Advance the Struggle Collective Reader

Historical Context of Marx's French Revolutionary Works

Selections from Chris Harman's People's History of the World

Chronology

1773: 'Boston Tea Party'.

1775: Fighting at Lexington and Bunker Hill.

1776: American Declaration of Independence.

1781: British defeat at Yorktown.

1780s to 1830s: Spread of factory system and mining in Britain.

1789: Storming of Bastille, beginning of French Revolution.

1791: Slave revolt in St Domingue.

1792: French revolutionary war, Battle of Valmy, execution of king.

1793-94: Jacobins rule France, end of feudal dues, 'terror'.

1794 Fall of Jacobins, 'Thermidor'.

1793-98: British take over Saint Domingue, defeated by ex-slave army.

1797: British naval mutinies.

1798: Rising against British rule in Ireland, formation of Orange Order to combat it.

1799: Combination laws ban trade unions in Britain. Napoleon takes all power in France.

1801-03: Napoleon tries to reimpose slavery in Haiti, imprisonment and death of Toussaint, Dessalines leads ex-slave army to victory.

1804: Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony.

1805: Napoleon becomes emperor.

1807: Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*.

1807: Britain bans slave trade.

1810: First risings against Spanish rule in Mexico and Venezuela.

1810-16: 'Luddites' attack machines in north of England.

1814-15: Napoleon defeated. Restoration of old monarchs. Waterloo.

1811-18: Publication of novels by Jane Austen and Walter Scott.

1819: 'Peterloo' massacre of working class demonstrators.

1830: Revolution in Paris replaces one monarch by another.

1830s: Novels by Stendhal and Balzac.

1830: World's first passenger railway.

1831: Faraday discovers electric induction.

1832: British middle class gets vote.

1834: Poor Law Amendment Act establishes workhouses in Britain.

1838-39: Chartist movement demands vote for workers.

1839-42: Opium War against China.

1842: General strike in Lancashire.

1840s to 1860s: Novels of Dickens, George Eliot, Brontës.

Mid-1840s: T'ai-p'ing rebels take control of nearly half of China.

1846-49: Great Irish Famine.

1847: *The Communist Manifesto*.

Spring 1848: Revolutions across Europe, unsuccessful rising in Ireland, last great Chartist demonstration in London.

June 1848: Crushing of workers' movement by French bourgeoisie.

1848-49: Restoration of old monarchies across Europe.

1850s and 1860s: Spread of industry to Germany and France.

1843-56: British complete conquest of northern India.

1857: Indian Mutiny.

1857-60: Second Opium War, colonial 'concessions' in Chinese cities.

1859: Darwin's *The Origin of Species*.

1859-71: Italy unified under king.

1861: American Civil War begins. Tsar ends serfdom in Russia.

1863: Lincoln declares end of slavery.

1865: Defeat of American South.

1864: T'ai-p'ing rebels finally crushed by British led troops.

1866: Nobel discovers dynamite.

1867: Meiji revolution from above ends feudal rule of Tokugawa in Japan.

1867: Marx publishes *Capital*.

1870: Franco-Prussian War. Fall of Louis Bonaparte.

1871: Paris Commune, workers control city, then Republican government attacks city, killing thousands.

1871: Bismarck establishes German Empire under Prussian monarchy.

1873: First electrical machine.

Mid-1870s: Troops withdraw from Southern states of US, rise of 'Jim Crow' segregation.

Chapter 2

The French Revolution

'Here and today begins a new age in the history of the world,' wrote Goethe, the foremost representative of the Enlightenment in Germany, in the summer of 1792.

A year previously, the Dutch conservative patrician van Hagendorp had seen the way things were going. 'In all nations' two great parties were forming, he wrote. One, the party of the church and state, believed in 'a right government to be exercised by one or several persons over the mass of people, of divine origin and supported by the church'. The other denied any right of government, 'except that arising from the free consent of all those who submit to it' and held 'all persons taking part in government accountable for their actions'.[24]

What excited Goethe was that these two great 'parties' had confronted each other on the field of battle at Valmy, in northern France, and the second party had won. The forces of the French Revolution had defeated the armies of half the monarchies of Europe.

Ten years earlier nothing would have seemed more absurd to most thinking people than the idea of a revolution in France, let alone one that would set all Europe ablaze. The French monarchy had ruled for well over 1,000 years and had enjoyed unchallenged power for 140 years. Louis XIV, the 'sun king', and his great palace at Versailles symbolised the consolidation of an enduring 'absolutism' which had made France the greatest power in Europe, such had been the inheritance of his successors Louis XV and Louis XVI.

Yet in the summer of l789 that power had suddenly begun to fall apart. The king had summoned representatives of the three 'estates' which made up French society—the clergy, the nobles and the rest of the population, the 'third estate'—to discuss ways of raising taxes. But the representatives of the third estate had refused either to bow to the nobles or to do what the king told them. They proclaimed themselves a 'National Assembly' and, gathering on a tennis court after the king had locked them out of their hall, swore an oath not

Chronology of the French Revolution

1787-88: Aristocrat reaction resists taxes on big estates, king agrees to call Estates-General.

April 1789: Meeting of Estates-General in Versailles.

June 1789: Third Estate delegate declare themselves National Assembly.

July 1789: Parisian crowd storms Bastille.

October 1789: Women's march on Versailles, king dragged back to Paris, Lafayette's national guards begin to dominate city, constitutional monarchy.

July 1790: Feast of Federation in Paris, celebration of 'harmony' between king and people.

Spring 1791: King tries to flee Paris.

July 1791: Guards massacre people in Champs de Mars.

August 1791: Beginning of slave rising in Saint Domingue (Haiti).

September 1791: Constitution with tight property qualification.

January 1792: Food riots in Paris.

April 1792: Girondin government declares war on Austria and Prussia, serious military defeats.

August 1792: Insurrectionary journée in Paris, arrest of the king, Danton joins government.

September 1792: Victory at Valmy, election of Convention by male adult suffrage.

January 1793: Execution of king.

February 1793: Britain joins war.

Spring 1793: Advance of invading armies towards Paris, Royalist risings in west of France (Vendée).

May-June 1793: Insurrection in Paris, Jacobin government led by Robespierre and Danton, civil war.

Summer 1973: Murder of Marat, end of all feudal payments, Royalists hand Toulon to British.

September 1793: Journée in Paris, law setting maximum prices, beginning of Terror.

October-December 1793: Defeat of Royalist and Girondist revolts.

February 1794: Jacobins end slavery throughout French Empire.

March-April 1794: Execution first of Hébert, then of Danton, by Jacobins, revolutionary armies successful on all fronts.

June-July 1794: 'Great Terror'.

July 1794: 'Thermidor', execution of Robespierre and other Jacobins.

November-December 1794: Jacobin club closed, repeal of 'maximum' laws for prices.

March-May 1795: Vicious suppression of last popular rising, 1200 arrests, 36 executions.

September 1795: New constitution with restricted suffrage, government relies on Bonaparte to suppress royalist rising, real power with five man Directory.

November 1799: Bonaparte seizes power, becomes 'first consul'.

1804: Bonaparte makes himself Emperor Napoleon I.

to disperse until he gave them a constitution. The king responded by summoning 20,000 troops and sacking his chief minister, Necker, supposedly sympathetic to the call for reform.

The delegates of the third estate were all from the respectable middle class, and most from the wealthier parts of it. Half were lawyers, the rest mostly merchants, bankers, businessmen and wealthy middle class landowners. There was not a single artisan or peasant. They were also almost all convinced of the need for a monarchy, albeit a 'constitutional one', and for rigid property qualifications in any electoral system. But they were not prepared simply to be crushed, and the arguments in Versailles were creating a ferment among vast numbers of people in Paris who had never thought of politics before. Clubs emerged, initially among well off members of the middle class, at which people discussed what was happening. A host of news sheets and pamphlets appeared. Some 400 representatives of the Parisian middle class met in the city hall and declared themselves the city council, or 'commune'.

The fall of the Bastille and after

Rumours of a pending military coup stirred the masses of the city as never before. On 12 July crowds from the poorer sections of the city demonstrated, seizing any muskets they could find. Two days later a vast number marched on the symbol of royal domination over the city, the Bastille fortress, 100 feet high and surrounded by an 80 foot moat. This was not just some protest demonstration. Powder for muskets was stored in the building, and innumerable opponents of the regime had been imprisoned there. The crowd was determined to capture it. The defenders opened fire with cannon. Three hours of shooting followed, causing 83 deaths. People dragged out cannon of their own, seized from the *Hotel des Invalides*. After threatening to blow up the fortress and the popular district around it, the commander surrendered the Bastille to the masses. Revolution had taken hold of the capital—an example soon to be followed in town after town across the country.

The fall of the Bastille was the first great turning point in the revolution. The action of the Parisian masses emboldened the National Assembly to decree the abolition of feudalism (although it expected the peasants to pay compensation for the ending of feudal dues) and

to pass a 'declaration of the rights of man', similar in tone to the American Declaration of Independence. Further mass action thwarted another attempt by the king to stage a military coup. Women from the poorer areas of Paris marched to Versailles, pulling 20,000 armed men behind them. They broke into the palace and forced the king to return with them to Paris, where he would be under popular surveillance.

This was still a long way short of the overthrow of the monarchy. The crowd which attacked the Bastille and the women who marched on Versailles did so very much on their own initiative, prompted by the food shortages hitting poor areas as well as by hatred of the king's aristocratic friends. But they still accepted the leadership of the official representatives of the third estate—upper middle class men who wanted only limited change. These concentrated the new armed power in Paris in the hands of a National Guard recruited almost exclusively from the better off sections of the middle class. Presiding over it was Lafayette, a former general and aristocrat, whose 'democratic' credentials came from acting as an official French adviser in the American War of Independence. Under his leadership the assembly set about framing a constitution which restricted the vote, through a steep property qualification, to so-called active citizens and left the king with the power to delay new laws by two years. People were expected to rejoice at a new order built around the 'unity' of the king and the assembly, of the rich and the poor. Many did at first. There was a general feeling of liberation and exaltation when the king, ex-aristocrats, the middle classes and the Parisian masses jointly commemorated the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille at a great 'festival of the federation'.

The sense of unity did not last long. The aristocrats bitterly resented the loss of their old privileges, even though they hung on to their wealth. Many were to move abroad, from where they plotted the overthrow of the revolution with those who stayed behind. The king and queen wrote secretly to other monarchs, urging a foreign invasion.

At the same time, there was growing bitterness among the masses of both country and town at the fact that material conditions had not improved. Already, the summer of 1789 had seen a wave of discontent among the peasantry—'the great fear'—which involved the invasion of aristocratic chateaux and burning of titles to feudal dues. In the cities and market towns there was repeated agitation over food shortages, price rises and unemployment which merged into a hatred

for aristocrats and speculators. There was a ferment of ideas, encouraged by a proliferation of newspapers—250 burst into print in the last six months of 1789 alone—and the influence of political clubs where people met to debate what was happening. The best known of these was the Jacobin club in Paris, dominated by a lawyer from the northern town of Arras, Robespierre, and corresponding with scores of other such clubs throughout the country. Another lawyer, Danton, dominated the Cordelier club, which was cheaper to join and so closer to the masses, its members much influenced by the daily newssheet *L'Ami du Peuple* written by Jean Paul Marat.

Yet for more than two years Lafayette's 'moderate' constitutional monarchism dominated the political terrain. An attempt by the king to flee Paris in June 1791 to join counter-revolutionary armies gathering across the border was only thwarted by the prompt action of a village postmaster in summoning the local militia. The dominant faction in the assembly rejected any challenge to the monarchy. 'The revolution is over,' they proclaimed and spread the story that the king had been kidnapped. 'The greatest danger', said one leader, Barnave, would be 'the destruction of the monarchy', for it would mean 'the destruction of the concept of property'.[25] Jean Paul Marat was driven into hiding and a spell in exile in Britain. 'Le Chapelier' laws banned unions and strikes. The National Guard opened fire on thousands of people queuing to sign a republican petition in the Champ de Mars—the venue of the Festival of Federation almost 12 months before. Fifty died in a massacre rarely mentioned by those who weep over the subsequent fate of the queen, Marie Antoinette.

Repression could not stop rising popular agitation, however. Food shortages, price rises and unemployment drove the artisans and tradespeople (known as *sans-culottes* because the men wore trousers rather than the breeches of the wealthy classes) as well as the labourers to the point of desperation. January and February 1792 saw food riots in Paris, while in the countryside bands of poor peasants descended on markets to impose price reductions on corn and bread. One of the Jacobins, Hébert, produced a paper *Le Père Duchesne*, specially directed at *sans-culottes* readership. Jacques Roux, a popular priest in one of the poorest quarters, built a group of followers, described by their enemies as the *enragés* ('madmen'), who articulated the elemental hatred of the poor for the aristocrats and rich. A growing number of *sans-culottes* joined political clubs and flocked to regular 'section' meetings held in each part of

Paris. A revolutionary women's organisation led by an ex-actress, Claire Lacombe, built support among those who had participated in the food protests and the march on Versailles.

Repression could not paper over the splits at the top of society either. The king and queen were still plotting with the counter-revolutionary armies abroad. The 'moderates' who ran the government fell out among themselves, torn between fear of these plots and fear of the masses below. Within the Jacobin club a group known as the Brissotins (after one of their leaders, Brissot) or Girondins, who saw themselves as less radical than Robespierre and Danton, began to manoeuvre to replace Lafayette in the government.

Each of these rival groupings believed there was a simple solution to their problems—war against the foreign armies that had gathered across France's northern borders. The king believed war would lead to defeat by foreign troops who would restore his full power. Lafayette believed it would enable him to become a virtual dictator. The Girondins believed they would benefit from a wave of nationalist enthusiasm. The most determined opposition to war came from Robespierre, so often portrayed by historians and popular novelists as a bloodthirsty monster. He argued in the Jacobin club that war would open the door to counter-revolution. But he could not stop the Girondins from agreeing with the king to form a government and then declaring war on Austria and Prussia in April 1792.

Revolutionary war

The war began disastrously. The French army suffered serious defeats—partly because its generals had a tendency to go over to the enemy—and the king tried to use the resulting chaos as an excuse to get rid of the Girondins. The Duke of Brunswick proclaimed on behalf of the invading army that it would impose 'exemplary vengeance' if victorious and 'hand over the city of Paris to soldiery and punish the rebels as they deserved'.[26]

The threat of counter-revolution backfired. It prompted a new upswell of activity from below. There was a feeling among the mass of the population that foreign invasion threatened everything gained in the previous three years. Thousands of people, 'passive citizens' officially deemed too poor to vote, flooded into the *sections*, the regular mass assemblies in each Parisian locality. A call from the National Assembly

for volunteers to fight the counter-revolutionary invasion led to 15,000 signing up in Paris alone. *Fédérés*, active enthusiasts for the revolution, began to march to Paris from provincial towns—most notably those from Marseilles, whose marching tune became the anthem of the revolution. All except one of the 48 *section* meetings in Paris demanded a republic. Local National Guard units in the poorer areas were increasingly influenced by the revolutionary mood.

It was not only the poor who were frightened by the spectre of counter-revolution, so were the radical sections of the middle class led by Robespierre, Danton and Marat. They saw that defeat stared them all in the face unless they made a further revolution. They did so on 10 August 1792, the second great turning point of the revolution. Tens of thousands of *sans-culottes* from the *sections* joined the *fédérés* to march on the Tuileries palace. National Guards who were meant to be defending the king joined the insurrection and it defeated the royal troops after a battle in which 600 royalists and 370 insurgents died.

The Parisian masses were once again in control of the city. The Assembly, made up of 'moderate' representatives elected under the property qualification less than a year before, bowed to the new power. It voted to suspend the king, recognise the new revolutionary commune based on the Parisian *sections*, and organise new elections based on universal male suffrage. The Girondins were back running the government, but had to give three positions to Jacobins—most notably to Danton, who became minister of justice.

These changes alone were not enough to defeat the threat from outside. The French army continued to suffer defeat as the foreign armies—now joined by the likes of Lafayette—marched towards Paris. There were hordes of nobles and royalists in the capital, many in poorly guarded prisons, waiting for the opportunity to wreak revenge for the humiliations of the past three years. The officer corps of the army and the government administration were stuffed with royalist sympathisers.

Only two things could deal with the threat to the revolution—sending large numbers of eager revolutionary volunteers to confront the enemy at the front, and decisive action to stop further coups by monarchists and aristocrats at the rear. The Girondins who dominated the government were not capable of fulfilling either task. But Danton displayed the energy needed to tap the popular

mood. 'Audacity, audacity and still more audacity' was his slogan as he used enthusiastic revolutionary volunteers from the poorer areas of Paris to breathe new life into the armies at the front.

In Paris, too, the masses took a decisive initiative. Spurred on by Marat, they took the crushing of domestic counter-revolution into their own hands. They descended on the prisons and summarily executed those they believed to be royalists in what became known as the 'September massacres'.

The move was a response by crowds who knew they would face the gibbet or the guillotine themselves if the enemy took Paris, and who also knew many people in high places were ready to aid that enemy. They had already seen friends and neighbours suffer—in the massacre at the Champ de Mars, in the slaughter at the front where officers sided with the enemy, and from the hunger brought by the shortage of bread. They had to do something. Unfortunately, in the panic and without organisations of their own to guide them, the crowds were easily drawn into indiscriminate killing of those in prison, so that ordinary prisoners died alongside rabid opponents of the revolution. Nevertheless, the action had the effect of intimidating and subduing the royalist fifth column in the city.

On 20 September the revolutionary army halted the invading forces at Valmy. The next day the new Convention—the first legislature of any country in history to be elected by the vote of the whole male population—abolished the monarchy and declared France 'the republic, one and indivisible'.

Not only had the king gone, so had very many features regarded as irremovable only three years before. The remnants of feudalism were now swept away in deed as well as word, as were the tithes which people had been forced to pay to keep bishops and abbots in luxury. The superstitions of the church were no longer propped up by the might of the state. There were plans to encourage education and extend scientific knowledge, bringing the ideas of the Enlightenment into everyday life. The customs posts which impeded trade routes in order to benefit local notables were gone. In the volunteer militia units at the front ordinary soldiers voted for their fellows to become officers.

No wonder Goethe believed a new era had begun.

Yet the revolution was far from over. The next two years saw a further radicalisation both in the government and at the base of society. Then, in the summer of 1794 there was a sudden falling back

of the revolutionary wave, allowing new inequalities and some old privileges to re-emerge in what became, eventually, a new monarchy. In the process there occurred the famous 'terror' which has so befogged many people's understanding of—and sympathy for—the revolution. The execution of the king, agreed on by the narrowest of majorities in the Convention, was followed by the execution of many other aristocrats and the queen. Then the Jacobins sent Girondin leaders to the guillotine; Robespierre and Saint-Just sent Danton and Hébert to the guillotine; and finally, Robespierre and Saint-Just themselves were sent to the guillotine by the 'Thermidorians'—a coalition of former supporters of the Girondins, Danton and Hébert. It was this grisly spectacle which popularised the saying, 'Revolutions always devour their own children'[27]—and with it, the implication that revolutions are always futile and bloody enterprises.

It is a false generalisation. The English Revolution did not devour its leaders—that task was left to the Restoration executioners—and neither did the American Revolution. It is an observation which also fails utterly to grasp the real forces at work in France.

The roots of revolution

Any brief account of revolutionary events necessarily concentrates on eye catching events and the best known personalities. But a revolution is always more than that. It involves a sudden change in the balance of social forces, resulting from slow, often imperceptible developments over long periods of time. It can only be understood by looking at those developments.

At the top of the old society—usually known as the *ancien régime*—were the monarchy and the nobility. The traditional feudal aristocracy of the *noblesse d'epée* (nobility of the sword) retained a privileged position in France which it had long since lost in Britain. The French monarchy had over the centuries cut back on some of the independent power of the great nobles. It had been able to do so by using the towns and the new, moneyed 'bourgeois' classes as a counterweight to the great aristocrats. The monarchs of the 16th and 17th centuries had given institutional expression to this by selling positions in the state administration and the courts to sons of the moneyed classes, who soon became a new hereditary nobility, the *noblesse de robe* (nobility of the robe). This group dominated the law courts (confusingly for

English speakers, known as *parlements*) which implemented royal decrees.

Finally, there was yet another form of nobility consisting of the great 'princes' of the church—bishops and abbots. These enjoyed wealth comparable to the great aristocrats, while the mass of priests lived in conditions hardly better than the peasants. The upper clergy owed their positions to royal patronage—which, in turn, was dependent on influence at court. So it was possible for someone like Charles Maurice de Talleyrand—a member of one of the old aristocratic families, 'lacking in all apostolic virtues'[28] and who had not even completed holy orders—to be given an important abbotship at the age of 21. Like the nobles, the upper clergy paid no taxes yet received the rents and feudal dues from vast tracts of land as well as church tithes.

No major section of the nobility showed any inclination to give up of its privileges. Indeed, as the costs involved in maintaining a life of luxurious consumption rose, the nobility set out to increase them—by greater severity in the enforcement of feudal dues, by taking over parts of the communal property of peasant villages, and by monopolising lucrative positions in the state, the army and the church. There was a 'violent aristocratic reaction'.[29]

This was while France was experiencing considerable industrial growth, particularly in rural handicraft production. According to a recent estimate the economy grew at 1.9 percent a year throughout the 18th century.[30] Textile output grew 250 percent, coal output seven or eightfold, and iron output from 40,000 tons to 140,000 tons. By 1789 a fifth of France's population were employed in industry or handicrafts.[31]

The moneyed class of big merchants (especially in the Atlantic ports connected to the West Indian sugar colonies), 'putters out' and, occasionally, manufacturers (like the handful of monopolists who controlled the printing industry) grew in size and wealth. The rich bourgeoisie were in an anomalous position. In formal, legal terms they were inferior to any members of the nobility. But often they were richer and able to exercise considerable influence over the monarchy. What is more, they could buy up land which gave them feudal dues from the peasantry and could profit from acting as tax 'farmers' for the monarchy. Beneath them the lower bourgeoisie were completely excluded from influence. But they, too, often channelled money their families had obtained through trading, shopkeeping or

luxury crafts into investments in land or into the purchase of certain legal offices. Both groups of the bourgeoisie resented the discrimination against them by the aristocracy, but they by no means stood in automatic revolutionary opposition to the absolutist monarchy. Indeed, they could still look to the monarchy to protect them from the aristocracy.

Wedged between the bourgeoisie and the urban poor were a mass of small tradespeople and artisans. Traditionally they had relied on state sponsored guilds to regulate prices and protect their incomes. But the spread of the market made this a less and less effective way of providing them with security. A sudden change in market conditions might deprive them of an income, while the increase in the price of bread after harvest failures—as in the late 1780s and again in the early 1790s—might drive them close to starvation. What is more, a growing portion of the artisan and small trading workforce was made up of journeymen—employees—who could never expect to own their own businesses. These had little in common with those artisans and traders who remained conservative and guild-minded.

There were also a growing number of 'men on the make'—people prepared to look for any opportunity to get ahead: a lucrative trading deal, a financial reward for some political service, or the pioneering of a new productive technique. But although such people could resent the 'irrationality' of the old order—they often devoured popular forms of Enlightenment thinking—they were not revolutionaries.

The peasantry made up the bulk of French society. It varied enormously from region to region. In a few areas it had undergone changes similar to those in England, with the emergence of capitalist farmers employing innovative techniques. There were a rather larger number of peasants whose production was oriented to the market (through the cultivation of vines or a combination of spinning or weaving with farming), but with holdings that remained small. Then there were vast numbers who leased land from or shared their crop with landowners, leaving them with no funds for agricultural improvement even if some were able to employ a limited number of labourers. Finally, there were many whose condition, apart from the absence of formal serfdom, hardly differed from medieval times. Yet almost all of the peasantry had certain features in common. They felt the land was really their own, yet had to pay feudal dues to landowners, tithes that

could amount to 9 percent of the crop to the church, and, usually, rent on top. What is more, they had to pay high taxes from which the nobility and the clergy were exempt. This burden meant they suffered terribly if their crops failed or the prices of things they had to buy rose.

The complex interrelation between the monarchy, the aristocracy, the different groups of the bourgeoisie and the various sections of the peasantry has led some 'revisionist' historians to claim the revolution cannot be explained in class terms.[32] The bourgeoisie, they say, was more likely to obtain its income from legal offices, landownership or even feudal dues than it was from modern industry. Therefore, it could not have been a class standing for a new, capitalist way of producing in opposition to a nobility and monarchy based on feudalism. These historians argue that their case is confirmed by the small number of big industrialists involved on the revolutionary side and the considerable number of merchants who took the side of the king.

Some of their factual claims are undoubtedly true. The bourgeoisie as a class certainly did not stand in unremitting revolutionary opposition to the old order. It had grown up within this order over hundreds of years and was tied to it, both ideologically and financially, in innumerable ways. The leading revolutionary figures were not financiers or industrial capitalists but lawyers like Danton and Robespierre, journalists like Desmoulins, and even, in the case of Marat, a former doctor to the upper classes. But the conclusions drawn by the revisionists are fundamentally false. The intertwining of the interests of the nobility and the bourgeoisie did not stop them being attracted towards opposite visions of French society. One looked back to the past, to the defence of aristocratic privilege and feudal dues against all change. The other looked towards a society built around the formal equality of the marketplace, where ancestry alone could not hold back the 'man on the make'. The mass of the bourgeoisie repeatedly hesitated in face of the measures needed to advance that model of society. But they certainly did not go into exile in disgust when it triumphed, as did much of the aristocracy.

The division of society around these rival poles was not, in the first place, brought about by the bourgeoisie, but by the aristocratic reaction. As with the English and American revolutions, it was not the mass of people demanding something new which produced the initial upheaval, but the attempt of the old order to push things backward.

Money had become the central preoccupation of the French

monarchy in the 1780s. It had spent enormous sums on the Seven Years War with Britain and Prussia, and more again during the American war with Britain. Bankruptcy threatened if it did not find ways to increase its tax revenue. But it found this almost impossible. The exemption of the nobles and clergy from taxation meant the burden fell on the lower classes, and the point had been reached where most of them simply could not pay more. Average living standards in the countryside were falling, while wages in the towns had risen by only 22 percent against price rises of 65 percent.[33] What is more, the method of raising tax was hopelessly inefficient, with considerable sums being siphoned off by the 'tax farmers' who collected it.

The king was briefly brought to see how serious the situation had become. He appointed a 'reforming' ministry in 1786 which presented a plan to rationalise the tax system and extend it to the huge landholdings of the nobility and the church. The aristocracy were outraged. An assembly of 'notables' picked by the king rejected the proposals. When further reforms were brought forward, the *noblesse de robe* in the provincial *parlements* refused to implement them—and when the ministers tried to proceed in spite of them, they organised public protests which turned into riots in some places. In these protests, the nobility still found it possible to win the support of many members of other classes. After all, the talk of higher taxes could seem like a threat to some members of the bourgeoisie and peasantry.

The nobility, seeing themselves as the natural leaders of society, had the illusion that they could use popular support to bend the government to their will. Their central demand was for an *Estates-General*—an assembly which had last been convened in 1614. In agreeing to this in May 1789, the king was conceding to the reactionary demands of the aristocracy, not some progressive movement of the bourgeoisie or the lower classes.

Yet this concession to the aristocracy forced the other classes to organise. They were required to choose representatives of the 'third estate'. In the towns this meant assemblies to choose 'electors' who in turn would vote for delegates. In the countryside it meant villagers deciding who to send to an area meeting which would take decisions. The mass of people had no experience of such things and usually put their trust in those best able to speak. The result was that the assembly of the third estate was dominated by lawyers and other well heeled members of the middle class. But the process of

choosing delegates encouraged many millions of people to think for the first time about what they wanted from society. In villages and towns across France they drew up *doléances*—lists of demands they wanted the *Estates-General* to implement. The discussion led to the activist groups beginning to crystallise in the poorer quarters of Paris, which were to storm the Bastille in July and march on Versailles in October. It also encouraged ferment among the peasants, which boiled over into revolt against local nobles in the summer of 1789.

The reactionary offensive of the aristocracy roused the middle class and created the mood of self assertion among its representatives as the *Estates-General* assembled. They were not revolutionary in intent. They were still enamoured with the monarchy and, rather than abolish it, wanted to cut the aristocracy down to size, so that there would be an end to arbitrary privilege and bullying. But they were not prepared to be dictated to, and they felt emboldened by the ferment in society. Hence their defiant gestures—their assertion of 'human rights', and declarations about the end of feudalism—could be followed by a compromise which left the king with considerable power and the aristocracy with their property.

But the aristocratic reaction was not going to be brought to an end so quickly. So long as the aristocrats were in control of their fortunes, their country estates and the officer corps of the army, they were going to try to re-establish their old positions of privilege.

Reformers, revolutionaries and *sans-culottes*

The popular movements which had backed the middle class assembly in the summer of 1789 had roused the lower classes to challenge their miserable lot for the first time. They had begun to see that the wealth of the few and the poverty of the many were two sides of the same coin. At first they identified wealth with the aristocracy. But it was not long before they were turning their attention to those sections of the bourgeoisie who aped the aristocracy or who enriched themselves as 'tax farmers', landowners and speculators.

The agitation of 1789 had thrown up many thousands of new political activists among the middle classes. It was they who attended the political clubs, read the mass of pamphlets and newspapers, and took part in electoral meetings. They were exultant at first. It seemed that history was offering them a chance to realise the dreams of the

Enlightenment, to right the wrongs castigated by Voltaire, to introduce the society imagined by Rousseau. They adopted heroic postures, imagining themselves as reincarnations of figures from ancient Rome like Brutus.

But they were in danger of being trapped between aristocratic reaction on the one side and the popular ferment on the other. For although 1789 had shown that popular unrest could defeat the aristocracy, peasants burning landowners' title deeds did not stop if the landowners were from the bourgeoisie, and townspeople did not stop attacking food speculators who had bourgeois credentials.

It was this which led to the repeated splits within the ranks of the middle class political activists. Typically, the majority opted for security, property and conciliation of the monarchy and aristocracy. Only a radical minority were prepared to risk rousing the masses. But then reaction, emboldened by the concessions made to it, would make moves which threatened the majority and they would swing behind the radicals—although with a section splitting away to join the counter-revolution.

This was what happened in 1791 and 1792. It was to happen again in 1793.

The crisis of 1792, which culminated in the proclamation of the republic and the execution of the king, had involved the overthrow of Lafayette by the Jacobins and the Parisian masses organised through the *sections*. The Girondins had gone along with this action, but were still reluctant to go further and agree to the execution of the king. They feared 'the mob'—the 'hydra of anarchy' as Brissot called it.[34] Against a background of growing hunger in town and countryside alike, they resisted demands from the Parisian *sections* to control prices, to requisition grain supplies to feed people and to take exemplary action against 'hoarders and speculators'.

Instead they attacked the masses in much the same way as the previous government. 'Your property is threatened', one of their leaders warned the wealthy bourgeoisie in April, 'and you are closing your eyes to the danger… Chase these venomous creatures back to their lairs'.[35] The Convention voted overwhelmingly to send Marat before the revolutionary tribunal on a charge of subversion, only to see him acquitted. Hébert was arrested and the president of the Convention declared—in language similar to the notorious statement of the Duke of Brunswick—that unless 'recurrent insurrections' in the

city stopped, 'Paris would be destroyed'.[36] The army suffered a new series of defeats as its commander, Dumouriez, deserted to the enemy. Disaffected peasants in the Vendée region in the west of France joined a bloody monarchist rising.

Finally, on 29 May 'moderates' and royalists together seized control of Lyons and imprisoned the Jacobin mayor, Chalier, before executing him in July.

Robespierre's Jacobins were as middle class as the Girondins, although many historians argue they came mostly from a lower layer of the middle class. They were just as devoted to the 'rights' of property, as they repeatedly declared in their public statements. Robespierre was personally incorruptible, but many of his supporters had no compunction about trying to benefit financially from the revolution—after all, they were members of, or aspirants to, the bourgeoisie. Danton had personally enriched himself, at one point accepting money from the king. Marat and Hébert did agitate among the Parisian masses—but from the point of view of those who were small artisan or traders, with no objection to profit.

But in the early summer of 1793 they could see that the alternative to the revolution going forward was a carnival of reaction which neither they nor the gains of the previous four years would survive. They could also see the only way to push the revolution forward was to ally with the Parisian masses once more and make concessions to the peasantry, even if that meant taking measures which clashed with bourgeois interests. Robespierre wrote in his diary, 'The dangers come from the middle classes, and to defeat them we must rally the people'.[37] In other words, the radical bourgeoisie in the Jacobin club had to unite with the revolutionary *sans-culottes* of the Parisian *sections* against the moderate Girondin bourgeoisie. The revolution's third great turning point had arrived.

On 26 May 1793 Robespierre issued a call for the people to revolt. On 29 May, 33 of the Parisian sections met together and chose an insurrectionary committee of nine members to organise a *journée*—a new uprising. On 31 May and 2 June the ringing of the *tocsin* (alarm) bell and the firing of cannon summoned the masses onto the streets. They surrounded the convention with 80,000 armed people and compelled it to issue orders for the arrest of 29 Girondin deputies. The Parisian *sections* were now the centre of power in the capital and the Jacobin leadership was, in effect, the government of France.

The defeated Girondins fled the city to stir up revolt in the provinces. They had friends in the officer corps of the army, allies among the big merchants, sympathy from middle class landowners afraid of the rural revolt, the allegiance of all those who saw any 'mob' as a threat—and, of course, support from an aristocracy which would rejoice in a victory against the revolution. Within weeks, much of the south and west of the country was in Girondin hands. The Vendée was held by royalists, the anti-Jacobins had handed the southern port of Toulon and ships of the Mediterranean navy over to the British, and foreign armies were still marching towards Paris. The counter-revolution had even shown it could strike in the capital when a young woman from the Girondin town of Caen, Charlotte Corday, gained access to Marat by claiming she needed his help, and stabbed him to death as he sat in his bath.

The Parisian *sans-culottes* masses urged the Jacobin leaders to take further revolutionary measures to stop the rot, and that leadership soon saw it had no choice. A Committee of Public Safety—which reported at least once a week to the convention and was subject to re-election each month—was empowered to take whatever emergency measures were appropriate. A 'law of the maximum' imposed price controls on bread and speculation in people's hunger became a capital crime. There was a forced loan on the rich to pay for the war and a progressive tax, starting at 10 percent and rising to 50 percent, on all income over the minimum needed to keep a family.[38] The economy became increasingly subject to central direction, with an important nationalised sector producing war supplies. The land seized from émigrés and the church was divided into small plots to placate peasant anger. The volunteer revolutionary units and the old army units were merged at the front, so that the volunteers could enthuse the regulars while learning military skills from them, and they jointly elected their officers. Suspect officials were purged from government departments. Revolutionary commissioners were sent with full power to put down the counter-revolutionary risings in the countryside. All single men between the ages of 18 and 25 were required to do military service, without the old exemptions which allowed the well-to-do to pay substitutes to take their place. Finally, after further *journées* in September, the convention and the Committee of Public Safety agreed to a policy of severe repression—terror.

The Jacobins and the terror

The impetus for the terror came from below—from people who had suffered under the old regime, who knew they would suffer even more if it came back and whose friends and relatives were already dying daily at the front as a result of betrayal and corrupt profiteering. It combined the emotional desire for vengeance with the rational understanding that, under conditions of civil war, opponents of the revolutionary regime would seize every opportunity to do it damage. Prison would not deter them, since they would expect to be released once their plots were successful. People like Hébert on the 'terrorist' fringe of the Jacobins fanned these feelings. But the main Jacobin leaders were slow to embrace the call. Far from being the 'callous butcher' of legend, Robespierre had been almost alone in calling for the abolition of the death penalty in the early days of the revolution. By contrast, the Girondins supported its use for ordinary 'criminals' from the lower classes but had qualms when it came to the king.

Only 66, or one quarter, of the 260 people brought before the revolutionary tribunal before September 1793 had been condemned to death. From October the pace accelerated. The execution of the queen, Marie Antoinette, was followed by the condemnation of the Girondins and the Duke of Orleans (who had tried to advance his own cause by parading as a Jacobin). In the last three months of 1793, 177 out of 395 defendants were sentenced to death, and by December the number of people in Paris prisons had risen to 4,525—from 1,500 in August. Nevertheless, the number of executions at this stage was much smaller than might be believed from popular accounts in novels and films which suggest scores going to the guillotine every day.

The 200 year litany of complaints about the executions of aristocrats and royalists must be put in perspective. Executions had been a continual occurrence under the old regime. Poor people could be hanged for stealing a piece of cloth. As Mark Twain once put it, 'There were two reigns of terror: one lasted several months, the other 1,000 years.' The army marching towards Paris from the north would have installed its own terror, much greater than that of the Jacobins, if it had been able to take the city, and it would have used the royalists and aristocrats to point out 'ring leaders' for instant execution. The 'moderates' and royalists who took over Lyons, Marseilles and Toulon established tribunals that 'ordered patriots guillotined or hanged'.

The results 'were piteous'[39]—the death toll in Lyons was said to be 800.[40] In the Vendée a royalist priest reported that 'each day was marked by bloody expeditions' against republican sympathisers. Even to have attended a mass presided over by one of the clergy who accepted the republic was grounds 'to be imprisoned and then murdered or shot under the pretext that the prisons were too full'.[41] At Machecoul 524 republicans were shot.[42] On top of this, there was the enormous death toll in the battles on France's northern borders, in a war begun by the monarchists and Girondins and joined with enthusiasm by all enemies of the revolution, at home and abroad—a war in which French officers sympathetic to the other side might deliberately send thousands of soldiers to their deaths.

The victims of the counter-revolution and the war do not figure in the horror stories about the revolution retailed by popular novelists, or even in Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*. For such writers, the death of a respectable gentleman or lady is a tragedy, that of a republican artisan or seamstress of no concern.

This was essentially the argument Robespierre put to the convention in late September 1793. He was justifying punitive measures against one of the republic's generals, Houchard, for retreating unnecessarily and causing a military disaster. 'In two years 100,000 men have been butchered because of treason and weakness,' he said. 'It is weakness for traitors which is destroying us'.[43] It was an argument which won over many of the deputies who vacillated over whether to back Jacobin measures.

The worst bloodshed during the revolution did not take place in Paris, where the revolutionaries never lost control, but in fighting to reconquer regions held by its opponents. There were a handful of cases where the republican armies took bloody revenge: in Lyons a revolutionary commission passed 1,667 death sentences; in the Vendée rebels taken prisoner carrying weapons were summarily executed; in Nantes 2,000 to 3,000 supporters of the revolt were executed by drowning in the River Loire; in Toulon there were mass executions of those blamed for handing the city to the British.[44]

There is another aspect of the terror which has to be examined. This is the terror which the revolutionary leaders directed at each other in the course of 1793-94. It began with the antagonism between the Girondins and the Jacobins. The Girondins had shown in the charges they had laid against Marat their own willingness to

resort to repression. Nevertheless, the first Girondin leaders arrested after the establishment of the Jacobin government had simply been placed under house arrest. By then leaving Paris to stir revolt in the provinces, they proved this was a disagreement which could not be settled by words alone. Robespierre and Danton came to feel that any Girondin left free would behave in the same way. Vigorous repression—and in conditions of civil war, that meant execution—was the only way to prevent them doing so.

But for the middle class Jacobins, the same logic which applied to the Girondins applied, in conditions of civil war, to certain other republicans. As far as Robespierre was concerned his own allies, the *sans-culottes* of Paris, were beginning to become a problem. They had done wonders in providing mass support for the revolution in the streets. But they were also antagonising the very social group from which Robespierre and other Jacobin leaders came—those people of property wavering over whether to fight for the republic. At the very moment he was adopting the *sans-culottes*' call for terror, Robespierre began a crackdown on *sans-culottes* organisations—in mid-September Jacques Roux was arrested; in October Claire Lacombe's Society of Revolutionary Republican Women was dissolved; and finally, in March, Hébert and several others were guillotined.

The 'extremists' who put forward demands that could only frighten the respectable, propertied middle class were not Robespierre's only problem. He also feared the revolution could be destroyed by those who put personal interests and inclinations above the needs of the moment. This applied especially to some of the circle around Danton—a man capable of enormous revolutionary courage and enthusiasm, but also very attracted by the rewards available from mixing with dubious wealthy figures. It was no coincidence that his friends were involved in a major corruption case concerning the French East India Company. When Danton began to draw around him an informal 'indulgent' faction in January and February 1794, Robespierre began to fear he was following the path taken by the Girondins nine months earlier. Five days after the execution of Hébert, it was the turn of Danton, Desmoulins and others to be arrested, brought before the tribunal and executed.

Robespierre and his close allies felt beleaguered. Their own class was half attracted to the forces of counter-revolution. A class based on profit making, its members were continually subject to the temptation

of bribery and corruption. Only fear of drastic measures could keep the middle class on the path to victory. Robespierre believed he stood for a new form of society in which the essential values of the middle class would be realised. He gave expression to this feeling by identifying his goal as 'virtue'. But he could not achieve this without disciplining the middle class itself, and sometimes very harshly. As he put it in February 1794, 'Without virtue terror is useless; without terror, virtue is powerless.'

What is more, the terror made the state the focus for revolutionary feeling and action. It served to divert the *sans-culottes* masses away from a path full of danger for the middle class—the path of increasingly taking direction of the revolution into lower class hands. It was much better for the middle class politicians if the *sans-culottes* were dancing the *Carmargnole* while watching the state's guillotine at work than if they were arguing and acting on their own behalf. The terror came to function not only to defend the revolution, but also to symbolise the way in which the state was being centralised by a political group balancing between the masses and the conciliatory elements in the bourgeoisie.

By the spring of 1794 the Jacobins around Robespierre ruled alone, winding down the popular organisations in Paris—purging the commune, dissolving the *sections*, abolishing the commissioners who investigated food hoarding. Government power was centralised as never before in the hands of an apparently unified group of men, no longer beset by factions to the left and right. But such a centralised power could only get its way by resorting more than ever to repression. As Soboul explains:

> Hitherto the terror…had been directed against the enemies of the revolution. But now it was extended to include those who opposed the government committees. In this way the committees used the terror to tighten their grip on political life.[45]

The centralisation of the terror created a momentum of its own. The Jacobin core began to feel anyone not with them must be against them—and the feeling was, in part, justified. There was growing antagonism towards them among their own middle class as it chafed at the restraints on its freedoms, and there was antagonism from many of the *sans-culottes* followers of Roux and Hébert. Dealing with such antagonism by terror only served to increase the isolation of the Jacobin

core still further. But calling off the terror threatened to give a free hand to those who wanted vengeance on the Jacobin core.

Robespierre vacillated over what to do. He tried to hold the terror in check in certain provinces—for instance, by recalling to Paris the man who had been responsible for the mass drownings in Nantes. But then he allowed the terror in Paris to escalate massively in May 1794, so that the next three months saw as many executions as the preceding year. For the first time, the accused were denied the right to a defence, juries could convict on nothing more than 'moral guilt', and people who might have no connection with one another were tried in groups on the grounds that they might have 'conspired' in the prisons. It was at this time that the great pamphleteer of the American Revolution and of British plebeian radicalism, Tom Paine, only narrowly avoided execution—his crime being that he was a 'foreigner' who had been friendly with some of the Girondins (as, of course, had most of the Jacobin leadership at some point in the past).

Thermidor and after

Jacobin methods succeeded as the Girondin ones had not in defending the revolutionary regime. By the summer of 1794 the revolutionary army was showing itself to be probably the best fighting force Europe had ever seen. The revolts in the provinces had been smashed, the French army was in occupation of Brussels and moving northwards, and the republic did indeed seem 'one and indivisible'.

Yet these very successes created an insuperable problem for the Jacobins. They had been able to raise themselves up by balancing between left and right—and in the process take very harsh measures against sections of their own class—because large sections of the middle class had seen no alternative a few months before. This was why, month after month, the convention had voted to renew the powers of the Committee of Public Safety. But the victories led to a growing feeling that dictatorial rule was no longer necessary.

Robespierre had made many enemies in the previous months—'indulgent' sympathisers of Danton, emissaries who had been recalled from the provinces for carrying repression too far, former allies of Hébert, and those who had never really broken with the Girondins but were afraid to say so. On 27 July 1794 they united to ambush Robespierre in the midst of a debate in the Convention. A delegate

moved that an arrest warrant be issued against him and his close allies, and the Convention voted unanimously in favour.

The Jacobins made a last attempt to save themselves by calling on the masses to rise in a revolutionary *journée*. But they themselves had dissolved the committees and banned the *sans-culottes* papers that could organise such a rising. They had lifted the ban on speculation in food and, only four days before, had published maximum wage rates which meant a cut in earnings for many artisans. Only 16 of the 48 *sections* of Paris sent forces to join the attempted rising, and they were left standing around for hours without proper leadership before dispersing. Robespierre and 21 of his allies were executed on 28 July, followed by another 71 men the next day—the largest mass execution in the history of the revolution.

Robespierre had shouted out in the convention, 'The republic is a lost cause. The brigands are now triumphant.' He was right in the sense that the great movement of the last five years had come to an end. Thermidor, the name of the month in which Robespierre was overthrown in the republic's revolutionary calendar, has ever since signified internal counter-revolution.

The allies who had overthrown him did not stay long in power. The months which followed saw those who hated the revolution gain a new confidence. Groups of rich young thugs, the *jeunesse dorée* (golden youth) began to take over the streets of Paris, attacking anyone who tried to defend the revolutionary ideals or who showed lack of respect for their 'betters'. A mob of them forced the Jacobin club to close. A constitutional amendment brought in a new property qualification for the vote. A 'white terror' led to a wave of executions of former revolutionaries and the victimisation of very many others. Two brief *sans-culottes* risings in April and May 1795 showed that the poor, given a chance, were more than a match for the *jeunesse dorée*, but they were crushed by forces loyal to the Thermidorians. Émigrés began to return to the country and boast that the monarchy would soon be back. The pretender to the throne, the future Louis XVIII, insisted from exile that he wanted to bring back the old regime, complete with its three estates, and punish all those who had taken part in the revolution, including the Thermidorians. Then in October 1795 the royalists staged a rising of their own in Paris. The Thermidorians, terrified, began rearming Jacobins and calling on *sans-culottes* for help before the army—especially a rising officer, a one-time Jacobin called Napoleon

Bonaparte—came to their assistance. Fearful of a full-blooded monarchic restoration, the Thermidorians agreed to concentrate power in the hands of a Directory of five men. For four years the Directory was pulled first in one direction then in another, all the time allowing more power to accede to Napoleon, whose base in the army provided a bastion against both the royalists and any rebirth of popular Jacobinism, until in 1799 Napoleon staged a coup which in effect gave him dictatorial power. In 1804 he had the pope crown him emperor, ruling with the support both of some former Jacobins and some of the aristocrats who had returned from exile. Finally, in 1814 and 1815, defeat for his armies allowed the other European powers to reinstitute the Bourbon monarchy. Robespierre's final, desperate warning seemed vindicated.

Yet in two respects he was wrong. The revolution was over after Thermidor 1794, but many of the changes it had brought remained. Napoleon's regime was built on consolidation of many of these changes: the ending of feudal dues; the creation of an independent peasantry; the ending of internal customs posts; the creation of a uniform national administration; above all, the determination of government policy in the light of bourgeois goals rather than dynastic or aristocratic ones. Napoleon's army could conquer much of Europe for a period precisely because it was not the army of the old regime. It was an army organised and motivated in ways established during the revolution, particularly its Jacobin phase. Its best generals were men who had risen through the ranks on merit in the revolutionary period—Napoleon even relied on a former Jacobin 'terrorist' to run his police.

Like the Dutch, English and American revolutions before it, the French Revolution had cut away the great obstacles inherited from the past to a fully market based society. And after the events of 1792-94 there was now no way aristocratic reaction could reimpose them.

Looking back on the revolution 20 years later, the novelist Stendhal observed, 'In 2,000 years of world history, so sharp a revolution in customs, ideas, and beliefs has perhaps never happened before'.[46] The revolutionaries may have been defeated, but much of the revolution's heritage survived to shape the modern world.

Robespierre was wrong in a second way as well. That was because the revolution did not just consist of the rise of middle class political groups, each one more radical than the one before. Centrally, it also

involved the entry into political life of millions of people in the town and country who had never before had a chance to shape history. They had learned to fight for their own interests and to argue with each other over what those interests were. The peasants who had burned down the chateaux of the aristocrats in 1789 and 1792 were not going to let a subsequent government take their land from them. In Paris and other cities the lower classes had risen to fight for their own interests on a scale never before seen in history—and would do so again in 1830, 1848 and 1871, as well as in 1936 and 1968.

Accounts of the revolution which look, quite rightly, at its overall impact on world history are always in danger of understating what happened on the ground, in the narrow streets and overcrowded dwellings of the poorer parts of Paris. It was here that people read and argued over the writings of Marat and Hébert, spent hour after hour at their section 'meeting in permanence', hunted out hoarders of grain and searched for monarchist agents, sharpened pikes and marched on the Bastille, organised the risings that replaced the constitutional monarchists by the Girondins and the Girondins by the Jacobins, and volunteered in their thousands to go to the front or to spread the revolution through the countryside.

There were limitations to the popular movements in the cities. They arose from the structures of French society at the time. The great majority of the urban masses still worked in small workshops, where the master and his family would work alongside perhaps a couple of employees whose living standards did not differ markedly from their own. They could come together on the streets or in section assemblies and clubs. But they were not tied to one another organically in the process of production which took up much of their time. Their ideal was the preservation of the individual family unit, with the father in charge, not the collective reorganisation of society. They could rise up against the aristocrats who had humiliated them in the past and the speculators who would see them starve, showing enormous courage and inventiveness, as histories of the revolution by Kropotkin and Guerin[47] have shown. And when they rose up they could begin to throw off many of their own prejudices, as shown by the vanguard role played by women in many of the protests, by the call from some of the revolutionaries for women to be able to vote, and by the emergence of revolutionary women's clubs. Yet in the great crisis of the revolution in 1793-94 they found it difficult to put

forward a programme of their own which could lead to victory.

As Albert Soboul has shown, their condition of life meant they could push the Jacobins to take necessary radical measures, but they could not frame a collective, class response of their own which could solve the revolution's problems. They could fight for maximum prices, but they were not in a position to take over the decisive productive processes. Even their keenness for terror was a sign of their weakness. They had to focus attention on stopping other people sabotaging the revolution because they could not take direct, collective control over its destiny themselves.

Yet it was their action and initiative, as much as the inspiring words of Danton or the steely determination of Robespierre, which overturned the old order in France—inspiring or terrifying all of Europe and beyond for much of the next century. From them also emerged, in the aftermath of the crushing of the popular movement, a group of revolutionaries around 'Gracchus' Babeuf (executed in 1796) whose stress on social and economic equality helped lay the ground for the socialist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Chapter 3

Jacobinism outside France

'Succour to all peoples who want to recover their liberty' was the promise held out by the Girondin-led convention of 1792. The war which Brissot proclaimed against the monarchs of Europe was not going to be an old-style war of conquest, he claimed, but a war of liberation. There were certainly many people outside France prepared to rejoice at any revolutionary advance:

> This was a glorious mental dawn. All thinking beings shared in the jubilation of this epoch. Emotions of a lofty character stirred men's minds…a spiritual enthusiasm thrilled through the world.[48]

So the ageing German philosopher Hegel described the impact of the events in France on the world of his youth. His memory was not playing tricks on him. The message of revolution found an echo everywhere the Enlightenment had influenced people.

The English poets Wordsworth, Southey and Coleridge enthused about the storming of the Bastille. 'From the general heart of human kind, Hope springs forth like a full-born Deity', Coleridge wrote. The poet-engraver William Blake was almost arrested for defending the revolution's principles in an argument with a soldier. The house of the pioneering chemist Joseph Priestley was attacked by a royalist mob. The German philosophers Kant and Fichte were as enthusiastic as the young Hegel. Even after Thermidor, Kant could say, 'The misdeeds of the Jacobins were nothing compared to the tyrants of past time'.[49] Beethoven incorporated the melodies of revolutionary songs into his music and embodied the spirit of the revolutionary army in his great third symphony, the *Eroica* (although he removed the dedication to Napoleon in disgust after he proclaimed himself emperor). From Ireland, Wolfe Tone of the Belfast middle class and Lord Edward Fitzgerald, a member of an old aristocratic family, went to Paris to make contact with the revolutionary government. In Latin America a 16 year old from Caracas, Simon Bolivar, also from an aristocratic family, defended the revolution in an

argument with the Spanish viceroy in Panama in 1799; while a Mexican priest, Miguel Hidalgo, won students such as Jose Maria Morelos to the ideals of the revolution.

Revolution at bayonet point

Such enthusiasm meant advancing French armies found many local allies, at first, as they crossed the borders into Belgium, Holland, northern Italy and southern Germany. Middle class opponents of monarchist or oligarchic governments described themselves as 'Jacobins'—and even after the Jacobins had fallen from power this remained the general name for supporters of the revolutionary forces. Whenever the French army advanced, these forces would work with it to carry through from above reforms similar to those enforced, from below, in France—abolition of serfdom and feudal dues, separation of church and state, confiscation of church lands, abolition of internal customs posts, and the establishment of more or less democratic assemblies. But problems soon began to arise.

One of Robespierre's arguments against Brissot had been that the peoples of other countries would not welcome foreign invaders, however well intentioned. He was soon to be proved right, despite the initial enthusiasm of many intellectuals and some sections of the middle class. The victorious French army could only maintain itself by pillage and by imposing tribute on countries it conquered. What began as a war of liberation passed through a bitter period as a war of revolutionary defence, and ended up as a war of imperial conquest. Napoleon carried the process to its logical conclusion by annexing Belgium, Savoy and German statelets south of the Rhine, replacing democratic assemblies by monarchies and installing his brothers as kings in Italy, Westphalia, Holland and Spain.

Even under Napoleon the French army bulldozed away the remnants of feudalism and, in some cases at least, prepared the ground for the advance of capitalist production. But, without the *sans-culottes* and peasant risings that had been so important in France, its local allies lacked any base among the mass of people. The peasants and urban lower classes gained nothing from the French occupation to make them identify with the new order, since tribute paid to France and the costs of providing for the French army constituted a burden as great as the old feudal payments. The local 'Jacobins' were left high and dry

whenever the French army was forced to withdraw.

This happened everywhere in 1812-14. Napoleon over-extended his empire on two fronts, by trying to place his brother on the Spanish throne and by marching across the north European plain to Moscow. It was a disastrous strategy. His troops managed to put down a popular uprising in Madrid, but from then on were harassed by guerilla fighters as British troops led by Wellington fought their way across the Iberian Peninsula. Meanwhile, the occupation of a deserted Moscow turned into a disaster as enemy troops and harsh winter conditions destroyed his 1,000 mile supply lines. So unpopular were the French armies in the occupied territories that Spanish and Prussian liberals allied themselves with monarchist forces to drive them out in what seemed like wars of 'national liberation'—only to find themselves betrayed by victorious kings and driven down into the depths of oppression and depression expressed in the paintings of Goya's 'dark period'.

Napoleon's defeat (or rather his two defeats, since he staged an amazing 100 day comeback in 1815 before being defeated at Waterloo) allowed all the kings, princes and aristocrats to return in style, creating a weird half-world in which the old superstructures of the 18th century *ancien régimes* were imposed on social structures which had been transformed—at least in France, northern Italy and western Germany. This is the world brilliantly portrayed in the novels *The Red and the Black* and *The Charterhouse of Parma* by Stendhal (a former commissary in Napoleon's army), as well as *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexander Dumas (whose father, the son of a black slave, had been a general under Napoleon).

Britain: the birth of a tradition

It was not only in continental Europe that the revolution had a profound impact on political life. It had a mighty influence in Britain. The most important sections of the bourgeoisie had obtained a significant influence over political affairs before 1789 and saw no reason to play with revolution. But the French events stirred wide sections of the masses in the rapidly expanding cities and towns—the ever increasing numbers of craftspeople, journeymen and small shopkeepers, and along with them, some of the new industrial workers of the factories.

Tom Paine's two part defence of the revolution and call for similar constitutional principles in Britain, *The Rights of Man*, sold 100,000 copies. In Sheffield at the end of 1791, 'five or six mechanics… conversing about the enormous high price of provisions' and abuses in government, formed the Sheffield Constitutional Society, dedicated to universal suffrage and annual parliaments. By March 1792 it was 2,000 strong and organised a street celebration involving up to 6,000 after the revolutionary victory at Valmy in the autumn.[50] Similar societies were launched in Manchester, Stockport, Birmingham, Coventry and Norwich, with varying degrees of success.[51] The London Corresponding Society, founded by shoemaker Thomas Hardy at the beginning of 1792, mushroomed until it had 5,000 members organised in 48 'divisions' (branches)[52] and was establishing a national network with the provincial societies.

The movement was big enough to worry the British government as it prepared for war against the French Revolution at the end of 1792. Local bigwigs in Birmingham had already incited a mob to attack a dinner of local reformers commemorating the fall of the Bastille in 1791, sacking houses, burning down meeting places and driving people like the chemist Joseph Priestley from the city.[53] Now the government encouraged the anti-Jacobin agitation nationally. Loyalist societies were set up in each locality to whip up a nationalist war fever.

There was also a vicious crackdown against any attempt to propagandise democratic ideas. Tom Paine, charged with treason for *The Rights of Man*, was forced to flee the country. Two leaders of the Scottish Friends of the People, the young lawyer Thomas Muir and the English Unitarian preacher Thomas Palmer, were sentenced to transportation after a notoriously biased trial,[54] as were three delegates to a 'Scottish constitutional convention'. Thomas Hardy and a dozen other London leaders were put on trial for treason and Hardy's wife died as a mob attacked their home. When a sympathetic jury acquitted the defendants, parliament suspended *habeas corpus* so that activists could be imprisoned without facing a jury.

At certain points the agitation of the English and Scottish Jacobins met with a wide response among the urban classes. They could gather thousands to open air meetings, and some of the leaders of the great naval mutinies which shook the British navy in 1797 were clearly under the influence of their ideas. But the mass of the middle class were

prepared to unite with the landowning class in defence of the profitable status quo, giving the government a free hand to crush the movement. By the late 1790s it was very difficult for anyone to express sympathy for revolutionary ideals.

Yet the agitation of the Sheffield Constitutional Society, the London Corresponding Society, the Scottish Friends of the People and others did have one important effect. As Edward Thompson showed in his *The Making of the English Working Class*, it helped create a tradition that was to have great effect in the years 1815-48.

Ireland's Republican rising

The example of France had an even greater direct impact in Ireland, Britain's oldest colony, giving birth to a revolutionary nationalist tradition that persists today.

English governments had consolidated their hold over the island after smashing resistance in the 1650s by settling Protestant peasants (mainly from Scotland) on land taken from native Catholics in the province of Ulster. The descendants of these peasant settlers lived in fear of being driven from the land by a Catholic rising, leading them to feel a community of interest with the great Anglo-Irish landowners, who were also Protestants. They were frightened to challenge the policies imposed on them by British governments in case it encouraged the dispossessed Catholics. The Protestant parliament in Dublin acted, until the 1770s, as a rubber stamp for policies made in London.

Attitudes began to change in the last quarter of the 18th century. The American War of Independence gave the Dublin parliament increased bargaining power, since British governments wanted a militia of Irish volunteers to ward off any French attack. For a time, it seemed the Irish parliament could act in the interests of Irish landowners and businessmen. But these hopes were dashed once the war ended, and there was much bitterness against Britain, especially among the growing Protestant commercial middle class of Belfast.

These feelings coalesced in an enthusiastic response to the French Revolution. Volunteers began to drill, demand a constitutional convention and back Catholic emancipation. In 1792 'the town of Belfast, now foremost in the fight for democracy, celebrated by a grand procession and festival the anniversary of the French Revolution… A republican spirit pervaded the whole atmosphere.' Posters attacked

religious sectarianism: 'Superstitious jealousy, that is the cause of the Irish Bastille: let us unite and destroy it'.[55] One of the organisers of this event, the young Protestant lawyer Wolfe Tone, formed a new radical organisation, the United Irishmen, at a dinner in Belfast with a dozen men, mainly businessmen (a draper, a linen manufacturer, a tanner, a clerk, an apothecary, a watchmaker, and three merchants).[56]

In Ireland, as in Britain, there was an attempt to destroy the new Jacobinism with repression. Laws passed on English orders by the Irish upper class forbade the carrying of arms and outlawed the United Irishmen. Forced underground, the organisation became increasingly revolutionary. Its aim became the overthrow of British rule, which had kept Ireland economically backward and riven it along religious lines. There had to be a revolutionary rising to create a modern nation, as in France. The United Irishmen took it for granted that this would be a capitalist nation, but one which had thrown off the dead weight of foreign rule and native aristocracy. Achieving this, Tone increasingly saw, depended on the middle class, mainly Protestant United Irishmen rousing the Catholic peasantry, which had a long tradition of anti-landlord agitation through armed, underground 'defender' groups.

The numbers prepared to back a rising were greater than those at the disposal of the British government—100,000 compared with about 65,000.[57] But they were much less well trained and armed. Success seemed to depend on getting military support from France.

The rising took place in 1798. But the French support was too little and came too late, with the landing of 1,100 troops in Mayo in August. By then the authorities had been able to arrest the leaders of the movement and forced those rebels who were already armed into premature action. Risings in Wexford and Antrim were crushed. The repression which followed made the terror of the French Revolution seem like a child's game. Reprisals against those suspected of supporting the rising cost an estimated 30,000 lives.[58]

That was not the end of the story. As tension had mounted in the three years before the rising, the authorities had deliberately encouraged groups of Protestants to organise hate campaigns against Catholics. Local clashes between Catholic and Protestant peasants in the village of Diamond in Antrim in the autumn of 1795 had been followed by the founding of a semi-secret Protestant organisation, the Orange Order. The Anglo-Irish landlords despised peasants of any sort and stood aside from the new body at first. But they soon saw

it as invaluable in warding off the threat of revolt:

> Gradually during 1796 and 1797…the Orange Order was transformed from a small, scattered and socially unacceptable fringe organisation, despised by the ruling class, into a powerful province-wide society, approved and actively sustained by some of the highest individuals in Britain and Ireland.[59]

General Lake, commander of the armed forces, presided at Orange processions, and armed Orange groups increasingly worked alongside government troops and militia to punish supporters of the United Irishmen. They presented rebel Protestants with a choice—to be whipped and tortured or join the Orange Order to whip and torture other rebels.[60] In such ways, the British authorities and Anglo-Irish landowners not only crushed the rising, but gave an enormous boost to sectarian religious feeling.

The two political traditions which have dominated Irish politics for the last 200 years, Republicanism and Orangeism, were born as offshoots of a Europe-wide struggle of revolution and counter-revolution.

For the time being, however, this was hardly a matter of concern for the 'civilised' statesmen of the British government. Having successfully prosecuted a policy of divide and rule against the United Irishmen, two years later they were able to persuade the Irish parliament to vote itself out of existence. Irish agriculture and industry had been severely damaged in the past by exclusion from British-controlled markets. Now they were deprived of any political means of protecting themselves, while the Anglo-Irish landowners extracted huge rents and consumed them in unproductive idleness in England. The British government believed it had solved the 'Irish question'—a belief that was to recur every 30 or 40 years right through to the present.

Haiti's black Jacobins

Counter-revolution did not succeed everywhere. On an island 3,000 miles away across the Atlantic, in Haiti, the outcome was very different to that in Ireland. But it took a decade of bitter uprisings, wars and civil wars to attain.

Saint Domingue, the western part of the island of Hispaniola, had been the richest prize in the French monarchy's colonial empire. Its plantations produced more sugar than all of Europe's other Caribbean

and American colonies put together, and poured wealth into the pockets both of plantation owners and the commercial capitalists of French ports like Nantes and Bordeaux.

The source of this wealth lay in the relentless labour of 500,000 black slaves, whose work so destroyed their lives that only continual imports from Africa maintained their numbers. Lording it over them were 30,000 whites—a much smaller proportion of the population than in any of the North American states—and alongside these lived a similar number of free mixed race 'mulattos', some of whom had become quite wealthy and might even be slave-owners.

The relatively small numbers of the white population did not prevent it having great pretensions. It felt the wealth of the colony was a result of its own efforts and resented the rules imposed on its trade by the *exclusive*—France's version of the mercantile system. Accordingly, it felt impelled to advance its own demands for 'liberty' as part of the agitation of the well-to-do middle class of the 'home country' in the spring and summer of 1789. News of the storming of the Bastille was followed by armed defiance of the royal governor—although the colonial insurgents had no intention of applying the revolution's slogans of 'liberty' and 'equality' to the black slaves or even the free mulattos.

Although only 7 percent of the population, the whites were very much divided. The 'small whites', owning perhaps three or four slaves each, could feel as bitter at the humiliation they endured at the hands of the 'big white' plantation owner as the French middle class at the aristocracy. The planters, keen to have a free hand to decide with whom they traded, were not going to let the 'small whites' exercise political control. And both groups were outraged when the French assembly, in its revolutionary exuberance, decreed equal rights for all free men, including the mulattos and free blacks—although it carefully avoided any mention of slavery. Soon there was near civil war between shifting alliances of the four groups which made up the free population—the supporters of the governor, the big whites, the small whites and the mulattos.

All of them expected the black slaves to continue working, suffering, receiving punishment and dying as if nothing had changed. They were sorely mistaken. The slaves seized the chance to rebel—setting fire to plantations, killing slave-owners, forming armed bands to fight off the white militia and spread the revolt, and throwing up leaders of their own. The most prominent, the former livestock steward Toussaint

L'Ouverture, was soon skilfully manoeuvring between the rival white groups, the mulattos, an invading Spanish army from the other half of the island, and successive representatives from the Girondins in France. Then, just as the *sans-culottes* were sweeping the Jacobins to power in France, a British military force landed in Saint Domingue.

What happened next had much wider implications than just the future of Saint Domingue. Important sections of the British ruling class, influenced by the arguments of Adam Smith, had been coming to the conclusion that slavery's time was past. After all, they had already lost the sugar plantations of North America and their West Indian sugar plantations were much less important than those of France. The government of William Pitt had given some encouragement to the anti-slavery campaign of William Wilberforce. But the prospect of taking over Saint Domingue, the most important of all the slave economies, changed its mind and it prepared to embrace slavery enthusiastically. Victory in this attempt would have given a new impetus to slavery throughout the world.

The upward surge of the revolution in France which brought the Jacobins to power had equally important implications for the slave rebellion. Many of the Girondin leaders had, personally, been committed opponents of slavery and members of the Society of the Friends of the Blacks formed in 1788. They were mainly journalists or lawyers inspired by Enlightenment ideas. But their most important political base lay with the commercial bourgeoisie of the western French ports, and these were vehemently against any measures which would hit their profits. Having propagandised the anti-slavery argument, the Girondins were not prepared to put it into practice. By contrast the popular forces which swept the Jacobins forward had no material interest in slavery and readily identified the suffering of the slaves with their own suffering. At the same time, the middle class Jacobin leaders, terrified of military defeat at the hands of a coalition including Britain, could see the advantage of encouraging slave revolts on the British islands of the Caribbean.

On 4 February 1794 the Jacobin-dominated convention decreed the abolition of slavery in all French lands, as its president gave a fraternal kiss to black and mulatto emissaries from Saint Domingue. An alliance had been formed between two revolutions that was to shatter Pitt's hopes of enlarging British capitalism's stake in slavery. The British expeditionary force of 60,000 troops suffered greater casualties than

Wellington's peninsular army a decade later. The balance of material calculation in the British parliament shifted again. It gave the opponents of the slave trade a new hearing and voted to ban the trade in 1807.

Unfortunately this was not the end of the matter for the ex-slaves of Saint Domingue. The shift to the right in France after Thermidor gave new influence to the old slave-owners and their mercantile allies. As Napoleon prepared to crown himself emperor, he also schemed to reimpose slavery in the colonial empire. He sent a fleet with 12,000 troops to seize control of Saint Domingue from Toussaint L'Ouverture's forces. The war which followed was easily as bitter as the war against the British. At one point the French army seemed to have won after Toussaint, mistakenly trying to conciliate with the enemy, was kidnapped and died in a French prison. It was left to one of his former lieutenants, Dessalines, to rally black resistance and defeat Napoleon's army just as Toussaint had defeated the British army.

Saint Domingue became the independent black state of Haiti. It was a poor state—15 years of almost continual warfare had done enormous damage. The sugar economy which had produced so much wealth for a few could not be restored without near slavery—and although Dessalines's successor, Christophe, tried to impose this, the people would not have it. They might be poor, but they were freer than their fellow blacks in Jamaica, Cuba, Brazil or North America.

Latin America's first revolutions

It was the freedom of Haiti that attracted a visit in 1815 from the Venezuelan who had argued so vociferously for the principles of the revolution at the age of 16—Bolivar. Now he was one of the leaders of a revolt which was challenging Spanish rule across Latin America.

The revolt, like that of Haiti, was detonated by events in Europe. In 1808 Napoleon had installed his brother Joseph as king of Spain after the abdication of the feeble Bourbon king, Charles IV. This provoked a revolt marked by uprisings in Madrid and massive guerilla activity in the countryside as well as setpiece battles waged by remnants of the Spanish army with British support. Much of the dynamism of the revolt came from deeply religious peasants led by priests horrified at any challenge to the feudal practices of the nobility and church and

determined to reimpose an absolute monarchy under Charles's son Ferdinand—complete with the Inquisition. But for a period, a *junta* (council) of the liberal bourgeoisie of Cádiz was able to pose as the national focus for the revolt, even though its ideas were anathema to the forces involved in the fighting in most parts of the country.

The result was that not just Spain but its whole empire was without a coherent government for six years. In the Americas there was a sudden power vacuum all the way from California to Cape Horn. A variety of political forces set about trying to fill this and, inevitably, ended up in bitter wars with one another.

Over the previous 300 years the original Spanish settlers had, like the British in North America and the French in Saint Domingue, begun to develop interests of their own which clashed with those of the empire's rulers. The political crisis in Spain seemed to provide the opportunity to assert those interests.

The colonial viceroys, pledged to the cause of the Spanish monarchy, were determined to resist such demands, had troops at their disposal, and could rely on the church for further backing. The viceroys also had something else going for them—the splits within colonial society were even greater than they had been in North America. Vast areas of Latin America were dominated by great landowners, who had established essentially feudal forms of control over the indigenous peoples. Meanwhile, in the cities there were merchants whose fortunes came from trade with Spain rather than other parts of Latin America, a middle class which believed the crown and the landowners alike were cramping economic advance, and a mass of artisans, workers, and, in some regions, black slaves.

Such was the situation when Bolivar, himself from a family of large landowners, took part in the first insurrection in Venezuela against Spanish rule in 1810—just as 2,000 miles away the revolutionary priest Hidalgo was leading a rising in the Mexican town of Guadalajara. The risings enjoyed initial success and then were crushed. Hidalgo was executed and Bolivar forced to flee for his life. The pattern was repeated as Bolivar staged another rising in Caracas, only to be defeated again (and to seek support in Haiti), while Morelos took up the banner of Hidalgo and was executed in turn. Bolivar was successful at his third attempt—marching from Venezuela, through Nueva Granada (now Colombia) into Bolivia and meeting with the 'liberator' of Argentina, San Martin, before going on to join with

the Chilean 'liberator' O'Higgins to drive the Spanish crown from Peru. Meanwhile, a third revolt in Mexico finally forced the Spanish to concede independence. Yet the victories were sour for those driven by the ideals of Bolivar and Hidalgo. They had embraced the values of the French Revolution and aimed not merely at getting rid of the crown, but at ending feudalism, freeing the slaves and establishing a full bourgeois republic. Hidalgo had even gone so far as to rouse peasants to revolt with talk of dividing the land, while Bolivar followed his victories by calling a 'Continental Congress' in Panama to establish a 'United States' of Latin America.

The great landowners who dominated the continent were not interested. It had been their opposition to such radical talk that led to Bolivar's initial defeats and Hidalgo's execution. Although they eventually hailed Bolivar and Hidalgo's successors as 'liberators', they also ensured that independence was on their own terms. Land reform never came, power remained in the hands of regional oligarchies, and schemes to establish a single Latin American republic to rival the United States were stillborn. Despite his successes and the statues of him which adorn every town in Venezuela, Bolivar died a disappointed man.

Latin America remained very much as it had been before independence—a continent of a few outstanding colonial cities with a 17th and 18th century splendour to rival many in Europe, surrounded by vast hinterlands of great *latifundia* estates worked by near-serfs. Its 'nations' were freed from Spanish rule but still dependent to a greater or lesser degree on foreign powers. Mexico was to be invaded by the US and France in the course of the 19th century, while Britain was to exercise a dominating influence over countries like Argentina and Chile. In each Latin American country oligarchic cliques plotted against one another, staged coups, ran rival 'Liberal' and 'Conservative' parties, and preserved social structures characterised by extreme privilege on the one hand and vast, stagnating pools of poverty on the other.

Chapter 4

The retreat of reason

In 1789 revolutionary enthusiasm had swept many intellectual circles influenced by the Enlightenment. But the feeling was not universal. Voices were soon heard denouncing what was happening as an assault on civilisation. Their complaint was not about the terror, which was three years off. Lafayette's National Guard was still in tight control of Paris, the king was still appointing governments, even if they were responsible to the assembly, and Robespierre was still denouncing capital punishment. The hostility was to the very suggestion that the mass of people should exercise any say over the affairs of state.

'The swinish multitude' was undermining the very basis of civilisation according to Edmund Burke in Britain, in a text that became—and remains—the bible of counter-revolution:

> The glory of Europe is extinguished forever. Never, never more shall we behold the generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission to dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive even in servitude itself, the spirit of exalted freedom.[61]

Burke had not previously been reckoned a dyed in the wool conservative. He had opposed British policy in America and had damned the behaviour of the British conquerors of Bengal. Tom Paine, returning to London from America in the late 1780s, regarded him as a friend. But the mere hint of mass involvement in political life was too much for him. His denunciation, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, appeared in 1790 and was a polemic aimed at uniting landed property, moneyed wealth and the 'cultivated classes' against any idea that artisans and farmers, let alone 'servants' and labourers, should rule. That meant rejecting each and every concession to liberal doctrines. Once sympathetic to the abolition of slavery, Burke now denounced abolitionism as 'a shred of the accursed web of Jacobinism'.[62] In a later writing, he insisted Tom Paine deserved 'the refutation of criminal justice'.[63]

The *Reflections* was an instant success among the upper classes—50,000 copies were sold in England and numerous foreign translations appeared within a couple of years. George III loved it, Catherine the Great was enthusiastic, Stanislav, the last king of Poland, was full of praise. None of them, of course, had any experience of 'servitude' or had ever done anything to promote the 'spirit of exalted freedom'.

Burke's writings in England were soon matched on the continent by those of de Maistre. He not only insisted that rulers should be 'separated from the people by birth or wealth, for once the people have lost their respect for authority all government will come to an end',[64] but extended the argument into an attack on the whole basis of the Enlightenment. 'The greatest crime a nobleman can commit', he wrote, 'is to attack the Christian dogmas'.[65]

He was not alone in warning that challenges to old prejudices could lead to challenges from exploited classes to their masters. Gibbon now saw a place for the absurd Christian beliefs he had savaged in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. He wrote of 'the danger of exposing old superstitions to the contempt of the blind and ignorant multitude'.[66]

Not merely the revolution, but the very foundations of the Enlightenment were under attack—and this intensified as the advance of the revolutionary armies made all the crowned heads and aristocrats of Europe quiver. They turned to obscurantist beliefs as a bulwark against the spread of reasoning among the masses, and took the most repressive police measures against those who tried to continue the Enlightenment tradition.

The tide of unreason was strengthened by the disillusionment among many whose hopes of 1789, dented by the second wave of terror, turned sour with Thermidor and collapsed into despair with the crowning of Napoleon. Their mood became one of cynicism or even reaction. 'Rulers are much the same in all ages and under all forms of government,' wrote Coleridge in 1797. The German poet Hölderlin suggested the hope of a better world was in itself an evil—'What has transformed the state into hell is precisely those men who tried to transform it into heaven'.[67] Even those who refused to betray the hopes of 1789 generally abandoned direct confrontation with the old order. The field was increasingly open for those who preached blind faith in religious myths and monarchic delusions.

Whereas 50 years earlier Hume could express openly sceptical views, Shelley was expelled from Oxford at the age of 18 for defending atheism.

Voltaire had exposed the absurdities of the Old Testament, but not until the 1840s did people like David Strauss resume the attack on the Bible. Buffon and Lamarck in France and Erasmus Darwin in England had been able in the 18th century to advance the notion that species might evolve. But the atmosphere in Britain even in the 1830s and 1840s was such that Erasmus's grandson Charles delayed 20 years before revealing to the world that he believed this too and had a new theory as to how it happened.[68] The Scottish Enlightenment thinkers Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson had expounded ideas about the development of human society from hunting-gathering to the present. But this was forgotten by those who simply repeated phrases from *The Wealth of Nations*, while seeing society as god-given. It was as if there was an attempt to freeze people's thinking for the best part of half a century.

The swing from Enlightenment to obscurantism was not total. There continued to be many advances in mathematics, physics and chemistry—encouraged more by the spread of industry and the needs of war. Policy clashes between industrialists seeking profits and landowners interested only in higher rents led David Ricardo in England to develop Smith's understanding of capitalism. The German philosopher Hegel synthesised many Enlightenment insights into an overview of the development of human understanding, although in a way which separated this development from any material underpinning. Walter Scott, Honoré de Balzac, Stendhal and Jane Austen advanced the novel as the characteristic way of giving literary expression to the dilemmas of the middle classes in the emerging capitalist world. 'Romanticism' in literature, music and art celebrated feelings and emotions rather than reason. This often led to the glorification of an allegedly 'golden' obscurantist past, but in societies which had not cast off the remnants of feudalism it could also lead to a glorification of traditions of folk opposition to tyranny and oppression. A few 'Utopian' thinkers like Saint-Simon, Fourier and, in Britain, the successful pioneering industrial manager Robert Owen, drew up blueprints for how society could be better organised—although they were unable to point to any agency for translating these into reality. It required a new generation, born in the late 1810s and early 1820s, to build on the heritage of the Enlightenment and the early revolutionary years. But in the meantime, the world was changing dramatically, despite all the attempts of the Restoration monarchies to reimpose 18th century patterns of life.

Chapter 5

The industrial revolution

'In my establishment in New Lanark, mechanical power and operations superintended by about 2,000 young persons and adults…now complete as much work as 60 years before would have required the entire working population of Scotland,' according to Robert Owen, the industrialist and future socialist, in 1815.[69]

He may have been exaggerating somewhat, but he was hammering home an important truth. Changes were occurring in the ways human beings produced things on a scale that had not occurred since hunter-gatherers first took up agriculture 10,000 years earlier. At first these changes were concentrated in the north of England, the Lowlands of Scotland and parts of Belgium. But they were soon to shape developments everywhere.

They involved a series of interconnected innovations: the employment of complex machines; the making of tools from hardened steel instead of wood, easily bent brass or easily broken cast iron; the smelting of steel in coal furnaces, not charcoal ones which had to be moved as local forests were chopped down; and the use of coal to provide, via the steam engine, a massive new source of motive power to turn machinery.

The combination of the new machines, the new metallurgy and the new energy source increased immeasurably what people could produce. It also cut to a fraction the time it took people and goods to move from one place to another.

In the late 18th century it still took two weeks to travel from Boston to Philadelphia, a ship could be stuck in harbour for a fortnight or more waiting for the wind to change, and famines regularly occurred because of the difficulty of moving foodstuffs from one area to another. Wheeled vehicles had been known in Eurasia and Africa for more than 3,000 years, but could not be used on rough or boggy terrain. The mule train was often a more important means of transporting goods than the cart. In Europe mud roads would often have a stone

parapet down the middle to make movement easier for horses or mules but not for vehicles. In Mogul India bulk transport on land relied on vast herds of oxen, each with baggage on its back.[70]

Now vast armies of labourers using relatively cheap steel picks and shovels were put to work building canals and the first solid, smooth-surfaced roads to link major towns. Mine owners discovered that they could speed up the movement of coal by using vehicles with grooved wheels on rails—at first made of wood but soon of iron. Engineers applied the steam engine to powering ships and the rail vehicles as well as factories. In 1830 the first passenger train ran from Manchester to Liverpool.[71] Human beings could suddenly move at a speed they had scarcely imagined. Goods made in one city could be in another in a couple of hours instead of a couple of days. There was the potential for armies to move from one end of a country to the other overnight.

There was also accelerating change in agriculture, with the final elimination of the peasantry in Britain through enclosures and with the near-universal adoption of the previous century's new crops and new forms of cultivation—the turnip, the potato, wheat instead of oats or barley, new grasses, a more efficient plough and improved rotation of crops. The effect was to increase food output, but also to force unprecedented numbers of people to seek employment as wage labourers, either on the capitalist farms or in the new industries.

A class of a new sort

There was a transformation of the working and living conditions of millions of people. They began to crowd into towns and cities on a scale unknown in history. So long as industry relied upon charcoal as a fuel and water and wind for power, much of it was confined to rural areas. Coal and steam changed this. The modern factory with its giant chimneys began to dominate the landscape of the area around Manchester in Lancashire and Glasgow in Scotland. By the 1830s Britain was the most urban society humanity had known. In 1750 there had been only two cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants—London and Edinburgh. By 1851 there were 29 and the majority of people lived in towns.[72]

The transformation to modern industrial production was not instantaneous. As in many Third World countries today, the growth of

major industry was accompanied by a massive growth of small industry based upon 'sweated labour'. The industrial revolution in England took root first in textiles and mining. But in textiles it was cotton spinning that was concentrated in factories, employing mainly women and children, while weaving was still done by handloom workers in rural areas. Their numbers increased massively, as did the numbers employed in many pre-industrial urban trades. And there was a huge increase in the mining workforce, usually based in villages rather than towns, albeit villages located by rivers, canals or railway lines.

People had their lives transformed as they became increasingly dependent on cash relations with the capitalist class for a livelihood. The burgeoning number of independent handloom weavers in the 1790s was turned into a desperate mass of people barely able to scratch a livelihood in the 1840s by competition from new factories using power-looms.

There has been long discussion among economic historians on 'the standard of living' question—on whether people's lives deteriorated on entering industry and the city. However, much of the discussion is beside the point. People moved to the city—as they move to Third World cities like Bombay or Jakarta today—because it seemed the only alternative to misery in the countryside. But the city could not provide a secure and comfortable future. People might have skills one day which, with luck, would enable them to sell their labour power, but they could find these skills redundant the next—as the handloom workers did. Change had usually been slow, if painful, in the rural economy of the early 18th century. In the urban economy of the 19th century it was often rapid and devastating. Production was for the markets, and markets could expand and contract at breathtaking speed. During booms people would abandon old occupations and village homes for the lure of seemingly 'easy money' in the city. During slumps they would find themselves stranded, no longer with a small piece of land to provide a supply of food, however meagre, if they lost their jobs.

Sections of the new workers did acquire skills to stabilise their situation for periods of time. But even they often had to struggle bitterly against attempts by employers to worsen their conditions, especially when trade slumped or new technologies were available. And there was always a sizeable section of the urban population living in 'pauperdom'—too sick, too old or too unskilled to make it even

into the world of semi-permanent work.

This new labour force was the source of massive wealth. But it was wealth for others. Even the statisticians who claim to show a rise in the living standards of the majority of the working population cannot pretend that it measured up to the advances which occurred in productivity. While the new working class had to cope somehow, living just above or below subsistence level, the sort of people who inhabit, say, a Jane Austen novel, wined, dined, hunted, courted each other and supped tea in beautiful surroundings. In the hungry years after 1815 some 12 percent of national output went as interest to holders of the national debt.

Those who lived off its sweat saw the new workforce as presenting a continual problem—how to make it work as they wished. Workers brought up in the countryside were used to the rhythm of the seasons, to short periods of intense labour interspersed with longer periods with opportunities for relaxation. They would not only take Sunday off but also, if they could, Monday (known as 'Saint Monday' in England and 'Blue Monday' in Germany). Breaking such habits became an obsession for the factory owners. The machines had to be worked from sunrise to sunset, and longer still once the invention of gaslights made night work possible. Clocks installed in factories were there to hammer home the new saying, 'Time is money'.[73] Human nature itself had to be changed so that people would come to think there was nothing strange about spending all their daylight hours in a closed room without seeing the sun, the trees and flowers or hearing the birds.

The propertied classes believed any attempt to alleviate poverty would undermine the new discipline. If poor people could obtain any sort of income without working, they would become 'idle, lazy, fraudulent and worthless', lose 'all habits of prudence, of self respect and self restraint' and develop a 'spirit of laziness and insubordination'.[74]

Thomas Malthus had conveniently provided a 'proof' that the living standards of the poor could not be improved. They would simply have more children until they were worse off than before, he said. Jean-Baptiste Say, a populariser of Adam Smith's ideas, had also 'proved' that unemployment was impossible in a genuinely free market. If people could not find work it was because they demanded wages higher than the market could bear. Poor relief, by offering a cushion against destitution, simply encouraged this disastrous practice. The

only way to deal with poverty was to make the poor poorer! Conditions had to be such that the 'able bodied' unemployed would do virtually anything rather than apply for relief. The Poor Law Amendment Act, passed in Britain in 1834, set out to establish these conditions by limiting relief to those who were prepared to be confined in prison-like workhouses—nicknamed 'Bastilles' by those they threatened.

It was not only the physical lives of the workforce that changed with industrialisation. There was also a change in mentality. Life in crowded conurbations produced very different attitudes from those in isolated villages. It could lead to loneliness and despair as well as poverty. But it could also lead to new feelings of class community, as people found themselves living and working alongside unprecedented numbers of other people with the same problems and in the same conditions. What is more, it gave people a greater awareness of the wider world than was typical in the countryside. Workers were much more likely to be able to read and write than their peasant forebears, and through reading and writing to know about distant places and events.

The new world of work brought with it a new form of family and a radical change in the position of women. The peasant wife had always played a productive role, but it was usually one subordinated to her husband, who was responsible for most transactions with society outside the family. By contrast, in the first flood of the industrial revolution it was women (and children) who were concentrated in their hundreds and thousands in factories. Conditions were horrible—so horrible that many dreamed of finding a man who could free them from the double toil of sweated labour and childcare. But for the first time women also had money of their own and a degree of independence from husbands or lovers. The 'millgirls' of Lancashire were famed for standing up for themselves, as were the *grisettes* of the east end of Paris for taunting the police and challenging soldiers. In revolutionising production, capitalism was also beginning to overturn attitudes which had helped sustain the oppression of women for thousands of years.

Objects and subjects

The new class of industrial workers did not simply suffer. It soon showed it could fight back. In the 17th and 18th centuries the concentration of certain artisan trades in towns and cities had been expressed in the role played by apprentices and journeymen in the

English Revolution, by the 'mechanics' of New York and Pennsylvania in the American Revolution, and, above all, by the *sans-culottes* in the French Revolution. Now people were being concentrated on a much greater scale, in huge workplaces grouped in conurbations of unprecedented size. It provided them with possibilities of resistance greater than those open to any previous exploited class—and it was resistance that could encourage the growth of ideas opposed to existing society in its entirety.

The radical agitator John Thelwell had observed in 1796 what the future might hold:

> Monopoly and the hideous accumulation of capital in a few hands…carry in their own enormity the seeds of cure… Whatever presses men together…though it may generate some vices is favourable to the diffusion of knowledge, and ultimately promotive of human liberty. Hence every large workshop and manufactory is a sort of political society, which no act of parliament can silence and no magistrate disperse.[75]

His prophecy was confirmed within two decades. A new wave of agitation began, fitfully, in Britain towards the end of the Napoleonic Wars. It was eventually to achieve greater dimensions and to be sustained over a longer period than any wave of protest before. It arose from various currents—the radical artisans of London who were heirs of the movement of the 1790s; the stocking maker and weaver 'Luddites' whose wages were being forced down by the introduction of machines; and the illegal trade unions of skilled workers, cotton spinners and farm labourers (whose 'Tolpuddle Martyr' leaders were transported to Australia). The struggle went through different phases—machine breaking, mass demonstrations like that attacked by the gentry militia at 'Peterloo' in Manchester in 1819, big strikes, agitation for the vote alongside the middle class in 1830-32, attacks on workhouses after 1834, protests at the establishment of the police forces designed to keep a grip on working class neighbourhoods. These struggles threw up a succession of leaders who organised, agitated, propagandised and began, in some cases, to turn certain of the ideas of Adam Smith and David Ricardo against the capitalists. The movement also had newspapers of its own like the *Black Dwarf* and the *Poor Man's Guardian*—papers whose owners faced repeated arrest as they reported the agitation and challenged capitalists and landowners alike.

The Chartists

In the late 1830s these different streams of agitation flowed together to give rise to the Chartist movement. Here was something never before seen in history—a movement of the people whose labour kept society going, organised from below, not just as a one-off riot or revolt, but a permanent organisation, with its own democratic structures. Its principal paper, the *Northern Star*, founded in Leeds in 1837, soon had a circulation as great as the main ruling class paper, the *Times*, and its articles were read out loud for the illiterate in workshops and pubs in every industrial area.

The history taught in British schools often treats Chartism as a minor movement, damned by its eventual failure. But it was the biggest mass movement in Britain in the 19th century. Three times it threw the ruling class into a panic. In 1838-39 hundreds of thousands of workers attended mass meetings at which the points of the Chartist programme were presented and debated; tens of thousands began to drill in expectation of a popular rising; the government was worried enough to send the military to the industrial areas; and there was an attempted armed rising in Newport, south Wales.[76] Then in 1842 the first general strike in history occurred in Lancashire as workers marched from factory to factory, putting out furnaces and spreading their action.[77] Finally, in 1848, roused to new action by industrial depression in Britain, famine in Ireland and a wave of revolutions in Europe, masses of workers prepared again for confrontation. Their hopes were disappointed. The state stood firm, the lower middle class rallied behind it, the Chartist leaders vacillated, and the anger which had led 100,000 to gather in Kennington, south London, dissipated—but not before the government had turned half of London into an armed camp.[78]

Like every living movement, Chartism comprised a mixture of different groups holding different ideas. Its formal programme—the points of the Charter—was one of far-reaching democratic reform based on universal male suffrage and annual parliaments rather than on a socialist reorganisation of the economy. Its leaders were divided between adherents of 'moral force', who believed in winning over the existing rulers, and the adherents of 'physical force', who believed in overthrowing them. Even the physical force party had no real idea of how to achieve its goal. Yet in the dozen odd years of its existence

Chartism showed something quite dramatic. The bourgeoisie had not yet finished fighting its own battles to clear away the debris of feudalism in much of Europe. But it was already creating alongside it a new exploited class capable of turning the revolutionary language of the French Revolution against the bourgeoisie itself.

This was as important for world history as the French Revolution and the industrial revolution had been. The success of Britain's capitalists in industrialising was encouraging others elsewhere to try to emulate them. There were already a few factories in France and parts of southern Germany before 1789. Now islands of industry were emerging not only in these countries, but in northern Italy, Catalonia, Bohemia, the northern United States, and even in the Russian Urals and on the Nile. Everywhere there was the smoke of the new factories there were also outbursts of spontaneous anger and defiance from those who laboured in them. In 1830 the Parisian masses took to the streets for the first time since 1795. The advisers of the Bourbon king, Charles X, saw only one way to halt the revolution—to persuade the king to go straight into exile and to wheel on in his place a relative, the 'bourgeois monarch' Louis Philippe of Orleans. The manoeuvre succeeded, but the display of lower class power was enough to inspire a flurry of risings in other parts of Europe—all unsuccessful apart from the one which separated Belgium from Holland to form an independent state under British protection.

The French poet and historian Lamartine commented, 'The proletarian question is the one that will cause a terrible explosion in present day society if society and governments fail to fathom and resolve it'.[79] His prophesy was proven correct 18 years later when the whole of Europe was shaken by revolution and Lamartine himself enjoyed a brief moment of glory.

Chapter 6

The birth of Marxism

'A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of Communism', begins the introduction to one of the most influential pamphlets ever. Two Germans exiled in Paris completed it at the end of 1847. It predicted imminent revolution, and scarcely was the ink dry on the first printed copies than revolution had broken out. But this, alone, does not explain the enormous impact of a work that was soon to be translated into every European language. What enthralled readers then—and still does today—was its ability in a mere 40 or so pages to locate the emergence of the new industrial capitalist society in the overall scheme of human history. It endeavoured to show that it was as transitory as the forms of society which preceded it, and to explain the immense class conflicts which were besetting it even where it had not yet fully disposed of the old feudal order.

The authors, Frederick Engels and Karl Marx, were men of enormous ability. But it was not simply personal genius which ensured they made such an enormous impact—any more than it was the personal genius of Plato or Aristotle, of Confucius or Buddha, of Saul of Tarsus or the prophet Mohammed, of Voltaire or Rousseau, that ensured their place in history. They lived at a place and in a time when all the contradictions of a period came together, and they had at their disposal something the others did not: access to intellectual traditions and scientific advances which enabled them not merely to feel but also to explain these contradictions.

They were both from middle class families in the Prussian Rhineland. Marx's father was a well-to-do government official, of Protestant religion but Jewish upbringing and ancestry. Engels' father was a prosperous manufacturer with factories in the Rhineland and in Manchester. In the Rhineland of the 1830s and 1840s such backgrounds did not necessarily lead to conformity. Capitalism was more developed there than anywhere else in Germany, and the French occupation of only a few years before had swept away the residues of feudal society. But these were still

dominant in the Prussian monarchy which ruled the region. Even among the older middle class there was a desire for 'reforms' which would free them from this burden, and among the younger generation this translated into a spirit of radicalism.

Germany as a whole, like most of the rest of Europe, had gone through a period of intellectual reaction in the first decades of the century. The country's most famous philosopher, Hegel, now wrapped his old belief in the progress of the human spirit through history in mystical, religious clothing and extolled the virtues of the Prussian state (or at least its 'estates'-based constitution of the 1820s). But among the generation who entered the universities in the 1830s and early 1840s there was a turning back to the ideas of the Enlightenment and even the early years of the French Revolution. 'Young Hegelians' such as Bruno Bauer turned Hegel's notion that everything changes through contradiction into a liberal criticism of existing German society. David Strauss extended Voltaire's attack on the Old Testament into a questioning of the New Testament. Ludwig Feuerbach took up the materialist philosophy expounded 80 years before by d'Holbach and Helvetius. Karl Grün won a wide following for his 'true socialist' call for enlightened men of all classes to work together to bring about a better society than either feudalism or capitalism.

Marx and Engels were an integral part of this generation as it tried to come to terms with a society caught between past and present. They studied Hegel, took up the arguments of Feuerbach, delved into the ideas of Helvetius and d'Holbach, and followed up Strauss's criticism of religion. But they did more than that. They also confronted the new industrial capitalism which was making its first, limited inroads. Engels was sent by his father to help manage his Manchester factory and experienced at first hand the clash between the bright future promised by liberal ideals in Germany and the harsh reality of life for workers in Britain's industrial revolution—chronicling these in his *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. He also came across workers who were fighting back against this reality. Arriving in Manchester in the aftermath of the general strike of 1842, he joined the Chartist movement.[80] This in turn led him into contact with the 'Utopian Socialist' criticisms of capitalism contained in the writings of Robert Owen, and to a critical study of the 'political economy' used to justify the existing system.[81]

After finishing his doctorate on Greek atomist philosophy, Marx was

appointed editor of a recently formed liberal paper, the *Rheinische Zeitung*, at the age of 24. This led to clashes with the Prussian censor—the paper was banned after six months—and brought Marx face to face for the first time, he later explained, with 'material questions'. He wrote about the attempts by the nobility to treat the peasants' tradition of gathering wood from the forest as 'theft', and began to consider what property was and where it came from. He was exiled to Paris where a critical reading of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, with its defence of monarchic coercion as the only way to bind together an atomised society, convinced him that a merely liberal constitution could not produce real freedom for people. He began a serious study of the political economists, especially Smith and Ricardo, and wrote his conclusions about the nature of capitalism in an unpublished manuscript.[82]

Alienation

Marx noted that the system as described by Smith, Ricardo and their followers made the lives of people dependent upon the operations of the market. But the market itself was nothing other than the interaction of the products of people's labour. In other words, people had become prisoners of their own past activity. Feuerbach had described the way people worshipped gods they themselves had created as 'alienation'. Marx now applied the same term to the capitalist market:

> The object that labour produces, its product, confronts it as an alien power, independent of the producer. The product of labour is labour that has solidified itself into an object, made itself into a thing, the objectification of labour… In political economy this realisation of labour appears as a loss of reality for the worker, objectification as a loss of the object or enslavement to it…
>
> The more the worker produces, the less he has to consume. The more values he creates, the more valueless, the more unworthy he becomes… [The system] replaces labour by machines, but it throws one section of workers back to a barbarous type of labour, and it turns the other section into a machine… It produces intelligence—but for the worker, stupidity… It is true that labour produces wonderful things for the rich—but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces—but for the worker, hovels. It produces beauty—but for the worker, deformity… The worker only feels himself outside his work,

> and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, when he is working he does not feel at home.[83]

Marx's conclusion was that workers could only overcome this inhumanity by collectively taking control of the process of production, by 'communism'. Human liberation did not lie, as the liberal democrats said, in a mere political revolution to overthrow the remnants of feudalism, but in social revolution to establish a 'communist' society.

Marx and Engels worked together to give practical content to their newly formed ideas through participation in the groups of exiled German socialists in Paris and Brussels. This culminated in them joining an organisation of exiled artisans, the League of the Just, which was soon to be renamed the Communist League—and to commission them to write *The Communist Manifesto*.

In the meantime, they developed their ideas. In the book *The Holy Family* and an unpublished manuscript, *The German Ideology*, they criticised the left Hegelians—and with them the notion inherited from the Enlightenment that society could be changed merely by the struggle of reason against superstition. They used Feuerbach's materialism to do this, but in the process went beyond Feuerbach. He had seen religion as an 'alienated' expression of humanity. But he had not asked why such alienation occurred. Marx and Engels traced this alienation to the efforts of successive generations of human beings to wrest a livelihood from nature and the way this led to differing relations between people. Feuerbach's materialism, they insisted, had neglected the role of human beings in changing the external world as well as being changed by it. This 'dialectical' interaction, they argued, permitted a materialist interpretation of history. They combined it with their critique of political economy to provide an overall view of history and society in *The Communist Manifesto*.

This is not the place to go into the details of that view—especially since this whole book is an attempt to interpret history on the basis of it. But certain important points do need spelling out.

The new world system

Marx's ideas are often dismissed as out of date because they were written a century and a half ago—especially by those who base themselves on a simplistic reading of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*,

published more than 40 years before Marx was born. Yet, written at a time when industrial capitalism was confined to a small area of the western fringe of Eurasia, the *Manifesto* presents a prophetic vision of capitalism filling the world—of what today is called 'globalisation':

> The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere… The bourgeoisie through its exploitation of the world market gives a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of reactionaries it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood… In place of the old local and national seclusion and self sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations…
>
> The bourgeoisie by its rapid improvement of all the instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all…nations into civilisation. The cheap price of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls… It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production… In one word, it creates a world after its own image.

If such passages are to be criticised, it cannot be because they are out of date, but rather because the processes Marx described were only in an embryonic condition when he wrote. Today's world is much more like Marx's picture than was the world of 1847.

Marx and Engels took up the theme of alienation and presented it in much simpler language:

> In bourgeois society, living labour is but a means to increase accumulated labour…the past dominates the present… Capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality.

This damns bourgeois society itself:

> Bourgeois society…that has conjured up such a gigantic means of production and of exchange is like a sorcerer who is no longer able to control the power of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells… It is enough to recall the great commercial crises that by their periodical return put the existence of the entire bourgeois society on

> trial, each time more threateningly… In these crises there breaks out an epidemic that in earlier epochs would have seemed an absurdity—the epidemic of over-production… It appears as if a famine, a universal war of devastation, has cut off the supply of every means of subsistence; industry and commerce seem to have been destroyed. And why? Because there is too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce… And how does the bourgeoisie get out of these crises? On the one hand, by enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by conquest of new markets and by the more thorough exploitation of old ones. That is to say, by preparing the way for more extensive and more destructive crises, and by diminishing the means by which such crises are prevented.

Marx and Engels only had space to give a cursory overview of the crisis and the long term destiny of capitalism in the *Manifesto*. Much of the rest of Marx's life was devoted—through a scrupulous reading of the texts of bourgeois political economy and an intense empirical study of the world's first industrial capitalism, that of Britain—to elaborating how the logic of capitalism, of a world built upon the accumulation and circulation of alienated labour, worked itself out.[84]

Marx and Engels noted an important contrast between capitalism and previous forms of class society. Previous ruling classes looked to enforce conservatism to bolster their rule. But however much capitalists looked to this as a political and ideological option, the economic momentum of their own society continually undercut it:

> The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society… Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and humans[85] are at last compelled to face with sober senses their real conditions of life and their relations with their kind.

Workers and the new system

The *Manifesto* stressed something else about capitalism, and about the working class arising out of it:

> In proportion as the bourgeoisie, ie capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed—a class of labourers who live only so long as they can find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital. These labourers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market.

The working class is concentrated by the development of capitalism itself into a force that can fight back against capitalism:

> With the development of industry, the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more. The various interests and conditions of life within the ranks of the proletariat are more and more equalised, in proportion as machinery eliminates all distinctions of labour, and nearly everywhere wages are reduced to the same low level… Commercial crises make the wages of workers ever more fluctuating. The unceasing improvement of machinery, ever more rapidly developing, makes their livelihood more and more precarious.

Out of this situation develop 'combinations'—trade unions—which begin the organisation of workers into a class. Even if this is:

> …continually being upset by the competition of workers among themselves… The essential condition for the existence and for the sway of the bourgeois class is the formation and augmentation of capital; the condition for capital is wage labour. The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by the revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of modern industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own gravediggers.

These passages, like those on the development of large-scale industry and the world market, were a projection into the future of

developing trends rather than an empirically accurate account of Europe—let alone Africa, Asia and the Americas—in 1847. In France and Germany the industrial working class was still a small proportion of the population, not 'the immense majority acting in the interests of the immense majority' (as another passage described it). In Germany even in 1870 factory workers were only 10 percent of the total workforce. And although they were much more than this in Britain in 1848, there were still large numbers working on the land, in small workshops or as servants. What Marx and Engels saw clearly, however, was that as capital conquered the globe this class would grow.

Their picture is sometimes criticised because it assumed that the growth would be of stereotypical 'proletarians' in large industry. I will return to this point later, in dealing with the history of the last quarter of the 20th century. Here it should be said that although this might have been their assumption, based on Engels' experience of Manchester and of Chartism, it is not built into the logic of their argument. The growth of wage labour in place of peasant or artisan production does not in itself necessitate the growth of one particular form of wage labour. All it implies is that an ever greater proportion of the social workforce will depend for a livelihood on selling their capacity to work (what Marx was later to call their 'labour power'). And the conditions and wages for their work will be determined, on the one hand by the competitive drive of capital, and on the other by the degree to which they fight back against capital. It is besides the point whether they work in factories, offices or call centres, whether they wear overalls, white collars or jeans. Seen in these terms, it is difficult to fault the logic of Marx and Engels' argument at a time when workers of all sorts are told that their livelihoods depend upon the success of firms or countries in 'global competition'.

Marx and Engels half recognised at the end of the *Manifesto* the still undeveloped character of capitalism globally. 'The Communists turn their attention chiefly to Germany because that country is on the eve of a bourgeois revolution,' they wrote. It was, they added, 'bound to be carried out under much more advanced conditions of European civilisation and with a much more developed proletariat than that of England in the 17th century and France in the 18th century' and to be 'but the prelude to an immediately following proletarian revolution'.

About the imminence of revolution they were to be proved completely correct, as they were about the much greater role workers would play in this than in previous revolutions. What they could not foresee was the way the bourgeoisie would react to this much greater role.

Chapter 7

1848

> I spent the whole afternoon wandering Paris and was particularly struck by two things: first the uniquely and exclusively popular character of the recent revolution and of the omnipotence it had given the so-called people—that is to say, the classes who work with their hands—over all other classes. Secondly how little hatred was shown from the first moment of victory by the humble people who had suddenly become the sole mentors of power…
>
> Throughout the whole day in Paris I never saw one of the former agents of authority: not a soldier, nor a gendarme, nor a policeman; even the National Guard had vanished. The people alone bore arms, guarded public buildings, watched, commanded and punished; it was an extraordinary and terrible thing to see the whole of this huge city in the hands of those who owned nothing.[86]

These were the words of the historian Alexis de Tocqueville, writing about 25 February 1848. The French king, Louis Philippe, had just abdicated and fled the country. A protest march by republican students and sections of the middle class had clashed with police outside the ministry of foreign affairs, igniting a spontaneous rising in the poorer, eastern part of Paris which had been the centre of *sans-culottes* agitation in the revolution of half a century before. Crowds chanting 'Vive la réforme' burst through the lines of troops and swarmed through the palaces and the assembly buildings. Opposition politicians threw together a government headed by Lamartine. To ensure it gained the support of the masses, they included a socialist reformer, Louis Blanc, and, for the first time in history, a manual worker, Albert.

The revolution in France was a bomb beneath every throne in Europe. There had already been a brief civil war in Switzerland the previous December and a rising in Sicily in January. Successful uprisings now followed in Vienna, Milan, Venice, Prague, Berlin, and the industrial towns and state capitals of virtually every German principality.

In every city, protests led off by the liberal middle classes culminated in huge crowds defeating attacks by the army and the police and taking over palaces and government buildings. Reactionary politicians like Metternich, the architect of counter-revolution in 1814 and 1815, now fled for their lives. Monarchs and aristocrats remained behind, but only kept their positions by professing agreement with liberal constitutions. Absolutism seemed dead virtually everywhere. Radical democratic reforms seemed achieved—universal male suffrage, freedom of the press, the right to trial by jury, the end of aristocratic privilege and feudal payments.

But it was not to be. By the summer the monarchs and aristocrats were regaining their confidence. They began attacking rather than bowing before the democratic movements and, in the late autumn, crushed the movement in key centres like Berlin, Vienna and Milan. By the summer of 1849 counter-revolution was once more victorious throughout the whole continent.

The revolutions in February and March had been victorious because risings involving the mass of small traders, artisans and workers had beaten back armies and police officered by monarchists and aristocrats. But the governments and parliaments put in place by them were composed mainly of sections of the propertied middle classes. So the parliament elected for the whole of Germany (including German-speaking Austria) which met in Frankfurt in May contained no fewer than 436 state employees (led by administrative and judicial officials), 100 businessmen and landowners, 100 lawyers and 50 clergymen.[87] Such people were not prepared to put their lives, or even their careers, at risk by revolutionary action against the old authorities. What is more, they regarded the masses who had brought them to power as a 'disorderly rabble', quite as terrifying as the old ruling class.

The same fear afflicted the new governments and parliamentarians as had held back the 'Presbyterians' in the English Revolution, the 'moderates' of New York and Pennsylvania in the American Revolution, and the Girondins in the French Revolution. But it did so on a greater scale. No revolutionary middle class force comparable to the 'Independents' or Jacobins emerged to impose its will on the rest.

The growing islands of industry across western Europe meant the capitalist class was bigger and more powerful in 1848 than it had been at the time of the French Revolution. Alongside it there was a growing middle class of intellectuals, professors, teachers and civil servants

who looked to England as their economic model and the unified national state established by the French Revolution as their political model. In Hungary and Poland even sections of the nobility agitated for national independence from Austria and Russia.

But the other side of the growth of the constitutional-minded, or even republican, middle class was the growth of the working class. Most production might still be in small workshops where artisans employed a few journeymen, or in the homes of weavers and spinners working for a 'putting-out' merchant. Nonetheless, conditions were increasingly subject to the debilitating and unifying impact of the capitalist market. In Paris, for instance:

> In substantial parts of artisan manufacture, effective control of production was passing to merchants who organised sales and controlled credits. Workers in these trades and even the master artisans who employed them, as well as factory workers, were more and more conscious of external forces governing their lives, all seeking to make them more efficient at all costs. These forces were commonly identified with 'capitalism' or 'financial feudalism'.[88]

Similar conditions were present, to a greater or lesser extent, in Berlin, Vienna and the industrial towns of the Rhineland.

The bitterness intensified after 1845 as harvest failures interacted with the ups and downs of the market economy to produce a great economic crisis from Ireland in the west—where a million starved to death as grain was exported to pay for rents—to Prussia in the east. Hunger, rising prices and massive levels of unemployment fuelled the discontent which flared into revolution in February and March 1848. Artisans and workers joined and transformed the character of the street protests organised by the middle class constitutionalists and republicans. Peasants in regions like the Black Forest rose up against feudal dues and aristocratic landowners as they had not done since the Peasant War of 1525.

The scale of the discontent sent a shiver of fear down the spine of every capitalist, big or small. For the workers and peasants were not just concerned with democratic constitutions or feudal privilege. They were demanding living standards and conditions that challenged capitalist profits and capitalist property. The propertied liberals would unite with their traditional opponents, the propertied aristocrats and monarchists, to oppose this.

There were already signs of this in Germany and Austria before the blood was dry from the March fighting. The new governments restricted membership of the National Guard to the middle class, left the officer corps of the old armies untouched, conciliated with the old monarchist state bureaucracies, and ordered the peasants to stop their risings against feudal dues. The Prussian parliament in Berlin spent its time drawing up a constitutional agreement with the Prussian king, and the supposed all-German parliament in Frankfurt did little more than argue over its own rules of procedure. Neither parliament did anything to provide a focus for people's revolutionary aspirations or to stop aristocratic reaction beginning to regroup and rearm its forces.

The June fighting

It was in Paris, however, that the decisive turning point in events occurred.

The workers and artisans who had played the decisive role in overthrowing the old order in February had economic and social grievances of their own which went far beyond the liberal-democratic programme of the government. In particular they demanded work at a living wage.

They were not a formless mass. In the years since 1830 clubs committed to social reform (led by people like Louis Blanc) and secret societies which combined social demands with Jacobin insurrectionism (led by people like August Blanqui) had gained a following. Their ideas were discussed in cafes and workshops. 'Republican and socialist newspapers which stressed the need for representative government as a means of ending insecurity and poverty proved increasingly attractive as the prosperous early years of the 1840s gave way to a period of intense crisis'.[89]

The government formed amid the armed crowds on 24-25 February was in no condition to ignore the demands they raised. It met 'under pressure from the people and before their eyes' with continual 'processions, deputations, manifestations'.[90] Thus, it decreed a one and a half hour reduction in the working day and promised employment for all citizens. It set up 'national workshops' to provide work for the unemployed, and Louis Blanc, as minister of labour, established a 'labour commission' in the Luxembourg Palace where 'between 600 and

800 members—employers' representatives, workmen's representatives, economists of every school' became 'a virtual parliament'.[91]

At first the propertied classes did not dare raise any complaint about this. The tone changed once the immediate shock of 24-25 February had passed. Financiers, merchants and industrialists set about turning middle class opinion against the 'social republic'. They blamed the deepening economic crisis on the concessions to the workers and the national workshops (although they were, in fact, little better than the English workhouses).

The bourgeois republicans in the government concurred. They rushed to placate the financiers by recognising the debts of the old regime, and they imposed a tax on the peasantry in an attempt to balance the budget. They ensured the National Guard was dominated by the middle classes, and recruited thousands of the young unemployed into an armed force, the *Gardes mobiles*, under their own control. They also called elections for a Constituent Assembly at the end of April. This gave the Parisian artisans and workers no time to spread their message outside the capital and ensured the election campaign among the peasantry was dominated by landowners, lawyers and priests who blamed the new taxes on 'red' Paris. The new assembly was dominated by barely disguised supporters of the rival royal dynasties[92] and immediately sacked the two socialist ministers.

Then on 21 June the government announced the closure of the national workshops and gave the unemployed a choice between dispersal to the provinces and enrolment in the army.

Every gain the workers and artisans had made in February was taken from them. They saw no choice but to take up arms again. The next day they threw up barricades throughout the east of Paris and did their utmost to press towards the centre. The republican government turned on them with the full ferocity of the armed forces at its disposal—up to 30,000 soldiers, between 60,000 and 80,000 members of the National Guard, and up to 25,000 *Gardes mobiles*[93], all under the command of General Cavaignac. Civil war raged throughout the city for four days, with the better-off western areas pitted against the poorer eastern districts.

On one side, supporting the 'republican government', were the monarchists of both dynasties, the landowners, the merchants, the bankers, the lawyers and the middle class republican students.[94]

On the other were some 40,000 insurgents, 'drawn mainly from the

small-scale artisan trades of the city—from building, metalwork, clothing, shoes and furniture, with the addition of workers from some modern industrial establishments such as the railway engineering workshops, as well as a large number of unskilled labourers and a not inconsiderable number of small businessmen'.[95] Each centre of resistance was dominated by a particular trade—carters in one place, dock workers in another, joiners and cabinet makers in a third. As Frederick Engels noted, it was not only men who fought. At the barricade on the Rue de Clery, seven defenders included 'two beautiful young *grisettes* [poor Parisian women]', one of whom was shot as she advanced alone towards the National Guard carrying the red flag.[96]

The rising was crushed in the bloodiest fashion. A National Guard officer, the artist Meissonier, reported:

> When the barricade in the Rue de la Martellerie was taken, I realised all horror of such warfare. I saw defenders shot down, hurled out of windows, the ground strewn in corpses, the earth red with blood.[97]

The number of dead is not known, but 12,000 people were arrested and thousands deported to French Guyana.

The return of the old order

The defeat of the Parisian workers gave heart to the opponents of revolution everywhere. The German *Junker* (noble) Bismarck told the Prussian National Assembly, it was 'one of the most fortunate events in the whole of Europe'.[98] In the German kingdoms and principalities the authorities began dissolving left wing and republican clubs, prosecuting newspapers and arresting agitators. In Italy the Austrians inflicted a defeat on the Piedmont army and regained control of Milan, while the king of Naples established military rule. The Austrian general Windischgraetz imposed a state of siege in Prague after five days of fighting with the Czech middle class, students and workers. He occupied Vienna in the face of bitter popular resistance at the end of October, leaving 2,000 dead, and then moved against Hungary. A week later the Prussian king dissolved the Constituent Assembly in Berlin. The 'moderate' majority in the Frankfurt parliament responded to this openly counter-revolutionary measure by offering to proclaim him emperor of Germany in March—an offer which he rejected before sending his army into south Germany to crush further revolutionary moves.

The great hopes of the spring of 1848 had given way to desperation by the beginning of 1849. But the wave of revolution was not yet dead. The democratic associations and workers' clubs still had a much higher active membership than the conservative and 'moderate' organisations. The spring saw successful risings in parts of the Rhineland, the Palatinate, Dresden, Baden and Württemberg, with rulers running away just as they had the previous March. But many people still looked to the Frankfurt parliament to give a lead—and this it was not prepared to do. The revolutionary army which formed in the south (with Frederick Engels as one of its advisers) was thrown on to the defensive, defeated in battle and forced by the advancing Prussian army to flee across the border into Switzerland. The Hungarians led by Kossuth were finally crushed when the Austrian emperor received military assistance from the Russian tsar. The king of Naples reconquered Sicily in May, and revolutionary nationalists who had seized control of Rome and driven out the pope were forced to abandon the city after a three month siege by the armed forces of the French republic.

In France, where the whole revolutionary process had begun, the middle class republicans found that, having defeated the workers, there was no one to protect them against the advance of the monarchists. However, the monarchists were divided between the heirs of the Bourbons and the heirs of Louis Philippe and were incapable of deciding who to impose as king. Into this gap stepped a nephew of Napoleon, Louis Bonaparte. He won the presidency late in 1848 with 5.5 million votes—against only 400,000 for the middle class republican leader Ledru Rollin and 40,000 for the left wing revolutionary Raspail. In 1851, fearing he would lose a further election, he staged a coup. The following year he proclaimed himself emperor.

Karl Marx drew the conclusion at the end of the year:

> The history…of the whole German bourgeoisie from March to December…demonstrates… that purely bourgeois revolution…is impossible in Germany… What is possible is either the feudal and absolutist counter-revolution or the *social republican revolution*.[99]

Backdoor bourgeoisie

The revolutions did not leave Europe completely unchanged, however. In Germany and Austria they brought about the final end of

feudal payments and serfdom—although on terms which transformed the landowning *Junkers* into agrarian capitalists and did little for the peasants. The monarchs of most German states conceded constitutions which left them with the power to appoint governments, but provided for parliamentary representation for the moneyed classes and even, in a diluted form, for the workers and peasants. The ground was cleared for capitalist advance, even if it was capitalist advance under monarchies which prevented the bourgeoisie itself from exercising direct control over the state.

Germany began to undergo its own industrial revolution. Industry grew at a rate of around 4.8 percent a year; the railways by 14 percent. Investment in the 30 years after 1850 was four times the level of the 30 years before. Coal production rose fourfold in Prussia in 25 years, raw iron output multiplied 14-fold, steel output rose 54-fold. The number of steam powered machines rose by about 1,800 percent. Alfred Krupp had employed a mere 60 workers in 1836; by 1873 he employed 16,000. Although Germany's industrialisation took off 60 years after Britain's, it was soon catching up.[100] The Ruhr's collieries were larger and more intensive than those of south Wales; the German chemical industry developed synthetic dyes long before Britain's.

These years also saw the accelerated growth of large-scale industries in France and, at a slower pace, in parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The bourgeoisie, looking back in the late 1860s, could reflect that they might have lost the political struggle in 1848, but they had won the economic battle. In France they put their faith in Louis Bonaparte. In Germany they rejoiced as Bismarck, exercising near dictatorial powers within the Prussian monarchy fought wars against Denmark, Austria and France to build a new, unified German Empire as the most powerful state in western Europe.

The Italian and Hungarian bourgeoisies also recovered from the defeat of the national movements in 1848-49. At first the Austrian crown continued to rule over Milan, Venice and Budapest, as well as Prague, Cracow and Zagreb. But the national movements were far from destroyed. There was continuing enthusiasm for national unity among sections of the Italian middle class and, although few of the peasantry and urban poor shared such feelings (a bare 4 percent of the population spoke the Tuscan dialect that was to become the Italian language), there was enormous bitterness against the king of Naples and the Austrian rulers of Lombardy. In the late 1850s Cavour—the

minister of the king of Piedmont—sought to take advantage of these feelings. He made deals with the radical nationalist Mazzini and the republican revolutionary Garibaldi, on the one hand, and the governments of Britain and France on the other. Garibaldi landed with 1,000 revolutionary 'redshirts' in Sicily to raise the island in revolt against the king of Naples[101] and marched north. The king of Piedmont sent an army south and they crushed the royal army of Naples between them, while French forces ensured the withdrawal of the Austrians from Lombardy. Then Cavour and the king of Piedmont completed their manoeuvre by disarming Garibaldi's troops, forcing him into exile and gaining the reluctant backing of the southern Italian aristocracy, who recognised 'things have to change if they are to remain the same'.[102] The kings of Piedmont became the kings of the whole of Italy—although the united country long remained fractured between an increasingly modern capitalist north and an impoverished south where landowners continued to treat the peasants in a near-feudal manner and mafia banditry flourished.

Hungary, likewise, gained nationhood by manoeuvres at the top aimed at incorporating the forces of rebellion below. In the 1860s the Austrian monarchy reorganised itself following its conflicts with France and then with Prussia. It established two parallel administrative structures. The first was run by a German speaking government apparatus, partly responsible to a parliament in Vienna, and ruled over Austria, the Czech lands, the Polish region around Cracow and the Slav speaking province of Slovenia. The second was run by a Hungarian speaking government apparatus in Budapest and ruled over Hungary, Slovakia, the partially Romanian speaking region of Transylvania, and the Serbo-Croat speaking provinces of Croatia and (following conflicts with Turkey) Bosnia. The arrangement allowed it to stabilise its rule for half a century.

Two old national movements in Europe remained completely unsatisfied, however. In Ireland the late 1840s had seen a renaissance of the nationalism born at the time of the French Revolution and crushed in 1798. The Great Famine of those years revealed the horrific human cost of the damage done to the Irish economy by its subservience to the British ruling class. A million people died, another million were forced to emigrate, and the population was halved. Even the dominant constitutional politician, Daniel O'Connell, who had worked all his life for Irish Catholic rights within the 'United Kingdom', was forced

to raise the question of independence—while a new generation of middle class radicals saw the need to go further, to fight for a republic. Their attempt at a rising in 1848 was smashed. But from now on the 'Irish question' was to be central in British political life.

The failure to solve the Irish issue at one end of Europe was matched by the continuing struggle of Polish nationalism at the other. The Polish nobility had never been reconciled to the partition of the kingdom of Poland between Russia, Prussia and Austria in the 1790s, and they led revolts against Russian rule in the 1830s and again in the 1860s. The Polish nobles were feudal landowners, dominating not merely the Polish but also the Byelorussian, Ukrainian and Jewish lower classes. Yet their fight against the Russian tsar led them into conflict with the whole counter-revolutionary structure imposed on Europe after 1814 and again after 1848, and to find common purpose with revolutionaries and democrats across Europe. For the British Chartists, the French republicans and the German communists, the Polish struggle was their struggle—and exiled Poles from noble families were to be found fighting in Italy, southern Germany, Hungary and Paris.

Chapter 11

Storming heaven: The Paris Commune

By the beginning of the 1870s the new capitalist order was well on its way to global domination. It reigned supreme in the US and through most of western Europe—and these in turn were dictating terms to the rest of the world. Even the Russian tsar had felt compelled to end serfdom in 1861, although he gave half the land to the old feudal class and left the peasantry very much at its mercy. Everywhere the world was being turned upside down.

But events in Paris soon showed that the turning did not need to cease once capitalism was on top. Marx and Engels had written in T*he Communist Manifesto* that 'the bourgeoisie produces its own gravedigger'. On 18 March 1871 the French bourgeoisie discovered how true this could be.

Four years earlier Louis Napoleon had displayed the splendour of his empire to the monarchs of Europe in a 'Great Exhibition', centred on a vast elliptical glass building 482 metres long, with a dome so high 'that one had to use a machine to reach it'.[132]

He seemed to have something to celebrate. France had undergone enormous capitalist development since he had overthrown the republic in 1851. Industrial production had doubled as modern industries had grown, and old handicraft production had fallen more than ever under the control of putting-out capitalists who treated the workers much as they would in a factory.

But the emperor's own power was not as secure as it appeared. It depended on a balancing act. He played rival groups in the ruling class off against one another, and tried to bolster his postion by emulating the exploits of the first Napoleon through military adventures in Italy and Mexico (where he attempted to impose a French nominee, Maximilian, as emperor). None of this could prevent the growth of opposition to his rule. Sections of the bourgeoisie turned

bitter as speculation damaged them and filled the pockets of a coterie of financiers close to the emperor. The adventure in Mexico turned into a debacle as Maximilian was executed by a firing squad. Parisian workers, who remembered the massacres of 1848, hated the regime as the cost of living rose ahead of wages. Louis Bonaparte's own leading official, Haussmann, noted that over the half the population of Paris lived in 'poverty verging on destitution' even though they laboured 11 hours a day.[133] By 1869 the republican opposition was sweeping the board in elections in Paris and other big cities. Then in July 1870 Louis Bonaparte allowed the Prussian leader Bismarck to provoke him into declaring war.

The French forces suffered a devastating defeat at the battle of Sedan. Louis Bonaparte was completely discredited, and abdicated. Power fell into the hands of the bourgeois republican opposition. But the Prussian army was soon besieging Paris, and Bismarck insisted on punitive terms—a huge financial payment and the handing of French Alsace-Lorraine to Prussia.

Paris held out through five months of siege in conditions of incredible hardship, with people forced to eat dogs and rats to survive, without fuel to warm their homes in sub-zero temperatures. The workers, artisans and their families bore the brunt of the suffering as prices soared.[134] They also bore the brunt of defending the city. They poured into the National Guard, raising its size to 350,000—and, by electing their own officers, they did away with its middle class character. Their resistance was soon worrying the republican government as much as the Prussians were. The descendants of the *sans-culottes* of 1792, the children of the fighters of 1848, were armed again. 'Red' clubs and revolutionary newspapers flourished, reminding the workers and artisans of how the bourgeois republicans had treated them in 1848. As Karl Marx wrote, 'Paris armed was the revolution armed.'

The republican government had succeeded in putting down one left wing attempt to overthrow it on 31 October. It just managed to beat back another on 22 January, using regular troops from Brittany to shoot a crowd from the working class area of Belleville. It was terrified it would not succeed next time. The vice-president, Favre, saw 'civil war only a few yards away, famine a few hours',[135] and decided there was only one way to protect his government. On the night of 23 January he secretly crossed the Prussian lines to discuss terms for a French surrender.

The news caused anger among the poor of Paris. They had suffered for five months for nothing. Then the republican government called elections, at a mere eight days notice, to confirm the decision to surrender. As in 1848, the Paris left had no time to campaign in the rural constituencies where the great bulk of the electorate still lived, and priests and rich landowners were able to exercise a decisive influence over the vote. Of the 675 deputies returned, 400 were monarchists. The bitterness in Paris grew greater still. The betrayal of the siege was being followed by the betrayal of the republic. Then came a third betrayal, the appointment as head of government of 71 year old August Thiers. He now claimed to be a 'moderate republican', but he had first made his name by crushing a republican rising in 1834.

For the moment the Parisian masses kept their arms, while the regular army was disbanded under the terms of the agreement with the Prussians. What is more, large numbers of the affluent middle classes took the opportunity to get away from Paris, leaving the National Guard more than ever as a working class body.

Thiers knew a clash with the Parisian masses was inevitable. He recognised they controlled the arms of the National Guard, including 200 cannon, and sent regular soldiers to seize these from the heights of Montmartre. While the soldiers were waiting for horses to move the guns, local people began to argue with them. As Lissagaray recounts, 'The women…did not wait for the men. They surrounded the machine guns, saying, "This is shameful, what are you doing?" '[136] While the soldiers stood, not knowing how to react, a group of 300 National Guards marched past, sounding drums to rouse the population to resistance. As National Guards, women and children surrounded the soldiers, one of the generals, Lecomte, three times gave an order to shoot at the crowd. 'His men stood still. The crowd advanced, fraternised with them, and Lecomte and his officers were arrested'.[137]

By three in the afternoon of that day, 18 March, Thiers and his government had fled the capital. One of the world's great cities was in the hands of armed workers, and this time they were not going to hand it over to a group of middle class politicians.

A new sort of power

The armed masses exercised power at first through the elected leaders of the National Guard—its 'central committee'. But these were

determined not to do anything which could be construed as heading a dictatorship. They organised elections for a new elected body, the Commune, based on universal male suffrage in each locality. Unlike normal parliamentary representatives, those elected were to be subject to immediate recall by their electors and to receive no more than the average wage of a skilled worker. What is more, the elected representatives would not simply pass laws which a hierarchy of highly paid bureaucratic officials would be expected to implement, they were to make sure their own measures were put into effect.

In effect, as Karl Marx pointed out in his defence of the Commune, *The Civil War in France*, they dismantled the old state and replaced it with a new structure of their own, more democratic than any since the rise of class society:

> Instead of deciding once in three or six years which member of the ruling class was to misrepresent the people in parliament, universal suffrage was to serve the people constituted in communes… The Communal constitution would have restored to the social body all the forces hitherto absorbed by the state parasite feeding upon, and clogging up, the free movement of society…
>
> Its real secret was this. 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 political emancipation of labour.[138]

Marx noted that, as the representative of the city's working people, the Commune set about implementing measures in their interests—banning night work in bakeries and the employers' imposition of fines on employees, handing over to associations of workers any workshops or factories shut down by their owners, providing pensions for widows and free education for every child, and stopping the collection of debts incurred during the siege and eviction for non-payment of rent. The Commune also showed its internationalism by tearing down monuments to militarism and appointing a German worker as its minister of labour.[139]

It had no chance to show what further measures might be carried out by a workers' government. For the republican government immediately began organising armed forces to suppress it, and worked with its Prussian 'enemy' to do so. It persuaded Bismarck to release French prisoners of war captured the autumn before and untouched

by the ferment of ideas in Paris. It gathered them in Versailles, together with new recruits from the countryside, under officers with barely disguised royalist sympathies. By the end of April Thiers had Paris surrounded by an army dedicated to crushing the Commune, and an agreement from Bismarck to allow it to pass through Prussian lines. The Commune faced overwhelming odds. It also faced another problem. Its elected representatives were heroically dedicated to their cause. But they lacked a political understanding of how to respond to the forces gathering against them.

Two major political currents had developed within the workers' movement in France since the 1830s. First, there was the current associated with August Blanqui. It conceived of the workers' struggle as a more radical, more socially conscious version of the Jacobinism of 1793. It stressed the role of a highly organised conspiratorial minority acting on behalf of the working class. So Blanqui's life had been marked by a succession of heroic attempts at insurrection when the mass of workers were not ready for it, followed by long spells in prison while workers took action without him (including imprisonment by the republican government throughout the Commune). The second current grew out of the social teachings of Proudhon. There was a bitter reaction against the experience of Jacobinism by his followers and a rejection of political action. They argued that workers could solve their problems through 'mutualism'—associations which could set up cooperative businesses—without worrying about the state.

Marx saw both approaches as dangerously inadequate. He had no doubt that workers should learn from the experience of the Great French Revolution, but he believed they had to go far beyond it. There had to be decisive political action, as the Blanquists argued, but it had to be based on organised mass activity, not on heroic actions by small groups. There had to be economic reorganisation of production as the Proudhonists argued, but it could not occur without political revolution. However, Marx was not in a position to influence events in Paris. There were people in the Commune such as the Blanquist Vaillant who were prepared to collaborate with Marx, but there were none who fully accepted his ideas. Both the Central Committee of the National Guard and the Commune were composed not of Marxists, but of Blanquists and Proudhonists—and their decision-making suffered from the deficiencies of both traditions.

The republican government had virtually no forces at its disposal at

the time of its flight from Paris on 18 March. It would have been possible for the National Guard to march on Versailles at that point and disperse its forces almost without firing a shot. But the 'non-political' Proudhonist tradition led the Commune to spend its time passing fine resolutions while leaving Thiers free to gather troops. When Thiers showed his aggressive intent by beginning to shell Paris on 2 April, they did call for a march on Versailles. But they made no serious preparations for it, sending the National Guard off without proper organisation and lacking the cannon to reply to artillery attacks from the other side. They handed the still weak forces in Versailles an unnecessary victory, and ended all chance of dispersing them easily.

They made a parallel mistake inside Paris itself. The whole of the country's gold was in the vaults of the Bank of France. The Commune could have seized it, denying funds to Thiers and asserting its own mastery over the country's economy. But neither the Blanquist nor the Proudhonist tradition allowed for such an assault on the 'rights of property'. As a result, things were much easier for Thiers than they need have been.

The revenge of the bourgeosie

Thiers took the opportunity to build up an enormous army. It began to bombard the city systematically from forts on the outskirts, defeating the Communard forces in a series of skirmishes, and then broke through into the city itself on 21 May. If Thiers expected an easy conquest, he was to be disappointed. The workers of Paris fought street by street, block by block, building by building. It took Thiers' troops a week to drive them back from the affluent western part of the city through the centre to the Commune's stronghold in the east, crushing the last resistance early in the morning on Whit Sunday.

The defeat of the Commune was followed by an orgy of violence almost without precedent in modern times. The bourgeois paper *Le Figaro* boasted, 'Never has such an opportunity presented itself for curing Paris of the moral gangrene that has been consuming it for the past 25 years'.[140] The victorious commanders of the Versailles troops seized the opportunity.

Anyone who had fought for the Commune was shot on the spot—1,900 people between Whit Sunday morning and Whit Monday morning alone (more in one day than in Paris during the whole of the

'Great Terror' of 1793-94). Troops patrolled the streets picking up poorer people at will and condemning many to death after 30 second trials because they looked like Communards. A preacher told of witnessing the execution of 25 women accused of pouring boiling water over advancing troops. The London *Times* commented on:

> …the inhuman laws of revenge under which the Versailles troops have been shooting, bayoneting, ripping up prisoners, women and children… So far as we can recollect there has been nothing like it in history… The wholesale executions inflicted by the Versailles soldiery sicken the soul.[141]

The total number of killings came to somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000 according to calculations by present day French historians.[142] Another 40,000 Communards were held in prison hulks for a year before being put on trial—5,000 of these were sentenced to deportation and another 5,000 to lesser penalties.

One of the deportees was the best-known leader of the fighting women, Louise Michel. She told the court, 'I will not defend myself; I will not be defended. I belong entirely to the social revolution. If you let me live, I shall not cease to cry vengeance'.[143] The Commune had been held back from granting women the vote by the prejudices of its time. But working class women understood, despite this, that the crushing of the Commune was a crushing of themselves.

The repression had a terrible impact on the working class of Paris. As Alistair Horne comments, 'The face of Paris changed in one curious way for some years: half the house painters, half the plumbers, the tile layers, the shoemakers and zinc workers had disappeared'.[144] It was to be almost two decades before a new generation of French workers rose, who remembered the suppression of the Commune by the 'republican' government, but who had the determination to resume the struggle for a better world.

Yet Karl Marx had the last word on the Commune. He saw that it represented the greatest challenge the new world of capital had yet faced—and the greatest inspiration to the new class created by capital but in opposition to it. He wrote to his friend Kugelmann that the Communards had been 'storming heaven',[145] and had provided 'a new point of departure of worldwide significance'.[146]