
Marx's Concept of Democracy

MAXIMILIEN RUBEL

Marx's social criticism, the very substance of his work, has two main targets: money and the state. Significantly enough the beginning of his critical activity antedated his joining the workers' movement. He came to communism simply by conceiving democracy as the springboard to freedom founded upon profoundly modified social relations, and through his theoretical demonstration that institutions such as money and the state were incompatible with human liberty. These two tasks required a break with Hegelian philosophy, and Marx proclaimed the necessity for such a break in two essays, written at two different moments several months apart, but published together in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* in January, 1844: the "Introduction to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*" and "The Jewish Question." Four years before the *Communist Manifesto*, they represent, in a sense, two variations in philosophical style upon the same theme.

Between the two, Marx began the study of important aspects of political economy and made his first attempts at a radical critique of theories of capital. Unpublished until 1932, these works elucidate the direction of his thought in crucial ways. Yet while an enormous literature has grown up around the Paris manuscripts of 1844, the so-called *Economical and Philosophical Manuscripts*, there exists no in-depth analysis of the important work Marx accomplished during the summer of 1843, in his Kreuznach retreat. Published for the first time in 1927, this voluminous, unfinished manuscript marks his definitive break with the political philosophy of Hegel. It also went further, for even as Marx violently denounced the inconsistency and deceit of certain Hegelian theses on the state and monarchy, property and bureaucracy, he formulated a conception of democracy much more radical than that contained in his articles against the Prussian censorship, published a few months earlier in the *Rheinische Zeitung*.

According to a widely held opinion, Marx abandoned the idealism and liberalism of his polemical essays when he became a communist. But unless his adherence to communism is written off as the act of a visionary, it cannot be defined that it was the logical, natural result of the same idealism and liberalism. The key to his communism is as much to be found in the anti-Hegelian Kreuznach manuscript as in the two Paris essays. The same conviction, acquired during his university years in Berlin and Bonn (1840-1842) and through his philosophical and historical studies, animates all three of them, the conviction, henceforth never relin-

quished by the scholar and the man of action, that democracy can only exist and flourish in a society in which freely associated men no longer alienate their personalities in economic and political mediations.

To elucidate the intellectual step that led Marx from democracy to anarcho-communism, we will limit ourselves to a brief glance at some of his reading. In one of his Berlin notebooks, there are no less than 160 extracts from Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. The passages deal with miracles, faith, philosophy, reason, theology, freedom of teaching, prophecy, the foundations of the republic, etc. All of them are transcribed without the slightest commentary, despite the title on the cover: "Spinoza: Political and Theological Treatise, by Karl Heinrich Marx, Berlin 1841."

How should this title be understood? Marx seems to mean that he had taken from Spinoza the necessary elements for the construction of his own vision of the world and human relations, truth being the work of all humanity and not of an isolated individual; in this sense he was following Goethe, himself a disciple of Spinoza. Furthermore, he copied (or had copied) some sixty extracts from Spinoza's letters. Spinoza's thought confirmed him in his determination to give the signal in Germany for the struggle for democracy. For Spinoza, the democratic republic and human freedom are the elements of a rational ethics, of a conception of man and human happiness in nature and society in which the individual can attain freedom through his consciousness, knowledge, and love. It was through Spinoza, not Hegel, that Marx learned to reconcile necessity and freedom. And when he tackled Hegelian mystification, and especially the metaphysics of the state—according to Hegel, the supreme goal of Reason—it was his reading of Spinoza that permitted him to attack the real bases of political authority: property and bureaucracy.

Further on, we shall see what motives led Marx (after he had freed himself from the spell of the Hegelian metaphysics of the state) to broaden Spinoza's concept of democracy, extrapolating its social implications and pushing them to the point where Spinoza's democracy slides into communism. Yet although Marx unconditionally rejected Hegel's political philosophy, when he began to write *Capital* he once again had recourse to the Hegelian dialectic: euphemistically, perhaps ironically, he spoke of a "flirtation." Fascinated by Hegel during his student years, he never, as far as his philosophy of history was concerned, completely detached himself. The ensuing ambiguity has been the source of the misunderstanding known as "historical materialism."

In Spinoza Marx found what he had sought in vain in Hegel and in Rousseau's *Social Contract*: the possibility for the individual to reconcile social existence and natural right. In the Declaration of the Rights of Man, this reconciliation existed only as a juridical fiction. Spinoza's *Treatise*, however, leaves no room for misunderstanding: "A democracy is born of the union of men in organized society, enjoying sovereign right over everything in their power." Democracy, "of all

forms of government the most natural, and the most consonant with individual liberty," is consequently also the least imperfect, for no one abandons his natural right in an absolute fashion. Each man "only hands it over to the majority of a society, whereof he is a unit. Thus all men remain, as they were in the state of nature, equals."¹

Spinoza's influence on Marx's early political thought is evident in the following passage, which also contains an echo of Feuerbach's attack on Hegel:

Democracy is the resolved mystery of all constitutions. Here the constitution not only in itself, according to essence, but according to existence and actuality is returned to its real ground, actual man, the actual people, and established as its own work. The constitution appears as what it is, the free product of men.²

Continuing his argument, Marx attacks Hegel, for whom man is an emanation of the all-powerful state. In opposition, he adduces democracy, which emanates from man and creates the state as an object, an instrument of man. Speaking of political constitutions, he paraphrases Feuerbach's critique of religion:

Just as it is not religion that creates man but man who creates religion, so it is not the constitution that creates the people but the people which creates the constitution. In a certain respect democracy is to all other forms of the state what Christianity is to all other religions. Christianity is the religion *par excellence*, the essence of religion, deified man under the form of a particular religion. In the same way democracy is the essence of every political constitution, socialized man under the form of a particular constitution of the state. . . . Man does not exist because of the law but rather the law exists for the good of man. Democracy is *human existence*, while in the other political forms man has only *legal existence*. That is the fundamental difference of democracy.³

Marx here is introducing new notions within the traditional conceptual framework of democracy, notions that dissolve it in the process. It was only later that he based his argument on empirical foundations and joined the concept of

¹ Benedict Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, trans. R.H.M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951), p. 207.

² *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right"*, ed. Joseph O'Malley, trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 29-30.

³ *Ibid.*, P. 30.

democracy to another concept deduced from it: the dictatorship of the proletariat. In both cases, it is a question of one and the same thing: the "people's self-determination."⁴ Yet it was only during his Kreuznach retreat, after quitting the editorship of the *Rheinische Zeitung* that Marx, putting his forced inactivity to use, studied the revolutionary history of France, England, and America in depth. It was his studies in Kreuznach that convinced him beyond the shadow of a doubt that the normal, inevitable destiny of a democratic republic was communism, or "true democracy," in which "the *political state disappears*."⁵

Another notebook from 1843 contains many quotations from the observations of a Scot who visited the United States in 1830-31, and arrived at much more radical conclusions about its future than Tocqueville. Thomas Hamilton's *Men and Manners in America* first appeared in 1833, two years before *Democracy in America*.⁶ Marx read it in 1843 in German translation and copied some fifty passages bearing upon important American problems: federalism and universal suffrage, the legal and real position of citizens, conflicts of interest between North and South, the constitutions of the New England states, etc. What stimulated his interest was the way Hamilton understood or perceived the social tendencies within American democracy. With as much liberal generosity as aristocratic inclination, the author describes the Republican and Federalist parties, the "silent revolution" that began with Jefferson, the rise of "numbers" versus men of property and knowledge. Marx could not have remained indifferent to the facts that Hamilton reported, or to his perception of precisely that which Tocqueville had been unable to sense: the revolutionary potential of American society.

Tocqueville considered America, with its quasi-complete equality of conditions, the very model of democracy. While fearing democracy's tendency toward majority tyranny, he was fundamentally optimistic about the social and economic future of democratic regimes. Hamilton, on the other hand, observing certain characteristics of American economic life, pointed out a tendency that Marx came to consider decisive for the future of America: class struggle. Following his discussions with "enlightened Americans" on the Constitution of the United States, he observed that there was no will "to counterpoise . . . the rashness of democracy by the caution and wisdom of an aristocracy of intelligence and wisdom." He then

4 Ibid., P. 31.

5 Ibid.

6 *Men and Manners in America* quickly went through two English editions, three German editions, and two French translations. Hamilton was already well-known as the author of an interesting novel, *Cyril Thornton* (1827).

gave an example of what he called "the progress and tendency of opinion among the people of New York":

In that city a separation is rapidly taking place between the different orders of society. The operative class have already formed themselves into a society, under the name of "The Workies," in direct opposition to those who, more favoured by nature or fortune, enjoy the luxuries of life without the necessity of manual labor. These people make no secret of their demands, which to do them justice are few and emphatic. . . . Their first postulate is "Equal and Universal Education." It is false, they say, to maintain that there is at present no privileged order, no practical aristocracy, in a country where distinctions of education are permitted. . . . There does exist. . . —they argue—an aristocracy of the most odious kind—an aristocracy of knowledge, education, and refinement, which is inconsistent with the true democratic principle of absolute equality. They pledge themselves, therefore, to exert every effort, mental and physical, for the abolition of this flagrant injustice. They proclaim it to the world as a nuisance which must be abated, before the freedom of an American be more than a mere empty boast. They solemnly declare that they will not rest satisfied til every citizen in the United States shall receive the same degree of education, and start in fair competition for the honors and offices of the state. As it is of course impossible—and these men know it to be so—to educate the laboring class to the standard of the richer, it is their professed object to reduce the latter to the same mental condition with the former.

But those who limit their views to the mental degradation of their country, are in fact the Moderates of the party. There are others who go still farther, and boldly advocate the introduction of an Agrarian Law, and a periodical division of property. These unquestionably constitute the Extreme Gauche of the Worky parliament, but still they only follow out the principles of their less violent neighbors, and eloquently dilate on the justice and propriety of every individual being equally supplied with food and clothing; on the monstrous iniquity of one man riding in his carriage while another walks on foot, and, after his drive, discussing a bottle of champagne while many of his neighbors are shamefully compelled to be content with the pure element. Only equalize property, they say, and neither would drink champagne or water, but both would have brandy, a consummation worthy of centuries of struggle to attain.'''

Examining the labor policy of the American government in the light of the enormous internal resources of the United States, Thomas Hamilton firmly asserted that "the Americans are destined to become a great manufacturing nation":

Huge manufacturing cities will spring up in various quarters of the Union, the population will congregate in masses, and all the vices incident to such a condition of society will attain speedy maturity. Millions of men will depend for subsistence on the demand for a particular manufacture and yet this demand will of necessity be liable to perpetual fluctuation. When the pendulum vibrates in one direction, there will be an influx of wealth and prosperity, when it vibrates in the other, misery, discontent, and turbulence will spread through the land. A change of fashion, a war, the glut of a foreign market, a thousand unforeseen and inevitable accidents are liable to produce this, and deprive multitudes of bread, who but a month before were enjoying all the comforts of life.

And Hamilton concluded his vision with a prediction in the purest Marxian style:

Let it be remembered that in the suffering class will be practically deposited the whole political power of the state; that there can be no military force to maintain civil order, and protect property; and to what quarter, I should be glad to know, is the rich man to look for security, either of person or fortune?

None of Hamilton's "eminent" interlocutors denied the inevitability of such a period of disorder. But most often they replied that it would not occur in the foreseeable future, and that for the moment there was little to worry about. Hamilton observed:

I cannot help believing, however, that the period of trial is somewhat less distant than such reasoners comfort themselves by imagining; but if the question be conceded that democracy necessarily leads to anarchy and spoliation, it does not seem that the mere length of the road to be travelled is a point of much importance. This of course would vary according to the peculiar circumstances of every country in which the experiment might be tried. In England, the journey would be performed with railway velocity. In the United States, with the great advantages they possess, it may continue a generation or so longer, but the termination is the same. The doubt regards time, not destination.⁸

⁸ Ibid., p. 66.

For Tocqueville, social equality was the work of divine Providence. In a general, more or less Hegelian fashion, he described its progress as an "irresistible revolution" and thought that any attempt to limit democracy would be a violation of divine law. He reminded Christian nations that their first duty was democratic education, and called for "a new political science, indispensable to the new world." It would be tempting to say that Marx, the spiritual heir of Tocqueville and Hamilton, replaced the belief in divine Providence by the dialectic of historical necessity in his new social science. Our purpose here, however, is not to stir up the debate over Marx's "historicism" once again. What we are trying to demonstrate is the continuity in Marx's political evolution between his democratic convictions and his adherence to communism; between his first writings in social criticism in which communism takes the form of a moral denunciation of the cult of money (e.g., "The Jewish Question"), and *Capital*, in which the same denunciation is contained within the scientific schema of the capitalist system of production. As a communist, Marx simply wrote "communism" where Hamilton had written "anarchy" or "spoliation." And as an economist, he provided the Scot's warnings with a theoretical framework in the famous chapter of *Capital* on "The Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation."

This continuity in Marx's development is confirmed by his own later attitude toward his early writings. As the head of the Communist League in 1850, seven years after his adherence to communism, he authorized Hermann Becker to publish a selection of his writings in several volumes. The first volume, published in Cologne in 1851, included the liberal and democratic articles of the *Anekdoten* and the *Rheinische Zeitung*. Thus Marx was far from judging them obsolete and still considered the struggle for democratic liberties a necessity. He remained convinced of what he had asserted in the 1844 manuscripts, the first "draft" of *Capital*, and believed that his early ideas on democracy already contained the germ of his subsequent humanism, of which communism was but one particular aspect.

Two distinct concepts in Marx, democracy and communism, designate two stages in a single movement, political and social revolution. The first stage, the "conquest of democracy" by the working class, leads to the "dictatorship of the proletariat." The second, the abolition of social classes and political power, gives birth to human society. The distinction is essential to the understanding of Marx's politics. Leaving aside the manifold ramifications of his political sociology, let us simply recall that he considered social development subject to historical laws, and social revolutions dependent upon the material and moral conditions created by the growth of productive forces: technical progress on the one hand, and the maturity of human consciousness on the other. But whatever the epistemological ambiguities of Marx's thesis that human consciousness is patterned on social existence, its *ethical* character, rooted in the necessity of the proletariat's coming to consciousness, must be underlined.

The notion of a revolution in two distinct phases corresponds to the dual

character of Marx's thought and political activity. His political action, as many examples demonstrate, was often both exoteric and esoteric. Thus, in 1847, even as he joined the Communist League, he accepted the vice-presidency of the Brussels Democratic Association. In January 1848 he both wrote the *Communist Manifesto* and gave a speech on free trade that was published by the Democratic Association. During the revolution he founded and published the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* in Cologne and broke with the far left of the League when it denounced his "opportunism." In 1847, he wrote: "The domination of the bourgeoisie furnishes the proletariat not only with entirely new weapons for the fight *against* the bourgeoisie, but with a position completely different from that officially found in the party."⁹ Eighteen years later, in a public declaration, Marx and Engels reaffirmed their 1847 position and denounced the Lassallians for seeking the alliance of the proletariat and the royal Prussian government against the liberal bourgeoisie. "We still subscribe," they asserted, "to every word of our statement made at that time."¹⁰

Thus during every period of Marx's political career he fought tirelessly for democratic liberties: in the early 1850's with the Chartists, throughout the Second Empire with hundreds of antibonapartist articles, by his long struggle against Czarism and its instrument the Prussian state, and during the Civil War with his support of the North against the South and free labor versus slavery. In 1865, in the name of the Council of the First International, he sent an address to Abraham Lincoln recalling that a century earlier, the idea of "one great democratic republic" and the first Declaration of the Rights of Man had given the first signal for the European revolution of the eighteenth century, and thus making it clear to the working classes that "the slaveholders' rebellion was to sound the tocsin for a general holy crusade of property against labor." In 1871, Marx magnified the Paris Commune as "the true representative of all the healthy elements in French society, and therefore the truly national government," as well as "the working men's government," "the bold champion of the emancipation of labor," the antithesis of bonapartism and imperialism, the "*self-government* of the producers." As a government elected by universal suffrage, responsible and subject to dismissal at any moment, it was "the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labour."¹¹

As a final example, it will be remembered that when Marx managed to get Bakunin excluded from the International, it was because he was convinced that the

9 "La critique moralisante et la morale criticisante," in *Marx-Engels Werke* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1956-64) IV: 193.

10 Letter to the editorial board of the *Social-Demokrat*, February 26, 1865, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), p. 176.

11 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Writings on the Paris Commune*, ed. Hal Draper (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 76.

anarchist wanted to transform it into a conspiratorial society with himself as the absolute master. Bakunin's secret society was "purely and simply the reconstitution of all the elements of the authoritarian state under the name of *revolutionary communes*. . . . The executive body. . . is a revolutionary staff office, numerically few. . . . The unity of thought and action mean nothing other than orthodoxy and blind obedience. *Perinde ac cadaver*. We are '*en pleine compagnie de Jésus*'."¹²

Marx was not one to sing his own praises as a theorist. Yet without pretending that he had discovered the existence of either social classes or their struggle in modern society, he did not insist upon the originality of his demonstration that, 1) the existence of classes is a function of specific stages in economic development; 2) class struggle "necessarily" leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat — a concept entailing the negation of the State and the government; 3) this dictatorship leads to the disappearance of classes in a regenerated society.

Although Marx never said so explicitly, it can be presumed that he attributed scientific validity to these three theses, and that in his eyes the demonstration had the value of an empirically verifiable proof. It would be easy to cite the published and unpublished writings before 1852 in which Marx did indeed try to "prove" the three theses enunciated in his letter to Weydemeyer. With judicious balance, he used two methods simultaneously: on the one hand analysis, precise description, and information, and on the other deduction, synthesis, and ethical *Sinngebung*.¹³

Thus the conquest of democracy, a joint victory of the bourgeoisie and proletariat in their common struggle against the feudal state, held a large place in Marx's political theory. To be sure, it was merely the first stage in a struggle that would continue within capitalist society once it was freed from the vestiges of its feudal past, until the "conquest of democracy" by the poorest and most numerous class had been achieved. Violent or legal (Marx by no means discounted the potential efficacy of universal suffrage as a means to this end), this conquest certainly preserved the dictatorial character of class action. At the same time, however, and for the first time in the history of mankind, this dictatorship would be tantamount to democracy in the true sense of the word: the destruction of the state and the rule of the people, or to be precise, of the immense majority over the hitherto dominant, possessing minorities. The phase of total emancipation would then begin, and the utopia realized: classless society. Marx proclaimed it as early as 1847, in his polemic against Proudhon:

¹² "L'Alliance de la démocratie socialiste et l'association internationale de travailleurs" (1872).

¹³ As Karl Popper puts it: "Although history has no meaning, we can give it a meaning." *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 278.

The working class in the course of its development, will substitute for the old civil society an association which will exclude classes and their antagonism, and there will be no more political power properly so-called, since political power is precisely the official expression of antagonism in civil society.¹⁴

Marx's concept of democracy can only be fully understood as an integral part of his conception of social development and in the context of his historical time. Both as a theoretician and man of action, he participated in the struggle of the working and middle classes for political rights and national emancipation from absolutist and reactionary regimes. Democracy and national liberation were immediate goals, preliminary to the establishment of a classless society. Bourgeois democracy was merely the starting point for the autonomous movement of the workers. The legal means to the conquest of political power, universal suffrage represented a necessary stage in the struggle for social emancipation.

The ideas of socialism and communism took shape in Marx's thought within the notion of total democracy. Marx first encountered this notion in Spinoza and used it to criticize Hegel's political philosophy, rejecting his conceptions of bureaucracy, princely power, and constitutional monarchy. Far from breaking with his first conception of democracy when he became a communist, Marx sublimated it. In communism as he understood it, democracy was not only maintained, but acquired even greater significance.

This humanist ethic was the first positive result of his historical and philosophical studies. Later, Marx tried to provide it with a scientific basis, and abandoned philosophical speculation in favor of social theory and political action. And it was only after publishing his first declaration as a communist that he began to study the great bourgeois economists. His impassioned critique was based upon the earlier criteria that permitted him to denounce the "infamy" of political economy.

For Marx, democracy meant government of the people by the people, and it would only acquire its true meaning in a classless society freed from all state power and political mediation. As a provisional objective, it was to be achieved through the common struggle of the bourgeoisie and proletariat, with each class assuming a specific revolutionary role in the liquidation of the feudal absolutist past. This goal

14 *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), p. 174. The absence of a theory of proletarian power in Marx makes the anarchist criticism plausible, but it must not be forgotten that the historical illustration that Marx provides in his *Address on the 1871 Commune* represents the outline of just such a theory. Whatever Lenin's position in *State and Revolution* (versus Kautsky), his political praxis makes him the inheritor of enlightened despotism and its program, aptly described by Charles Seignobos as "everything for the people, nothing by the people." Marx's antagonism toward enlightened despotism, and consequently "Leninism," is clear as early as his first skirmish with Hegel, even before he joined the workers' movement.

once attained, the proletariat was summoned to emancipate itself by its own means. Since its emancipation was tantamount to that of all humanity, democracy finally revealed its renovating thrust. The proletariat, the principal fighter, is pushed to its "historical" action by the inhuman conditions of its existence. No longer just a historical fact, the class struggle becomes an ethical postulate: the modern proletariat must organize itself as a class conscious of its revolutionary "mission." Thus Engels could write: "For the ultimate triumph of the ideas set forth in the *Manifesto* Marx relied solely and exclusively upon the intellectual development of the working class as it necessarily had to ensue from united action and discussion."¹⁵

What Marx called the conquest of democracy, i.e., the conquest of political power, was guaranteed by the normal functioning of democratic institutions, theoretically excluding all violence in the struggle for social equality. Far from a natural law in human history, violence emerges from the class conflict that characterizes those societies in which productive forces have become forces of destruction and social alienation. Historically, democracy has functioned as a juridical fiction concealing the dictatorship of the exploiting classes over the exploited classes, reflecting a divorce between fundamental rights and material oppression. The historical and moral antithesis of this phenomenon would come to be with real majority government, the normal outcome of social conflict when universal suffrage changed from "the instrument of fraud . . . into an instrument of emancipation."¹⁶ Democracy gave producers—organized in parties and unions—the legal means of winning power and working progressively "for the transformation of all society into an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."¹⁷

Leaving aside the ambiguities of Marx's teaching, it can be said that its lasting value or message is to be found in his social criticism and revolutionary humanism. Unless it is merely a fiction, "Marxism" is only conceivable as a rejection of contemporary political systems, or more exactly as social criticism founded upon the idea or postulate of democracy freed from the hegemony of state and capital. But such a definition is tantamount to a recognition of the uselessness, or even harmfulness of "marxist" as a label for systems founded upon the disappearance of the democratic liberties bequeathed by the bourgeois revolution. In my reading, "marxism" rejoins the ethic common to socialism, anarchism, and communism, and the word itself becomes superfluous, precisely because of its ideological connotations. And vis-à-vis this ethic, no existing society can be considered free and human, for *all* are, in varying degrees, under the yoke of regimes that are the very

¹⁵ Preface to the German edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, in *Birth of the Communist Manifesto*, ed. Dirk J. Struik (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 139.

¹⁶ "Introduction to the Programme of the French Workers' Party," in *The First International and After*, ed. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 377.

¹⁷ *Communist Manifesto*, p. 112.

negation of the freedom and humanity that Marx envisioned when he spoke of democracy.

"Either society will perish," wrote Proudhon in 1840, "or it will do away with property." Today he would say, with Marx: either society will perish, or it will abolish capital and the state.

POSTSCRIPT

This essay was written in 1971 and published in 1972. Its publication in English in 1983, one hundred years after Marx's death, only makes sense as part of the ongoing debate over the phenomena of crisis already observed, almost simultaneously, by nineteenth-century thinkers as different and contradictory as Marx, Jacob Burckhardt, and Nietzsche.

The regression of the democratic spirit is one of them. It is reflected in the tentacular growth, now attaining nightmarish proportions, of the profit economy and state politics. Whereas the essential theses of the Marxian criticism of the capitalist mode of production, liberal and/or state, still seem valid, the predictions that Marx, the anarcho-communist, made about the emancipatory and creative force of democracy, as conquered by the workers' movement, have been thoroughly refuted. This tragic possibility was indeed envisioned by Marx, especially during modern civilization's moments of grave crisis. Thus, following the Crimean War, he perceived "symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors recorded of the latter times of the Roman empire," and characterized the perspective they offered in terms that merit citation in this period of official commemorations:

In our days everything seems pregnant with its contrary. Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labour, we behold starving and overworking it. The new-fangled sources of wealth, by some strange weird spell, are turned into sources of want. The victories of art seem bought by the loss of character. At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy. Even the pure light of science seems unable to shine but on the dark background of ignorance. All our invention and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and in stultifying human life into a material force.

Marx ended this speech, delivered on April 14, 1856 in commemoration of the founding of the Chartist *People's Paper*, with an exhortation to optimism and working-class action: "The English working men are the first born sons of modern industry. They will then, certainly, not be last in aiding the social revolution produced by that industry."

Translated by Barbara Bloom.