

RADICAL AMERICA

PAUL BOUTTELLE
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50¢

An SDS Journal of American Radicalism

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RADICAL AMERICA, an American New Left journal published 9-10 times per year, at 1237 Spaight St., Madison, Wis. 53703. New Subscription Rates: Sub without pamphlets, \$3 per year for SDS National Members, \$5 for all others; Sub with pamphlets, \$5 for SDS National Members, \$10 per year for all others. Supporting subs: \$10 and up. Current issue: 50¢. Back numbers (Vol. I, #3, Vol. II, #1-6, Vol. III, #1-3 all available) 75¢ each. RADICAL AMERICA is being microfilmed by University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, and will shortly be available from them on film.

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English translation of new epilog to the 1965
Insel edition of the 1856 German ed., in:
Radical America 3:4(July/Aug. 1969), 55-59

Epilogue to the New German Edition of Marx's 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon

HERBERT MARCUSE

Marx's analysis of how the revolution of 1848 developed into the authoritarian rule of Louis Bonaparte, anticipates the dynamic of late bourgeois society: the liquidation of this society's liberal phase on the basis of its own structure. The parliamentary republic metamorphoses into a political-military apparatus, at whose head a 'charismatic' leader of the bourgeoisie takes over the decisions which this class can no longer make and execute through its own power. The Socialist movement also succumbs in this period; the proletariat departs (for how long?) from the stage. All this is the stuff of the twentieth century -- but the twentieth from the perspective of the nineteenth, in which the horror of the fascist and postfascist periods is still unknown. This horror requires a correction of the introductory sentences of the 'Eighteenth Brumaire': the 'world-historical facts and persons' which occur 'as it were twice', no longer occur the second time as 'farce'. Or rather, the farce is more fearful than the tragedy it follows.

The parliamentary republic decays in a situation in which the bourgeoisie retains only the choice: 'despotism or anarchy. Naturally it voted for despotism.' Marx reports the anecdote from the Council of Constance, according to which Cardinal Pierre d'Ailly called out to the advocates of moral reform, 'Only the devil himself can still save the Catholic Church, and you demand angels.' Today, the demand for angels is no longer the order of the day. But how does the situation arise in which only authoritarian rule, the army, the sellout and betrayal of liberal promises and institutions can any longer save bourgeois society? Let us attempt briefly to summarize the general theme which Marx makes visible everywhere through the particular historical events.(1)

The bourgeoisie had a true insight into the fact that all the weapons which it had forged against feudalism turned their points against itself, that all the means of education which it had produced rebelled against its own civilization, that all the gods which it had created had fallen away from it. It understood that all the so-called bourgeois liberties and organs of progress attacked and menaced its class rule at its social foundation and its political summit simultaneously, and had therefore become 'socialistic'.

This inversion is a manifestation of the conflict between the political form and the social content of the rule of the bourgeoisie. The political form of rule is the parliamentary republic, but in countries 'with a developed class structure' and modern conditions of production, the parliamentary republic is 'only the political form of revolution of bourgeois society and not its conservative form of life'. (2) The rights of liberty and equality which have been won against Feudalism and which have been defined and instituted in parliamentary debates, compromises and decisions, can no longer be contained within the framework of parliament and the limits imposed by it: they become generalized through extra-parliamentary class struggles and class conflicts. Parliamentary discussion itself, in its rational-liberal form (which has long become past history in the twentieth century) transformed every interest, every social institution 'into the general idea': the particular interest of the bourgeoisie came to power as the general interest of society. But once it has become official, the ideology presses toward its own realization. The debates in the parliament continue in the press, in the bars and 'salons', in 'public opinion'. The 'parliamentary regime leaves everything to the decision of the majorities: how shall the great majori-

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MONTHLY REVIEW

Edited by Paul M. Sweezy
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ties outside parliament not want to decide? When you play the fiddle at the top of the state, what else is to be expected but that those down below dance?' (3) And 'those down below', they are the class enemy, or they are the non-privileged of the bourgeois class. Liberty and equality here mean something very different -- something which threatens constituted authority. The generalizing, the realization of liberty -- that is no longer the interest of the bourgeoisie, it is 'Socialism'. Where is the origin of this fateful dynamic, where can it be pinned down? The threatening ghost of the enemy appears to be everywhere, in one's own camp. The ruling class mobilizes, not only for the liquidation of the socialist movement but also of its own institutions, which have fallen into contradiction with the interest of property and of business; civil rights, freedom of the press and freedom of assembly and universal suffrage are sacrifices to this interest, so that the bourgeoisie 'might then be able to pursue its private affairs with full confidence in the protection of a strong and unrestricted government. It declared unequivocally that it longed to get rid of its own political rule in order to get rid of the troubles and dangers of ruling.' (4) The Executive becomes an independent power.

But as such a power, it needs legitimacy. With its secularization of liberty and equality, bourgeois democracy endangers the abstract, transcendent 'inner' character of ideology and thereby, the consolation in the essential difference between ideology and reality -- inner freedom and equality strives toward externalization. In its rise the bourgeoisie mobilized the masses; since then it has repeatedly betrayed and suppressed them. The evolving capitalist society must increasingly reckon with the masses, fit them into some condition of economic and political normalcy, teach them how to calculate and even (to a limited degree) how to rule. The authoritarian state requires the democratic mass base; the leader must be elected -- by the People, and he is elected. Universal suffrage, which is negated de facto and then de jure by the bourgeoisie, becomes the weapon of the authoritarian executive against the recalcitrant groups of the bourgeoisie. In the Eighteenth Brumaire, Marx gives the model analysis of the plebiscitary dictatorship. At that time it was the masses of small peasants who helped Louis Napoleon to power. Their historical role in the present is projected in Marx's analysis. The Bonapartists dictatorship cannot abolish the misery of the peasantry; the latter finds its 'natural ally and leader in the urban proletariat, whose task is the overthrow of the bourgeois order.' (5) And vice versa: in the despairing peasants, 'the proletarian revolution will obtain that chorus without which its solo song becomes a swan song in all peasant countries.' (6)

The obligation of the Marxian dialectic to the comprehended reality forbids dogmatic obligation: perhaps nowhere is the contrast of Marxian theory with contemporary Marxian ideology greater than in the perception of the 'abdication' of the proletariat in one of the 'most splendid years of industrial and commercial prosperity'. The abolition of universal suffrage excluded the worker 'from all participation in political power'. To the extent they were (7)

letting themselves be led by the democrats in the face of such an event and forgetting the revolutionary interests of their class for momentary ease and comfort, they renounced the honour of being a conquering power, surrendered to their fate, proved that the defeat of June 1848 had put

them out of the fight for years and that the historical process would for the present again have to go on over their heads.

As early as 1850 Marx had turned against the minority of the London Central Committee who put a dogmatic interpretation in 'the place of a critical view', and an idealistic one in place of a materialistic: 'While we say to the workers, you have 15, 20, 50 years of civil war and national struggles to go through, not only in order to alter relations but in order to change yourselves and make yourselves capable of political rule, you say the contrary: We must immediately come to power...' (8)

The consciousness of defeat, even of despair, belongs to the truth of the theory and of its hope. This fracturing of thought - in the face of a fractured reality, a sign of its authenticity - determines the style of the 'Eighteenth Brumaire': against the will of he who wrote it, it has become a great work of literature. Language grasps reality in such a way that the horror of the event is staved off by irony. Before it no phrases, no clichés can stand -- not even those of socialism. To the extent that men sell and betray the idea of humanity, smash down or jail those who fight for it, the idea as such can no longer be expressed; scorn and satire is the real appearance of its reality. Its form appears both in the 'socialist synagogue', which the regime constructs in the Luxemburg Palace, and in the slaughter of the June days. Before the mixture of stupidity, greed, baseness and brutality of which politics is composed, language forbids seriousness. What happens is comical: every party is supported on the shoulders of the next, until this one lets them fall and supports itself in turn on the next. So it goes from Left to Right, from the proletarian party to the party of order.

The party of Order hunches its shoulders, lets the bourgeois-republicans tumble and throws itself on the shoulders of armed force. It fancies it is still sitting on its shoulders when, one fine morning, it perceives that the shoulders have transformed themselves into bayonets. Each party strikes from behind at that pressing further and leans from in front on that pressing back. No wonder that in this ridiculous posture it loses its balance and, having made the inevitable grimaces, collapses with curious capers. (9)

That is comical, but the comedy itself is already the tragedy, in which everything is gambled away and sacrificed.

The totality is still nineteenth century: the liberal and pre-liberal past. The figure of the third Napoleon, still laughable for Marx, has long since given way to other, more horrible politicians: the class struggles have metamorphosed, and the ruling class has learned how to rule. The democratic system of parties has either been abolished or reduced to the unity which is necessary if the established institutions of society are not to be endangered. And the proletariat has decayed into the generality of the working masses of the great industrial nations, who bear and preserve the apparatus of production and domination. This apparatus forces the society together into an administered totality which mobilizes men and countries, in all their dimensions, against the enemy. Only under total administration, which can at any time transform the power of technology into that of the military, the highest productivity into final destruction, can this society reproduce itself on an expanded scale. For its enemy is not only without, it is also within, as its own potentiality: the satisfaction of the struggle for existence, the abolition of alienated labor. Marx did not foresee how quickly and how

closely capitalism would approach this potentiality, and how the forces which were supposed to explode it would become instruments of its rule.

At this stage, the contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production has become so broad and so obvious, that it can no longer be rationally mastered or stamped out. No technological, no ideological veil can any longer conceal it. It can only appear now as naked contradiction, as reason turned into unreason. Only a false consciousness, one which has become indifferent to the distinction between true and false, can any longer endure it. It finds its authentic expression in Orwellian language (which Orwell projected too optimistically into 1984). Slavery is spoken of as freedom, armed intervention as self-determination, torture and firebombs as 'conventional techniques', object as subject. In this language are fused politics and publicity, business and love for mankind, information and propaganda, good and bad, morality and its elimination. In what counter-tongue can Reason be articulated? What is played is no longer satire, and irony, via the severity of horror, becomes cynicism. The Eighteenth Brumaire begins with the recollection of Hegel: Marx's analysis was still indebted to 'Reason in History'. From the latter and from its existential manifestations, criticism drew its power.

But the Reason to which Marx was indebted was also, in its day, not 'there': it appeared only in its negativity and in the struggles of those who revolted against the existent, who protested and who were beaten. With them, Marx's thought has kept faith -- in the face of defeat and against the dominating Reason. And in the same way Marx preserved hope for the hopeless in the defeat of the Paris Commune of 1871. If today unreason has itself become Reason, it is so only as the Reason of domination. Thus it remains the Reason of exploitation and repression -- even when the ruled cooperate with it. And everywhere there are still those who protest, who rebel, who fight. Even in the society of abundance they are there: the young -- those who have not yet forgotten how to see and hear and think, who have not yet abdicated; and those who are still being sacrificed to abundance and who are painfully learning how to see, hear and think. For them is the Eighteenth Brumaire written, for them it is not obsolete.

footnotes

1. Marx-Engels Selected Works, vol. 1, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1951, p. 260.
2. *Ibid*, p. 232.
3. *Ibid*, p. 261.
4. *Ibid*, p. 290.
6. *Ibid*, p. 308.
7. *Ibid*, p. 308.
8. Enthüllungen über den Kommunistenprozess zu Köln, edited by Franz Mehring, Berlin, 1914, p. 52.
9. Marx-Engels, op. cit, p. 244.

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