



Chris Harman

Full Marx

(July 1987)

From **Socialist Worker Review**, No. 100, July/August 1987.

Transcribed by Christian Høgshjerg.

Marked up by [Einde O'Callaghan](#) for the **Marxists' Internet Archive**.

Many of the works of Marx and Engels have only become accessible in recent years. *Chris Harman* reviews the most exciting publishing project of our time.

UNTIL RECENTLY English speaking revolutionaries who wanted seriously to study the ideas of Marx and Engels faced one immense problem: only a small portion of their voluminous output was available in English.

This was one of the reasons (although not the major one) for the rather limited understanding of Marxism that prevailed among revolutionaries in this country before World War One: at that time among the basic works not translated were Volume Three of **Capital** (first English

translation 1916), **The Class Struggle in France** (1934), and **Critique of the Gotha Programme** (1938). Even **Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy** had to be obtained from a Chicago publisher.

In the 1930's things improved with the cheap Moscow booklets and the two volume **Selected Works**. But the works selected for publication tended to be those which could be reconciled with the very mechanical and narrow interpretation of Marxism established by Kautsky and Plekhanov and adopted by Stalin – so **Anti-Dühring** and **Dialectics of Nature** featured prominently, while **The Holy Family** did not appear until 1956, the **1844 Manuscripts** until 1959 and the **German Ideology** could only be obtained in an edited American edition until the 1960s.

For this reason the renovation of Marxism which started after the Hungarian revolution of 1956 and gathered speed with the upheavals of 1968-9 in part involved a rediscovery of virtually unknown writings by Marx and Engels. Works like Hal Draper's magnificent three volume **Marx's Theory of Revolution** and Rosdolsky's **The Making of Marx's Capital** are invaluable because they reconstruct Marx's arguments using the whole body of his writings.

The source for their studies was mainly the German language edition of the collected works of Marx and Engels – **The Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe** or **MEGA** for short (although Draper also carried through a labour of love hunting out a full set of Marx's articles from the **New York Tribune**). In the last decade these collected works – complete with previously undiscovered writings – have begun to appear in English, and two thirds of the projected 50 volumes have now been published.

The first thing that strikes anyone who opens the **Collected Works** is the prodigious scale of the output of

Marx and Engels.

There is a right wing myth to the effect that Marx was a lazy writer, incapable of pulling himself together to finish **Capital** and living, parasitically, off Engels' generosity. Quite a different picture emerges from the **Collected Works**. It was true that Marx could often not meet publishers' deadlines. But that was for very good reasons.

First the writing of **Capital** was not some simple, routine job. Marx was involved in producing from scratch an account of how capitalist society operated. When he started all he had were, on the one hand, the partial, limited, one sided accounts to be found in the writings of political economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo; on the other hand massive amounts of empirical material to be found in British government reports. To transform these into a coherent explanation of how a whole economic system, and with it the whole of present day society, functioned took him years of the tedious labour of going through the material, of finding the writings of the economists and making notes on them, of working out in his own mind the interconnections between things, and finally of putting it down on paper in a form accessible to activists inside the socialist movement.

Second, Marx could never simply forget about the day to day problems that faced the working class and socialist movements while he did this. It is true that in the early 1850s he and Engels decided that the revolutionary wave of the late 1840s had exhausted itself and that, in the new circumstances, attempts by groups of exiles to build revolutionary parties could only lead to sectarian disasters. But this did not mean they abandoned all involvement in the movement.

In the 1850s they kept contact with those, like Ernest Jones, who were trying to hold together the remnants of

Chartism in Britain. They did what they could to aid agitation against Palmerston and others in the British government who, he claimed, were virtual agents of the Russian “gendarme of Europe” (with Marx writing an anti-Palmerston pamphlet, in volume 15 of the **Collected Works, Revelations of the Diplomatic History of the 18th Century**). They maintained a voluminous correspondence with former comrades from the German movement in Europe and North America.

In the 1860s they exerted themselves even more. Marx had to interrupt his work on **Capital** in 1861 because of one of those incidents that arise in periods of defeat which drive even the most tenacious revolutionaries to near despair. An old time opponent of Marx’s, Vogt, wrote a pamphlet claiming that Marx was a police spy, and the libel was repeated by sections of the liberal and left press right across Europe (and, of all places, in the **Daily Telegraph** in London).

Marx felt that unless he refuted the libel very quickly, he and Engels would find themselves shunned by the whole movement. He was compelled to write letter after letter replying to Vogt’s stories (see Volume 41 of the **Collected Works**) and finally, to write a book in which he proved that Vogt himself was in the pay of the French emperor Louis Bonaparte (a claim which was vindicated when the French archives opened after the emperor’s fall).

Hardly was the Vogt business out of the way than trade unionists in Britain and socialists in France created a new, mass based international organisation, the International Working Men’s Association (generally known as the First International). Marx hastened to contribute his services to this, writing virtually all of its public statements, handling most of its correspondence and ensuring that it did indeed draw together a new generation of activists around the

elements of socialist, class politics. To this task was added in the early 1870s that of campaigning for Irish Fenian prisoners in British jails (see his and Engels' notes on the history of Ireland in Volume 21 of the **Collected Works**) and aiding refugees from the defeated Paris Commune.

If Marx had just carried this work load and written the thousand or so pages of the **Grundrisse**, the 300 pages of **Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy**, and the 2,000 pages of **Capital** it would have been an incredible accomplishment. But on top of this, he had to make a sort of living.

He wrote a column, about twice a week, year after year for the **New York Tribune**. In this he described and commented on events as seen from London, ranging from the course of the Crimean war, through the politics of the different European powers to the background to the opium wars and the Indian mutiny. When he lost this opportunity to earn a few pounds by journalism he turned to writing pieces for the **New American Cyclopaedia**.

Finally Marx and Engels wrote to each other on a virtually daily basis commenting on current events, books they had read, newspaper articles or people they had met.

The **Collected Works** bring together all these different sorts of writings. The resulting volumes are not the sort of thing anyone is going to read through from beginning to end. Some of the journalistic pieces, for instance, are full of fascinating insights: this is true of the **Tribune** articles in Volume 15 of the **Collected Works** on the Indian mutiny, the opium war and the failed Spanish revolution of 1856; others, like many of those dealing with the Crimean War (also published separately as a 600 page book, **The Eastern Question**), deal in detail with episodes of hardly any interest at all today.

The real value of the **Works** lies in the way you suddenly come across, in the most unexpected places, passages that throw a whole new light on Marx's ideas, often in such a way as to add to your understanding of the world more than 100 years after he wrote.

Take for instance one of the most recent of the volumes to appear, Volume 22. It mainly deals with the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and the Paris Commune of 1871.

It begins with 250 pages by Engels which I, for one, had never heard of before. They are made up of articles he wrote virtually every day during the course of the campaign for the **Pall Mall Gazette**. When I started to read them, I expected to find a somewhat turgid account of military tactics. What I found was a remarkable use of the Marxist method of analysis, completely different from the mechanical Marxism which dominated after Marx and Engels' deaths.

Engels shows how the starting point for an understanding of the war has to be crudely material factors – the arms industries on both sides, the number of able bodied men at their disposal, the location of railways for moving men and supplies. But he does not stop with these factors. He shows how the way in which capitalism has developed in France and Germany produces differing states and differing groupings within the ruling class, in particular producing in France a layer of corrupt generals and politicians who are led by a desire for personal advance, and a fear of the Parisian masses, to make the most outrageous military mistakes.

Finally, he shows that, although the individual personalities of the key figures on both sides grow up out of the particular material and social sediment, this does not stop them playing a role when it comes to deciding the way the different armies respond at different points in time, and therefore in determining the actual progress of the war.

The latter half of the volume is dominated by Marx's writings – the two, relatively brief, *Addresses of the International Working Man's Association on the Franco Prussian War*, then the *Address on the Paris Commune*, entitled **The Civil War in France**, and finally, the two preparatory drafts Marx wrote for this work.

Marx, unlike many would be disciples, never had any compunction about changing his attitude when events proved him wrong. The aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war led to one of the most important such changes.

At the beginning of the Franco-Prussian War, Marx and Engels saw it as an offensive war by the French emperor against Prussia and so, “On the German side as a war of defence”. But this did not mean that they concluded that German socialists should throw themselves into the Prussian war effort.

Rather, Marx asked,

“Who enabled Louis Bonaparte to wage war ... It was Bismarck [the Prussian leader] who conspired with the very same Louis Bonaparte for the purpose of crushing popular opposition at home ... If the German working class allow the present war to lose its strictly defensive character and to degenerate into a war against the French people, victory or defeat will alike prove disastrous ...”

The war did, of course, lose its “strictly defensive character”. The French army was defeated at the Battle of Sedan, Louis Napoleon abdicated and a group of middle class politicians formed a republican government in Paris while the German army moved to lay siege to the French capital.

Now Marx saw that the main task of revolutionaries was to defend the French republic against its enemies – including Bismarck, who he said was intent on restoring the

French emperor to the throne. But this did not mean that Marx had any faith in the republican government. The *Second Address*, of September 1870 argued:

“Some of their first acts go far to show they have inherited from the Empire not only ruins, but also its dread of the working class... Is the Republic, by some of its middle class managers, not intended to serve as a mere stop gap and bridge over to an Orleanist [i.e. monarchist – *CH*] restoration.”

Marx did not conceive of the working class as having any choice in this situation but to put pressure on the middle class republican government:

“The French working class ... moves under circumstances of extreme difficulty. Any attempt at upsetting the new government in the present crisis, when the enemy is almost at the doors of Paris, would be desperate folly. The French workmen must perform their duties as citizens; but at the same time they must not let themselves be deluded by the souvenirs [i.e. memories – *CH*] of 1792 ... Let them calmly and resolutely improve the opportunities of republican liberty, for the work of their own class organisation ...”

In March the republican government capitulated to the Prussians and tried to disarm the Parisian masses. They responded by seizing power and proclaiming the Commune. The republican government fled the capital and proceeded to wage civil war against it from Versailles.

This was not at all what Marx had expected to happen. It was one of those sudden upturns in working class struggle that no one can predict. But what mattered to him now was not to stick by every word he had written six months before, but to defend the Parisian workers and to analyse the significance of their actions. This Marx did in **The Civil War in France**.

The final, published draft of the work is one of the greatest pamphlets ever written. Its 44 pages do not merely defend the Commune against its detractors and expose the middle class republicans in Versailles as hypocrites and frauds.

It also goes on to show the world historical significance of the Commune by contrasting the new sort of political organism it had brought into being with the old bourgeois state. It is this which made the pamphlet so important for Lenin in 1917 when it came to working out the tasks of the Russian working class. It is what makes it vital today for anyone who wants to understand both Marx's socialism and the modern world.

Marx's central argument is that under capitalist society there is an ever greater tendency for the state to rise above society:

“The centralised state power, its ubiquitous organs of standing army – police, bureaucracy, clergy and judicature – organs wrought after the plan of a systematic and hierarchic division of labour – originates from the days of absolute monarchy, servicing nascent middle class society as a mighty weapon in its struggles against feudalism. Still, its development remained clogged by all manner of medieval rubbish ... The gigantic broom of the French revolution of the eighteenth century swept away all these relics of bygone times, thus clearing simultaneously the social soil of its last hindrances to the superstructure of the modern state ...

“During the subsequent regimes the government ... became not only a hotbed of huge national debts and crushing taxes with its irresistible allurements of place, pelf [bribery] and patronage, it became not only the bone of contention between the rival factions and adventurers of the ruling classes; but its political character changed simultaneously with the economic changes of society. At the same pace at which the progress of modern industry developed, widened, intensified the class antagon-

ism between capital and labour, the state power assumed more and more the character of the national power of capital over labour, of a public force organised for social enslavement, of an engine of class despotism.

“After every revolution marking a progressive phase in the class struggle, the purely repressive character of the state power stands in broader and broader relief.”

Marx’s conclusion – which amazingly most Marxists forgot about in the 30 years after his death and which Lenin had to rediscover in 1917 – was that: “The working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes.”

The Commune showed the alternative. Marx stressed that its members were elected directly by workers and recallable by them. So were the police, the judges and “the officials of all other branches of the administration”. “From the members of the Commune downwards, the public service had to be done at workman’s wages ...” The standing army was replaced by “the armed people”. This Marx contrasted with the situation in which the mass of people were only allowed to decide “once in three or six years which member of the ruling class was to misrepresent the people in parliament ...”

The “true secret” of the Commune was that “it was essentially a working class government, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour.”

If the final, published draft of **The Civil War in France** is such a brilliantly written, clear and incisive work, why

bother with the two earlier drafts? These were, after all, simply half finished products, which Marx decided to cut back (the first draft was twice as long as the finished pamphlet) and re-ordered, changing emphases and discarding points he did not regard as central.

But in cutting back, Marx also removed certain things which he clearly believed, and which are of continuing interest today. Some of these are quite minor points, as when in the first draft he shifted his assessment of the attitude of workers to the republic to such a point as to say the Commune should have been proclaimed much earlier:

“The victorious establishment of the Commune in the beginning of November 1870 (then already initiated in the great cities of the country and sure to be imitated all over France) would have taken the defence out of the hands of traitors ... it would have altogether changed the character of the war. It would have become the war of republican France, hoisting the flag of the social revolution of the nineteenth century against Prussia, the banner bearer of conquest and counter revolution ... It would have electrified the producing masses in the old and the new world.”

More important is that the earlier drafts amplify what Marx has to say about the state, portraying it as a “state monster” which grows up with the growth of capitalism:

“The complicated state machinery, which with its ubiquitous and complicated military, bureaucratic, clerical and judiciary organs, encoils the living society like a boa constrictor, was first forged in the days of absolute monarchy as a weapon of modern society in its struggle of emancipation from feudalism ... The first French revolution ... was forced to develop what absolute monarchy had commenced, the centralisation and organisation of the state power, and to expand the circumference and the attributes of state power, the number of its tools, its independence and its supernaturalist sway of real

society which in fact took the place of the medieval supernaturalist heaven with its saints. Every minor social interest engendered by the relations of social groups was separated from society itself, fixed and made independent of it and oppose to it in the form of state interest, administered by state priests with exactly determined hierarchical functions.”

In the decades after the revolution,

“This parasitical (excrement upon) civil society grew to its full development.

“All revolutions ... only perfected the state machinery instead of throwing off this deadly incubus ...

“All reactions and all revolutions had only served to transfer that organised power – that organised force of the slavery of labour – from one hand to the other, from one fraction of the ruling class to the other.”

The Commune, therefore, was:

“A revolution not against this or that, legitimate, constitutional, republican or imperialist form of state power. It was a revolution against the state itself, this supernaturalist abortion of society, a resumption by the people for the people of its own social life. It was not a revolution to transfer it from one fraction of the ruling class to the other, but a revolution to break down this horrid machinery of class domination itself. It was not one of those dwarfish struggles between the executive and parliamentary forms of class domination, but a revolt against both these forms ...”

Such passages – and there are several more such – destroy any claim that Marx’s socialism had anything to do with simply using the existing state to regulate the rest of society. They confirm what Lenin argued in 1917, that the existing state has to be smashed; they likewise refute the claim of some self proclaimed

Marxists (including those who have written the preface to Volume 22) that “Marx did not rule out the victorious working class making use of the socially necessary bodies of the bourgeois state on condition that they were democratically reformed.”

Marx also challenges a couple of other common misconceptions in these pages.

It is often claimed as an irrefutable premise of Marxism that the state bureaucracy is merely the tool of some existing social class. I myself have heard or read this hundreds of times as “proof” that the rulers of Russia, China and the other so called “socialist” states cannot be a ruling class.

Marx’s own approach is rather different. He argues that once the state bureaucracy has risen above society it can wrest at least a degree of independence from the classes whose interests it has previously served. So he writes that the Prussian state after the Napoleonic wars and the Russian state after the Crimean war carried through “daring social reform”:

This

“was fettered and limited in its character because it was destroyed from the throne and not conquered by the people. Still there were great social changes, doing away with the worst privileges of the old ruling classes and changing the economical basis of the old society ...”

In France the state becomes “not only a means of the forcible domination of the middle class” but also “a means of adding to the direct economic exploitation a second exploitation of the people by assuring to their families all the rich places in the state household”. The state bureaucracy arises to assure the domination of

the existing ruling class, but in the process becomes a “parasite” which is capable of “humbling under its sway even the interests of the ruling classes ...”

Finally, Marx does not share the view, common among latter day Marxists, that the natural form of the capitalist state is bourgeois democracy. Quite the opposite. He argues that the more the class struggle develops, the more difficult it becomes for the bourgeoisie to retain this form.

For Marx the empire of Louis Napoleon was not some aberration, but “the last degraded and only possible form of ... class rule, as humiliating to those [exploiting – *CH*] classes as to the working class which they kept fettered by it.”

And as he puts it in the second draft:

“However galling to the political pride of the ruling class and its state parasites, it proves itself to be the really adequate regime of the bourgeois ‘order’ ... The state, thus seemingly lifted above civil society, becomes at the same time the hotbed of all the corruptions of that society. Its own utter rottenness, and all the rottenness of the society to be saved by it, was laid bare by the bayonet of Prussia.”

Marx says that the empire was the “unavoidable political form of ‘order’ ... of bourgeois society”. So much so that Prussia itself adopted it.

“The Empire is not, like its predecessors, the legitimate monarchy, the constitutional monarchy and the parliamentary republic, one of the political forms of bourgeois society, it is at the same time its most prostitute, its most complete, and its ultimate political form. It is *the* [emphasis in Marx] state power of modern class rule, at least on the European continent.”

The point is not that Marx was necessarily right. He was wrong, for instance, to think that there was no

future for bourgeois democracy in France itself: Thiers, the butcher of the Commune, did manage to stitch together a republican form of government which remained intact from 1861 to 1940. But what Marx does serve to emphasise is that bourgeois democracy is not the “natural” form of capitalist power.

Most of the points I’ve made in this article are based upon just one of the volumes of the **Collected Works**. Such was the fruitfulness of the method Marx discovered and the acuity of his brain that in virtually any one of the volumes works similarly penetrating observations are to be found.

Sometimes you have to sift through page after page of dross – of articles which he turned out as quickly as possible to pay his food bills or of polemics against long forgotten sectarians – to come across them. Sometimes you have to work hard at your studying as with the very latest volume (Volume 28) which is the new edition of the first half of the **Grundrisse**. But there is a mass of material to add to our understanding of Marx and of the society he analysed – a society which, unfortunately, we still live in.

This does not make the **Collected Works** an easy read for anyone. Few people – especially few people who are engaged in changing the world as well as interpreting it – are going to have the time and energy to read the whole lot from cover to cover. But as a source of what Marx really thought, which you can consult by dipping into from time to time, it is invaluable.
