

Introduction

This is a study of how Marx treats politics. It is set in the context of his materialist theory of society and history, which has aroused such interest and controversy, but is not a study of that theory as such. This is not because I think the interest misplaced, or the controversy fruitless, but because I believe that an important contribution is to be made by looking thoroughly at how Marx operates in a specific area. Not only is politics the specific area which interested him most; it is also the one where he was most keenly aware of not having achieved a comprehensive and definitive viewpoint. Marx has of course received much attention as a social and political thinker in the broad sense, in works from which I have derived much help. I, however, have concentrated on his specific treatment of politics and, within that, on the positive rather than the normative aspects of his approach. As well as being a major part of Marx's 'unfinished business', the area which I have chosen is crucial to Marxist thought, posing the question of how political structures, and political conflict, can be integrated in an economically based theory of society and history.

It might be said that such a study cannot be conducted, for want of material and of indications of Marx's basic approach. As we shall see, there is no lack of material. As for his basic approach, I have found that it is possible to reconstruct the theory behind his empirical assertions at the various stages of his career. There are obvious dangers. The material is by no means of a uniform weight, being written in quite different circumstances for quite different reasons. A careful decision has to be made as to the emphasis to put on each work. Moreover, we must beware of foisting on Marx bits of 'theory' which he would rightly disown. On the other hand, he does claim to have interesting things to say about politics because of having a scientific theory of it. We are entitled, perhaps obliged, to probe the presuppositions, consistency and validity of what he says. I have not done this in any

negative spirit, although I have frequently been critical. My belief is that Marx's achievement can be best served by trying to subject it to the rigorous criteria by which he wished to succeed.

Although no historian, I frequently discuss Marx's views in the light of what historians think of the topics in question. The most rewarding way to grapple with Marx's thought is to see him trying to make sense of the events of his time, and attempt to measure his successes and failures. I hope that there is not too much 'amateur history' for the professional historian. While I have consulted everything he wrote, in my presentation I have concentrated on those areas where he is applying some (explicit or implicit) theory. I am sure that the political scientist will want to elaborate certain lines of interpretation beyond the point where I leave them; I hope that I have indicated the right direction. This holds also for the broader question of elaborating a distinctive and solid contemporary Marxist science of politics; I hope that that enterprise will benefit from a clear statement of the content and merits of Marx's own treatment.

Chapter 1 explores some of the basic positions which Marx held in his early writings. These are informed by the unifying theme of all his treatment of politics: the correlation between capitalist industrialisation and bourgeois political power. Most of the time Marx claims quite straightforwardly in these writings that as their economic power increases, the bourgeoisie will gain increasing political sway. The chapter argues however that, although Marx ignored or was unaware of the fact, his theory even at this early stage contains intimations of the way in which, because of their conflicts with the lower orders, the bourgeoisie's political power can turn into a two-edged sword.

Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of Marx's concept of the bourgeoisie as a class, and looks at what he thought of the first French revolution. This discussion does not attempt either 'a Marxist account of the revolution' or to set out what Marx would have said had he written the work on the subject which, characteristically, remained but a project. It does however set what we can glean of his views on it against contemporary criticisms of the 'Marxist stereotype'. As well as arguing that on a number of points Marx would appear to escape their strictures, this discussion also, and chiefly, sets the scene for our investi-

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gation of the topics on which he did write in detail. The rest of the chapter looks at his expectations for the coming revolutions in France and Germany, as set out in the *Communist Manifesto*. We note that the particular alignment of forces which Marx expects – with the lower orders supporting the bourgeoisie until the latter's crucial battles are won – is but one out of a range of possibilities, others of which would prove disastrous for Marx's hopes.

Chapters 3 and 4 show that in fact the disastrous alignments prevailed. The German bourgeoisie, keenly aware of the threat posed to it by the demands of peasants and artisans, relied on the support of the old state forces and thus made possible a restoration of the authoritarian monarchy. Where the German bourgeoisie failed to win power, the French bourgeoisie failed to keep it. In their conflict with the lower orders they were constrained so to depend on the President, Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, that he was enabled to stage a successful coup. As well as expounding the broad lines of Marx's account, these two chapters explore the notions about revolutionary crisis and the process of its resolution which Marx is employing here.

Chapter 5 examines a topic raised by the preceding two chapters: how Marx explains the political actions of individuals and groups. From a careful analysis of his usage, it emerges that he does not claim that 'all motivation is economic', although he does think that in crises people will act so as to protect their economic rather than any other, conflicting interests. It is shown that by 'necessity' Marx understands not some overarching metaphysical predetermination, but rather the kind of cumulative process whereby people, who could in principle have decided otherwise, involve themselves in irreversible consequences of the decisions which they do take. The chapter also documents the shift in Marx's perspectives away from expecting that the bourgeoisie hold the key to the immediate future, to belief that the proletariat is the only class still capable of really revolutionary action.

Chapter 6 begins by showing how Marx treats politics within the conception of the economic structure of capitalism in his mature economic works. It shows how the role of force in changing social structures is to be distinguished from the roles of power and ideology within social structure, and goes on to discuss Marx's approach to proletarian revolution. It discusses the kind

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of necessity which Marx believes holds of this revolution, and looks at the main lines of his thought on revolutionary strategy, by contrast with the strategic views of Bakunin, Lassalle and others whom he opposed.

Chapter 7 deals with how Marx treated the politics of Britain, France and Germany in the decades after the 1848 revolutions. It discusses Marx's expectation that the bourgeoisie would come to the helm politically as industry developed, and concludes that Marx's success in this claim, while not negligible, was far from total. It concludes by looking at how coherent a theory of the state Marx comes up with in his latest pronouncements, and argues that while it is profound and provocative, it is far from consistent and comprehensive.

Chapter 8 looks more directly at general theoretical issues than do the other chapters. It begins by briefly presenting the nature of Marx's materialism – both 'methodological' and 'sociological' – and the central contention of his materialist conception of history. This puts the preceding investigation in its broader context, and serves as an introduction to the discussion of Marx's general conception of the nature, emergence and abolition of politics. An account is given of Marx's attitude to early communal societies, and his depiction of their disintegration under the impact of private property. His views on the chances of survival of the Russian rural commune, and on the possibility that Russia can arrive at communism without an intervening capitalist stage, are discussed, and their significance for his general attitudes considered. The chapter goes on to discuss how Marx conceives of the relation between politics and class society. A point from chapter 1 is put in wider context here: there is in Marx, besides the relatively simple correlation between politics and class, the basis of a more complex view which situates class itself within a wider concept of the division of labour. This more complex account can better handle some of the cases which the simpler account has to regard as exceptions, although this is achieved by relaxing some of the stringency of the latter. Marx's distinction between *government* (to be found in all societies) and *politics* (the species of government peculiar to class societies) is discussed. While the distinction leaves some problems unsolved, it is a plausible one. Marx's belief that government in communist society will be non-political is less naive than is often allowed, but here again there

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are problems about the sheer size and complexity of modern society – even without capitalism – which Marx does not satisfactorily resolve, and which raise the possibility of a survival or re-emergence of politics in some form.

The conclusion suggests that we are left, after our examination of Marx, with a number of useful ‘tools’ for the Marxist analysis of politics: a basic assertion about the role of the economy in society, which can be applied in the area of politics; notions about how classes will act in political struggle, about revolutionary crises and their resolution, and about the nature of political ‘foundedness’; an understanding of the place of politics in the Marxist conception of social structure; the broad lines of a revolutionary strategy based on Marx’s mature economic theory; an interpretation of the nature of his claims about the political structure of industrial society, and general notions about the nature of politics, the conditions of its emergence and the possibility of its abolition.

1. The early theory of politics

This chapter will examine Marx's ideas about the relation between modern society and politics, as these emerge in his writings prior to the *Communist Manifesto*. As well as establishing the main lines of his thought on this subject – and thus also the main lines of our inquiry – it will argue that there are implicit in the notions which Marx employs at this time certain tensions of which he was not fully aware but which would force themselves on him as concrete history made realities of them.

Theory of the state in embryo

A famous Irish novelist once answered the claim that the Irish people were priest-ridden with the rejoinder that the priests were people-ridden. If we take the priests as analogy for the state (an analogy never far from his mind) we find much the same paradox in Marx's treatment of the relations between state and civil society. Nowhere does this emerge more sharply than in the 1843 *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, which swings alarmingly between the thesis that society is state-ridden (i.e. that the state tyrannises over society) and the thesis that the state is society-ridden (i.e. that it is a mere reflection of social conditions). Sometimes Marx seems to be arguing that if only society were freed from the trammels of bureaucracy, it could develop naturally along the right lines. No sooner have we decided that this is the plot, than he implies that what is really wrong is that the state, the would-be sphere of freedom and community, is bound too closely to the evil reality of civil society. Neither argument on its own can make sense of the whole work: there is here a 'built-in tension' between two views of the state–society relation.

In Hegel's theory, Marx tells us, the state is the sphere which as it were 'tops off' a fundamentally sound civil society. It is the sphere in which the struggle of individuality and competition is

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integrated with community. But Marx claims that Hegel's institutional provisions have

underhandedly evolved into a guarantee against the electors, against their self-confidence. . . In order to achieve political significance and efficacy [civil society, that is, the 'unofficial class'] must rather renounce itself as what it is, as unofficial class. Only through this does it acquire its political significance and efficacy. (*CHPR*, pp. 125, 77)

Here we see the state arrogating to itself the power of society, forcing society to undergo a 'transsubstantiation' before it will recognise it (p. 77). The summit of this arrogance is achieved by the bureaucracy, which is the state's tyranny crystallised in a specific institution. In the perfected organism of a true human community there would be no divorce between society itself and its organising power; in our imperfect world, the bureaucracy exists independently, as the 'organising power' abstracted from the rest of society. To that extent it is a mere 'formalism'. But insofar as it 'constitutes itself as a real power and becomes itself its own material content' this formalism, this mere 'illusion', becomes a very 'practical illusion', becomes the vehicle of the individual careers and power-lust of the bureaucrats: in short, their 'property' (pp. 46–7). The bureaucracy expresses the fact that the state structures, rather than serving society, achieve power over it.

Alongside this view of the state epitomised in the bureaucracy, we have the quite opposite view of it as the mere *instrument* or *servant* of civil society, reflecting, even in its most essentially *political* heart, the social conditions which it is supposed to rule:

Independent private property, or actual private property is then not only the support of the constitution but the constitution itself. And isn't the support of the constitution nothing other than the constitution of constitutions, the primary, the actual constitution? . . .

What then is the power of the political state over private property? Private property's own power, its essence brought to existence. What remains to the political sphere in opposition to this essence? The illusion that it determines when it is rather determined. (*CHPR*, pp. 107–8, 100)

Here we have not only the direct antithesis of the 'dominant' state but also a striking hint, for this early stage in his development, of Marx's 'economically-based' theory of politics. Despite its own delusions of grandeur, we are told, this servile state is merely the

roundabout device through which private property regulates its own affairs.

We may now turn to consider some other early works subsequent to the *Critique*. Much has been made of the accuracy of Marx's alleged attribution to Hegel of the remark that history repeats itself, first as tragedy and then as farce. It should be noted that Marx attributes to Hegel only the claim that history repeats itself, and then says: 'He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce' (*EBLB*, p. 146). Marx is here quoting an authority weightier even than Hegel: namely himself! In a letter to Ruge in March 1843, he says of Frederick William IV of Prussia that 'The comedy of despotism in which we are being forced to act is as dangerous for him as tragedy was once for the Stuarts and the Bourbons' (*EW*, p. 200). In an article of the following year he says that it is good for the other nations 'to see the *ancien régime*, which in their countries has experienced its *tragedy*, play its *comic* role as a German phantom' (*CCHPRI*, p. 247).

The 'tragedy' for Marx, of course, was that Frederick William's 'comedy' was to have a far longer run than he expected, as we shall see in chapters 3 and 7 below. For the moment, what interests us is that these passages have more than a literary significance. They show the falsity of a tempting misconception about Marx's reaction to Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte's coup d'état in France in 1851. The misconception is that Marx, having held exclusively to the 'servile state' view, was rudely awakened by Bonaparte's coming to power, and for the first time forced to acknowledge that the modern state's role could not naively be reduced to that of serving the economically dominant class. The truth is that Marx's reflections on the 1851 coup are a return, not only in imagery but also in topic, to earlier phases of this thought. Far from seeing the Jacobins of the First French Revolution as tragic figures for the first time in 1851, in response to Bonaparte's coup, he has already analysed their tragedy in 1844–6. When he gives the name 'Bonapartism' to the new French regime he has already, in 1844, specified the nature and significance of the 'Bonapartism' of the first Napoleon.

∴ In his 'Draft Plan for a Work on the Modern State' of 1845 (never, characteristically, carried out), Marx refers to the 'self-conceit' of the modern state (*DP*, p. 669) [*Selbstüberhebung*

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(*MEW* III, p. 537)]. By this term Marx indicates the tendency for the state to believe that it really is at the centre of things, the sun around which society revolves. He calls this a 'confusion' [*Verwechslung*] with the ancient state of Greece or Rome. He had already sketched this theme before, in his contribution to *The Holy Family*, written with Engels in September–November 1844. There he reflected on the irony that men like Robespierre and Saint-Just, in reality inaugurating a new society freed from state control, tried nevertheless 'to model the political head of the society after the fashion of the ancients' (*HF*, p. 164; see also *JQ*, p. 17).

Their pretension is to make the state, which must be the means, the servant of society, into an end in itself. Marx reflects that it is not surprising that 'the relationship is set upon its head in the minds of the political liberators' (*JQ*, pp. 231–2), if we grasp that what happens in events like the French Revolution is that political life, previously stifled and restricted, the preserve of the clique of rulers, at last emerges into its own space. 'It unleashed the political spirit which had, as it were, been dissolved, dissected and dispersed in the various cul-de-sacs of feudal society' (p. 233). The political liberators were deceived, they 'got the relation inverted', because they saw only this, the *liberating* aspect of the political revolution.

Robespierre, Saint-Just and their party fell because they confused the ancient, realistic and democratic republic based on *real* slavery with the modern spiritualist democratic representative state which is based on emancipated slavery, on bourgeois society. What a terrible irony it is to have to recognise and sanction in the Rights of Man modern bourgeois society, the society of industry, of universal competition, of private interest freely following its aims, of anarchy, of the self-alienated natural and spiritual individuality, and yet subsequently to annul the manifestations of the life of that society. . . . [The Rights of Man] proclaimed the right of a man who cannot be the man of the ancient republic any more than his *economic* and *industrial* relations are those of the ancient times. (*HF*, pp. 164–5; translation slightly amended from *MEW* II, p. 129)

'The Jewish Question' gives us what we might call the structural basis of the tragedy of the Jacobins. The very state which they tried to erect into a real community in fact *presupposes* its own divorce and abstraction from social reality; 'far from abolishing these *factual* distinctions, the state presupposes them in order to exist, it only experiences itself as *political state* and asserts its

universality in opposition to these elements' (*JQ*, p. 219). This is why 'the political drama necessarily ends up with the restoration of religion, private property and all the elements of civil society, just as war ends with peace' (p. 222).

As well as Frederick William IV and the Jacobins, Marx also pays attention to a third case of a state dominating, or attempting to dominate, civil society. This is the state of Napoleon I:

Napoleon was the last act in revolutionary terror's struggle against bourgeois society, which had been equally claimed by the revolution, and against its polity. Granted, Napoleon already discerned the essence of the modern state: he understood that it is based on the unhampered development of bourgeois society, on the free movement of private interest etc. He decided to recognise and protect that basis. He was no terrorist with his head in the clouds. Yet at the same time he still regarded the state as an end in itself, and civil life as a treasurer and as his subordinate which must have no will of its own. He perfected the Terror by substituting permanent war for permanent revolution. He fed the ego of French nationalism to complete satiety but demanded the sacrifice of bourgeois business, delights, wealth etc. as often as it was expedient to the political aim of conquest. If he despotically oppressed the liberalism of bourgeois society – the political idealism of its daily practice – he showed no more pity for its essential material interests, trade and industry, whenever they conflicted with his political interests. (*HF*, pp. 166–7; see also *IISH*, B17, p. 11)

Marx's attitude to these topics is very important to the question whether, at least at this stage in his career, he was a Jacobin. This has been argued most strongly and notably by Lichtheim (Lichtheim 1961, pp. 55 and 87ff; see also Levine, ch. 4). I believe that this argument is false and importantly so. Of course Marx is a Jacobin if by that name we mean one who is committed to the values of liberty, fraternity and equality proclaimed by the French Revolution, one who wishes to realise them in a refractory civil society. But the crucial distinction between the Jacobins and Marx is his realisation, and their inability or refusal to grasp, that within the structure of the bourgeois world this project is tragically impossible. Even in the 1843 *Critique* he says that modern political life is 'the scholasticism of popular life', an estrangement whose fullest expression is monarchy. He sees the republic as 'the negation of this estrangement *within its own sphere*' (*CHPR*, p. 32; emphasis added). This conveys his grasp that no overcoming of political estrangement can be complete while there are still two distinct spheres, one 'social' and the other 'political'. Even at this