

conditions for revolutionary action at each moment of history. The synthesis between thought and "subversive praxis," which is present as a tendency in all of Marx's work, attains concrete form in the theory and practice of "the communism of the masses": revolution becomes "scientific" and science "revolutionary."²¹

II. The Communist Revolution and the Self-Emancipation of the Proletariat

a) *The myth of the savior from on high*

"Myth: a fabulous story . . . in which impersonal agents, usually forces of nature, are represented in the form of personified beings whose actions and adventures bear symbolic meanings." This rather broad definition from the *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*,²² if completed with the observation that the bourgeois social myth transforms history into nature,²³ enables us to grasp clearly the mythological character of the idea of the savior from on high, in its bourgeois form. In this conception, the "natural" laws of society – meaning by "natural" eternal, unchangeable, independent of human will and action – and the movement of history (also conceived in "naturalistic" terms) are represented in the form of a "transcendental" symbolic personage: the socio-historical world becomes nature, and the "forces of nature" are incarnated in a Hero.

This myth has a long history and goes back to times well before the appearance of the modern bourgeoisie. But, just as the "return" of Greco-Roman culture in the Renaissance must be explained by the conditions prevailing in the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries, and the "reappearance" of medieval corporatism in Fascist ideology by the situation in the 20th century, so the development of the obsession with a transcendental Liberator in the political theory of the revolutionary bourgeoisie has to be studied in relation with the structure of the bourgeois world. At bottom, behind the apparent "resurrection" of an old theme, what we see here is, rather, a new form, with specific features, because it is bound up with a new historical totality.

²¹ My book is based on a doctoral thesis presented at the Sorbonne in 1964, and so before the appearance of Althusser's principal writings, apart from his excellent article on the young Marx (1960). I share his general view of Marx's youthful writings as a theoretical "long march." I share also with Althusser the hypothesis of an "epistemological break" (a political break, too, in my opinion) which is observable in the *Theses on Feuerbach* and *The German Ideology*. Having said that, it will be quite plain that my "reading" of Marx is not at all the same as that of the author of *Reading "Capital"*.

The social basis of the bourgeois myth of the savior from on high is to be found in the constituent elements of "civil society" – private property and free competition, which turn this society into a grouping of "egoistic" atoms struggling against each other in a veritable *bellum omnium contra omnes* in which the "social," the "general interest," the "collective" has necessarily to be projected, hypostasized, eventually *alienated* as a being or an institution "outside" and "above" civil society.²⁴ From another angle, economic alienation, the separation of the producer from the production process as a whole, so that this looks to the isolated individual like a set of "natural" economic laws alien to his will, leads the bourgeois thinker into mechanistic materialism. In this way he arrives at the theory that "men are products of circumstances and upbringing," a theory which, as Marx noted in the third thesis on Feuerbach, "is bound to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society."²⁵ In fact, shut up in the vicious circle of "men/circumstances," the ideology of the revolutionary bourgeoisie cannot escape from mechanical materialism otherwise than by appealing to a "higher" being who is capable of breaking, from without, the irresistible social mechanism.

Upon the infrastructure of private property and the laws of the capitalist market there is thus built up the myth of the savior from on high, an incarnation of public virtue contrasted with the competition and particularism of individuals; a demiturge of history to break the chain of fatalism; a superhuman hero who liberates mankind and "constitutes" the new state. This myth appears, implicitly or explicitly, in most of the political doctrines of the bourgeoisie in its ascent. For Machiavelli, he is "the Prince," for Hobbes, "the Absolute Sovereign," for Voltaire, "the Enlightened Despot," for Rousseau, "the Lawgiver," for Carlyle, "the Hero." The 17th-century English Puritans thought they had found him in the person of "the Lord Protector" (Cromwell), the Jacobins in "the Incorruptible," the Bonapartists in the Emperor. "The world-soul on horseback," wrote Hegel about Napoleon, so summing up in a brilliant phrase the entire structure of the bourgeois mythology of the "savior." The Word is made flesh, the immense and uncontrollable forces of history are incarnate in a personified Higher Being.

²⁴ Lefort, *op. cit.*, p. 133: "Thus, the bourgeoisie usually finds the image of its own unity situated outside of itself, and it presents itself as an historical subject only through the mediation of a power which transcends the realm of the activities in which the bourgeoisie constitutes itself as an economic class." Marx, in "The Jewish Question," CW, III, 154.

Where the political state has attained its true development, man – not only in thought, in consciousness, but in *reality*, in *life* – leads a twofold life, a heavenly and an earthly life: life in the *political community*, in which he considers himself a *communal being*, and life in civil society, in which he acts as a *private individual*, regards other men as a means, degrades himself into a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers. The relation of the politi-

Liberation having been accomplished in this alienated fashion, the new state established by the "Liberator" cannot but be itself alienated. Constituted by the separation between "private" and "public," "man" and "citizen," "civil society" and "political state," it inherits from the Savior the role of protector of the "social" from the particularism of individuals. Whereas, under feudalism, the *Biürgerliche Gesellschaft* was directly political in character, the estates, corporations, etc., being elements in the life of the state, bourgeois political emancipation projects political life into a sphere that is above and outside society.²⁶ In conclusion, to the economic alienation of the capitalist market corresponds a political alienation which is expressed in the myth of the savior from on high and in the constitution of the liberal state. We can find traces of it in the political ideologies of the bourgeoisie on its way up, between the 16th and the 19th centuries.

b) *Workers' self-emancipation*

The period 1789–1830, in the history of the modern labor movement and of modern socialism, is a transitional phase between "bourgeois messianism" and the idea of workers' self-emancipation, which finds expression in two characteristic forms: utopian socialism and secret societies (not to mention, of course, the adhesion of sections of the working people to Jacobinism and Bonapartism, more or less direct prolongations in the working class of the bourgeois myth). The historical bases of these forms must be sought in the still embryonic state of the labor movement and of the proletariat in the modern sense of the term. Analyzing the conditions of this epoch, Engels observed that

the proletariat, which then for the first time evolved itself from these propertyless masses as the nucleus of a new class, as yet quite incapable of independent political action, appeared as an oppressed, suffering estate, to whom, in its incapacity to help itself, help could, at best, be brought in from without or down from above.²⁷

It was precisely this help "from above" that the utopian socialists sought to bring, presenting themselves as bearers of the Truth, Messiahs come to free humanity (Fourier), "New Christs" (Saint-Simon), or appealing to the Princes to grant emancipation to the peoples. Saint-Simon writes to Tsar Alexander I, to Louis XVIII, and to the Holy Alliance; Fourier addresses himself to Napoleon, to Louis XVIII, and to Louis-Philippe; Owen publishes a manifesto to the Congress of the Holy Alliance at Aachen. This ideological structure differs from bourgeois messianism only by the content of its program of emancipation, and it is precisely the clash between the communist content and the bourgeois form that makes these moves appear utopian and naïve.

The bourgeoisie might, with reason, entrust to a Napoleon the defense of its interests, but it seems curious to expect the liberation of the proletariat to come from Tsar Alexander I. The bourgeois myth was "realistic," that of the first socialists "utopian."

It was also a solution "from above" that was advocated by the group of neo-Babouvist conspirators whose program of action replaced the individual hero by the secret society of the initiated, and the dictatorship of the man sent by Providence by that of a "revolutionary directory" emerging from the conspiracy. This conception of the emancipation process, the immediate basis of which was the confusion between communists, Jacobins, and Republicans during the Restoration, constitutes a step forward from the messianism of the bourgeoisie and of the utopians. It is revolutionary and relatively "de-mythified" in character; however, the radical change is seen as being the work of an "enlightened" minority, the broad masses having no role but that of "supporting force." We shall examine later the origins and evolution of this intermediate form between the action of the "savior from on high" and Marx's "task of the workers themselves."

Utopian socialism and the secret societies had their *raison d'être* in the weakness of the independent labor movement, which until 1830 amounted to no more than the heritage of the *compagnonnages* together with a few movements of resistance and combination.²⁸ This weakness allowed the utopians practically to ignore the labor movement and the conspirators to regard the masses as "too immature" to carry out a revolution by themselves. Both sought for "socialist," "egalitarian," "industrial," "communist," etc., society a path that did not run through the masses – neither through their coming to consciousness nor through conscious revolutionary action. The new world would be established by the miraculous intervention of a "new Christ," if not of a monarch, or by a putsch effected by a handful of conspirators.

The conditions for the idea of self-emancipation to emerge can be either conjunctural – a revolutionary situation – or structural – the proletarian condition. It is the historical coincidence of these two orders that transforms it into an idea-force of the broad masses of the people.

The attitude of the workers during revolutionary conjunctures reflects the eminently practical character of their coming to consciousness: the experience of armed action by the people, the accentuation of social conflicts, the de-bunking of the "great men" of the ruling strata; in short, *revolutionary praxis* is reflected at the level of the consciousness of the vanguard and of the masses by the radicalization of aspirations for equality and the blossoming of the project of self-liberation.

And so we see appearing the first modern manifestations of communism, the first outlines of the idea that the workers should free themselves by their own efforts, during the great bourgeois revolutionary upheavals, even before the modern proletariat has appeared. Engels notes these "revolutionary armed uprisings," these "independent outbursts of that class which was the forerunner, more or less developed, of the modern proletariat," during the Reformation and the great English and French revolutions (Münzer, the Levellers, Babeuf).²⁹

Thomas Münzer's movement was millenarist but not messianic. The bands of armed peasants and plebeians whom he led or inspired did not look for their salvation to anyone sent from Heaven but to their own revolutionary action, aimed at establishing the Kingdom of God on Earth. Whereas Luther linked himself with the princes (the Elector of Saxony, etc.) and incited them to massacre the rebels, Münzer wrote that "the people would free themselves . . . and it would go with Dr. Luther as with a captive fox."³⁰

The struggle of Münzer's plebeians against the "bourgeois" further becomes, during the great English revolution, the struggle between the Levellers and Cromwell. The political program of the Levellers was "self-government" for the broad masses, which they opposed to Cromwell's military dictatorship. In a pamphlet composed in March 1649, *The Hunting of the Foxes*, their leader, Richard Overton, wrote: "We were before ruled by King, Lords and Commons; now by a General, a Court Martial and House of Commons; and we pray you what is the difference?" Unlike Cromwell, who saw himself as having been sent by Providence to impose his conception of God's will upon a corrupted humanity, the Leveller leaders (Lilburne, Overton, etc.) gave expression to the inarticulate passions, grievances, sufferings, and revolt of the broad masses, whose voluntary and conscious adhesion they sought to win.³¹

Finally, during the revolutionary struggles of the years II and III in France, the same kind of conflict occurred between the representatives of the most combative *sans-culottes* and the Jacobin dictatorship. In criticizing "the Incorruptible" himself, the "Enragés" (J. Roux, Leclerc, Varlet, etc.), whose theme was "People, save thyself," were inciting the masses to expect salvation not from the "constituted authorities" but from a "revolutionary upheaval," a "spontaneous movement."³²

²⁸ Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, CW, X, 19.

²⁹ Engels, *The Peasant War*, CW, X, 426.

³¹ Cf. T. C. Pease, *The Leveller Movement* (Chicago: 1916), p. 360; D. M. Wolfe, *Leveller Manifestos of the Puritan Revolution* (New York: 1944), p. 98; V. Gabriel, introduction to *Disfranchisement and the Levellers* (London: 1967), p. 107.

In these three movements we find, of course, only a crude egalitarianism and a very vague sketch of the idea of self-liberation. Between them and the *Communist Manifesto* there lies all the difference between the urban *plebs* of the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries – a heterogeneous and imprecise category wherein poor craftsmen, journeymen, hired hands, lower clergy, unemployed, vagrants, etc., are all mixed up together – and the modern proletariat which begins to take shape in the 19th century. It is only with the appearance of this class, after the Industrial Revolution, that the structural foundation arises for a coherent and rigorous conception both of communism and of self-emancipation, yet the role of the conjuncture continues to be determining: as a general rule, it is only during great revolutionary crises that the broad masses of the proletariat identify themselves with this conception.

The very nature of the proletariat and of the proletarian revolution constitutes the structural foundation for the theory of workers' self-liberation. In the first place, the common bond, union, community does not appear to the workers as something external and transcendental (as it does for the bourgeois competing among themselves) but as an attribute of the masses or the result of common action: "solidarity" is the immediate psychological relation among the workers, at the level of the factory, the trade, and the class. The bourgeois ideologist Hobbes saw social life as a "war of all against all," but the naïve craftsmen of the London League of Communists had as their motto:

"All men are brothers." For the proletariat, which has no private property (in means of production, etc.), the "social," the "public," no longer needs to be incarnated in a Higher Being over against the particularism of individuals. It becomes immanent in "the people," it presents itself as a quality intrinsic in the workers as a whole. Insofar as he is not a property-owner and is not drawn into "free competition," the proletarian *can* escape from bourgeois political alienation and its myths. Looked at in another way, the historical significance of the proletarian revolution is essentially different from the "taking of power" by the bourgeoisie: it will be a self-liberation or it will be nothing. The bourgeoisie can become the "ruling class" even without a conscious historical action, because the bourgeois revolution belongs to the Kingdom of Necessity. Even if this action is alienated, oriented towards illusory objectives, and inspired by myths, the "cunning of reason" of economic and social liberation will give it victory. The bourgeois revolution is the immediate realization of the bourgeoisie's social being. The barriers in the way of this realization are purely external. It does not presuppose any "self-changing" by the class. This "automatic," alienated, and necessary process can easily assume the mythological form of a personal Liberator from without. The proletarian revolution, on the contrary, has to be the first *conscious* transformation of society, the first step in the "Kingdom of Freedom," the historical moment when individuals who have hitherto been objects and products of history move forward as subjects and producers. It does not realize

a "transcendence of self" through coming to consciousness and revolutionary action.³³ As Engels wrote in his "political testament" (the 1895 preface to *The Class Struggles in France 1848–1850*):

The time of surprise attacks, of revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of masses lacking consciousness is past. When it is a question of a complete transformation of the social organization, the masses themselves must also be in on it, must themselves already have grasped what is at stake, what they are fighting for, body and soul.³⁴

It must nevertheless be observed that in some periods, for a number of reasons which need to be studied concretely in each case, certain leaders, the vanguard, or even a large part of the mass take over the bourgeois mythology or return to past forms of organization and action (utopianism, conspiracy, etc.). We see, for instance, in the 19th century, the reappearance in some sectors of the working class of the myth of the man sent by Providence: the "flirtation" of Proudhon, Weitling, and some worker groups with Napoleon III, of Lassalle with Bismarck, and so on. Furthermore, utopia and the secret society reappear after 1848 and persist in diverse forms (Proudhonism, Blanquism) right down to the Commune of 1871. And ought one not to interpret similarly what is conventionally called "the cult of personality" in the working-class movement in the 20th century?

The most favorable conditions for the appearance of these phenomena of "ideological regression" are:

- a) weakness, immaturity, low level of consciousness in the working-class movement;
- b) defeats of the proletariat, setbacks to the revolution, disappointment and discouragement of the masses;
- c) isolation of the vanguard, bureaucratization, gap between leaders and mass. To the revolutionary conjuncture corresponds the tendency to self-emancipation, to the victory of the counterrevolution corresponds the return to messianic myths, utopia, and Jacobino-Machiavellism.

c) *Marx's "communism of the masses"*

The economic and social consequences of the Industrial Revolution were more and more felt in Europe during the period 1830–1848: growth of towns, development of industry and commerce, concentration and numerical increase of

³³ Cf. Lukács, *History and Class-Consciousness*, p. 71; A. Gorz, *La morale de l'histoire* (Paris, 1959), p. 175; R. Luxemburg, "Masse et chefs," in *Marxisme contre dictature* (Paris, 1946), p. 37. [From "Gekwickte Hoffnungen" ("Hopes dashed"), *Die Neue Zeit* 1900, 1901, 1902, 1903, 1904, 1905, 1906, 1907, 1908, 1909, 1910, 1911, 1912, 1913, 1914, 1915, 1916, 1917, 1918, 1919, 1920, 1921, 1922, 1923, 1924, 1925, 1926, 1927, 1928, 1929, 1930, 1931, 1932, 1933, 1934, 1935, 1936, 1937, 1938, 1939, 1940, 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944, 1945, 1946, 1947, 1948, 1949, 1950, 1951, 1952, 1953, 1954, 1955, 1956, 1957, 1958, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025, 2026, 2027, 2028, 2029, 2030, 2031, 2032, 2033, 2034, 2035, 2036, 2037, 2038, 2039, 2040, 2041, 2042, 2043, 2044, 2045, 2046, 2047, 2048, 2049, 2050, 2051, 2052, 2053, 2054, 2055, 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the proletariat, pauperization, and proletarianization of craftsmen, etc. These changes brought about, directly or indirectly, a great reinforcement and reorientation of the labor movement. We thus see, in France, the formation of independent working-class groups and tendencies, separate from republicanism and purely bourgeois Jacobinism. This was the time of the rise of "workers' unions," societies for resistance, secret societies made up of workers and with a working-class ideology, neo-Babouvist communism, a wave of combinations, strikes, riots, and popular insurrections. In England, trade unions develop, the worker masses organize themselves politically (Chartism), strikes and uprisings follow one after another. In Germany, the first workers' associations appear, and also the first workers' revolts. In exile, German craftsmen form Babouvist secret societies. In general, Europe's working class appears on history's scene, begins to act through its own organizations and also to sketch out a program of its own.

Marx was able to grasp the common feature of these experiences and to develop into a coherent theory the more or less vague and fragmentary tendency towards communism and self-emancipation, and he could grasp and give expression to the real movement of the proletariat because, since 1843, he had been concerned with "making the world aware of its own consciousness, . . . explaining to it the meaning of its own actions,"³⁵ and not inventing and imposing a new ready-made dogmatic system.

The central idea of Marx's "communism of the masses" was self-liberation by the masses through the communist revolution. This idea, or, rather, this significant constellation of ideas, was made up of three dialectically linked ideas, three perspectives that were mutually implicit:

- a) recognition of the potentially revolutionary nature of the proletariat;
- b) the proletariat's tendency towards communist consciousness, by way of its revolutionary praxis;
- c) the role of the communists in developing this tendency towards total coherence.

In this threefold approach, the critical practical structure of Marx's thought appears clearly: on the basis of critical reflection about reality, a possibility emerges, and upon this possibility he builds a project for transforming action.

Marx's doctrine of the communist revolution is a *realistic* political theory because it is based on a "critico-scientific" analysis of capitalist society: the possibility of changing social reality is present within reality itself.³⁶ The hypothesis of the potentially revolutionary and communist nature of the proletariat is the link, the organic connection, between Marx's political theory

and his sociology, economics, philosophy of history, and so on. "Communism of the masses" presupposes Marx's entire *Weltanschauung*; it is a partial totality articulated within this longer totality.

In this conception, the role of the *communists* (a broad term which, for Marx, embraces the ideologists, the political leaders, and the vanguard of the proletariat) is qualitatively different from that of the Jacobin heroes or the revolutionary conspirators. They are the "catalysts" of the totality within the labor movement: their function is to link every limited demand, every national struggle, every partial moment, to the total movement (the ultimate aim, the international struggle, etc.).³⁷ Contrary to the ideologists of the "Savior" or the supporters of conspiratorial societies, for whom the separation between "the general interest" and the masses is institutionalized, because people are necessarily particularist, corrupt, or ignorant, Marx refuses to dig a ditch between the communists and the proletariat, because their separation is provisional, because the proletariat tends towards the totality, towards communism, towards revolution. The bourgeois doctrine alienates the "totality" in an individual or an institution because he regards civil society as essentially particularist. The conspirator sees in the secret sect the only bearer of the "totality," because the working-class mass seems to him to be doomed to obscurantism so long as the capitalist regime survives. Marx sees his role and that of the communists as an instrument of self-liberation of the masses, because he is witnessing the birth of an independent labor movement, and he believes this to be capable of attaining consciousness of its historic task.

³⁵ Cf. V.I. Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?* CWL, V, 423: "The Social Democrat's ideal should not be the trade-union secretary, but the *tribune of the people*, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; who is able to generalize all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth before all his associates the necessity of . . ."