord, capitalist, and worker, in place of the peasant village. While their societies continued to diverge over the course of the early modern period, English and French authors could thus still read each other with varying degrees of comprehension, sharing many of the same political issues, and the disposition to promote trade, yet failing to comprehend the different logic behind the other's system of social production.

Liberal political principles of civic equality among the propertied, then, had a cogency in France in 1789 that had nothing to do with the capitalist context that had produced their classic formulation in the work of Locke. At the same time, a variety of French theorists could read the work of English political economists approvingly, even if they more had in mind circumventing the impediments that traditional privilege posed to trade, rather than a truly revolutionary reorganization of production based exclusively on the market-driven imperatives of capital. England and France had truly different social systems. Yet the ascendancy of private property; the ambiguous relationship between members of the dominant propertied class and centralized state power; and the increasing salience of trade (whatever the underlying system of production)—these made for striking points of congruence between at least some of the liberal ideology developed on each side of the Channel.

When Marx and Engels wrote of the modern state managing the common affairs of the “bourgeoisie,” then, they conflated the very different states and societies of England and France. In doing so, they followed the lead of liberal historians who championed the bourgeoisie as a class for historical progress. Together with the liberals, Marx and Engels excluded the states in Germany, Italy, and Iberia from the ranks of modern states, for they had not yet experienced “bourgeois revolution.” While a few lesser states like the Netherlands could be fit to it, the established model for historical progress was obviously based upon a conflation of France and England. Through the liberal association of strikingly similar political struggles in fundamentally different social contexts, “bourgeois” became a synonym for “capitalist,” when in virtually every respect the French bourgeoisie of 1789 were almost the antithesis of a truly capitalist class.
From the start, Marx's critique of Hegel affirmed the reappropriation of power by the people directly, as had been demanded and practised by the *sans-culottes* at their most revolutionary, when they challenged even the Jacobins who sought to wield the instrument of the state. More than this, however, it affirmed the socialist objective that had only begun to achieve coherent expression during the years of the Revolution. Again and again, the positions and practice of even the most revolutionary bourgeois revealed that the preservation of private property remained the foundation of the state, even to the extent that the people were robbed in substance of the very liberty, equality and sociality for which the Revolution stood for in purely political terms. Marx realized, therefore, that we were alienated from our collectivity not only in the form of the state, but also within civil society, based on different relationships to the forms of property, and propertylessness. Thus, though even the political goals of the French Revolution still remained unmet in Germany, Marx was from the outset committed to socialist goals that went far beyond the political revolution, and he clarified the philosophical foundations for these goals against the claims not only of Hegel's liberalism, but also the more radical philosophical Jacobinism of Bauer.

This much, then—a fundamental critique of liberal and Jacobin politics and political philosophy—Marx already had achieved by the autumn of 1843. These earliest works of Marx, indeed, made a significant contribution to the understanding of emancipation within the critical political philosophy of pre-capitalist Europe. Yet by the time Marx had identified the proletariat as the key to the whole social revolutionary project of human emancipation, at the turn of 1844, he had not only gone beyond the politics of the French Revolution, but—through his exposure by Engels to a new line of critical thought that in turn revealed the "innermost secret" of an emerging, radically different form of class society—he had embarked upon a fundamentally new approach to the emancipatory project that would become the basis of his life's work. Earlier, he had expressed to Arnold Ruge his intention of writing a history of the Convention during the French Revolution, and his notebooks reveal that during 1843 he had begun work to that end. After Marx turned to the critique of political economy, however, that project dropped from his agenda. In its place, he eventually produced *Capital*.

Marx never acknowledged a rupture in this move from the problematic of the politics of the French Revolution, to the problematic of class struggle in capitalist society. Yet both politics and political philosophy on the Continent had continued to be rooted in the dynamics and conditions of pre-capitalist class society. The Enlightenment had not been defined by liberalism as such—Voltaire was certainly no liberal—but by a looser
rejection of revealed knowledge, hoary superstition, and the pretended sanctity of too-human institutions and mores. The ideas of the English liberals certainly influenced Continental thinkers, but Montesquieu's conception of the separation of powers, for example, corresponded more to the interests of the noblesse de robe in relation to the absolutist monarchy rather than to any social or political interest discernible in England. Rousseau subsequently rejected both the claims and theoretical foundations of liberalism, as well as absolute monarchy, to conceive of the “general will” in terms that were solidly grounded in pre-capitalist normative sociality. It was significant social inequality, and the inherently abusive power of the state that preserved it, to which Rousseau objected—not anything specific to capitalism or its development, with which he reveals no familiarity. Nor, in attempting to justify the absolutist state as having something akin to this “general will,” was Hegel any more concerned than Rousseau with specifically capitalist society. In neither the context of Continental political philosophy, nor that of the political movements which he covered as a journalist, did Marx have occasion to confront capitalism before the end of 1843. Like Rousseau, but enriched by the experiences of the popular movement in the Revolution, Marx conceived of human emancipation from the chains imposed by property and the state. No more than Rousseau, however, had he yet conceived of a process or agency, beyond philosophy, by which this emancipation could be achieved.

Through the critique of political economy, however, Marx did more than just identify the agency of the proletariat in 1844. Far more importantly, the proletariat were transformed in his thought from being simply the “propertyless,” as they had been in pre-capitalist social and political thought, to take the specific form of the capitalist working class. Their struggle was not simply the struggle of the dispossessed and disenfranchised everywhere, but specifically located in the structured social relationships of capital accumulation and its crises, founded on the commodification of labour power and the continual revolutionising of production.

Though social justice would demand equality and human emancipation in any form of class society, it was Marx's particular claim, arrived at through the critique of political economy, that the same revolutionary transformation of society which brought about capitalism, in turn established a dynamic contradiction between ever-expanding human productive capacities, and the reduction of actual humans to a means for achieving that growth. In the history of hitherto existing class societies there had been what Marx called in his 1844 Manuscripts the “movement of property”: “Only at the culmination of the development of private property does this, its secret, appear again, namely that on the one hand it is the product of alienated labour, and that on the other it is the means
by which labour alienates itself, the *realisation of this alienation*.” As he argued in the *Manifesto*, “modern bourgeois property is the final and most complete expression of the system of producing and appropriating products that is based on class antagonisms, on the exploitation of the many by the few.” It is specifically in and through these *fully developed* property relations—the particular social relations of capitalist production which he came to understand through the critique of political economy—that the contradiction between human capacities and human needs is itself fully developed.

This contradiction takes form both in periodic economic crises, which capitalism cannot escape, and in the forging of a capitalist working class, whose interests ultimately can only be met by ending the system of capitalist production, exchange, and property. While it is yet to be proven that Marx and Engels were right in believing that the contradictions of capitalism would lead through these developments to a social revolution, which in turn would lead to the development of communism, this process of historical transformation was explicitly predicated on the logic of capitalist social relations which Marx discerned through the critique of political economy.

It was through reading the political economists, and drawing out the real implications of the system they described—eventually through the massive project of *Capital*—that Marx came to understand the specific possibility of achieving communist society through working-class struggle that is associated with his name. Classical political economy articulated a principle of social and economic organization that had, however, yet to be fully realized even in England. It was Marx's genius to identify through his critique the contradictions and potentialities inherent in the logic of this yet to be realized system, allowing him to describe both the basic character of capitalism, and the process by which it would be superseded, at a time when it was still only taking form.

Given the historical presumptions he shared with the proponents of the capitalist system, but also the unprecedented magnitude of social and economic transformation that it actually embodied, it is hardly surprising that Marx misjudged the extent to which capitalism had actually developed by the 1840s. Indeed, notwithstanding the brilliance of his insights into the implications of capitalist social relations as early as 1844, it was only in the late 1850s that he clarified even for himself the crucial differences between capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production. Had he seen fit, a decade earlier, to ask whether capitalist relations were actually manifest in the “bourgeois” property relations prevalent on the Continent, it is not clear that he would yet have had the tools to answer the question.
He did not ask. In England, France and Germany alike, liberals had long presumed that freedom included the right to free enjoyment of property in at least some sense. The untrammelled economic freedom of property specific to capital, meanwhile, was articulated in terms of “freedom of trade” even in England. Indeed, though Marx emphasized in *Capital* the difference between capitalist production and mere exchange, he also revealed that the truly unique character of capitalist production rests upon extension of the commodity form to the heart of the production process through the commodification of labour-power. Though capitalism is really about production by the market, it is commonly thought of even by Marxists as production for the market. Liberals already understood historical progress in terms of the growth of commerce. Everywhere, as a result, the undeniably important growth of trade in modern Europe was mistaken to coincide with capitalist development in the terms of political economy.

“Civil society” had originally signalled to the English the establishment of the state as a bulwark to property and the natural relations of exchange based upon it. “Bourgeois society” had subsequently signalled to the French the emergence of freedom from privilege, and the principles of freedom and equality in trade and political life, realized through the rise of the bourgeoisie. In Germany, these terms found a happy confluence of meaning in the term *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*. With Hegel, drawing on Smith, attaching such significance to *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* as the sphere for development of the economic individual, every authority was in agreement that whatever was true of English society applied equally to the rest of Europe, allowing for differences in the form of state. Marx never doubted that the liberals who went before him, in describing the bourgeoisie as agents of historical progress for advancing their interests as a class, had accurately depicted both the class and their interests. In this regard, however, he gave the liberals far too much credit, and too little considered the ideological underpinnings of their histories. Not only did this error cause Marx and Engels to miss the fact that capitalism was only beginning to spread from England (where it remained far from fully developed in its generalized, industrial form), but it suggested a spurious model of revolutionary class agency.

### Socialism and Proletarian Revolution

The idea of revolution, in the wake of 1789, was indelibly marked by the idea, first propagated by liberal apologists ready to accept the bloody mantle of class war as the necessary price of progress, that, characteristically, an ascending class would rise up to cast aside a previously dominant class whose time had passed. It was generally recognized that to prevail against the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie had had to involve the people. Yet, if on the one
hand there was much to unify the Third Estate, as “the Nation,” against the aristocracy, who were opposed to the Nation, it was clear on the other hand that there was a crucial division between the interests of the propertied bourgeoisie, and those of the poor. As early as 1791 a fierce debate arose, in deciding whether there should be a property qualification for elections, over the difference in interests between the bourgeoisie and the people (or as the apologists for the bourgeoisie then put it, between “the Nation” and “the brigands”). Through the involvement of the people, the bourgeois political revolution of 1789 became a truly social revolution.

The tension between the bourgeois political project, which even in its most radical Jacobin form always took the preservation of private property to be a precondition of the state, and the social interests of the propertyless, for whom democracy could never be a merely “civic” right without social implications, was an enduring feature of the Revolution's political dynamic. Though Robespierre was a truly incorruptible advocate for the people as citizens, and he accepted the need to limit the negative effects of property (at least temporarily, during the war), he would not cross the line to advance the people's interests by making a fundamental challenge to property itself. This helps to explain why the sans-culottes did not rally to his defense in 1794, while at the same time a movement (admittedly small) began to distinguish itself from the merely political tasks of building and defending the Nation, specifically advocating radical measures to redress social inequality. As Marat had recognized from the start, the very fact of the Revolution would eventually raise the issue of whether a loi agraire should affect the distribution of property; and so, quite independently of the development of capitalism in England, it was the Revolution of 1789 that put the idea of socialism on the European political agenda.

The autonomous political activism of the sans-culottes was decisively crushed by the Thermidorean regime after their final insurrection on 1 prairial, and the Conspiracy of Equals was later dispatched with little difficulty. But babouvism survived Babeuf, and one of the legacies of the Revolution was the small but growing socialist movement of the early nineteenth century. Still, as their (Marxist) historians always recognized, the sans-culottes never themselves constituted a capitalist working class, and their common social interest lay in the provision of affordable bread rather than the sale of commodified labour-power. By the early 1840s, French workers were already highly conscious of what was now called “the social question,” and increasingly identified with one or another of the approaches to “socialism” articulated by Cabet, Blanc, Proudhon, and others—even as they continued to maintain their compagnonnages. In its origin, then, French socialism was no more specifically an indication of
the development of capitalist society than were the liberal politics of the bourgeoisie in 1789.

However, much as the common characteristics of liberalism in England and France tended to blur the crucial differences in their societies, so did the idea of socialism tend to blur the differences in their workers' movements. In both England and France, workers fought for traditional rights, as well as against novel inequities. In England, however, one enduring form of struggle in the first half of the century, much emphasized by E. P. Thompson, was resistance to the capitalist demolition of pre-capitalist rights of labour, and for retention of “honourable” control over the labour process by the workers themselves. At the same time, workers fought to maintain their rate of pay in the face of competition from “dishonourable” trades, and argued for preservation of the Speenhamland system of poor relief for the unemployed and underemployed, even if it had been initially imposed by justices of the peace in the interest of maintaining public order. From early in the modern period, indeed, the English maintained a system of poor relief based on taxes that differed from all other European approaches to poverty, which can be seen to be part of the long process of adaptation by an increasingly capitalist form of state to the pressures attendant on the continuing development of capitalism. In trying to preserve what they came to see as their right to relief, workers were not in fact fighting to hold on to a part of “the old order,” but were engaged in continuing struggle over the responsibility of the state for social welfare in a capitalist society.

In France, during the first half of the century, struggle was characterized instead by essentially traditional artisans confronting what had become a chronic condition of underemployment. Where English workers in the 1830s sought to keep the state from eliminating poor relief, the last refuge from the naked effects of “the labour market,” in France the demand emerged instead for the state to address the chronic problem of underemployment by establishing workshops to create jobs. Only in the course of the latter half of the century did the French workers' movement come to include the struggles of workers in proletarianized industries; but these newer, more capitalist struggles often took place at the same time that artisanal workers continued to press for traditional demands. This tension played a pivotal role in the development of socialism in France, particularly insofar as anarcho-syndicalism came to constitute a significant challenge to the socialist organizational project of the French Section of the Workers' International (as the French socialists insisted on calling themselves until after the establishment of the Fifth Republic). The syndicalist emphasis on direct action and organization by workers in the workplace resonated powerfully with the traditional corporatist organization and struggles of the artisans. The contrast with the
development of the trades unions in Britain, and eventually the emergence of Labourism from a Liberal-Labour alliance, is telling. The greater political radicalism and relatively lesser development of effective unions among French workers, throughout the nineteenth, and well into the twentieth century, was not in fact a hallmark of the advanced proletarian character often imputed to them, but rather of the later and initially less intensive development of industrial capitalism in France.

In England, a working class had made itself through struggle over the establishment of capitalist property rights, capitalist forms of production, and the capitalist laissez-faire state. In France, traditionally pre-capitalist artisans and labourers had been radically politicized by the protracted struggles among the propertied over the constitution of the state. Traditional forms of economic organization, such as the guilds, might be abolished for immediately political purposes, as when, on the night of August 4, 1789, most of the forms of “privilege” recognized by the old social order were thrown on the bonfire of revolutionary civic zeal. Such political manifestations of liberalism were dictated by struggle against the aristocracy itself, and not by an underlying agenda of capitalist economic reforms. This is clear in the case of the guilds, as also with the abolition of legal impediments to enclosure in the countryside, since, in both cases, during and after the Revolution the same essential structure of pre-capitalist economic organization survived, regardless of changes in the law.

Conclusion

It is not, then, socialism which has failed to live up to its expectations. In the terms with which Marx conceived of it, as the emancipatory successor to capitalism, socialism was never on the agenda in the nineteenth century. The expectation that it was then on the agenda derived from a historical misunderstanding, an inherently ideological misrepresentation of the politics and society of late eighteenth-century France. The great fear in the first half of the nineteenth century was that of social revolution, in which the people—or at least a mobilized part of them—thrust themselves onto the political stage, handing control over public policy to those who spoke on behalf of popular interests. But the “socialist” character of the spectre then haunting Europe derived from the political legacy of the French Revolution, and was no manifestation of the just-emerging class struggles specific to capitalist society.

The class struggles of ancien régime France were the struggles of a non-capitalist society, and it was they that gave rise to the politics of the French Revolution. As capitalist relations of production were introduced on the Continent in the course of the nineteenth century, the development of specifically capitalist forms of class struggle of
course came to be marked by this pre-capitalist political legacy. This is evident particularly in the contrast between the highly politicized and consciously revolutionary workers' movements that took form on the Continent, and the largely “economistic” trade unionism that prevailed in Britain after the final, glorious manifestation of Chartism in 1848. From the perspective of 150 years on, it is evident that it was not in fact the Continent that was in the van of capitalist class struggle. It was the peculiarity of the English to have endured capitalist society long before anyone else, and to have been peculiarly shaped by that capitalism. As European societies became more thoroughly capitalist, especially in the course of the second half of the twentieth century, it is striking to what degree they in fact have become more like the English.

This is, of course, why the question of whether there is any validity at all to the *Communist Manifesto* arises today. The spectre that was then haunting Europe has certainly passed from the scene, whatever the future may hold. The fervent hope of socialists from Marx to the New Left that English trade unionists would learn to act more like Continental revolutionaries has never been realized; instead, most of the European left seems increasingly of a mind with New Labour. What, then, are we to make of the *Manifesto* today?

The historical trajectory sketched in the *Manifesto* is that of the development of capitalism as the ultimate form of exploitive class society. It is this line of analysis that is at the heart of Marx's historical materialism, expressed through his critique of political economy: first adduced in his *1844 Manuscripts*, theoretically deepened in long passages of the *Grundrisse*, and presented in virtually complete form in the three volumes of *Capital*. Aside from the signal error of projecting this development onto the liberal account of European history as the rise of the bourgeoisie, everything Marx had to say about the nature of capitalist society still holds.

Through his critique of Hegel and the merely radical politics of the French Revolution, and his embrace of popular struggles for social justice, Marx had been a “socialist” even before he began the critique of political economy. But the socialist transformation which he conceived through his confrontation with the guiding principles of capitalism had a dramatically different character than anything that had been conceived before. *This* socialism was conceived as the product of class struggles specific to capitalist society, where ultimately there would no choice but to bring an end to the whole history of class societies in order to secure the interests which the working-class majority have in putting an end to exploitation through the commodification of labour-power.

We can recognize today the errors of the view that the ascendancy of capitalist society was achieved
through bourgeois revolution, a historical conception rooted in the ideology of European liberalism. Nowhere was a feudal landlord class overthrown by a capitalist bourgeois class. Instead, the dominant class of English feudalism became the dominant class of English agrarian capitalism, and progenitors of the capitalist class in modern industrial capitalism. As industrial capitalist production spread through the mechanisms of the market and geo-political competition, the dominant classes of pre-capitalist societies generally were transformed in their turn. The history of the origin and development of capitalism, then, can be seen to have depended largely on the unintended consequences of actors in other forms of class society pursuing interests grounded and understood in terms of the class relations of those societies. Just as capitalism had its origins in the dynamics of pre-capitalist class societies, Marx argued that the classless society of socialism will have its origins in the dynamics of capitalism and its own class struggles. This is not to assert that the achievement of socialism must be as historically unconscious as the development of capitalism may have been. But it points to an ultimate potential for fundamental social change in actions taken in pursuit of perceived class interests within an existing context of class exploitation. By 1844, Marx had abandoned his initial idea that it would be the philosophers who would lead the way to human emancipation, arguing instead that the very structure and contradictions of capitalist class society would lead the working-class majority to end class society as such through its self-emancipation. The politics of class interest, not disinterested philosophy, held the key to the transcendence of class society. And so the Manifesto was issued as a call for class struggle.

The known history of societies may indeed be the history of class struggles, but the Manifesto makes it clear that these societies have had different specific forms, with differing forms of class struggle. Capitalism, moreover, is unique in that its class relations take an apparently purely economic form, in contrast to the extra-economic coercion that is characteristic in every pre-capitalist form. It is essential, therefore, not to confuse the class struggle which is specific to capitalist society with the sorts of struggles found in earlier times. With this in mind, it is significant that the idea of redistributing wealth in the interest of social justice can be traced back to the ancient world, finding notable expression in the Agrarian Law championed by the brothers Gaius and Tiberius Gracchus in the second century B.C. Much later, when Machiavelli observed that the struggle of the poor against the rich was salutary for republican self-government, he harkened back to the Roman republic as an inspiration for Florence. When similar ideas surfaced during the French Revolution, the links to the past were again obvious, in the references
made to a loi agraire as early as 1789, and in the name later taken by Gracchus Babeuf as well as the goals he espoused. The ideas of babouvism made an important contribution to the politics of the nineteenth century, along with other socialist conceptions and schemes for the redistribution of wealth. Yet all had far more in common with the social issues of dispossessed peasants and urban plebeians than with solutions to the problems of capitalist society, and were no more indicative of the development of capitalism than the radical republicanism of the Jacobins. Such socialist ideas and movements played an important role in the later development of specifically capitalist workers' movements, of course, as did the ideal of a democratic citizens' republic. They constituted a valuable legacy of radical thought and action which—whatever their defects—were often an asset in organizing struggles within and against capitalism. But, particularly because it was Marx and Engels in the Manifesto who first distinguished the communist project of the capitalist working class from all the utopian socialist ideas of the past, it is crucial to recognize that (especially on the Continent) this radical legacy had its roots in the social struggles of fundamentally non-capitalist societies.

In the terms of the day, then, Marx was certainly a socialist in 1843. He had a highly developed socialist critique of merely Jacobin radicalism, and embraced the struggles of working people and the dispossessed in his journalism. But this sort of socialism, even when pushed by Marx to conceive of the potential for human emancipation through the transcendence of alienation in society, was still very different from the specific conception of socialism that he developed through the critique of political economy, beginning in 1844. The difference lies not so much in the goal of emancipation, as in the conception of a historical process of class struggle that would lead to it. Through the critique of political economy, Marx conceived of the emancipation of humanity through the self-emancipation of the capitalist working class. Exploitation had achieved its most perfectly realizable form in capitalism, and with no further capacity to develop alienation, class society would come to an end with it through its own inescapable contradictions and the class struggle generated by them. This is the key to the project outlined in the Manifesto. The conflation of this process with the social conflicts of pre-capitalist Europe was an error, as was Marx's acceptance of the liberal accounts of 1789 as a bourgeois class revolution. But these errors take nothing away from the core of the ideas put forward in the Manifesto, which Marx went on to develop with great clarity through the more rigorous critique carried out in the Grundrisse and Capital. However inspiring the socialism of Babeuf and the others, it is the project of ending the commodification of labour-power and the tyranny of market forces over
social life which remains relevant to us today, and it is this which is the legacy of the *Communist Manifesto*.

The weaknesses of the *Manifesto* have everything to do with looking back to 1789, while its strengths involve looking forward to the role of class struggle within capitalist society and its capacity to bring about an end to the history of class society as such. The confusion of the issues of capitalism with the issues of the aftermath of the French Revolution was virtually universal at the time, and Marx's failure to recognize it can be attributed to the fact that, after turning from the issues of the Revolution to those of capitalist society, he never had occasion to re-examine his initial presumptions about the nature of the historical conjuncture. Marx in fact proved amazingly perceptive in the *Communist Manifesto*. He claimed that Europe in 1848 was on the verge of revolution, and a great wave of revolution in fact coincided with its publication. He recognized fundamental truths about the nature of capitalist society—truths widely acknowledged by a range of commentators looking back from 1998—at a time that it had still barely taken form even in England.

If the European politics of the day were not in fact yet the politics of capitalist class society, and the politics that have developed since have been very different from what was anticipated on the model of the French Revolution, this takes nothing away from the essential message put forward in the *Manifesto*. Clearing away its historical errors, we are left with the understanding that the history of hitherto existing society has been the history of class struggles; that, in capitalism, class society has realized its ultimate form; that it is crisis-ridden as well as incapable of delivering social justice; and since, if capitalism is not to last forever, the only way forward is through socialism (the alternative being a relapse into more manifest forms of social injustice), the pursuit of the class interests of the majority in ending insecurity and want has the potential to liberate humanity from the indignity of class exploitation. In these terms, it is as true today as it was in 1848: “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.”
NOTES


2 This is to leave aside entirely the criticisms made of Marxism from a variety of postmodern/poststructuralist positions, generally based on very simplistic readings of Marx (if he has been read at all), and absurd generalizations about the Enlightenment. Earlier feminist critiques of the Marxist and non-Marxist left are a different matter, drawing much of their force from the prevalence of sexist attitudes and practices in both the parties of the Old Left and the culture and organizations of the New Left.


6 I discuss this historiography in some detail in *Rethinking the French Revolution*, dealing with the works of Guizot, Mignet, Thierry, and Barnave, among others.


See Brenner’s two articles in The Brenner Debate, as well as Wood, Pristine Culture, and Comminel, Rethinking. I have pursued in some detail the unique character of the legal social property relations that developed in England following the Norman Conquest in a forthcoming article, “English Feudalism and the Origins of Capitalism,” Journal of Peasant Studies, v. 27 (4), July 2000.

While important changes did take place in agriculture in the Netherlands and Flanders, these changes did not lead to development of the classic “trinity formula” of landlords, capitalist tenant farmers, and workers. The Low Countries introduced many agrarian innovations that proved important—not least when adopted in England—but they did not produce agrarian capitalism. There was, however, no transformation to speak of in the agriculture of France, Germany or Spain.

Marx’s insistence upon the difference between the capacity for merchants to make profits in trading commodities and the specifically capitalist production of surplus-value is central to the approach I share with Wood and Brenner. On the failure even of many Marxists to recognize this distinction in the development of capitalism, see Robert Brenner, “On the Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism,” New Left Review 104 (1977): 25-92. For a clear exposition of Marx’s conception of capitalism and of the nature of work in capitalist society, see the first few chapters of Harry Braverman’s Labor and Monopoly Capital (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974). These chapters stand on their own, whatever one’s view of the “monopoly capital” approach that figures later in the book.

E. P. Thompson was chiefly responsible for documenting this transformation and the resistance to it by the people of England, notably in The Making of the English Working Class (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) and Customs in Common (New York: The New Press, 1991). A powerful overview, however, was provided by Marx himself in the section on “The So-Called Primitive Accumulation” which closes Capital, Volume 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers,
1954), 667ff.

14 It was Engels who offered the first intimation of this merger, identifying the “struggle of capital and land against labour” in “Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 3, 434. Throughout *Capital*, Marx deals with the two classes of workers and capitalists. In the final, unpublished chapter of Volume 3 entitled “Classes” (*Capital*, Volume 3, [Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1957], 885-886), he returns to consider the trinity of landlord, capitalist and worker that appear in classical political economy, the very classes with which he had first begun his critique in the *1844 Manuscripts*.


17 See Thompson, *Customs in Common*, especially the chapter, “Custom, Law, and Common Right.”


25 The Whig view of history as progress realized through the rise of the middle class was already well established in England, and moderate French liberal historians sought to appropriate this perspective to legitimate the early stages of the Revolution. Thierry, for example, published an account of the English Civil War as a bourgeois revolution,
and in these terms a major historical advance, just two years after the final defeat of Napoleon, during the deeply reactionary days of the Restoration. See Augustin Thierry, “Vue des révolutions d’Angleterre,” in Dix ans d’Études historiques, Oeuvres complètes, Volume 6 (Paris, Furne, Jouvet, 1851). Thierry relied on his French audience to read between the lines of his history of England, a sign the liberal interpretation already was familiar to them as well. See also Stanley Mellon, The Political Uses of History: A Study of Historians in the French Restoration (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958).

26 Wood, Pristine Culture, and “State and Popular Sovereignty.”

27 Ibid.


29 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Collected Works, Volume 3, notes 117, 606, and Marx’s notebook excerpts from the Mémoires de R. Levasseur, to which the note refers.

30 Comninel, Rethinking, 198-199.

31 Wood, “Popular Sovereignty.”

32 Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, in Collected Works, Volume 3, 280.

33 Marx-Engels, Manifesto, 498.

34 Ibid., 490.


36 For a discussion of the French Revolution as social revolution, and a vindication of Georges Lefebvre’s views, shorn of the conventional gloss of “bourgeois revolution” that he applied to them, see George Comninel, “Quatre-vingt-neuf Revisited: Social Interests and Political Conflict in the French Revolution,” Historical Papers—Communications historiques (Ottawa, 1989).


40 For a thorough exploration of this unique historical experience, see the as-yet-unpublished doctoral dissertation of Larry Patriquin, *English Poor Relief in Capitalist Context* (Toronto: York University, 1996).

41 I discuss the night of August 4, 1789 in “*Quatre-vingt-neuf Revisited.*”

42 For a brilliant exploration of this theme, see Wood, *Pristine Culture*.

43 This is not, of course, to deny that crucial national differences continue to exist, reflecting the specific historical experiences of capitalist development in different pre-capitalist social contexts. Notwithstanding centuries of cultural, religious, political, and economic interaction, the histories of Italy, Germany, France and Spain have been very different. The persistence of significant national differences is far easier to understand if capitalist development is recognized to have been late, and external in origin, rather than all of Western Europe presumed to have developed along a common path for more than a millennium. Though greater homogeneity may lie in the future of Europe, the historical legacies of national difference are unlikely to fade overnight.
