

I: ON THE INTERPRETATION OF MARX'S THOUGHT

George Lichtheim

I

A consideration of the phenomenon called "Marxism" has an obvious starting point in Marx's own reflections on the subject of intellectual systematizations. According to him, they were either "scientific" (in which case they entered into the general inheritance of mankind) or "ideological," and then fundamentally irrelevant, for every ideology necessarily misconceived the real world of which science (*Wissenschaft*) was the theoretical reflection. Yet it is a truism that in some respects Marxism itself has acquired an ideological function. How has this transmutation come about, and what does it tell us about the theoretical breakthrough which Marx effected and which his followers for many years regarded as a guarantee against the revival of "ideological" thinking within the movement he has helped to create?

Regarded from the Marxian viewpoint, which is that of the "union of theory and practice," the transformation of a revolutionary *theory* into the *ideology* of a post-revolutionary, or pseudo-revolutionary, movement is a familiar phenomenon. In modern European history—to go back no further—it has furnished a theme for historical and sociological reflections at least since the aftermath of the French Revolution. Indeed there is a sense in which Marx's own thought (like that of Comte and others) took this experience as its starting point. In the subsequent socialist critique of liberalism, the latter's association with the fortunes of the newly triumphant bourgeoisie furnished a topic not only for Marxist thought, but it also enabled Marx to draw the conclusion that the "emancipation of the working class" had been placed upon the historical agenda by the very success of the liberal bourgeoisie in creating the new world of industrial capitalism.

In so far as "Marxism," during the later nineteenth century, differed from other socialist schools, it signified just this: the conviction that the "proletarian revolution" was a *historical necessity*. If then we are obliged to note that the universal aims of the Marxist school and the actual tendencies of the empirical workers' movement have become discontinuous, we shall have to characterize Marxism and the "ideology" of that movement during a relatively brief historical phase which now appears to be closed. The phase itself was linked to the climax of the "bourgeois revolution" in those European countries where the labor movement stood in the forefront of the political struggle for democracy, at the same time that it groped for a socialist theory of the coming post-bourgeois order. Historically Marxism fulfilled itself when it brought about the upheaval of 1917-1918 in Central and Eastern Europe. Its subsequent evolution into the ideology of the world Communist movement, for all the latter's evident political significance, has added little to its theoretical content. Moreover as far as Soviet Marxism and its various derivations are concerned, the original "union of theory and practice" has now fallen apart.

This approach to the subject is not arbitrary but follows from the logic of the original Marxian conception of the *practical* function of *theory*. It was not part of Marx's intention to found yet another political movement or another "school of thought." Rather his prime purpose as a socialist was to articulate the practical requirements of the labor movement in its struggle for emancipation. His theoretical work was intended as a "guide to action." If it has ceased to serve as such, one may only conclude that the actual course of events had diverged from the theoretical model which Marx had extrapolated from the political struggles of the nineteenth century. In fact it is today generally agreed among Western socialists that the model is inappropriate to the post-bourgeois industrial society in which we live, while its relevance to the belated revolutions in backward pre-industrial societies is purchased at the cost of growing divergence between the utopian aims and the actual practices of the Communist movement. From a different viewpoint the situation may be summed up by saying that while the bourgeois revolution is over in the West, the proletarian revolution has turned out to be an impossibility: at any rate in the form in which Marx conceived it in the last century, for the notion of such a revolution giving rise to a classless society has now acquired a distinctly utopian ring. Conversely the association of

socialism with some form of technocracy—understood as the key role of a new social stratum in part drawn from the industrial working class which continues to occupy a subordinate function—has turned out to be much closer than the Marxist school had expected. In short, the “union of theory and practice” has dissolved because the working class has not in fact performed the historic role assigned to it in Marx’s theory and because the gradual socialization of the economic sphere in advanced industrial society has become parallel with the emergence of a new type of social stratification. On both counts, the “revisionist” interpretation of Marxism—originally a response to the cleavage between the doctrine and the actual practice of a reformist labor movement—has resulted in the evolution of a distinctively “post-Marxian” form of socialist theorizing while the full doctrinal content of the original systematization is only retained, in a debased and caricatured form, in the so-called “world view” of Marxism-Leninism: itself the ideology of a totalitarian state-party which has long cut its connections with the democratic labor movement. While the Leninist variant continues to have operational value for the Communist movement—notably in societies where that movement has taken over the traditional functions of the bourgeois revolution—the classical Marxian position has been undercut by the development of Western society. In this sense, Marxism (like liberalism) has become “historical.” Marx’s current academic status as a major thinker in the familiar succession from Hegel (or indeed from Descartes-Hobbes-Spinoza) is simply another manifestation of this state of affairs.¹

II

While the interrelation of theory and practice is crucial for the evaluation of Marx—far more so than for Comte who never specified an historical agent for the transition to the “positive stage”—it does not by itself supply a criterion for judging the permanent value of Marx’s theorizing in the domains of philosophy, history, sociology or eco-

¹ Cf. *inter alia* the treatment of the subject in *Karl Marx—Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy*, ed. by T. B. Bottomore and M. Rubel, London 1956, and the recent spate of editions of Marx’s early writings. Historically, the interpretation of Marxism as the theory of a revolutionary movement which has now come to an end, goes back to the writings of Karl Korsch; cf. in particular his *Karl Marx*, London-New York 1963.

nomics. In principle there is no reason why his theoretical discoveries should not survive the termination of the attempt to construct a "world view" which would at the same time serve as the instrument of a revolutionary movement. This consideration is reinforced by the further thought that the systematization was after all undertaken by others—principally by Engels, Kautsky, Plekhanov and Lenin—and that Marx cannot be held responsible for their departures from his original purpose, which was primarily critical. While this is true, the history of Marxism as an intellectual and political phenomenon is itself a topic of major importance, irrespective of Marx's personal intentions. Moreover it is arguable that both the "orthodox" codification undertaken by Engels and the various subsequent "revisions" have their source in Marx's own ambiguities as a thinker.

As far as Engels is concerned, the prime difficulty arises paradoxically from his life-long association with Marx. This, combined with his editorial and exegetical labors after Marx's death, conferred a privileged status upon his own writings even where his private interests diverged from those of Marx, e.g. in his increasing absorption in problems peculiar to the natural sciences. While Engels was scrupulous in emphasizing his secondary role in the evolution of their common viewpoint,² he allowed it to be understood that the "materialist" metaphysics developed in such writings as the *Anti-Dühring* was in some sense the philosophical counterpart of Marx's own investigations into history and economics. Indeed his very modesty was a factor in causing his quasi-philosophical writings to be accepted as the joint legacy of Marx and himself. The long-run consequences were all the more serious in that Engels, unlike Marx, lacked proper training in philosophy and had no secure hold upon any part of the philosophical tradition, except for the Hegelian system, of which he virtually remained a life-long prisoner. The "dialectical" materialism, or monism, advanced in the *Anti-Dühring* and in the essays on natural philosophy published in 1925 under the title *Dialectics of Nature*, has only the remotest connection with Marx's own viewpoint, though it is a biographical fact of some importance that Marx raised no objection to Engels' exposition of the theme in the *Anti-Dühring*. The reasons for this seeming indifference must remain a matter for conjecture. What cannot be doubted is that it was Engels who was responsible for the subsequent interpretation of "Marxism" as a unified

² Cf. in particular his letter to F. Mehring of July 14, 1893, and the preface to the English edition of *The Condition of the Working Class in England*

system of thought destined to take the place of Hegelianism and indeed of classical German philosophy in general. That it did so only for German Social-Democracy, and only for one generation, is likewise an historical factum. The subsequent emergence of Soviet Marxism was mediated by Plekhanov and Lenin and differs in some respects from Engels' version (e.g. in the injection of even larger doses of Hegelianism) notably in the introduction by Lenin of a species of voluntarism which had more in common with Bergson and Nietzsche than with Engels' own rather deterministic manner of treating historical topics. In this sense Leninism has to be regarded as a "revision" of the orthodox Marxism of Engels, Plekhanov and Kautsky.

The whole development has obvious political, as well as intellectual, significance. I have dealt with it at some length elsewhere and must here confine myself to the observation that Soviet Marxism is to be understood as a monistic system *sui generis*, rooted in Engels' interpretation of Marx but likewise linked to the pre-Marxian traditions of the Russian revolutionary intelligentsia. Unlike "orthodox" Marxism, which in Central Europe functioned for at least one generation as the "integrative ideology" of a genuine workers' movement, Soviet Marxism was a pure intelligentsia creation, wholly divorced from the concerns of the working class. Its unconscious role has been to equip the Soviet intelligentsia (notably the technical intelligentsia) with a cohesive world view adequate to its task in promoting the industrialization and modernization of a backward country. Of the subsequent dissemination and vulgarization of this ideology in China and elsewhere, it is unnecessary to speak.³

In the light of what was said above about the transformation of Marxism from a revolutionary critique of bourgeois society into the systematic ideology of a non-revolutionary, or post-revolutionary, labor movement in Western Europe and elsewhere, this contrasting,

³ It is impossible here to document the links in the historical chain leading from Engels to Lenin and beyond, but reference should be made to Plekhanov's essay "Zu Hegels sechzigstem Todestag," originally published in *Neue Zeit*, November 1891, and reprinted in G. Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works*, Moscow 1961, vol. I, p. 455 ff. Lenin's contribution to the "philosophical" debate in his *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* (1909) is well known, as is his belated discovery of Hegel; cf. his *Philosophical Notebooks* of 1914-1916, now reprinted in vol. 38 of the *Collected Works*. The embarrassment caused to his editors by the evident incompatibility of the rather simple-minded epistemological realism expounded in the earlier work with the more "dialectical" approach of the *Notebooks* is among the minor charms of Soviet philosophical theorizing.

though parallel, development in the Soviet orbit presents itself as additional confirmation of our thesis. The latter assigns to Marxism a particular historical status not dissimilar from that of liberalism: another universal creed which has evolved from the philosophical assumptions and hypotheses of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The universalist content is, however, differently distributed. Liberalism was from the start markedly reluctant to disclose its social origins and sympathies whereas Marxism came into being as the self-proclaimed doctrine of a revolutionary class movement. The humanist approach was retained in both cases, but whereas liberal philosophy in principle denies any logical relation between the social origin of a doctrine and its ethico-political content, Marxism approached the problem by designating the proletariat as the "universal" class and itself as the theoretical expression of the latter's struggle for emancipation: conceived as synonymous with mankind's effort to raise itself to a higher level. Hence although for contemporary liberalism the unsolved problem resides in the unacknowledged social content of its supposedly universal doctrine, the difficulty for Marxism arises from the failure of the proletariat to fulfill the role assigned to it in the original "critical theory" of 1843–1848 as formulated in Marx's early writings and in the *Communist Manifesto*. Since liberalism cannot shake off the death-grip of "classical," i.e. bourgeois, economics—for which the market economy remains the center of reference—Marxism (at any rate in its Communist form) is confronted with the awkward dissonance between its universal aims and the actual record of the class upon whose political maturity the promised deliverance from exploitation and alienation depends. There is the further difference that the Marxian "wager" on the proletariat represents an "existential" option (at any rate for intellectuals stemming from another class), whereas liberalism—at least in principle—claims to be in tune with the commonsense outlook of educated "public opinion." This divergence leads back to a consideration of the philosophical issues inherent in the original codification of "orthodox Marxism."

III

Marx's early theoretical standpoint, as set out in the *Holy Family* (1845) and the *German Ideology* (1845–1846), was a development of French eighteenth-century materialism, minus its Cartesian physics

and the related epistemological problem in which he took no interest. The basic orientation of this materialism was practical, and its application to social life led in the direction of socialism, once it was admitted that between man and his environment there was an interaction which left room for a conscious effort to remodel his existence. As Marx put it in the *Holy Family*, "If man is shaped by his surroundings, his surroundings must be made human. If man is social by nature he will develop his true nature only in society. . . ." ⁴ Materialism or naturalism (the terms are employed interchangeably by Marx) is the foundation of communism. This conclusion follows necessarily, once it is grasped that the material conditions of human existence can and must be altered if man is to reach his full stature. Materialism is revolutionary because when applied to society it discloses what the idealist hypostatization of "spirit" obscures: that man's history is a constant struggle with his material environment, a struggle in which man's "nature" is formed and re-formed. The historicity of human nature, which is a necessary consequence of this anthropological naturalism, raises the question as to what criterion we possess for judging the activities of men in their effort to subdue the nonhuman environment: an effort mediated by social intercourse with other men, since it is only in and through society that men become conscious of themselves.⁵

The answer Marx gives is open to criticism on the grounds of circularity, since it amounts to saying that man's "nature" is constituted by his *Praxis*, i.e., his capacity for constituting a man-made world around him. However this may be, it is plain that for Marx the only "nature" that enters into consideration is man's own plus his surroundings which he transforms by his "practical activity." The external world, as it exists in and for itself, is irrelevant to a materialism that approaches history with a view toward establishing what men have made of themselves. It is doubly irrelevant because, on the Marxian assumption, the world is never simply "given" to consciousness, any more than man himself is the passive receptacle of sense impressions. An external environment, true knowledge of which is possible,

⁴ MEGA, I, 3, p. 307 ff.; cf. K. Marx-F. Engels, *The Holy Family*, Moscow.

⁵ "Language, like consciousness, . . . arises . . . from the necessity of intercourse with other men. . . . Hence consciousness from the very start is a social product and remains one as long as men exist at all," MEGA, I, 5, 19; cf. K. Marx-F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, New York 1960, p. 19

is a fantasy in abstraction from man's active role in molding the object of perception. The only world we know is the one we have constituted—that which appears in our experience. The "subjective" nature of this experience is checked by its social character which in turn is rooted in the permanent constituents of man as a "species being" (*Gattungswesen*) who "comes to himself" in society. There is, in the strict sense, no epistemological problem for Marx. The dialectics of perception and natural environment cannot, in his view, be compressed into a formula, for "reason" is itself historical and its interaction with nature is just what appears in history. Man has before him a "historical nature," and his own "natural history" culminates in his conscious attempt to reshape the world of which he forms a part.

The notion that this anthropological naturalism is anchored in a general theory of the universe finds no support in Marx's own writings. There is no logical link between Marx's conception and the "dialectical materialism" of Engels and Plekhanov, any more than there is a necessary connection between Marx's pragmatic view of conscious mental activity as an aspect of *Praxis* and the epistemological realism of Lenin. Indeed in the latter case there is positive incongruity. Perception as a mirror-image of an external reality which acts upon the mind through physical stimuli has no place in Marx's theory of consciousness. The copy theory of perception set out in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* (apart from being inadequate and self-contradictory in the way Lenin presents it) is incompatible with the Marxian standpoint. Its formulation arose from the accidental problem of working out a new theoretical basis for the natural sciences—a problem in which Marx had taken no interest. It also involved a divergence from Engel's approach, since materialism for Engels was not the same as epistemological realism. In Engels' quasi-Hegelian discussion of this theme, "matter" conserved some of the attributes of a primary substance which was somehow involved in the constitution of the universe. The difference between idealism and materialism was seen by Engels to lie in the former's claim to the ontological pre-eminence of mind or spirit whereas natural science was supposed by him to have established the materiality of the world in an absolute or ultimate sense. The resulting medley of metaphysical materialism and Hegelian dialectics (first described as "dialectical materialism" by Plekhanov) was conserved by Lenin, but his own theory of cognition—which was what mattered to him—was not strictly speaking dependent on it.

Matter as an absolute substance, or constitutive element of the universe, is not required for a doctrine which merely postulates that the mind is able to arrive at universally true conclusions about the external world given to the senses. Lenin's standpoint in fact is compatible with any approach which retains the ontological priority of the external world (however constituted) over the reflecting mind. Belief in the existence of an objective reality is not peculiar to materialists. It is, moreover, only very tenuously connected with the doctrine of nature's ontological primacy over spirit, which Lenin had inherited from Engels and which was important to him as a defense against "fideism."

The whole confusion becomes comprehensible only when it is borne in mind that the transformation of Marx's own naturalism into a metaphysical materialism was a practical necessity for Engels and his followers without being a logical one. It was required to turn "Marxism" into a coherent *Weltanschauung*, first for the German labor movement and later for the Soviet intelligentsia. As such it has continued to function, notwithstanding its philosophical inadequacies, but it has also suffered the fate of other systematizations undertaken for non-scientific reasons. At the same time it has paradoxically served to weaken the appeal of Marx's own historical materialism, since the latter was supposedly derived from a metaphysical doctrine of the universe—or an indefensible theory of cognitive perception—with which in reality it had no connection whatever.

IV

To grasp the full extent of this intellectual disaster it is necessary to see what Marx intended when he applied his realistic mode of thought to the understanding of history. The doctrine sketched out in his early writings (notably in the first section of the *German Ideology*) and subsequently given a succinct formulation in the well-known Preface to the 1859 *Critique of Political Economy* was "materialist" in that it broke with the traditional "idealist" procedure wherein ordinary material history was treated as the unfolding of principles laid up in the speculative heavens. The primary datum for Marx was the "real life-process" in which men are engaged, the "production and reproduction of material existence," as he put it on some occa-

sions. In this context, the so-called higher cultural activities appeared as the "ideological reflex" of the primary process whereby men organize their relationship to nature and to each other. Whatever may be said in criticism of this approach, it is quite independent of any metaphysical assumptions about the ontological priority of an absolute substance called "matter," though for evident psychological reasons it was easy to slide from "historical" to "philosophical" materialism. Even so, the grounding of the former in the latter does not necessarily entail the further step of suggesting that human history is set in motion and kept going by a "dialectical" process of contradiction within the "material basis." Such a conclusion follows neither from the materialist principle nor from the quasi-Hegelian picture Marx drew in the 1859 Preface where he referred briefly to the succession of stages from "Asiatic society," via Antiquity and the Middle Ages, to the modern (European) epoch. Marx's own historical research (notably in the *Grundrisse* of 1857-1858) stressed the radical discontinuity of these "historical formations." It is by no means the case that the emergence of European feudalism from the wreck of ancient society was treated by him as a matter of logical necessity. Even in relation to the rise of capitalism he was careful to specify the unique historical preconditions which made possible the "unfolding" of the new mode of production. The notion of a dialectical "law" linking primitive communism via slavery, feudalism and capitalism with the mature communism of the future was once more the contribution of Engels who in this as in other matters bore witness to the unshakeable hold of Hegel's philosophy upon his own cast of mind.

The reverse side of this medal is the ambiguous relationship of Marx and Engels to Comte and of Marxism to Positivism. The point has occasionally been made⁶ that in dealing with the rise of the "historical school" in nineteenth-century Europe, one has to go back to the intermingling of Hegelian and Comtean strands in the 1830's—mediated in some cases by writers who had actually studied under both Comte and Hegel.⁷ It is also arguable that Marx may have been more deeply influenced by Comte than he was himself aware since some of Saint-Simon's later writings are now known to have been in

⁶ E.g. by F. A. Hayek, in *The Counter-Revolution of Science*, Glencoe 1955, especially p. 191 ff

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

part drafted by his then secretary. However this may be, it is undeniable that the general effect of Engels' popularization of Marx ran parallel to the more direct influence of Positivism properly so called. With only a slight exaggeration it may be said that "Marxism" (as interpreted by Engels) eventually came to do for Central and Eastern Europe what Positivism had done for the West: It acquainted the public with a manner of viewing the world which was "materialist" and "scientific," in the precise sense which these terms possessed for writers who believed in extending to history and society the methods of natural sciences. While Marx had taken some tentative steps in this direction, it was Engels who committed German Socialism wholeheartedly to the new viewpoint.

At first sight it is not apparent why a Hegelian training in philosophy should predispose anyone in favor of the Comtean approach, which in some respects stands at the opposite pole. Moreover Marx owed more to the French materialists than did Engels; consequently there appears to be a certain paradox in the notion that the fusion of Hegelian and Comtean modes of thought was mediated by Engels. It must, however, be born in mind that the *Philosophie Positive* had two aspects. In so far as it stressed the purely empirical character of science and dispensed with metaphysical explanations, it belonged to the tradition of the Enlightenment in its specifically French "materialist" form (which was the only one Marx took seriously). Where it aimed at a universal history of mankind, its influence ran parallel to that of Hegelianism. Now the peculiarity of Marx's "historical materialism" is that it combines universalism and empiricism. For Marx (e.g. in the Preface to the 1859 work) the historical process has an internal logic, but investigation into the actual sequence of socio-economic formations is a matter for empirical research. The link between the two levels of generality is to be found in the interaction between technology ("forces of production") and society ("relations of production"). This interaction, however, is not uniform, i.e. not of such a kind that the historical outcome can be predicted in each case with reference to a general law abstracted from the principle of interaction. Unlike Hegel, Marx does not treat history as the unfolding of a metaphysical substance and unlike Comte, he does not claim to be in possession of an operational key which will unlock every door. Even the statement that "mankind always sets for itself only such tasks as

it can solve"⁸ is simply an extrapolation from the empirically observable circumstance that in every sphere of life (including that of art) problems and solutions have a way of emerging jointly. A formulation of this kind is at once too general and too flexible to be termed a "law." It is a working hypothesis to be confirmed or refuted by historical experience. Similarly the statement that socialism grows "necessarily" out of capitalism is simply a way of saying that economic conflict poses an institutional problem to which socialism supplies the only rational answer. Whether one accepts or rejects this, Marx is not here laying down a "law," let alone a universal law. On his general assumptions about history, the failure to solve this particular problem (or any other) remained an open possibility. In such a case there would doubtless be regress, perhaps even a catastrophe. The "relentless onward march of civilization" is a Comtean, not a Marxian, postulate. If the second generation of his followers understood Marx to have expounded a kind of universal optimism, they thoroughly misunderstood the meaning and temper of his message.⁹

In relation to bourgeois society the Marxian approach may be summarized by saying that this formation contains within itself the germs of a higher form of social organization. Whether these latent possibilities are utilized, depends upon historical circumstances which have to be investigated in their concreteness. One cannot deduce from a general law of social evolution the alleged necessity for one type of society to give birth to a more developed one—otherwise it would be incomprehensible why classical Antiquity regressed and made room for a primitive type of feudalism instead of evolving to a higher level. In fact Marx held that the collapse had been brought about by the institution of slavery, which was both the basis of that particular civilization and the organic limit of its further development.¹⁰ In principle the same might happen again. If Marx makes the assumption that the industrial working class is the potential bearer of a higher form of social organization, he is saying no more than that no other class appears capable of transcending the *status quo*. What might be called the existential commitment of Marxism to the labor movement follows from this assumption. Like every commitment it carries with

⁸ MEW, XIII, 9; cf. K. Marx-F. Engels, *Selected Works*, Moscow 1951, vol. I, p. 363.

⁹ On this point cf. Korsch, *op. cit.*, p. 51 ff.

¹⁰ *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Berlin 1953, p. 380 ff.

it the implied possibility of failure. Were it otherwise, there would be no sense in speaking of "tasks" confronting the movement: it would be enough to lay down a "law" of evolution in the Comtean or Spencerian manner. Belief in an evolutionary "law" determining the procession of historical stages was not only the mark of "orthodox" Marxism as formulated by Kautsky and Plekhanov under the influence of Spencer and other evolutionists but was also the mark of Engels whose synthesis of Hegelian and Comtean modes of thought made possible this fateful misunderstanding.

V

In justice to all concerned it has to be borne in mind that Marxism and Positivism did have in common their descent from the Saint-Simonian school. It was in the latter that the notion of history as a developmental process subject to "invariable laws" was first adumbrated in confused fashion, later to be given a more adequate formulation by Comte and Marx. The justification for treating these two very disproportionately gifted thinkers under the same heading arises from the evident circumstance that their contemporaries were affected by them in roughly similar ways. In general it might be said that Marx did for the Germans—notably for German sociology and the "historical school" (Schmoller, Weber, Sombart, Troeltsch and so on)—what Comte had earlier done for Durkheim and his school in France. And this assimilation of Comtean and Marxian modes of thought into the canon of academic sociology was evidently rendered possible by their commitment to the idea of history as the special mode of societal evolution. In saying this, one is simply stating the obvious, although on occasion this does no harm. It was Saint-Simon who had first declared that the proper business of social science is the discovery of laws of development governing the course of human history. To say that Marx, no less than Comte, remained true to this perspective is simply to say that he remained faithful to his intellectual origins (which in this case antedated the Hegelianism of his student days since we know that he had come across Saint-Simonism while still a schoolboy). That human history forms a whole—in Hegelian terms a "concrete totality"—was a certainty he never surrendered. There is the same attachment to the original vision in his oft-repeated statement that

knowledge of the "laws" underlying historical development will enable society to lessen the "birthpangs" inseparable from the growth of a new social formation. Insight into the regularities of history is, by a seeming paradox, seen as a means of controlling the future course of development.

In all these respects Comte and Marx appeared to be saying the same thing, and it was this similarity which led so many Positivists to describe themselves as Marxists: notably in France, where indeed this identification became a factor in the evolution of the Socialist movement. Yet the differences are as important as the similarities. Comte's sociology dispensed with the notion of class conflict which for Marx was the central motor of historical progress. The Comtean view of society not only posited the latter as the basic reality—over against the state on the one hand, and the individual on the other—but also elevated it to a plane where the "science of society" was seen to consist in the elucidation of an harmonious interdependence of all the parts. From the Marxian viewpoint this is sheer fantasy, a willful disregard of the reality of conflict whereby alone social progress takes place. In the subsequent evolution of the two systems this difference in approach translated itself *inter alia* into the conflicting doctrines of Russian Populism (heavily impregnated by Comte) and its Marxist rival. There is a sense in which the defeat of *Narodnichestvo* represented the victory of the Marxian over the Comtean school. The Russian Marxists were aware of this situation, and down to Lenin's polemics in the 1890's the need to differentiate themselves from the Positivist belief in the organic unity of society played an important role in the development of their thinking.¹¹

The last-mentioned consideration, however, also serves to define the historical context within which the Marxian doctrine could expect to play a role in the formation of a revolutionary movement. When in the 1880's some former Populists turned from *Narodnichestvo* to Marxism, they did so because they found in Marx a convincing statement of the thesis that the economic process would "slowly but unavoidably undermine the old regime," so that the Russian proletariat, "in an historical development proceeding just as inexorably as the development of capitalism itself," would thereby be enabled to

¹¹ Cf. *inter alia* Plekhanov's writings of the 1880's (now reproduced in vol. I of his *Selected Works*.) See also Ryazanov's preface to the 1929 German edition of Plekhanov's *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* (1908).

“deal the deathblow to Russian absolutism.”¹² In other words, what they found was a *theory of the bourgeois revolution*. The latter being a “necessary” process—in the sense that the political “superstructure” was bound, sooner or later, to be transformed by the autonomous evolution of the socioeconomic realm—it was possible to interpret Marx’s doctrine in a determinist sense. In *Das Kapital* Marx had done so himself, to the extent that he had treated the “unfolding” of the new mode of production—once it had come into being—as a process independent of the conscious desires and illusions of its individual “agents.” Hence the link between the “materialist conception of history” and the notion of “ideology” as “false consciousness.” What his contemporaries (and the first generation of his followers) failed to see was that the entire construction was strictly appropriate only to the evolution of bourgeois society, which in Western Europe was coming to an end, while in Russia the “bourgeois revolution” was about to be carried through by a movement hostile to the traditional aims of the middle class. Marxism as a theory of the bourgeois revolution was destined to celebrate its triumph on Russian soil at the very moment when it began to falter in the post-bourgeois environment of Western industrial society. This discontinuity was later to be mirrored in the cleavage between the determinist character of “orthodox Marxism” and the voluntarist strain which came to the fore in the theory and practice of the Communist movement. The latter, faced with the evident exhaustion of the revolutionary impulse which had accompanied the great economic gearshift of the nineteenth century, was increasingly obliged to seek fresh sources of popular spontaneity in areas of the world not yet subjected to industrialism (whether capitalist or socialist). At the theoretical level, the uncomprehended necessity to find a substitute for the revolutionary proletariat of early capitalism—an aspect of the bourgeois revolution, for it is only the latter that rouses the working class to political consciousness—found its expression in the doctrine of the vanguard: an elite which substitutes itself for the class it is supposed to represent. This development signifies the dissolution of the Marxian “union of theory and practice”: a union originally built upon the faith that the working class as such can and will emancipate itself, and the whole of mankind, from political and economic bondage.

¹² Cf. Plekhanov’s pamphlet *Socialism and the Political Struggle* (1883).