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## MARXISM AS PERMANENT REVOLUTION

*Erik van Ree*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article argues that the ‘permanent revolution’ represented the dominant element in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ political discourse, and that it tended to overrule considerations encapsulated in ‘historical materialism’. In Marx and Engels’s understanding, permanent revolution did not represent a historical shortcut under exceptional circumstances, but the course revolutions in the modern era would normally take. Marx and Engels traced back the pattern to the sixteenth century. It is argued here that, in Marx and Engels, the proletarian revolution does not enter the historical agenda when industrial capitalism reaches the stage of integral development, but immediately after the bourgeois revolution, even in semi-developed countries like Germany and France where the industrial proletariat formed only a small section of the population. Marx and Engels worked out a political rather than an economic sociology of revolution.

**Keywords:** Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Permanent Revolution as defining feature of Marxism, historical materialism, premature revolution, French Revolution.

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This article discusses Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ conception of the ‘permanent revolution’. I will argue that permanent revolution was the dominant element in Marx and Engels’ political discourse. The two fathers of modern communism were proud of their materialist interpretation of history, but their sober insights were trumped by the permanent-revolutionary impulse and by their desire to see early proletarian victories sweep away the capitalist order. I propose an inversion of the standard view of the way Marx and Engels envisaged the conditions of the proletarian revolution. In my reading of their work, the moment of the proletarian revolution would not arrive when capitalism reaches the stage of integral industrialization, but immediately after the bourgeois revolution, without an intervening period of capitalist economic development.

The existing scholarship is divided over this issue. At the risk of oversimplifying the matter, we can distinguish two schools. According to one viewpoint, which remains dominant outside academia, Marx and Engels expected the era of proletarian revolution to arrive only at a very high stage of development of capitalism, when large-scale industry dominates the economy and the industrial proletariat comprises the majority of the population.<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>2</sup> See for example: J. Plamenatz, *German Marxism and Russian Communism* (London/New York/Toronto, 1954), pp. 121–35, 173, 217; G. Lichtheim, *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study* (London, 1961), pp. 51–62, 122–9; W. Leonhard, *Sowjetideologie heute*, Vol. 2, *Die politischen Lehren* (Hamburg, 1962), pp. 106–9; F. Borkenau, *World Communism: A History of The Communist International* (Michigan/

second school is represented among others by Reidar Larsson, Richard Hunt, Hal Draper, Alan Gilbert and Eric Hobsbawm. These authors have produced detailed studies of the revolutionary strategies advocated by Marx and Engels from the beginning of their communist careers in 1843. They conclude that Marx and Engels accepted the possibility of proletarian revolution in the relatively backward circumstances of France and Germany in the mid-nineteenth century, and that they conceptualized this possibility in terms of ‘permanent revolution’.<sup>3</sup>

When Marx and Engels were proposing their communist strategies for Germany and France, these were indeed not highly industrialized capitalist nations. In 1850 the German industrial working class made up less than 3.5 percent of the economically active population.<sup>4</sup> Around 1870, neither in France nor in Germany did that figure exceed 10 percent.<sup>5</sup> At that time, the

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Toronto, 1962), p. 21; A.C. Janos, ‘The Communist Theory of the State and Revolution’, in *Communism and Revolution: The Strategic Uses of Political Violence*, ed. C.E. Black and T.P. Thornton (Princeton, 1964), pp. 27–41, pp. 30–1; A.G. Meyer, *Communism: Third Edition* (New York, 1967), p. 31; S. Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (London, 1968), pp. 150–62, 185–220, 241, 250–8; R.C. Tucker, *The Marxian Revolutionary Idea* (London, 1969), pp. 100–1, 103–4, 122–6; 136–8; W. Leonhard, *Die Dreispaltung des Marxismus: Ursprung und Entwicklung des Sowjetmarxismus, Maoismus und Reformkommunismus* (Vienna, 1970), pp. 36–7, 46–8, 55–6, 69, 125; G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 203, 206–7; D. McLellan, *Marxism after Marx: An Introduction* (London/Basingstoke, 1979), pp. 2–3; R. Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York, 1991), pp. 345–8; G.P. Stenson, *After Marx, Before Lenin: Marxism and Socialist Working-Class Parties in Europe, 1884–1914* (London, 1991), pp. 20–1; J. Plamenatz, *Man and Society: Political and Social Theories from Machiavelli to Marx*, Vol. 3, *Hegel, Marx and Engels, and the Idea of Progress: New, Revised Edition* (London/New York, 1992), pp. 278–93; R. Pipes, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime, 1919–1924* (London, 1994), pp. 501–2; T. Eagleton, *Why Marx was Right* (New Haven/London, 2011), ch. 2.

<sup>3</sup> See: R. Larsson, *Theories of Revolution: From Marx to the First Russian Revolution* (Stockholm, 1970), pp. 31–49, 58–60, 125–7; R.N. Hunt, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels: Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy, 1818–1850* (London, 1974), chs. 6–7; H. Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution*, Vol. II, *The Politics of Social Classes* (New York/London, 1978), pp. 27, 169–288, 317, 358–452; A. Gilbert, *Marx’s Politics: Communists and Citizens* (Oxford, 1981), chs. 2, 4, 7–12; M. Hundt, ‘Zur Entwicklung der marxistischen Revolutionstheorie nach der Revolution von 1848/49’, in *Marx-Engels-Jahrbuch*, 10 (Berlin, 1987), pp. 31–64; E. Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Marx and Marxism 1840–2011* (London, 2011), pp. 63–9, 71.

<sup>4</sup> Out of an economically active German population of 15.8 million people in 1850, 24 percent worked in the secondary sector, i.e. approximately 3.8 million people. An estimated 1.75 million people were engaged in *Handwerk*, and 1.5 million in *Verlag*, adding up to 3.25 million artisans. This would leave 550,000 industrial workers: F.-W. Henning, *Deutsche Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte im 19. Jahrhundert* (Paderborn, 1996), pp. 351, 877, 885.

<sup>5</sup> In 1860–5 there were an estimated 1.2 million industrial workers in France: Michel Beaud, *Histoire du capitalisme de 1500 à nos jours* (Paris, 1981), pp. 135, 187–8. According to information provided by Roger Price, the active population of France stood

industrial share of the national income made up less than a third in France and less than a quarter in Germany.<sup>6</sup>

I believe the conclusions of the second school are based on incontestable evidence, but it would be rash to say that this closes the case. There are good reasons why many serious scholars stick to the idea that Marx and Engels made proletarian revolution conditional upon integral industrialization, despite the evidence to the contrary. One does after all not have to search very hard to find indications in their work that the proletarian revolution depends on conditions created by capitalist development and that it will be the result of a mature class antagonism between proletariat and bourgeoisie.

Significantly, the authors of the second school take this into account. They treat the permanent-revolutionary scenario as a shortcut, allowing an otherwise inevitable stage of capitalist industrialization to be skipped or contracted. In Michael Löwy's interpretation, Marx and Engels acknowledged 'the *objective possibility* of a rupture in the succession of historical tasks'. The focus shifted 'from a fixed succession of generation-long economic stages to a telescoped sequence of political phases'.<sup>7</sup> In Draper's interpretation the permanent revolution represented a '*telescoping* of the two tasks' of the democratic and socialist revolutions.<sup>8</sup> Larsson refers to a supposed Marxist conception of '“compressed” development'.<sup>9</sup> The most sophisticated interpretation of Marx and Engels' theory of proletarian revolution in the literature is, then, that the bourgeois revolution would end in a comparatively long era of capitalist economic development, but that history might accelerate under exceptional circumstances.

I will argue that for Marx and Engels the permanent revolution did not represent a shortcut or exceptional scenario, but the course that revolutions in the modern era would normally take. Marx and Engels believed that revolutions by bourgeois classes tended rapidly to trigger proletarian revolutions in an uninterrupted process. This was, they assumed, the pattern of the modern revolution, which they traced back to the sixteenth century. The pattern preserved its validity in the nineteenth century. Marx and Engels admitted

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at 15.1 million in 1866: *An Economic History of Modern France, 1730–1914* (London/Basingstoke, 1981), pp. 168–9. For 10 percent for 1875 Germany, see Henning, *Deutsche Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte*, pp. 351, 678.

<sup>6</sup> For 1872–82 France (30 percent) and 1860–9 Germany (24 percent), see S. Kuznets, *Modern Economic Growth: Rate, Structure, and Spread* (New Haven/London, 1967), pp. 88–9.

<sup>7</sup> M. Löwy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development: The Theory of Permanent Revolution* (London, 1981), pp. 7–8.

<sup>8</sup> Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory*, p. 175; see also p. 238.

<sup>9</sup> Larsson, *Theories of Revolution*, p. 31. See also: M. Levin, 'Deutschmarx: Marx, Engels and the German Question', *Political Studies*, 29 (4) (1981), pp. 537–54, p. 542; *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution: The Documentary Record*, ed. R.B. Day and D. Gaido (Leiden/Boston, 2009), p. 27.

that in earlier centuries, when capitalism had been in the ascendant, workers' insurrections had necessarily ended in failure. But they concluded that now, in their own days, the proletarian revolution had acquired the potential to establish itself in power on a stable basis and to initiate the socialist transition. That was even the case in countries such as Germany and France that in the mid-century remained in the initial stages of industrialization, with proletariats comprising only small fractions of the population. The point was that even in these countries the capitalist order had outlived itself, or so Marx and Engels believed; and it was this that made the seizure of power by these small proletariats not an exceptional occurrence but precisely the thing to expect.<sup>10</sup>

Researching Marx's and Engels' views on the permanent revolution constitutes a real challenge. We are dealing here with the work of two extremely prolific authors, whom we cannot simply lump together. What is more, the period under scrutiny here stretches out over half a century and we cannot just assume that Marx and Engels were all the time presenting one, unchanging viewpoint.

There exists an extensive literature about the question of the identity or non-identity of Marx's and Engels' views.<sup>11</sup> It is not my intention to contribute to or even to take a position in this debate, which focuses on the question of whether Engels' naturalist-scientific philosophical system constituted a new departure compared to Marx's humanistic orientation. Marx's and Engels' considerations of revolutionary strategy do not figure prominently in this debate. Nevertheless, the existing literature suggests that differences between the two men in that field may not have been very significant.<sup>12</sup> The evidence

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<sup>10</sup> This article does not reconsider Marx's and Engels' views of the Russian revolution and the question of communism and the village commune.

<sup>11</sup> For the case for a rift between Marx and Engels, see: Lichtheim, *Marxism*; Avineri, *Social and Political Thought*; N. Levine, *The Tragic Deception: Marx Contra Engels* (Oxford/Santa Barbara, 1975); D. McLellan, *Engels* (Hassocks, 1977); L. Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth and Dissolution*, Vol. 1, *The Founders* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 376–408; McLellan, *Marxism after Marx*, ch. 1; T. Carver, *Marx & Engels: The Intellectual Relationship* (Brighton, 1983); T. Carver, *Friedrich Engels: His Life and Thought* (Basingstoke/London, 1989); A. Walicki, *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom: The Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia* (Stanford, 1995), pp. 111–207. For the essential sameness of Marx's and Engels' thinking, see: Hunt, *Political Ideas*, pp. 93, 124 ff.; Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory*, pp. 23–6; A. Gouldner, *The Two Marxisms: Contradictions and Anomalies in the Development of Theory* (London/Basingstoke, 1980), pp. 250–86; J.D. Hunley, *The Life and Thought of Friedrich Engels: A Reinterpretation* (New Haven/London, 1991). For a more recent, methodological contribution to this debate see T. Carver, 'The Engels–Marx Question: Interpretation, Identity/ies, Partnership, Politics', *Engels after Marx*, ed. M.B. Steger and T. Carver (Manchester, 1999), pp. 17–36.

<sup>12</sup> None of the scholars referred to earlier as the second school informs us of significant differences between Marx's and Engels' revolutionary strategies during the decade following 1843. The defender of the thesis of Engels' originality compared to Marx, Terrell Carver, does not find important differences in their revolutionary writings before

presented in this article indeed allows the conclusion that there was very little light, if any, between Marx and Engels when they formulated their conclusions on the permanent revolution in the period from 1843 to the early 1850s. Later on neither of them fundamentally altered his views on the matter. Through the years, Marx and Engels persistently repeated the same essential points, independently of circumstance, medium and audience. The conception of a two-stage but uninterrupted revolution belonged to their stable core beliefs, from which they did not back away.

### Permanent Revolution

Karl Marx (1818–83) and Friedrich Engels (1820–95) were born in the German Rhineland. They grew up in the aftermath of Napoleon Bonaparte's defeat. In the period of Restoration, European elites desperately attempted to get the genie of the French Revolution back into the bottle. In France, where feudal regulations such as local tariffs, guilds and estate privileges had been abolished in 1789, the Bourbons had been restored to power. The dynasty was once again overthrown in 1830, when a new monarch, Louis Philippe, ascended the throne. But his regime was far from democratic. In the Marxist interpretation it narrowly represented the bourgeoisie of finance. In Germany feudal regulations partly continued in force. The country remained fragmented into princely states. Even in Great Britain the bourgeoisie still shared power with the aristocracy after the 1832 electoral reforms. In all of these countries, democratization, or the 'bourgeois revolution' as Marx and Engels called this process, remained on the agenda.

Marx's and Engels' communist writing careers began in 1843–4. In 1845 they moved to Brussels, where they stayed until the revolution broke out in 1848. France, the German states and the Habsburg Empire were convulsed by violent uprisings. The main issues at stake concerned democratization, the abolition of feudal regulations, and German and Italian state unification. During the revolutionary years of 1848 to '49 Marx and Engels lived in Paris and Cologne most of the time. After the defeat of the revolution both men moved to Great Britain, where Marx's studies of capitalism resulted in *Capital*.

During the period from 1843 to 1850 Marx and Engels were constantly reformulating their revolutionary strategies for Germany. We learn from the authors referred to above as the second school that they first advocated an immediate proletarian revolution aiming for democracy and then for communism. Later they drew the conclusion, to be laid down in the 1848 *Communist Manifesto*, that the German proletarian revolution must be preceded by a 'bourgeois revolution' against feudalism and absolutism, and

1859 (Carver, *Marx & Engels*, pp. 96, 142–4). Another forceful proponent of the thesis of the Marx–Engels rift, Norman Levine, concludes that notwithstanding the later Engels' shift in the direction of parliamentarism, the 'permanent revolution' remained his 'concept of revolution' (Levine, *Tragic Deception*, pp. 182–5).

which would serve as the ‘prelude to an immediately following proletarian revolution’.<sup>13</sup> When the revolution broke out in Germany in March 1848, the attempts to establish a united democratic republic, or alternatively a constitutional monarchy, ended in failure. After 1848 Marx and Engels no longer trusted the German bourgeoisie. For a short interlude in 1849–50 they reverted to the idea of an immediate proletarian revolution aiming for a democratic and social republic.<sup>14</sup> Finally, in their March 1850 *Address to the Communist League*, Marx and Engels predicted the seizure of power by the ‘democratic petty bourgeois’, instead of by the discredited bourgeoisie. The revolution would then quickly escalate into a proletarian victory.<sup>15</sup>

The conception of the ‘permanent revolution’ was meant to provide a solid foundation for the revolutionary strategies outlined in the *Manifesto* and the March 1850 *Address*. Marx was the first to use the term permanent revolution in 1843. In the years leading up to 1850 we find several other occasions of his and Engels’ use.<sup>16</sup> Neither man ever provided a formal definition, but we can reliably establish what they meant by it. On most occasions, Marx and Engels

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Manifesto of the Communist Party’, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 6 (New York, 1976), p. 519 [hereafter *CW*]; K. Marx and F. Engels, *Werke*, Vol. 4 (Berlin, 1972), p. 493 [hereafter *MEW*].

<sup>14</sup> In ‘The Situation in Paris’ (January 1849), Marx and Engels recognized only two options, ‘*Restoration of the monarchy or — a red republic*’. However, ‘some small intermezzi’ on the way to the red republic seemed unavoidable (*CW*, Vol. 8, p. 283; *MEW*, Vol. 6, p. 211). It seems that some form of bourgeois revolution preceding the proletarian revolution remained on Marx’s and Engels’ minds even now.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Address of the Central Authority to the League, March 1850’, *CW*, Vol. 10, pp. 280–1; *MEW*, Vol. 7, pp. 247–8. The idea that the bourgeois revolution will rapidly escalate into a proletarian struggle can be found all over Marx’s and Engels’ writings of the period. See for example: Introduction to the ‘Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right’, (Marx, written 1843–4), *CW*, Vol. 3, pp. 184–6; *MEW*, Vol. 1, p. 389; Engels’ 20 February 1846 letter to *The Northern Star*, published as part of ‘The State of Germany’, *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 29; *MEW*, Vol. 2, p. 580; ‘Address of the German Democratic Communists of Brussels to Mr. Feargus O’Connor’ (Marx/Engels, July 1846), *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 58; *MEW*, Vol. 4, p. 24; ‘The Prussian Constitution’ (Engels, March 1847), *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 71; *MEW*, Vol. 4, p. 35; ‘Protective Tariffs or Free Trade System’ (Engels, June 1847), *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 94; *MEW*, Vol. 4, pp. 60–1; ‘Moralising Criticism and Critical Morality’ (Marx, October 1847), *CW*, Vol. 6, pp. 332–3; *MEW*, Vol. 4, p. 352; ‘Principles of Communism’ (Engels, written late 1847), *CW*, Vol. 6, pp. 350, 356; *MEW*, Vol. 4, pp. 372–3, 379; ‘The Movements of 1847’ (Engels, January 1848), *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 528; *MEW*, Vol. 4, p. 502; ‘Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany’ (written by Engels in 1851–2, published under Marx’s name), *CW*, Vol. 11, p. 10; *MEW*, Vol. 8, pp. 10–11.

<sup>16</sup> ‘On the Jewish Question’ (Marx, written August–December 1843), *CW*, Vol. 3, pp. 155–6; *MEW*, Vol. 1, p. 357; ‘The Holy Family’ (Marx/Engels, written September–November 1844), *CW*, Vol. 4, p. 123; *MEW*, Vol. 2, p. 130; ‘The Magyar Struggle’ (Engels, January 1849), *CW*, Vol. 8, p. 227; *MEW*, Vol. 6, p. 166; ‘The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850’ (Marx, 1850), *CW*, Vol. 10, p. 127; *MEW*, Vol. 7, p. 89; ‘Address März 1850’, *CW*, Vol. 10, pp. 281, 287; *MEW*, Vol. 7, pp. 248, 254.

were referring to the French Revolution, to which I will return shortly. In the March 1850 address, however, they used the term to refer to their own policies. When confronted with a petty bourgeois, revolutionary-democratic government, they explained, the workers must ‘make the revolution permanent’ until all propertied classes are driven from their ruling positions and until ‘the proletariat has conquered state power’.<sup>17</sup> Permanent revolution here referred to a proletarian revolution rapidly triggered by the seizure of power by the democratic petty bourgeoisie.

We would like to know whether Marx and Engels found the term also applicable in the case of the earlier model they had proposed in the *Communist Manifesto*, and in which the proletariat was supposed to take over not from the democratic petty bourgeoisie but from the bourgeoisie. This cannot be documented on the basis of writings of that time, but much later, in 1884, Engels reminisced that back in 1848 he and Marx had hoped for the revolution not to be ‘declared complete, but lasting [*in Permanenz*]’. This had indicated, Engels continued, that the communists could only engage in the struggle for their real party aims when ‘the most extreme of the official parties existing in Germany came to the helm’.<sup>18</sup> This was a clear reference to the *Communist Manifesto*’s German strategy. The term permanent revolution, then, referred to a revolution by either bourgeois or petty bourgeois classes, aiming for the democratization of the state, and which triggers a second, proletarian revolution in a rapid process of escalation.<sup>19</sup>

### French and Other Revolutions

Apart from underpinning Marx and Engels’ revolutionary strategies, the term permanent revolution had another historical dimension. In most instances

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<sup>17</sup> *CW*, Vol. 10, p. 281; *MEW*, Vol. 7, p. 248.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Marx and the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* (1848–49)’, *CW*, Vol. 26, p. 126; *MEW*, Vol. 21, pp. 21–2.

<sup>19</sup> The scholarly literature does not properly reflect Marx and Engels’ definition. The confusion is due to the influence of Lev Trotsky’s understanding of the concept. Trotsky foresaw a workers’ revolution aiming for the democratization of Russia, to be followed by a quick move towards the socialist transition: B. Knei-Paz, *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky* (Oxford, 1979). To my knowledge Marx and Engels never referred to the strategy in which the workers carried the first (democratic) as well as the second (socialist) revolution with the term permanent revolution. Larsson and Draper use a broad definition in which all strategies foreseeing a rapid transition from a democratic to a socialist stage, regardless of class basis, qualify as permanent revolution: Larsson, *Theories of Revolution*, pp. 24–37, 125–7; Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory*, pp. 27, 169–288, 380. For Michael Löwy (*Politics*, ch. 1) and Richard Day and Daniel Gaido (*Witnesses to Permanent Revolution*, introduction), only the strategy with a proletarian-democratic stage constitutes the real thing. Löwy (p. 3) discovers ‘different threads of theory — “stagist” and “permanentist” ’ in Marx and Engels. In my opinion this is confusing: the permanent revolution represents a particular form of stagism.

when they were using the term Marx and Engels were referring to the French Revolution.<sup>20</sup> Mainly, the period of the Terror of 1793–4 was on their minds. The revolution of July 1789 in Paris had resulted in a constitutional monarchy. In August 1792 the king was overthrown, in what amounted to a second revolution, carried out by the Paris Commune and its sections, and fuelled by the energies of the masses of the *sans-culottes*, described by George Rudé as the ‘small shopkeepers, workshop masters and wage-earners’ of Paris.<sup>21</sup> In May–June 1793, pressure by the sections resulted in the Girondin leaders’ demise, leaving the Jacobins as the main power-holders in the parliament, the Convention, and Robespierre and Saint-Just as the main leaders ruling France through the Committee of Public Safety. In July of the next year their reign of terror was brought to an end.<sup>22</sup>

The term permanent revolution first appears in Marx’s writings in *The Jewish Question*, written in late 1843. Marx acquaints his readers with an aggressive but weak Jacobin state that takes recourse to ‘the guillotine’, while all the time ‘declaring the revolution to be permanent’.<sup>23</sup> In *The Holy Family*, written in 1844, Marx and Engels once again associated ‘the permanent revolution’ with Robespierre’s ‘revolutionary terrorism’.<sup>24</sup> In January 1849 Engels openly congratulated the Hungarian revolutionary leader Kossuth for following the example of 1793 and establishing a ‘*terreur rouge*’ and a ‘revolution in permanence’.<sup>25</sup>

In these cases permanent revolution did not refer to the rapid bourgeois-proletarian sequence discussed above but to the progressive radicalization of the French Revolution that had ended in the Terror.<sup>26</sup> However, the two uses of the term would remain mutually consistent, should we assume that Marx

<sup>20</sup> On Marx’s interest in the French Revolution, see: A. Cornu, ‘Karl Marx’ Stellung zur Französischen Revolution und zu Robespierre (1843–1845)’, in *Maximilien Robespierre, 1758–1794*, ed. W. Markov (Berlin, 1961), pp. 505–24, pp. 505–6; P. Kägi, *Genesis des historischen Materialismus: Karl Marx und die Dynamik der Gesellschaft* (Vienna/Frankfurt/Zürich, 1965), p. 169; J. Bruhat, ‘La Révolution française et la formation de la pensée de Marx’, in *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 38 (2) (1966), pp. 125–70, pp. 130–5.

<sup>21</sup> G. Rudé, *The French Revolution* (London, 1988), p. 72.

<sup>22</sup> For Marx’s 1843–4 readings in French Revolutionary history, see: Kägi, *Genesis*, pp. 169–89; Bruhat, ‘La Révolution française’, pp. 135–44; H.-P. Jaeck, *Die französische bürgerliche Revolution von 1798 im Frühwerk von Karl Marx (1843–1846): Geschichtsmethodologische Studien* (Liechtenstein, 1979).

<sup>23</sup> *CW*, Vol. 3, p. 156; *MEW*, Vol. 1, p. 357. For Marx’s earliest interpretations of Robespierre in a semi-Hegelian context, see F. Furet, *Marx et la Révolution française: Textes de Karl Marx présentés, réunis, traduits, par Lucien Calvié* (Paris, 1986), pp. 47 ff.

<sup>24</sup> *CW*, Vol. 4, p. 123; *MEW*, Vol. 2, p. 130.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Magyar Struggle’, *CW*, Vol. 8, pp. 227–8; *MEW*, Vol. 6, pp. 165–6.

<sup>26</sup> For Marx on the French Revolution pattern of radicalisation ending in Terror, see also: ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’ (Marx, written December 1851 to

and Engels interpreted the radical, terrorist stage of the French Revolution as its proletarian stage.

This is not something most students of Marx and Engels would easily agree to. It is acknowledged in the literature that Marx and his friend attributed an important role to the urban plebeian element, of whom the Jacobins had in some way been representative, and that they had on occasion, indeed, suggested that the Jacobin dictatorship represented a form of proletarian rule. But the consensus remains that in Marx and Engels' eyes the French Revolution represented a bourgeois phenomenon.<sup>27</sup> To my knowledge only Daniel Guérin suggested in 1946 that Marx conceptualized the French Revolution as a

March 1852), *CW*, Vol. 11, p. 124; *MEW*, Vol. 8, p. 135. On the self-accelerating mechanism of revolutions in Marx and Engels, see also: Larsson, *Theories of Revolution*, p. 29. For the close identification of permanent revolution and Terror in Marx, see also: Levine, *Tragic Deception*, ch. 4. Löwy (*Politics*, pp. 18–19) suggests that the term permanent revolution came from Jacobin usage. In one of the books that he studied in 1843 (W. Wachsmuth, *Geschichte Frankreichs im Revolutionsalter*, Vol. 2 (Hamburg, 1842), p. 341), Marx would have read that the Jacobin club decided to go into permanent session during the crisis of July 1794 that ended in Robespierre's execution. Wachsmuth frequently mentions the Paris sections and the National Convention establishing the 'permanence' of their sessions in periods of revolutionary crisis: Vol. 1 (1840), pp. 469, 471, 475, 482, 503; Vol. 2: pp. 30, 60, 109, 338ff, 424, 473. On page 153 (Vol. 2), Wachsmuth quotes the *Journal de Lyon* (27 June 1793), in which the 'Jacobins, cordeliers, montagnards' are accused of being 'in permanent insurrection [*révolte*]'. In his 1884 'Marx and the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*', Engels admitted that his reading of Alfred Bougeart's book about Marat had made him understand that his and Marx's revolution 'in *Permanenz*' had amounted to an unconscious imitation of this French revolutionary: *CW*, Vol. 26, p. 126; *MEW*, Vol. 21: p. 21. Bougeart mentioned the 'permanent guillotine' and Marat's support for the 'permanence' of civil assemblies and of the Paris Commune: *Marat, L'ami du peuple*, Vol. 1 (Paris, 1865), pp. 330, 419–20; Vol. 2, pp. 96–7. I thank Charlotte Goëtz for establishing that the term 'permanent revolution' cannot be found in Marat's collected works: personal communication 28 October 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Cornu, 'Karl Marx' Stellung'; Bruhat, 'La Révolution française'; E. Schmitt and M. Meyn, *Ursprung und Charakter der Französischen Revolution bei Marx und Engels* (Bochum, 1976); Jaeck, *Die französische bürgerliche Revolution*; Löwy, *Politics*; Furet, *Marx et la Révolution française*, introduction. For Jacobin rule as proletarian rule in Marx and Engels, see for example: Larsson, *Theories of Revolution*, p. 33; Schmitt and Meyn, *Ursprung und Charakter*, pp. 66–7, 69–71. Löwy (*Politics*, pp. 4, 7) calls Marx's characterization of Jacobin rule as a premature proletarian revolution 'not very convincing'. Jaeck (*Die französische bürgerliche Revolution*, pp. 185–6, 188–9) concludes that Marx saw Jacobin rule as a balancing act between proletariat and bourgeoisie. According to Furet (*Marx et la Révolution française*, pp. 27–64), Marx's claim that Robespierre represented the classes without property was hard to reconcile with historical materialism. For Marx and Engels' inspiration by the French Revolution, see also: Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory*, p. 203; *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution*, pp. 1–3. For the Marxist analysis of popular pressure from below as the driving force behind the radicalization of the French Revolution, see E. Kamenka, 'Revolutionary Ideology and "The Great French Revolution of 1789–?"', in *The Permanent Revolution: The French Revolution and its Legacy, 1789–1989*, ed. G. Best (London, 1988), pp. 75–99, p. 78.

sequence of a bourgeois and an ‘embryonic’ proletarian stage.<sup>28</sup> This is the interpretation that I hope to restore. My aim is neither to establish whether Marx and Engels’ interpretation of the French Revolution was historically accurate, nor to contribute to the debate among historians about the concept of ‘bourgeois revolution’. My aim is merely to establish what Marx and Engels’ interpretation of the French Revolution was.

For Marx and Engels Robespierre did not qualify as a proletarian political leader. Whereas they on occasion referred to Gracchus Babeuf as a communist ideologue, they would never have honoured Robespierre in that way.<sup>29</sup> Yet, too often did they claim that it was the *proletariat* that had seized power in 1793 to ignore such remarks. Marx and Engels were less scrupulous than present-day Marxists, who would mostly refuse to refer to the sans-culottes as proletarians. Of course, they understood very well that these were no modern factory workers, and they labelled them in all kinds of ways, for example as the ‘“innumerable” masses’.<sup>30</sup> But neither Marx nor Engels objected to the term *proletariat*. Engels wrote in 1845 that the Terror had proceeded from the party ‘which derived its support from the insurgent proletariat’. The fall of Robespierre signified ‘the victory of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat’.<sup>31</sup> In October 1847 Marx wrote that in 1794 ‘the proletariat’ had overthrown the political rule of the bourgeoisie, even though in the absence of the material conditions for the abolition of capitalism the victory of the proletariat only served ‘the *bourgeois revolution*’.<sup>32</sup> In November of the same year Engels called the Terror ‘the short time when the proletariat was at the helm of state in the French Revolution’.<sup>33</sup> These writings allow us to conclude that in the late 1840s both Marx and Engels entertained the notion of a bourgeois revolution of 1789 escalating into an embryonic proletarian revolution in 1793.

There was a powerful ambivalence to Marx and Engels’ evaluation of the Jacobin dictatorship, but it is nonetheless possible to make sense of it. In 1848 Marx made a little-commented-upon observation concerning the course of the German revolution that I believe sheds light on his understanding of 1793: ‘*Revolution* on the lips of the people meant: you, the bourgeois, are the

<sup>28</sup> D. Guérin, *La lutte de classes sous la première république: Bourgeois et ‘bras nus’ (1793–1797)*, Vol. 1 (Paris, 1946), pp. 1–8.

<sup>29</sup> See: ‘The Condition of England’ (Engels, August 1844), *CW*, Vol. 3, p. 473; *MEW*, Vol. 1, pp. 553–4; ‘Holy Family’, *CW*, Vol. 4, p. 119; *MEW*, Vol. 2, p. 126; ‘The Festival of Nations in London’ (Engels, 1845), *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 5; *MEW*, Vol. 2, pp. 612–13; ‘Moralising Criticism’, *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 321; *MEW*, Vol. 4, p. 341.

<sup>30</sup> ‘The German Ideology’ (Marx/Engels, written 1845–6), *CW*, Vol. 5, p. 178; *MEW*, Vol. 3, p. 162.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Festival of Nations’, *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 5; *MEW*, Vol. 2, pp. 612. Compare: ‘The Bourgeoisie and the Counter-Revolution’ (Marx, December 1848), *CW*, Vol. 8, p. 161; *MEW*, Vol. 6, p. 107.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Moralising Criticism’, *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 319; *MEW*, Vol. 4, pp. 338–9.

<sup>33</sup> ‘The Civil War in Switzerland’, *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 372; *MEW*, Vol. 4, p. 397.

*Comité du salut public* . . . to whom we have entrusted the government'.<sup>34</sup> Both Marx and Engels were obviously under the impression that the Robespierre government had been established by the proletarian sans-culottes. However, as its assumption of power had occurred under circumstances that did not allow socialist reform, the new government ended up as a clique of bourgeois leaders. But, again, given the way its power was acquired, there nonetheless remained a sense in which Robespierre's government represented proletarian rule. Or that seems to have been Marx and Engels' interpretation of what had occurred.

Later on Marx seldom returned to the issue of the class basis of the Jacobin dictatorship.<sup>35</sup> Engels did more often, but without altering his views. In 1880 he confirmed that during the Terror the "have-nothing" masses of Paris had been able 'for a moment to gain the mastery'. Engels repeated that the insufficient level of capitalist development had forced this government to serve the bourgeois revolution, and that a government of the poor had been impossible in the long run.<sup>36</sup> Engels designated the sans-culottes in various ways, for example as 'the plebeians — the forerunners of the later proletariat', or as the 'pre-proletariat [Vorproletariat]'.<sup>37</sup> But he did not rule out straightforward use of the term proletariat, as when he observed that the Great French Revolution had proved that the democratic republic was the classical form of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, when Marx and Engels expected bourgeois revolutions in their own days to trigger proletarian revolutions, they believed this conformed to a pattern earlier revealed in the French Revolution. What is more, as we will presently see, they concluded that other modern revolutions, too, had followed this same pattern from the sixteenth century onwards.

In October 1847 Marx formulated it as a general principle that 'the first appearance of a really active communist party occurs within the bourgeois revolution, at the moment when the constitutional monarchy has been abolished'.

<sup>34</sup> 'Bourgeoisie and Counter-Revolution', *CW*, Vol. 8, p. 165; *MEW*, Vol. 6, p. 111.

<sup>35</sup> For Marx's comment's on Robespierre's measures against the workers, see his letter to Engels of 30 January 1865: *CW*, Vol. 42, p. 71; *MEW*, Vol. 31, p. 48.

<sup>36</sup> 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific', *CW*, Vol. 24; p. 289, also p. 292; *MEW*, Vol. 19, p. 193, also p. 195.

<sup>37</sup> Engels to Victor Adler, 4 December 1889, *CW*, Vol. 48, p. 414; *MEW*, Vol. 37, p. 318; Engels to Karl Kautsky, 21 May 1895, *CW*, Vol. 50, p. 512; *MEW*, Vol. 39, pp. 482–3.

<sup>38</sup> 'A Critique of the Draft Social-Democratic Programme of 1891' (June 1891), *CW*, Vol. 27, p. 227; *MEW*, Vol. 22, p. 235. For Engels on Babeuf: 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific', *CW*, Vol. 24, p. 287; *MEW*, Vol. 19, p. 191. In a 4 September 1870 letter to Marx, Engels attributed the Terror to frightened bourgeois and the 'mob of the underworld': *CW*, Vol. 44, p. 63; *MEW*, Vol. 33, p. 53. See, for the Terror as instrument of the most revolutionary class: Engels to Kautsky, 20 February 1889, *CW*, Vol. 48, pp. 267–8; *MEW*, Vol. 37, pp. 155–6. See also Schmitt and Meyn, *Ursprung und Charakter*, p. 71.

Marx described the process of revolutionary escalation as a historical pattern of bourgeois revolutions triggering proletarian (communist) intervention. In his eyes, the 'Levellers' represented the 'communist party' of the seventeenth-century English Revolution.<sup>39</sup> Marx was in fact referring to Gerrard Winstanley's *Diggers*, a group of agrarian communists who had occupied common land near Weybridge (Surrey) not long after the execution of Charles I in January 1649. Once again this had the connotation of tragically premature action on the part of the plebeian-proletarian element.

With his observations on the German Peasant War (1524–5), Engels went back even further in history. His *The Peasant War in Germany* was published in 1850 in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung: Politisch-ökonomische Revue*, edited by Marx from London. This is how Engels described Luther's plight:

Between 1517 and 1525 *Luther* changed just as much as the present-day German constitutionalists did between 1846 and 1849, and as every bourgeois party does when, placed for a time at the head of the movement, it is overwhelmed by the plebeian or proletarian party standing behind it.<sup>40</sup>

This remarkable passage sketches the permanent-revolutionary progression from bourgeois to proletarian stages as a pattern applying as far back as the sixteenth century. Engels pointed to the existence of a '*plebeian opposition*' in the German bourgeois revolution, consisting of 'the journeymen, the day labourers, and the numerous precursors of the lumpenproletariat'.<sup>41</sup> In Thuringia this element actually seized power. In Engels' words, the 'embryonic proletarian element . . . gained the upper hand for a time over all the other factions of the movement'.<sup>42</sup> He was referring to the radical theologian Thomas Müntzer, who ruled the city of Mühlhausen for some months during 1524 and 1525. Engels sharply contrasted Luther's 'cowardly servility' to the princes, which expressed the 'hesitant and ambiguous policy of the burghers', with Müntzer's 'terrorist energy'. However, Müntzer's 'attack on private property' failed and his government soon collapsed. Engels concluded that this had been a premature revolution. Without the appropriate 'economic conditions', a leader like Müntzer is 'compelled to represent not . . . his class, but the class for whose domination the movement is then ripe'.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, in the late 1840s and early 1850s Marx and Engels discovered a permanent-revolutionary sequence of bourgeois and proletarian stages not

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<sup>39</sup> 'Moralising Criticism', *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 321; *MEW*, Vol. 4, p. 341. Compare Engels in 'Condition of England', *CW*, Vol. 3, pp. 472–3; *MEW*, Vol. 1, p. 554.

<sup>40</sup> 'The Peasant War in Germany', *CW*, Vol. 10, p. 416; *MEW*, Vol. 7, p. 347.

<sup>41</sup> *CW*, Vol. 10, p. 407; *MEW*, Vol. 7, pp. 337–8.

<sup>42</sup> *CW*, Vol. 10, pp. 408–9; *MEW*, Vol. 7, p. 339.

<sup>43</sup> *CW*, Vol. 10, pp. 415, 427, 470, 472; *MEW*, Vol. 7, pp. 339, 346, 358, 392, 400–3.

only in the French Revolution but in other, earlier revolutions as well.<sup>44</sup> Marx and Engels seem to have discovered the roots of this historical pattern in the dialectical inter-relationship between the two classes of bourgeoisie and proletariat. Engels observed in his 1847 *Principles of Communism* that, in augmenting their own strength, the bourgeois class cannot avoid increasing the strength of the workers: 'In the same proportion in which the bourgeois became wealthier, the proletarians became more numerous.'<sup>45</sup> The formula was accepted by Marx and quickly reproduced in important joint publications.<sup>46</sup> It would elegantly explain why, once the bourgeoisie was ready for revolution, the workers would also have gained sufficient strength for a revolutionary intervention of their own, even when capitalism was still in the ascendant.

Later on in his career Engels indeed spelled out this conclusion. In his 1880 *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* he explained that it was the mechanism of parallel economic development that lay at the basis of early proletarian class struggles. 'From its origin, the bourgeoisie was saddled with its antithesis: capitalists cannot exist without wage-workers.' This was, Engels continued, why 'in every great bourgeois movement, there were independent outbursts of that class which was the forerunner, more or less developed, of the modern proletariat'.<sup>47</sup> Earlier, Engels had referred to the same mechanism to highlight that the proletarian revolution might reach the stage of outstripping the bourgeois revolution, even in a country where the workers were still a tiny minority. In his 1870 preface to *The Peasant War in Germany*, Engels explained that in developing industry and trade the bourgeoisie could not avoid engendering a proletariat to the same degree. He added that in the course of this parallel development in each country a 'turning point' would arrive when the bourgeoisie would be noticing that 'its proletarian double is outgrowing it'. Engels suspected that in Germany that point had been reached in 1848.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See for Engels' later comments on the German Peasant War, 'Dialectics of Nature' (written 1873 to 1883), *CW*, Vol. 25, p. 318; *MEW*, Vol. 20, p. 311, and 'On the Peasant War' (written late 1884), *CW*, Vol. 26, p. 554; *MEW*, Vol. 21, p. 402. For Engels' comments on the 'three great bourgeois risings' of European history and on the English revolution, see his 1892 introduction to the English edition of 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific', *CW*, Vol. 27, p. 291; *MEW*, Vol. 22, p. 301.

<sup>45</sup> *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 346; *MEW*, Vol. 4, p. 368.

<sup>46</sup> 'Manifesto', *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 490; *MEW*, Vol. 4, p. 468; 'Revolution and Counter-Revolution', *CW*, Vol. 11, p. 10; *MEW*, Vol. 8, p. 10.

<sup>47</sup> *CW*, Vol. 24, pp. 286–7; *MEW*, Vol. 19, pp. 190–1. See also Engels: 'The Prussian Military Question and the German Workers' Party' (1865), *CW*, Vol. 20, pp. 70–1; *MEW*, Vol. 16, p. 70; and Engels' 1876–7 preparatory writings for the *Anti-Dühring*, *CW*, Vol. 25, p. 603; *MEW*, Vol. 20, p. 580.

<sup>48</sup> *CW*, Vol. 21, p. 97; *MEW*, Vol. 7, pp. 534–5. See also Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory*, pp. 227–8.

### The Question of Premature Revolution

Marx and Engels were convinced that the pattern of permanent revolution they discovered in earlier centuries was about to be repeated, but this time under more advanced conditions. We read in the *Communist Manifesto* that the 'first direct attempts of the proletariat' at the time of the struggle against feudalism 'necessarily failed, owing to the then undeveloped state of the proletariat, as well as to the absence of the economic conditions for its emancipation'. The conditions had now supposedly changed for the better. Germany, Marx and Engels informed their readers, was on the eve of a 'bourgeois revolution', and because this country now had 'a much more developed proletariat, than that of England was in the seventeenth, and of France in the eighteenth century', the German revolution would soon turn proletarian.<sup>49</sup>

At first, things seemed to move in the direction Marx and Engels hoped for. In February 1848 the French king Louis Philippe was overthrown, which event for Marx and Engels signified the seizure of power by the bourgeois class. Germany followed suit in March, when rebellions broke out and parliaments made a bid for power in the German states, which attempts however in the end remained unsuccessful. In Paris, the socialist journalist Louis Blanc and one worker entered the bourgeois government. The government established universal male suffrage, but worker participation proved no success. Blanc's national workshops were closed down in June 1848, whereupon the Paris proletariat rebelled. The revolt was brutally suppressed, and Blanc fled France.

The defeat of the revolutions of 1848–9 forced Marx and Engels to reconsider. From late 1850 onwards they began to emphasize that the proletarian revolution would be a long drawn-out process, and they warned against premature revolutionary attempts. This has been interpreted as if they admitted that German capitalism was insufficiently developed to allow a proletarian revolution after all, and that the whole permanent-revolutionary concept had been a rash mistake.<sup>50</sup> This interpretation is untenable.

In Marx and Engels' interpretation, the German as well as the French bourgeoisies were so shocked by the proletarian uprising in Paris that they lost their taste for political power. The German bourgeoisie gave up on the democratic project and voluntarily returned their power to the monarchs. In

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<sup>49</sup> *CW*, Vol. 6, pp. 514, 519; *MEW*, Vol. 4, pp. 489, 493. See also Larsson, *Theories of Revolution*, p. 28.

<sup>50</sup> See for example: Plamenatz, *German Marxism*, pp. 133–5, 217; Plamenatz, *Man and Society*, pp. 278–93; Lichtheim, *Marxism*, pp. 122–9; Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought*, pp. 196–201. According to Gilbert (*Marx's Politics*, introduction, p. 255), during the period 1850–2 Marx and Engels fell prey to economic determinism. See for a critique of Lichtheim's position that Marx's 1850 writings represented a temporary Jacobin aberration, M. Löwy, *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx* (Leiden/Boston, 2003), p. 150.

France, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte became emperor in 1852, again with the support of the bourgeoisie, who hoped he would protect their economic interests. As the bourgeois revolution folded itself up, Marx and Engels despaired at the bourgeoisie's revolutionary potential. As we have seen, in the course of 1850 they reoriented their hopes onto the petty bourgeoisie.

The warnings Marx and Engels issued in the early 1850s against premature proletarian revolutions were serious enough, but they had nothing to do with the question of the degree of capitalist development in Germany or France. One important factor that made them more cautious was the fact that the economic crisis of 1847 had turned into recovery by 1849. Marx and Engels concluded that until a new crisis set in, revolution was out of the question.<sup>51</sup> Marx classically formulated this idea as a fixed principle: '*A new revolution is possible only in consequence of a new crisis.*'<sup>52</sup>

Also, the disappointing performance of the German proletariat during the Springtime of the Peoples convinced Marx and Engels that this class was lacking in revolutionary experience. Marx elaborated on this in his famous 15 September 1850 speech at the Central Committee of the Communist League, in which he turned against a radical faction that aimed for an immediate proletarian revolution. Marx established bluntly that the German workers' development was 'rudimentary', and that they needed to be told: 'you will have to go through 15, 20, 50 years of civil wars and national struggles not only to bring about a change in society but also to change yourselves, and prepare yourselves for the exercise of political power'.<sup>53</sup> However, Marx could not have been referring to insufficient levels of capitalist industrialization, for economic development is not brought about by civil wars and national struggles. More likely, he was hoping that protracted class struggles would trans-

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<sup>51</sup> 19 December 1849 Marx to Joseph Weydemeyer, *CW*, Vol. 38, p. 220; *MEW*, Vol. 27, p. 516; 'Revue' (Marx/Engels, May-October 1850), *CW*, Vol. 10, p. 510; *MEW*, Vol. 7, p. 440; 'Real Causes why the French Proletarians Remained Comparatively Inactive in December Last' (Engels, February 1852), *CW*, Vol. 11, pp. 218, 221; *MEW*, Vol. 8, p. 228; 'Revolution in China and in Europe' (Marx, June 1853), *CW*, Vol. 12, p. 99; *MEW*, Vol. 9, p. 101; 'The Crisis in England' (Marx, March 1855), *CW*, Vol. 14, p. 61; *MEW*, Vol. 11, pp. 102-3. In his 1885 'On the History of the Communist League', Engels attributed his and Marx's 1850 advocacy of postponement of the revolution to the period of prosperity: *CW*, Vol. 26, pp. 326-8; *MEW*, Vol. 21, pp. 221-2. See also: P. Stadler, 'Wirtschaftskrise und Revolution bei Marx und Engels: Zur Entwicklung ihres Denkens in den 1850er Jahren', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 199 (1) (1964), pp. 113-44; E. Schraepfer, *Handwerkerbünde und Arbeitervereine 1830-1853: Die politische Tätigkeit deutscher Sozialisten von Wilhelm Weitling bis Karl Marx* (Berlin/New York, 1972), pp. 411-12, 416.

<sup>52</sup> 'Class Struggles in France', *CW*, Vol. 10, p. 135; *MEW*, Vol. 7, p. 98.

<sup>53</sup> See: 'Revelations Concerning the Communist Trial in Cologne' (Marx, 1853), *CW*, Vol. 11, p. 403; *MEW*, Vol. 8, p. 412.

form the political relations between the classes and provide the workers with the necessary experience.<sup>54</sup>

The most famous warning against premature revolution was delivered in Engels' work on the German Peasant War. As we saw earlier, Engels pointed out that Müntzer's revolutionary government in the city of Mühlhausen had been established prematurely. Under the existing socio-economic conditions Müntzer could not defend the interests of the proletarian-plebeian masses, but was forced to rule in the interest of the bourgeoisie. Engels compared him to Blanc, who as socialist minister had also been forced to carry out bourgeois policies. In 1848 the French proletariat, Engels wrote, had been 'much too weak to count on a rapid passage through the bourgeois period and on an early conquest of power'. But Engels importantly added that Müntzer's position 'was much more precarious' than Blanc's had been. The difference was, he explained, that in Müntzer's days 'not only the movement of his time, but also the age, were not ripe'.<sup>55</sup> This observation is extremely significant, for it means that in 1848 *only* the immaturity of the movement, not of capitalism as such, had hindered the revolution.

In his 15 September speech warned Marx against repeating Blanc's mistake of participating in a bourgeois government. Should the French proletarians seize power in advance of the petty bourgeoisie, they would be forced to take measures that were 'petty-bourgeois and not directly proletarian'.<sup>56</sup> In 1853 Marx suggested that the German proletariat entrust the revolution to the bourgeois classes and become the '*opposition party of the future*'.<sup>57</sup> In the same year Engels warned the workers not to seize power in advance of the establishment of the democratic republic. Otherwise they would have to carry out programmatic points that were 'not immediately in our own, but rather in the general, revolutionary and specifically petty-bourgeois interest', or they might be tempted to engage in premature 'communist experiments and leaps'.<sup>58</sup> Briefly, Marx and Engels, who were once again of one mind on this issue, were warning the workers to leave the democratic revolution to the petty bourgeoisie, before advancing themselves.<sup>59</sup> This was perfectly compatible with their permanent-revolutionary concept, which was not altered, let alone abandoned.

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<sup>54</sup> Marx and Engels had referred in their March 1850 address to the need for the workers to gain the necessary experience through a 'lengthy revolutionary development': *CW*, Vol. 10, p. 286; *MEW*, Vol. 7, pp. 253–4.

<sup>55</sup> *CW*, Vol. 10, pp. 470, 481; *MEW*, Vol. 7, pp. 400–1, 412.

<sup>56</sup> 'Meeting of the Central Authority, September 15, 1850', *CW*, Vol. 10, p. 628; *MEW*, Vol. 8, p. 600.

<sup>57</sup> 'Revelations', *CW*, Vol. 11, p. 449; *MEW*, Vol. 8, p. 461.

<sup>58</sup> 12 April 1853 to Weydemeyer, *CW*, Vol. 39, pp. 308–9; *MEW*, Vol. 28, pp. 579–80.

<sup>59</sup> See for this interpretation also Hunt, *Political Ideas*, pp. 244, 254–5.

Both Marx and Engels soon regained confidence that a new economic crisis would give the proletariat another chance. Once again they began to express hope for socialist revolutions in Germany and France in the not too distant future.<sup>60</sup>

After Marx's death in 1883, Engels became more aware of the opportunities parliamentary work offered the social democrats, but he continued to refer to his and Marx's strategic writings of 1848 and 1850, and to defend the uninterrupted transition from petty bourgeois to proletarian stages as the appropriate revolutionary strategy for Germany and France.<sup>61</sup> Only in 1895 did Engels finally admit that he and Marx had been gravely mistaken in assuming, back in 1848, that the socio-economic conditions for proletarian victory in Germany and France had been ripe: 'History has proved us wrong . . . It has made it clear that the state of economic development on the Continent at that time was not, by a long way, ripe for the elimination of capitalist production.'<sup>62</sup> Engels explained that under the impression of the Great French Revolution he and Marx had assumed that the moment of the 'decisive battle' had arrived, to be fought out 'in a single, long and vicissitudinous period of revolution', which would inevitably end with the 'final victory of the proletariat'. Engels realized that they could have been warned. 'All revolutions of modern times, beginning with the great English Revolution of the seventeenth century' had indeed displayed this pattern of progressive radicalization, but the radical minority had in the end always experienced a breakdown. Engels now realized that the times had not yet been ripe enough in 1848 for this pattern to be broken.<sup>63</sup>

### Historical Materialism

The main point of interest in Engels' 1895 reflections is his admission that fifty years earlier he and Marx had been under the illusion that the capitalist

<sup>60</sup> See for example: 'Real Causes', *CW*, Vol. 11, p. 218; *MEW*, Vol. 8, p. 228; 'Prospect in France and England' (Marx, April 1855), *CW*, Vol. 14, p. 145; *MEW*, Vol. 11, p. 182; Marx to Engels, 8 October 1858, *CW*, Vol. 40, p. 347; *MEW*, Vol. 29, p. 360; Marx's 28 February 1867 speech to German workers in London, *CW*, Vol. 20, p. 415; *MEW*, Vol. 16, p. 524; Engels to Marx 5 November 1867, *CW*, Vol. 42, p. 462; *MEW*, Vol. 31, p. 378. See also Hobsbawm, *How to Change*, pp. 65–6, 76–9.

<sup>61</sup> See: 'Marx and *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*', *CW*, Vol. 26, p. 126; *MEW*, Vol. 21, pp. 21–2; 6 June 1884 letter to August Bebel, *CW*, Vol. 47, p. 149; *MEW*, Vol. 36, pp. 159–60; 'History of the League', *CW*, Vol. 26, pp. 326–7; *MEW*, Vol. 21, p. 220; 'The Future Italian Revolution and the Socialist Party' (written January 1894), *CW*, Vol. 27, pp. 437–40; *MEW*, Vol. 22, pp. 439–42. Engels referred to the rapid succession of petty bourgeois and proletarian stages of revolution as 'the logic of 1792–94'. See for example 'The Situation' (October 1885), *CW*, Vol. 26, p. 332; *MEW*, Vol. 21, p. 226.

<sup>62</sup> 1895 introduction to 'Class Struggles in France', *CW*, Vol. 27, p. 512; *MEW*, Vol. 22, p. 515.

<sup>63</sup> *CW*, Vol. 27, pp. 509–12; *MEW*, Vol. 22, pp. 512–14.

mode of production had been ripe to be abolished on the European continent. This is why the two men could have concluded that, in contrast to earlier centuries, proletarian revolutions were now potentially triumphant. Engels' observations cast a strange light on the interpretation of the Marxist permanent revolution in terms of a shortcutting of historical stages. This interpretation assumes that Marx and Engels had realized that proletarian revolutions would be in advance of the level of economic development, but that they might exceptionally occur after all. But that is not at all what Engels was saying. In his self-critical retrospect, the proletarian revolution had simply been on the agenda because capitalism was on the way out.

But how could Marx and Engels have believed this in 1848? After all, in the conception later known as 'historical materialism', capitalist relations are only ripe to be abolished when they become a fetter on the development of the productive forces. Also, the establishment of a socialist mode of production requires the material preconditions of an economy overwhelmingly based on large-scale industry; and, finally, industrial workers must make up the majority of society. Capitalist market competition, resulting in the elimination of small-scale private enterprise, was supposed to bring all this about. Marx and Engels had already formulated those conclusions in 1845–6 in *The German Ideology*. The readers were informed that the moment for existing relations to be overturned arrives only when they no longer facilitate the development of the productive forces, and when 'the great mass of humanity' have been rendered 'propertyless', i.e. have become proletarians.<sup>64</sup>

None of these conditions had been met at the time, so how could Marx and Engels have fallen prey to such illusions? One does not have to dig deeper than the *Communist Manifesto* to find a clear and unambiguous answer to the question of why European capitalism, according to the authors, had turned into a fetter on the productive forces: 'For many a decade past the history of

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<sup>64</sup> *CW*, Vol. 5, pp. 48, 52; *MEW*, Vol. 3, pp. 34, 69. For other early formulations of 'historical materialism', see also: 'The Poverty of Philosophy' (Marx, written 1846–7), *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 211; *MEW*, Vol. 4, p. 181; 'Moralising Criticism', *CW*, Vol. 6, pp. 327–8; *MEW*, Vol. 4, p. 347; 'Principles', *CW*, Vol. 6, pp. 341–50; *MEW*, Vol. 4, pp. 363–74, 'Manifesto', *CW*, Vol. 6, pp. 489–96; *MEW*, Vol. 4, pp. 467–74. For later formulations by Marx: preface to 'A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy' (January 1859), *CW*, Vol. 29, pp. 262–4; *MEW*, Vol. 13, p. 9; first volume of 'Capital' (1867), *CW*, Vol. 35, pp. 748–51; *MEW*, Vol. 23, pp. 789–91; by Engels: 'Anti-Dühring' (1877–8), *CW*, Vol. 25, pp. 135–9, 254–71; *MEW*, Vol. 20, pp. 136–40, 249–65; 'Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy' (written early 1886), *CW*, Vol. 26, pp. 390–1; *MEW*, Vol. 21, p. 300. Occasionally Marx adopted extreme expressions, which however need not be taken literally: 'No social formation is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed.' In the same text Marx suggested that the material conditions of the new system need only be 'in the course of formation': preface to 'Critique of Political Economy', *CW*, Vol. 29, p. 263; *MEW*, Vol. 13, p. 9. Compare Engels: 'Anti-Dühring', *CW*, Vol. 25, pp. 137–9, 255; *MEW*, Vol. 20, pp. 138–9, 249. See also: Gilbert, *Marx's Politics*, p. 6.

industry and commerce is but the history of the revolt of modern productive forces against modern conditions of production.' To prove that the productive forces had indeed outgrown the bourgeois relations the authors referred to the phenomenon of the 'commercial crises'.<sup>65</sup> According to Marx and Engels, the pattern of periodic crises of overproduction, which they asserted had been in evidence since the early nineteenth century, marked the entry of capitalism into its obsolete stage. This notion is a recurrent theme in the early works of both men.<sup>66</sup> The significance of this can hardly be overestimated. For this is why Marx and Engels were under the impression that capitalism had outlived itself even on the European continent, which was after all suffering from periodic economic crises just like the industrially more developed Britain. That is, again, why proletarian revolutions were in their view timely.<sup>67</sup>

At the same time, undeniably, this opened up a profound paradox in the Marxist revolutionary doctrine. For even on the assumption that capitalism had outlived itself, the fact remained that the construction of socialist economies required conditions of developed industrialism that were absent on the

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<sup>65</sup> *CW*, Vol. 6, pp. 489–90; *MEW*, Vol. 4, pp. 467–8. Marx (28 December 1846 to P.V. Annenkov) dated the beginning of the pattern of universal crises to 1825: *CW*, Vol. 38, p. 99; *MEW*, Vol. 27, p. 455. See also 'Trade Unions' (Engels, May 1881), *CW*, Vol. 24, p. 383; *MEW*, Vol. 19, p. 256.

<sup>66</sup> See for example: Engels' first Elberfeld speech (February 1845), *CW*, Vol. 4, pp. 244–5; *MEW*, Vol. 2, pp. 537–8; 'Principles', *CW*, Vol. 6, pp. 347–8; *MEW*, Vol. 4, pp. 369–70; 'Wage Labour and Capital' (Marx, 1849), *CW*, Vol. 9, p. 228; *MEW*, Vol. 6, p. 423; 'The English Ten Hours Bill' (Engels, April 1850), *CW*, Vol. 10, pp. 299–300; *MEW*, Vol. 7, p. 242. Later on Engels formulated it classically in his *Anti-Dühring*: 'In these crises, the contradiction between socialised production and capitalist appropriation ends in a violent explosion.' *CW*, Vol. 25, p. 263; *MEW*, Vol. 20, pp. 257–8. See also: 'Karl Marx' (Engels, June 1877), *CW*, Vol. 24, p. 193; *MEW*, Vol. 19, p. 104; 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific', *CW*, Vol. 24, pp. 324–5; *MEW*, Vol. 19, p. 227; 'Ludwig Feuerbach', *CW*, Vol. 26, pp. 390–1; *MEW*, Vol. 21, p. 300.

<sup>67</sup> Marx suggested in a March 1845 draft of an article on Friedrich List that Germany need not follow the capitalist path to development: *CW*, Vol. 4, pp. 281–3. In his 1867 preface to *Capital* Marx referred to the 'natural laws of capitalist production' working with iron necessity. He observed that Britain represented Germany's future: 'The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.' *CW*, Vol. 35, pp. 9–10; *MEW*, Vol. 23, pp. 12, 15–16. According to Roman Szporluk (*Communism and Nationalism: Karl Marx Versus Friedrich List* (New York/Oxford, 1988), p. 176), Marx now acknowledged the inevitability of integral capitalist development for Germany. I find this interpretation difficult to accept. Marx and Engels still predicted early proletarian revolutions on the European continent. They did not withdraw their thesis that the crisis pattern marked the moment of capitalist decadence. More plausibly, then, Marx expected German capitalism to follow the British pattern as long as the proletarian revolution did not intervene. See James White (*Karl Marx and the Intellectual Origins of Dialectical Materialism* (Basingstoke/London, 1996), chs. 4–6), for the argument that Marx rejected the idea of capitalism as a universal model of development during the sixties.

European continent. Marx and Engels never changed their minds on this. In 1851 Engels indicated the requirements for the abolition of all class contradictions: ‘at least a doubling of the means of production now existing in Germany and France’.<sup>68</sup> Both Marx and he admitted that only in Great Britain were the material conditions for the socialist transition in evidence.<sup>69</sup>

The solution Marx and Engels provided is again easily found. The way out would be to create the conditions for the socialist transition *after* the proletarian revolution. In his *Principles of Communism* Engels explained that in countries with a low level of industrialization proletarian governments must initially dedicate their main efforts to economic growth, as a precondition for the abolition of capitalist property at a later stage.<sup>70</sup> Following up on this, the *Communist Manifesto* indicated that the proletariat would use its power to ‘increase the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible’ and to expropriate the bourgeoisie step by step. But even in the ‘most advanced countries’, conditions would not allow complete expropriation at one blow.<sup>71</sup> Thus, Marx and Engels closely adapted ‘historical materialism’ to the radical exigencies of the permanent revolution, not only in the question of the obsolescence of the capitalist relations of production, but also on the point of the material preconditions of the socialist transition.

Finally, this returns us to the question of how Marx and Engels could have expected proletariats to triumph where they were in the minority. The question becomes the more mysterious when the two men seemed to predict revolutions by minorities of workers and by majorities *in one and the same text*. The *Communist Manifesto* has it that capitalist society is ‘more and more splitting up’ into ‘two great classes directly facing each other — Bourgeoisie

<sup>68</sup> ‘Conditions and Prospects of a War of the Holy Alliance against France in 1852’ (written April 1851), *CW*, Vol. 10, p. 553; *MEW*, Vol. 7, pp. 480–1. See also: Larsson, *Theories of Revolution*, pp. 30–1; Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory*, p. 238.

<sup>69</sup> See for example: ‘England’ (Engels, January 1852), *CW*, Vol. 11, pp. 200–1; *MEW*, Vol. 8, pp. 210–11; ‘Letter to the Labour Parliament’ (Marx, 18 March 1854), *CW*, Vol. 13, p. 58; *MEW*, Vol. 10, pp. 125–6; ‘The General Council to the Federal Council of Romance Switzerland’ (Marx, January 1870), *CW*, Vol. 21, pp. 86–7; *MEW*, Vol. 16, pp. 386–7; ‘Confidential Communication’ (Marx, March 1870), *CW*, Vol. 21, pp. 118–19; *MEW*, Vol. 16, 414–15; Marx to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt, 9 April 1870, *CW*, Vol. 43, p. 475; *MEW*, Vol. 32, p. 669. See also Larsson, *Theories of Revolution*, p. 30.

<sup>70</sup> *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 350; *MEW*, Vol. 4, pp. 372–5.

<sup>71</sup> *CW*, Vol. 6, pp. 504–5; *MEW*, Vol. 4, p. 481. According to Larsson (*Theories of Revolution*, pp. 30–1), this prefigured the Bolshevik industrialization drive. See also: Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory*, p. 238. For later occasions when Marx and Engels indicated that conditions of poverty might still be in evidence at the time of the revolution, and that production would only reach the level required for the communist transition in the course of time, see for example Engels in his 1873 ‘The Housing Question’, *CW*, Vol. 23, pp. 324–5, 347–8; *MEW*, Vol. 18, pp. 220–1, 243; Marx’s 1875 comments on the Gotha programme: *CW*, Vol. 24, p. 87; *MEW*, Vol. 19, p. 21; ‘Karl Marx’, *CW*, Vol. 24, p. 193; *MEW*, Vol. 19, p. 104.

and Proletariat', and that the proletarian revolution will be a 'movement of the immense majority'. But the same text predicts a proletarian revolution in backward Germany in the near future!<sup>72</sup>

In my reading, Marx and Engels would have been surprised had they been accused of contradicting themselves here. The *Communist Manifesto* indeed predicts that class polarization at its climax will result in proletarian revolution, but it never claims that such a revolution can only occur after the completion of that process. In fact, apart from the passage in *The German Ideology* quoted above, I did not find a single instance in either Marx's or Engels' writings predicating the proletarian revolution on a proletarian majority.<sup>73</sup> To make the revolution dependent on a proletarian majority would have made nonsense of all of their revolutionary strategies for Germany and France, and both Marx and Engels carefully avoided doing this.

One of Engels' early writings gives an indication of how he may have reconciled the prediction of total class polarization with revolution by workers' minorities. Engels explains that the 'law of the centralisation of private property' is 'immanent in private property'. This law makes the division of the population into two classes of millionaires and paupers inevitable, *unless*, Engels logically adds, it is anticipated by the 'abolition of private property'.<sup>74</sup> Engels repeated the thought that the proletarian revolution might cut short the polarization process more than once.<sup>75</sup> Class polarization will surely climax in the revolution, unless the revolution comes first.

This is not to say that Marx and Engels would have allowed victorious proletarian revolutions to occur under just any circumstance at all. Such revolutions would depend on the presence of a certain critical mass of urban proletarians, which would again require a certain level of industrialization.<sup>76</sup> But revolutions by minorities of workers would not have been inconceivable

<sup>72</sup> *CW*, Vol. 6, pp. 485, 495, 519; *MEW*, Vol. 4, pp. 463, 472, 492–3. Marx had argued in his introduction to 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right', that the weakly developed German proletariat formed the '*material basis*' for a communist revolution: *CW*, Vol. 3, p. 183; *MEW*, Vol. 1, pp. 386–91.

<sup>73</sup> For the same conclusion, see Gilbert (*Marx's Politics*, p. 219): Marx 'never argued that the triumph of socialism in any particular country required that the proletariat be a majority (as opposed to a sizable portion) of the population'. See also Hobsbawm, *How to Change*, p. 62.

<sup>74</sup> 'Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy' (written 1843–4), *CW*, Vol. 3, p. 441; *MEW*, Vol. 1, pp. 522–3.

<sup>75</sup> See for example: 'The Condition of the Working-Class in England' (Engels, 1845), *CW*, Vol. 4, p. 303; *MEW*, Vol. 2, pp. 232–3; first Elberfeld speech, *CW*, Vol. 4, p. 244; *MEW*, Vol. 2, pp. 536–7.

<sup>76</sup> Neither Marx nor Engels ever precisely spelled out these conditions. But in 1860 Marx identified the existence of 'an *industrial proletariat* on a national scale' as the 'very first prerequisite of a proletarian revolution': 'Herr Vogt', *CW*, Vol. 17, p. 91; *MEW*, Vol. 14, p. 450. In his 1874–5 comments on Mikhail Bakunin's *Statehood and Anarchy*, Marx observed that a proletarian revolution required that the industrial proletariat

from a materialist point of view. As representatives of the modern, urban and industrial element, the workers would have been a class powerful beyond their number.

The problem for a proletariat that had not yet assumed majority status would remain that the revolution had to find its majority elsewhere. In his comments on the events in France in the years 1848 to 1852, Marx suggested a solution for that problem through a workers' alliance with the majority of small peasants. The latter might be persuaded that a proletarian government would be their best protection against the capitalist market.<sup>77</sup> This remained the favourite scenario. Both Marx and Engels frequently returned to it in the following decades.<sup>78</sup>

### Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the permanent revolution served as a master concept in Marx and Engels. The two men formulated it during the first ten years of their communist activity. It was truly a joint enterprise. All the main points are present in the early works of both men. During later decades, Engels individually expanded on the permanent revolution and some related questions, but he never took matters in a new direction. Only in 1895 did Engels make a partial break with the possibility of permanent revolution, when he concluded that he and his friend had been wrong to assume, half a century earlier, that continental European capitalism had outlived itself.

From a contextual angle, the permanent revolution represented an adaptation on Marx and Engels' part to the circumstances prevailing on the European continent, in two ways. First, for much of the nineteenth century, radical socialists in Germany and France, as well as in Britain, formed an insignificant faction compared to democrats and patriots. The revolutions of 1830 and 1848–9, and arguably even the Paris Commune, were dominated by democratic and national concerns, not by the social question. Marx and Engels

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account for 'at least a significant portion of the mass of the people': *CW*, Vol. 24, p. 518; *MEW*, Vol. 18, pp. 632–3.

<sup>77</sup> 'Class Struggles in France', *CW*, Vol. 10, pp. 55–7, 98–9, 122, 125; *MEW*, Vol. 7, pp. 19–21, 62, 84, 87–8; 'Eighteenth Brumaire', *CW*, Vol. 11, pp. 190–1, 193 f.; *MEW*, Vol. 8, pp. 201–2, 204.

<sup>78</sup> For Marx, see his letter to Engels, 16 April 1856, *CW*, Vol. 40, p. 41; *MEW*, Vol. 29, p. 47; 'The Civil War in France' (Marx, written April–May 1871), *CW*, Vol. 22, pp. 336–8; *MEW*, Vol. 17, pp. 341–4; first draft of 'Civil War in France', *CW*, Vol. 22, pp. 492–5; *MEW*, Vol. 17, pp. 549, 551–3. In his 1874–5 comments on Bakunin Marx argued that in countries with a majority of peasants, which was the case 'in all the states of the West European continent', the 'workers' revolution' had to ingratiate itself with the peasants: *CW*, Vol. 24, p. 517; *MEW*, Vol. 18, pp. 632–3. For Engels, see the 1870 preface to 'Peasant War in Germany', *CW*, Vol. 21, pp. 97–100; *MEW*, Vol. 7, pp. 534–7; 'The Peasant Question in France and Germany' (Engels, November 1894), *CW*, Vol. 27, pp. 483–4, 494–7; *MEW*, Vol. 22, pp. 486, 498–500.

understood that the social question alone would never generate sufficient energy to create a revolution. The only chance of coming to power that the workers' party might get, they assumed, was by surfing the waves of the powerful democratic movement. Democratic and patriotic upheavals might generate the turmoil the workers' party needed. The pattern of radicalization they discovered in the Great French Revolution convinced Marx and Engels of the feasibility of this strategy.

Second, at the time when Marx and Engels were converted to communism, the conditions of highly developed capitalism that a socialist transition required simply did not exist on the European continent. But the two friends were obviously not prepared to accept that the workers would have to postpone their revolution until the process of socio-economic polarization had come to a head. Instead, they formulated 'historical materialism' in such a way that continental-European capitalism seemed to have entered its terminal stage after all, regardless of the low levels of industrialization.

Permanent revolution signified a pattern of bourgeois and proletarian revolutions following each other in rapid succession. As Marx and Engels saw it, the moment of the proletarian revolution was defined by two sets of circumstances. First, the insurrection of bourgeois classes against the remnants of the feudal-absolutist order serves as a socio-political triggering mechanism and as the immediate cause of workers' revolutions. This pattern was traced back to the sixteenth century, and continued to define the way Marx and Engels imagined the revolutions of their own days. Second, the working class revolution obtains the potential to consolidate its hold on state power and to initiate the socialist transition from the moment when the capitalist mode of production has outlived itself. This moment has arrived when the system begins to get worn down by periodic crises of overproduction and is therefore no longer able to provide harmonious and sustained economic development. The implication of this particular definition of the obsolescence of the capitalist system is that it also predicts successful proletarian revolutions in countries that are only in the early stages of industrialization.

The reading of Marx and Engels according to which the classical moment of the proletarian revolution would only arrive when the workers form a majority class and large-scale industries dominate the economy must be discarded. To be sure, in Marx and Engels' conception, continental-European workers' governments would have been premature in the sense that the industrial conditions for an immediate socialist transition were lacking, and these conditions would have to be created after the revolution. Even so, Marx and Engels did not propose proletarian revolutions in Germany and France with an eye to contracting the stage of capitalist industrialization or to cutting some of history's corners, but quite simply in order to let the proletariat fulfil its historic mission, which was that of breaking the deadlock that, in their view, an ailing economic system was creating.

All this is not to deny that Marx and Engels' views concerning capitalist market competition were essential to their understanding of the revolutionary process. Market competition proved to them that capitalism was creating the conditions of its own demise, in the form of a revolutionary class that would become the majority, and of an economy based on large-scale industries that was outgrowing private ownership and demanded socialist public administration. The model reassured Marx and Engels that, even if early revolutions failed to arrive, ultimately capitalism was doomed. However, concretely, they expected the industrial proletariat to overturn capitalism long before the process of polarization was completed, through the establishment of a revolutionary majority in cooperation with the peasants; and in which case the industrial conditions for the socialist economy would for the most part be created after the revolution.

What all this amounts to is that Marx and Engels clearly subordinated economic considerations with respect to revolution to a political analysis. They framed the expected capitalist collapse as a political rather than an economic phenomenon. This is not to say that Marx and Engels denied the dependence of the political revolution on certain economic preconditions. But they tended to reformulate these preconditions in such a way that what on the face of it constituted insurmountable obstacles to revolution were effectively removed. We would do best to understand Marx and Engels' conception as a political rather than an economic sociology of revolution.

Finally, in light of the findings presented here I would suggest that it is worthwhile taking a fresh look at later interpretations of the permanent revolution in the works of Trotsky, Lenin, Stalin, Mao and other twentieth-century bolsheviks. It is widely held to be the paradox of Marxism that this philosophy was intended to empower the working class of advanced industrialized countries but came to power in predominantly peasant countries with small proletariats. It seems to the point to ask whether this interpretation remains tenable at all. The findings of this article also suggest new ways of interpreting the Marxist significance of Lenin's New Economic Policy, Stalin's Great Break, and even in our own days, of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'.

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