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MARX'S MISFIRED MISSION

Only in community with others has each individual the means of cultivating his gifts in all directions; only in the community, therefore, is personal freedom possible. – Karl Marx, The German Ideology

Marx's Critique of Hegel

It would be an overstatement to say that the failure of Marxism as an historical movement was evident long before the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. But it is possible to trace it to Marx's own inability, or reluctance, to build upon his own powerful insights in his 1843 manuscript *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, which did not appear in print during his lifetime except for the self-published introduction in 1844. Although the entire manuscript was discovered in the early 1920s by David Rjazanov, a Russian revolutionary and Berlin archivist of Marx's work, it was not translated until the rise of the New Left in Europe in the late 1960s and early 1970s¹. Before then it had been deliberately ignored by orthodox Marxist-Leninists, largely because it was considered juvenile and atypical of what had come to be considered the "real" Marx whose analytical acuity forged the mature writings of Marx after the revolutions of 1848 when he cemented his partnership with Engels.

From what is known about Marx during these early years, his failure to publish the manuscript in its totality can be attributed to several sets of circumstances. First, his close association with the radical academic coterie in Berlin known as the Young Hegelians persuaded the Prussian government to block him from launching an academic career. Second, while for a few years on receiving his doctorate he worked successfully as a journalist, state censorship of his writings forced him to go into exile in Paris, where he met Engels and took up the on-the-ground revolutionary cause. During the same period immediately preceding the social upheavals of the late 1840s, Marx became avidly immersed in reading history and political economy, and once outside Germany the philosophical topics

¹ The discovery of the importance of this part of the Marxian corpus is detailed in an essay by Shlomo Avineri, "The Hegelian Origins of Marx's Political Thought", *The Review of Metaphysics* 21 (1967): 33-56.

that had preoccupied him during his stint with the Young Hegelians in Berlin seemed increasingly unimportant or irrelevant. Third, the debacle of the 1848 uprisings probably convinced him that ferreting out the "contradictions" of industrial capitalism through the method of "dialectical materialism" he was developing with Engels was far more consequential than the abstruse academic issues that had aroused him as a graduate student a decade earlier. Finally, apart from the introduction which appeared in the radical Parisian newspaper *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, which he and Arnold Ruge had founded, the full manuscript itself was not really a coherent piece of writing, but a jumble of lengthy quotations from Hegel to which Marx attached profuse annotations and commentary.

It is perhaps fair to say that Marx's unpublished *Critique*, if he had actually worked through it and owned it as a threshold for his more mature career, would have taken the revolutionary young thinker in a somewhat different direction. What stands out everywhere within the German edition of the *Critique* is Marx's symphonic variation on the term *Gattung*, or "species", in relation to "human beings" (*Menschen*). Marx throws around such words - compounds in German, but hyphenated constructions in English translation - as "species-being" (*Gattungswesen*), "species-existence" (*Gattungsdasein*), "species-constitution" (*Gattungsgestaltung*), "species-content" (*Gattungsinhalt*), "species-will" (*Gattungswille*), "species activity" (*Gattungstätigkeit*), "species-life" (*Gattungsleben*), etc. This kind of rhetoric was familiar to the young Hegelians. It was implicit in the argument throughout Feuerbach's major work *The Essence of Christianity*. According to Feuerbach, Christianity in light of the doctrine of the "God-man" symbolizes human self-consciousness of itself as divine. That is the backdrop of Feuerbach's well-known quip that theology must become anthropology. Theological thought is an *un-selfconscious* simulacrum for the innate capacity of the human species to inquire into its own generic character. Human beings are the only animals capable of the all-compassing cognitive pursuit known as "science" (*Wissenschaft*). According to Feuerbach,

...the animal lacks consciousness, for consciousness deserves to be called by that name only because of its link with knowledge. Where there is consciousness in this sense, there is also the capacity to produce systematic knowledge or science. Science is the consciousness of species. In life we are concerned with individuals, but in science, with species. Only a being to whom his own species, his characteristic mode of being, is an object of thought can make the essential nature of other things and beings an object of thought.

Several sentences later Feuerbach offers a pithy summary this complex point by concluding that what makes human beings unique is that they “converse”, enter “into a dialogue with” themselves.²

In 1845 Marx made explicit what was only tacit in the *Critique* with his well-known “Theses on Feuerbach”, published in Brussels. In the 1843 manuscript Marx had concentrated on the “abstract” quality of Hegel’s putative *concrete universal*. Now he argued that even Feuerbach, as the cynosure of the Young Hegelians, had succumbed to the same hidden weakness. Feuerbach had portrayed himself as the materialist foil for Hegel’s speculative idealism, foisting the impression that the “secret” of self-realized spirit was truly the infinite potential of the species self-consciousness. But the “species-life” of collective humanity resided not in its aptitude for self-scrutiny under the aegis of “science” but in the form of historical praxis. The “essence” (*Wesen*) of “religion” is not, as Feuerbach maintained, self-conscious generic humanity, but “the ensemble of social relations.” Whereas Feuerbach wanted to construe the “species” (*Gattung*) merely as “an inner, dumb generality”,³ Marx proclaims that his new starting point for the dialectic is “social humanity”, which has an ongoing, concrete history. Feuerbach’s “material” refuses to “conceive of the sensible as practical activity”. Likewise, social theory itself can no longer be confined to the activity of the intellectual spectator, but must be completely imbricated “in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.”⁴ Thus the role of philosophy is no longer to “interpret” the world, but to “change” it.

The thought operations through which Marx realigned himself in the mid-1840s as an active revolutionary rather than simply as a critical theorist are evident in the *Critique*. But what is often given short shrift in the reams of literature analyzing Marx’s transition during this period is why precisely he switched in such a brief interval from the concerns of philosophy to political economy. It would be a stretch to suggest seriously that Marx was doing what we now regard “political theology” in the early 1840s, but his prepossession with both Hegelianism and the question of religion during those years make such an idea more than a little tempting. What is indisputable is that in the *Critique* Marx draws an enormous amount of attention, which never surface again in any of his later musings, the problem of popular sovereignty and its theological insinuations. In much of the lengthy unpublished portion of the manuscript Marx is obviously troubled by the seeming impasse when it comes to

² Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings*, trans. Zawar Hanfi (New York: Verso, 2012), 98.

³ Op. cit., 118.

⁴ *Early Political Writings*, op. cit., 117.

Hegel's formulation of sovereignty. Marx criticizes Hegel's mental acrobatics in justifying the constitutional monarchy of Frederick William III in Prussia following the Napoleonic wars.

Hegel and Frederick were born the same year, although the emperor outlived the philosopher. Frederick William III initially wanted to allow some of the liberal reforms that the French Revolution and Napoleon's armies had seeded into the souls of German patriots, but he quickly pulled back, preferring to support the reactionary policies of the German Confederation after the Congress of Vienna⁵. Yet while Prussia harbored its own version of the ancient regime, it became one of Continental Europe's pacesetters in the process of industrialization. Marx understood early on that Hegel's ennoblement of the Prussian state as the historical realization of the "idea of freedom" was so much claptrap – and not just politically. What he would later refer to the "immiseration" of the expanding urban working class was also becoming obvious. But the young Marx at first had only the linguistic instruments of Hegel's "speculative" philosophy – and the discursive parlor tricks of the Young Hegelians – to expose the grand master's dialectical chicanery. The inflection point for Marx's assault on Hegel's *Rechtsphilosophie*, as we have indicated, was the notion of sovereignty. Hegel, Marx insisted in the *Critique*, through a sleight of hand wanted to retain Bodin's demand that sovereignty must be singularly embodied in the person of a monarch while claiming concomitantly that it was also distributed equitably among the "people". Marx saw that ruse succeeded only because it drew attention away from what was really going on Frederick William's Prussia throughout the 1820s and 1830s. The monarch's sovereign authority was no longer technically vested in him as a person but in the state with its massive bureaucracy which de facto answered only to the king.

The Problem of Sovereignty

Hegel views sovereignty as an abstraction, Marx argues. "Sovereignty, the essence of the state, is first conceived to be an independent being; it is objectified." In keeping with Hegel's method of speculative dialectics such an objective entity must find its subject as "the self-incarnation of sovereignty."⁶ The presumption that sovereignty can reside simultaneously in the monarch and the people as an amalgam of self-incarnated subjects proves to be a subterfuge to hide the controlling power of the autocrat. The monarch hides behind the fiction of a state separated from the particular sovereign. "The state as sovereign must be one, one individual, it must possess individuality. The

⁵ Matthew Levinger, *Enlightened Nationalism: The Transformation of Prussian Political Culture 1806-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 205.

⁶ *Early Political Writings*, op. cit., 24

state is one not only in this individuality; individuality is only the natural moment of its oneness, the state's determination as nature.”⁷ What purports to be some kind of generalized will, yet it “has no more content than ‘I wil’, the moment of arbitrariness in the will,”⁸ which amounts to the individual sovereign.

Sovereignty must be concrete, according to Marx, but if it is not the person of the monarch, then it must *pari passu* be seated in the “species-being” that is the *populus*. “The state is an abstraction. The people alone is concrete.”⁹ Later in the *Critique* Marx examines the relation between sovereignty, the popular will, and legislation. The political authority to legislate, Marx insists, derives from the Medieval distinction between the “estates”. In other words, the genealogy of the idea of the legislative function depends on class divisions.¹⁰ Here Marx’s analysis becomes somewhat convoluted and opaque, but what he appears to be saying is that sovereignty at its marrow is confined to the establishment of laws as well as their implementation. In a very important respect sovereignty is incompatible with “empirical universality.” In fact, “the true antitheses...are the sovereign and civil society.”¹¹

In this early phase of his writings Marx is employing the traditional distinction reaching back to the Middle Ages between the political - or “sovereign” - realm and the various economic corporations or estates - churches, guilds, municipalities, fraternal societies, etc.. By the early nineteenth century under the influence of British liberal theory, especially the writings of Adam Smith, the notion of “civil society” as independent and competing collective economic interests had given way to the assumption that it is the sum of individual economic actors behaving in their own self-interest - the butchers, the bakers, the candlestick makers, and so on - that characterizes civil society. In his early work Marx characterizes civil society as “egoistic man”¹². The early nineteenth century view of civil society imbibed by the young Marx departs significantly from how the phrase is commonly employed nowadays, usually in the sense of democratic associations and non-governmental organizations dedicated to the promotion of the general welfare.¹³ This version

⁷ Op cit., 25.

⁸ Op cit., 26.

⁹ Op cit., 28.

¹⁰ Op cit., 73.

¹¹ Op cit., 84.

¹² Op cit., 49.

¹³ Such a contemporary definition has been offered by Cohen and Arato as a “notion of self-limiting

Democratizing movements seeking to expand and protect spaces for both negative liberty and positive freedom and to recreate egalitarian forms of solidarity without impairing economic self-regulation.” See Jean I. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1997), 17-18.

is closer to the pre-modern conception of the “estates” – and thus to certain fuzzy modern constructs of the democratic *politeia* – than in classic liberalism. However, it retains its importance even in the current situation insofar Marx’s version of “civil society” (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) stands in contradistinction to the power of the state, an interpretation on which anti-Soviet movements in Eastern Europe such as Poland’s *Solidarność* in the 1980s relied extensively to challenge the ruling Communist elites.¹⁴

In the *Critique* Marx takes to task Hegel’s position that the state serves a “mediating” role in the natural tension between the multiple elements of civil society, especially when it comes to mitigating economic conflicts. The state may masquerade as an arbiter, but it actually privileges specific economic interests as allies in bolstering its own political power. Marx of course was witnessing the re-invention of feudal interests in the early stages of industrialization as the new capitalist overlords, something that was not as pronounced in England. At the same time, Hegel had appropriated the rhetoric of English common law and parliamentary governance that had its origins in the seventeenth century Puritan assaults on absolutism without taking into account that Germany in the 1820s was still governed for the most part by Medieval princes and princelings as well as petty aristocrats. Marx’s effort in the fairly crude and ponderous diction of German idealism to locate authentic democratic impulses in the non-hereditary estates (*Stände*) and the artisan groupings, who through urbanization and proletarianization had lost their feudal protections and whom he regarded as the *real* social body, can be compared to an incipient present day trend, outside the cenacle of neoliberal ideologues, toward re-evaluating “populist” movements as having genuine political agency motivated by genuine political grievances against their *de-politicization* on the part of cognitive capitalist elites. The maddeningly murky Marxian metaphor of the “species-entity” (*Gattungsdasein*), a clever expression that called in the chips on Hegel’s spurious claims of a manifestly “ethical” bourgeois state headed by a lifelong serving monarch, still has an edge to it. Marx’s observation that Hegelian sovereignty is inescapably severed from actual civil society reminds us that the quest for the true “people” in the chirruping confusion of contemporary

¹⁴ The notion of what exactly is meant by “civil society” is confusing and highly contest, and has resulted from various meanings attached to the phrase by different writers since the eighteenth century. For a good overview of the changing meanings of the term, see Boris DeWiel, “A Conceptual History of Civil Society: From Greek Beginnings to the End of Marx”, *Past Imperfect* 6(1997): 3-42. For use of the term by Marx, see Geoffrey Hunt, “The Development of the Concept of Civil Society in Marx”, *History of Political Thought* 8(1987): 263-76. Viren Murthy regards the term in Marx as “synonymous with capitalism”. See Murthy, “Leftist Mourning: Civil Society and Political Practice in Hegel and Marx”, *Rethinking Marxism* 11(1999): 38.

theorizing about democracy, especially within our progressive neoliberal twilight mood of insipid posturing where everything seems to be in the lyrics of Lennon and McCartney "strawberry fields forever", remains a daunting project.

Where did Marx's mission misfire? We pose such a question only because of the now indisputable failure of Marxism as a mass historical movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The triumphalism of the globalist, quasi-capitalist ideology known as "neoliberalism", which gained attention in the two decades immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union and which had elevated Marxist-Leninism as the standard bearer for various internationals or world socialist movements in the first place, has now been discredited by the financial disasters of the past decade and a half. Yet Marxism, which has decanted into mostly specious and superficial academic polemics with hardly any serious rank and file organizational energy during that time, has never, even at its outset, been a monolith of either theory or practice that would rear up or topple *en bloc*. Derrida splendidly reminds us that we are forever "haunted" by Marx, who like the ghost of Hamlet's father is constantly staring directly at us from some alternate universe. Just as Hamlet the dead king has the same name as Hamlet, the self-tormented prince of Shakespeare's tragedy, so the "specter" of Marx has the same name, according to Derrida, as all the movements that yearn for the realization of the hope for democracy, or popular sovereignty. Derrida cites the opening lines of the Communist Manifesto from the 1840s which declares that a "specter" is haunting Europe. "No text in the tradition," Derrida writes. "seems as lucid concerning the way in which the political is becoming worldwide", what Derrida later in *Specters of Marx* dubs a "new international".¹⁵

Derrida uttered this prophecy in 1991 during a colloquium held in Southern California to discuss "Whither Marxism" right after the telling events of August in Russia that year. Just a little over 31 years later, however, no Derridean international in any perceptible form has emerged, even some kind of spooky ectoplasm peering at us from behind the visor of our political imagination. If there is a new "international", in the 2020s it manifests as erratically interlinked populist insurgencies around the planet that have defined themselves even more defiantly against the culturalist pseudo-Marxist elite pretensions of progressive neoliberalism. Such a populism for all its "internationalist" colorings is far from what Derrida appeared to have in mind. It is less concerned with justice from any kind of eschatological stance than in angrily redressing the economic disenfranchisement and cultural indignities experienced from the

¹⁵ *Specters of Marx*, op. cit., 14.

disdain constantly heaped on it by the mouth organs for the ruling knowledge classes. It has barely any intimation of a positive symbolism solidarity that would match this sense of indignation with a world-restoring vision that propels it forward.

Marx can be said perhaps to have "misfired" when he abandoned the philosophical projects of his twenties in his desperate scramble to move with his family from Europe to England after the reactionary crushing of the 1848 revolutions on the Continent. Unfortunately, Marx probably had little choice. If he was going to be taken seriously as political theorist and revolutionary in an English environment, it became necessary for him to take leave of his German philosophical vocabulary, which was either unintelligible or seemed ridiculous to his new Anglophone patrons and to adopt the rigorous inferential and mathematicised method of argument familiar to the leading intellectual luminaries of the new "scientific" materialism. But one must ask if Marx's vision of the inevitable crises of capitalism and any future prospects for the revolutionary transformation that had first happened happened in the 1790s in France would have been seeded at all without the Hegelian spectacle of a gradually unfolding universal history. To be credible after his English hegira in 1849 to his death in 1883 Marx remained mindful of both the *Zeitgeist* and his fealty to Engels, which also positioned him far better to assume a starring role in formation of the truly international socialist mobilizations that took shape in 1861 and thereafter. Nor otherwise would the first volume of Marx's most famous work *Capital* have come to be officially proclaimed by the Brussels Congress of the First International as the "Bible of the working class".¹⁶ In fact, *Capital* may have never been written at all. Yet in order to achieve that kind of notoriety within the specific context where Marxism became the most impactful mass movement of the twentieth century Marx had to abandon his most prescient political critique for an "historical materialist" apocalypticism that birthed totalitarian monstrosities brandishing his reputation while falsifying his initial aims. When the prophecy of the "inevitability" of a communist climax to history, first bruited as prophecy in the *Manifesto*, proved fraudulent by the close of the last century, the knives came out for Marx himself, and the entirety of his project – aside from its enduring utility as a skeptical alternative to the excesses of neoliberal enthusiasms – came under suspicion. There is no point in rehashing the tireless debates over the "good" versus the "bad" Marx. The uses and misuses of the legacy of great historical figures are rife as, for example, in the Jesus as conceived by the first century Jerusalem Church and the sixteenth century Spanish Inquisition. Marx was a mortal man,

¹⁶ Paul Lafargue, "Reminiscences of Marx," in Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 185

but his ideas, which vary considerably over his career, refuse to shrivel away.

In retrospect, the "misfire" can be traced specifically to Marx's jettisoning of the concept of *sovereignty* after the early 1840s and his ensuing fixation on the notion of the proletariat as the "universal class" destined to bring the whole of heaven down to earth in the revolutionary apocalypse. On the one hand, such a move, which encapsulates the more commonplace facets of Marxist theory, seems imprudent to let go of inasmuch as it has fired the imaginations of revolutionaries for almost two hundred years. On the other hand, it is what led ultimately to Marxism's public disgrace, and anyone other than those who consider Marx completely disreputable and worthless would be advised to consider what precisely remains redemptive in the complex corpus of his writings. Derrida's "specters" persist to this day, but their spectrality requires more specificity. The issue of sovereignty long before Marx's youthful decision to pick a fight with Hegel over the matter needs to be opened up anew on both its original and contemporary terms. For it is our view that the early modern formulation of sovereignty have both radical and revolutionary implications that the giant shadow of Bodin and Schmitt, both of whom favored some flavor of autocracy, prevent us from seeing. We can even go so far as to stress that these implications are implicit in the early Marx.

In the section of the *Critique* entitled simply "The Crown" Marx makes the rather undramatic claim that Hegel's defense of constitutional monarchy consists in his sly attempt to say that the monarch is the embodiment of the people, when in fact the latter's "sovereignty" is actually accorded to the state. In Hegel sovereignty coincides with "conscious reason" which can only prevail "in the state".¹⁷ Following Hegel's own logic of how the universal becomes concrete, the "sovereign" can never be a single, physical person who somehow represents the entirety of his subjects. Nor can sovereignty be compressed into the idea of the "state", which is an abstraction from the start. "The activities of the state are nothing but the modes of existence and operation of the social qualities of men",¹⁸ and it is this *social* dimension of sovereignty that Marx seeks to flesh out in the expressions "species-being", or "species-life". For Hegel, sovereignty is simply "the ideality of the state".¹⁹ Marx notes that Hegel calls it the "universal thought of this ideality", but for the ideal to become real much more than the state apparatus itself must be identified as the bearer of the sovereign content. The sovereignty of the people is radically different from the sovereignty of the monarch. Sovereignty as the "predicate", the "essence" (*Wesen*),

¹⁷ *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, op. cit., 21.

¹⁸ Op. cit., 22.

¹⁹ Op. cit., 23.

of the state, "never exhausts the spheres of its existence in a single one but in many one's."²⁰ In resisting the notion of popular sovereignty, according to Marx, balks at his own project of making immanent, or concrete, the universality of the very Idea of history. He "without hesitation ascribes living qualities to the abstraction."²¹ The difference between the unity of monarch us and the unity of the *populus*, or *demos*, lies in whether one seeks to pass the universal abstraction off as concrete, or to derive dialectically the universal from its moment of incarnation within the concrete. "Hegel proceeds from the state and makes man into the subjectified state; democracy starts with man and makes the state objectified man."²² Finally, there can be no "subjectivity" to the state. The radical nature of concretely realized, or "socialized", subjectivity abolishes the state. That premise, first enunciated within a fairly esoteric parsing of Hegel's own nomenclature by Marx in the *Critique*, held as the overarching premise of his thought until his demise. There genuinely can be no such thing as "state socialism" in the Marxian universe of discourse. It was the failure of Marxism as an historical movement to abolish the state that was the reason for its ultimate denouement.

But our commission is not to peruse what went wrong throughout the era of Marxism as a movement. It is our job to uncover what sovereignty means in its most concrete Marxian sense and to tease out what might be leveraged in current socio-political discussions from such a discovery. What is often scanted in Marxian theory was Marx's own suspicion of construct of "civil society", which in recent years has become a kind of sophistical signifier that cements neoliberal hegemony. "The bureaucracy", Marx writes later in the *Critique*, "is the state formalism of civil society. It is the state's consciousness, the state's will, the state's power, as a Corporation."²³ It is tantamount to "the same fantastic abstraction that rediscovers state-consciousness in the degenerate form of bureaucracy, a hierarchy of knowledge, and that uncritically accepts this incomplete existence as the actual and full-valued existence-the same mystical abstraction admits with equanimity that the actual empirical state-mind, public consciousness, is a mere potpourri of the 'thoughts and opinions of the Many'."²⁴

Civil Society

²⁰ Op. cit., 27.

²¹ Op. cit., 28.

²² Op. cit., 30.

²³ Op. cit., 46.

²⁴ Op. cit., 61.

Here Marx has not yet seemingly made the exact connection that will militate throughout his economic as opposed to his subsequent political manuscripts. Civil society is not yet in his thinking "bourgeois" (*bürgerlich*). The state bureaucracy is somehow its "formalistic" placeholder, an epistemic translation that Marx and Engels several years later in *The German Ideology* attribute to the dialectic of "base" and "superstructure." This translation becomes critical for understanding how the notion nowadays of democratic sovereignty has been hijacked by the ruling knowledge classes. The ruling knowledge class control the mediating performances of language through the corporate media, the higher education system, the global financial control centers neoliberal bureaucracies in Washington, London, Brussels, Geneva, etc. Their constant rhetoric attacking populist movements as "authoritarian" and "anti-democratic" mask their intent to preserve the prerogatives of the meritocratic and elite educated professionals who make up the administrative state as the locus of "democracy", which is precisely what Marx sought to expose in his critique of Hegel. "Neoliberal rationality", as Brown calls it, is hardly different from the "rationality" of the Prussian state in the first half of the nineteenth century.

In *The German Ideology* of 1846 Marx and Engels for the first time clearly and decisively clarify that the "sociality" of the human being as "species-being" is grounded in the historical relations of production. Yet, Marx and Engels observe, "production is not only of a special kind. It is always a certain body politic, a social personality that is engaged on a larger or smaller aggregate of branches of production."²⁵ Furthermore, this "body politic" is held together by a certain idea, or set of ideas. In one of the most well-known paragraphs of their collaboration Marx and Engels write:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance.²⁶

²⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books 1988), 7.

²⁶ Op. cit., 61.

Moreover, throughout history and in every age the ruling class seeks “to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society...expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones.”²⁷ In the *Critique* Marx had lambasted Hegel’s assimilation of democratic sovereignty to the administrative state and its literate and professional classes, the same kind of duplicity we find today in the progressive neoliberal regimes centered in the national capitols that claim to be bulwarks of “popular” governance fighting off through various illiberal decrees and executive power the “populist” hordes. But here Marx and Engels supplant the realm of mere ideas – or “ideology” – with the realm of production (“base”) out of which the ideas (“superstructure”) arise. The progressive neoliberal project sees the triumph of “democracy” worldwide, or the compulsion to fight for it, as akin to Hegel’s “self-determining idea”. The very notion of the “knowledge economy” and the exaltation of something called “the production of knowledge” as the nub of all economic relations is simply the second coming of Hegelian idealism with its complete capture of the capitalist production machinery. It is both the monomaniacal apotheosis of the Cartesian cogito and Mignolo’s modernist/colonialist matrix of power.

In the concluding paragraphs of the section on Feuerbach in *The German Ideology* subtitled “Individuals, Class, and Community” Marx and Engels show their hand concerning the relationship between their “anthropology”, the theory of the state, and their anticipation of a “communist” revolution. The historical failure of communism per se, and the inexorable past habit of so-called “communist revolutions” to ossify into immovable constellations of “state socialism” in which the productive capacity of the society itself falters, can be traced to these key pages. What Marx and Engels regard as the very juncture where the Hegelian abstraction of the people as the state is presumably abolished through the revolutionary activity of the proletariat that renders the true “universal class” historically concrete turns out to be a reversal of the process. The state does not dissolve, or “wither away”, and magically reveal itself finally as the concrescence of universal humanity. On the contrary, “universalized” humanity becomes a “people’s democracy” which is actually the state in its rawest and most primitive form, as either the Party or “Dear Leader”. How did such a deception become so entrenched in the first place?

²⁷ Op. cit., 62.

To answer this question we need to do a fine combing of the text of *The German Ideology*. The section on Feuerbach, including the "Theses", stands out among the pre-1848 writings because it elaborates extensively the more diffuse "materialism" contrasted with Hegel's idealistic philosophy in the *Critique*. In this section Marx and Engels analyze the changing affiliations between the "forces of production" (*Produktionskräfte*) and the "forms of intercourse" (*Verkehrsformen*). The former expression nowadays we would perhaps refer to as the types of technology, or the "infrastructure" for manufacturing. The term *Verkehr* can be translated as either "intercourse" or "commerce". But what clearly interests Marx and Engels in this early text is how changes in human "relations" (*Verhältnisse*) both mirror and are derived from the evolution of technology for economic production. These relations are not merely economic, but also familial, social, and political. Marx and Engels find the same kind of abstract rendering of essential human relationships in social contract theory that were consigned to Hegel in the *Critique*. Social contract theory begins with the abstraction of the "individual" in the state of nature that Hegel's *Rechtsphilosophie* locates in the bourgeois state, whether monarchial or parliamentary. The *Individuum* of the social contract is not a datum of nature, but a consequence of the division of labor.²⁸ The division of labor, in turn, is the basis of the parceling out of human beings into social classes, which assume a permanent mystified political form in feudalism and are *de-politicized* with the advent of industrial systems of production. Social contract theory, and by implication the modern political idea of sovereignty, reflects this actual modern trend which has secretly baptized the inexorable mutation of *homo politicus* into *homo oeconomicus* through the dissolution of the Medieval estates and the etherealization of all concrete relationships and "forms of intercourse" into the thoroughly abstract binary of labor versus capital.

Marx and Engels, however, aim both to identify "general essence" (*allgemeines Wesen*) of humanity and to chart its historical realization through revolutionary activity beyond both its sacral political hierarchization, as in Medieval society, and its pseudo-egalitarian iteration as the ideal of liberal democratic state. The futuristic goal of communism amounts to a reconstitution, a genuine dialectical *Aufhebung*, of the "natural" condition of intercourse (*Verkehr*) preceding the formation of classes through the division of labor. "Communism differs from all previous movements in that it overturns the basis of all earlier relations of production and intercourse, and for the first time consciously treats all natural premises as the creatures of hitherto

²⁸ Op. cit., 85.

existing men, strips them of their natural character and subjugates them to the power of the united individuals. Its organisation is, therefore, essentially economic, the material production of the conditions of this unity; it turns existing conditions into conditions of unity. The reality, which communism is creating, is precisely the true basis for rendering it impossible that anything should exist independently of individuals, insofar as reality is only a product of the preceding intercourse of individuals themselves."

Here Marx and Engels employ fairly recondite German technical philosophical language that is difficult to transpose into the more familiar idiom of contemporary economic theory. But in attempting to decipher the rhetoric of *The German Ideology* it becomes obvious that Marx and Engels have their own mystified notion of "community" (*Gemeinschaft*) which both antedates and postdates the historical processes, in the latter case the "communist utopia". The distinction between the "social" (*sozial*) and "common" (*gemein*) was embedded in German idealism and had a significant influence on the social theorists of Continental Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century, including such luminaries as Ferdinand Tönnies and Emile Durkheim. It also correlated broadly with the Hegelian distinction between the "universal" and the "concrete".

Class Society

For Marx and Engels the crystallization of the proletariat as the totality of both living labor and the universal class creates the historical conditions for the global revival of *Gemeinschaft* in the guise of the communist eschatology. "It is human history with its separation of laborers into classes, and ongoing struggle between these classes, that is now nearing its climax. According to Marx and Engels, "up till now...the communal relationship into which the individuals of a class entered, and which was determined by their common interests over against a third party, was always a community [*Gemeinschaft*] to which these individuals belonged only as average individuals, only insofar as they lived within the conditions of existence of their class — a relationship in which they participated not as individuals but as members of a class."²⁹ The ripening of historical conditions, especially the universal condition of alienated labor as the outcome of capitalist methods of social organization, indicates now, however, the immediate prospect for the universal recovery of labor's contribution to the system of industrial productivity through the affirmation of world worker communal solidarity.

²⁹ Op. cit., 84..

"With the community of revolutionary proletarians, on the other hand, who take their conditions of existence and those of all members of society under their control, it is just the reverse; it is as individuals that the individuals participate in it. It is just this combination of individuals (assuming the advanced stage of modern productive forces, of course) which puts the conditions of the free development and movement of individuals under their control — conditions which were previously abandoned to chance and had won an independent existence over against the separate individuals just because of their separation as individuals, and because of the necessity of their combination which had been determined by the division of labour, and through their separation had become a bond alien to them."³⁰

The focus in this passage on the "separation" (*Trennung*) of individuals in class society is telling, because it implies that the respective configurations of society corresponding to the various and unfolding systems of economic production are somehow unnatural. Marx and Engels repeatedly employ the word *zufällig*, or "accidental". The condition of labor in what might perhaps be characterized as its natural state is coincides with relations of production where one receives back equitably what one puts into it, and where the forms of social organization are earmarked by mutual aid and support of all members. In many respects the Marxian communist idyll is merely a more granular portrait of Rousseau's state of nature. The common denominator between Rousseau and Marx is they both see the acquisition of private property as equivalent to the Fall of humankind, an outsize political trauma that not only foments widespread economic and social inequality but enslaves individual beings to each other while estranging them from their true character, their *Gattungsdasein*. Both Rousseau and Marx talk about being bound up through class societies as in "chains".³¹

Nonetheless, Rousseau envisioned the emancipation of enslaved humanity through establishment of a republican form of government, whereas Marx and Engels looked toward the end of government altogether. For Marx and Engels, the key to emancipation is not political, but social and economic. It system of production determines the system of political participation, and only a transformation of the former will lead to authentic emancipation. In fact, not only the state, but politics itself will no longer be necessary. Marx and Engels describe this eventuality as the changeover from "activity" (*Betätigkeit*) to "self-activity"

³⁰ Op. cit., 84-5.

³¹ Rousseau, *Le Contrat Social*: "L'homme est né libre et partout il est dans les fers". Marx and Engels, *Die Deutsche Ideologie*: "Die scheinbare Gemeinschaft, zu der sich bisher die Individuen vereinigten, verselbständigte sich stets ihnen gegenüber und war zugleich, da sie eine Vereinigung einer Klasse gegenüber einer andern war, für die beherrschte Klasse nicht nur eine ganz illusorische Gemeinschaft, sondern auch eine neue Fessel."

(*Selbstbetätigkeit*), which corresponds to living labor without its self-alienation under state domination. Labor and the social "forms of intercourse" are now the sphere for the realization of concrete universality, where activity that is merely in Hegelian parlance "in itself" (*an sich*), or alienated from itself for the sake of another (*für sich*), is transformed into a communal project that is now "in and for itself" (*an und für sich*). It is no longer divided or estranged from itself as private property, or as class divisions. "The transformation of labour into self-activity corresponds to the transformation of the earlier limited intercourse into the intercourse of individuals as such. With the appropriation of the total productive forces through united individuals, private property comes to an end."³²

Marx's writings prior to 1848 show a profound concern for popular "sovereignty" in the most radical sense, even though he rarely invokes after the *Critique* other than in a few scattered cases where he is attacking his critics. Marx's reluctance to invoke the term evidently has to do with its familiar association with the theory of the state and the authority of the laws, *political* concepts which his view of history and his understanding of proletarian revolution proscribe. In contrast to Rousseau, Marx is suspicious of any concept of the general will. Another reason is that the idea of popular sovereignty historically was intimately connected with the institutions of parliamentary democracy, which Marx dismissed as the offspring of the feudal principles of the "estates" and of historic class divisions. In the 1843 manuscripts he cites Hegel's paradigm of sovereignty, "the ideality of the state's particular spheres and functions", as illustrating this deception.³³ But there is a deeper and far more subtle intimation of what sovereignty might mean if we examine, Marx goes on to say, the "species-being" of human life apart from the state along with every instance of "ideality".

Here Marx's well-known critique of religion comes into play. Sovereignty from the late Middle Ages forward entailed to some degree a divine certification of political authority. But Marx construes sovereignty in this setting as a vicious circle. The sovereign is made sovereign by divine authority, but it is the authority of the sovereign that declares what is truly divine, and what is not. Sovereignty as a *theopolitical* construct turns out to be simply a mystification of the political power of the state. Such an image of sovereignty propagates the hidden alienation of human beings from each other in their strict class distinctions as members of civil, or political, society, which both *extracts* and *abstracts* them from the immediacy and familiarity of common life in the context of *Gemeinschaft*. In short, "identity politics" is the very signature from Marx's point of view of capitalist

³² *The German Ideology*, op. cit., 94.

³³ *Early Political Writings*, op. cit. 4.

exploitation, a point that never seems to find a way to penetrate the adamantine skulls of academic "Marxists". It is the state control of minds and bodies through the subterfuge of formal slogan of "equity, diversity, and inclusion." It is an ingenious classificatory apparatus designed to cover over the *reality of class exploitation* that props up the pseudo-religious mystique of every progressive neoliberal regime that has risen to prominence in the "information age". It prevents them from becoming persons by constraining their psyches to think of themselves only as individuals defined by their class membership, which in turn is stipulated by the elite ideology.

Marx explains this *tromp l'oeil* as follows: "the members of the political state are religious through the dualism between individual life and species-life, between the life of civil society and political life; religious in that man relates to the life of the state, which is foreign to his actual individuality, as though it were his true life; religious in so far as religion here is the spirit of civil society, the expression of the separation and the distancing of man from man."³⁴ In the 1840s such a state was officially "Christian." But Marx notes in the essay "On the Jewish Question" that actual Christianity as an historical movement sought to abolish the sovereignty of the state in the name of a divine kingdom that was yet to come. In that respects early Christianity can be taken as the bearer of a radical sovereignty that supersedes the state, at least *sub specie aeternitatis*. "Political democracy is Christian in that in it man - not only one man, but every man - has value as a *sovereign* being, the highest being, but this is man in his uncultivated, unsocial aspect, man in his accidental existence, man just as he is, corrupted by the entire organisation of our society, lost to himself, alienated, under the domination of inhuman relationships and elements - in a word, man who is not yet an actual species-being. The fantasy, the dream, the postulate of Christianity, namely the sovereignty of man - but man as an alien being, different from actual man - is in democracy a sensuous reality, presence, secular maxim."³⁵ Indeed, Christianity offers a kind of template for popular sovereignty, or democracy, in the radical Marxian meaning of becoming a "sensuous reality." The communist revolution will transform it into a "presence", or a "secular maxim".

The Eclipse of Sovereignty

In other words, communism is the "kingdom of God" realized within the space of human life and temporality. It brings, if we may flaunt Marx's own well-known turn of phrase, "heaven down to earth." The kingdom of God is not a

³⁴ Op. cit., 41.

³⁵ Op. cit.

monarchical kingdom where all political truth and authority is invested in the singular persona of the God-King, or *God-Man-King*, but in the *communio sanctorum*, the manifestation of the cosmic Christ-event as the spiritually self-activated *corpus Christi*, the body of believers in radical relationship to each other. The *communio sanctorum* is also a situation of radical equality. The Apostle Paul denotes it as a form of organismic spiritual solidarity in which the formal distinctions of the righteous and unrighteous under the reign of "law" are abolished. All finite beings are not present to each other in an infinite manner through recognition of each other as manifestations of the Spirit of the resurrected Jesus. Paul puts it in intimate familial terms, the accepted mode of both moral and legal recognition in the ancient world. "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." As in "communism" formal identity and political distinctions which typify and classify as well as set individuals at odds with each other are erased. "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."³⁶

One of the problems with "Marxism," which has become its own ideology even in light of its own claim to have criticized all ideologies, is that insights such as the one referenced above do not reflect the general drift of even Marx's own thought. Marx's intuition of popular sovereignty, that is, his glimpse of the *radically relational* signification of human beings as species-being in the early 1840s, was eclipsed a year later in 1844 when he began his collaboration with Engels and turned from political critique to developing a theory of revolution. It is well-known that Engels, who enjoyed first-hand knowledge of the horrendous factory conditions in England and was involved in on-the-ground organizing activity among the working class, increasingly drove Marx to take a more "empirical" approach and to advance the communist movement as a practical political enterprise with the goal of imminent revolution.

The *Communist Manifesto* of course was the prompt display of Marx's and Engels' undertakings in the mid-1840s. Marx and Engels were the intellectual vanguard of the failed revolutions across all of Europe from 1848-51. As numerous historians have underscored, the collapse of those revolutions stemmed from the disconnect between the educated, liberal elites who sought the overthrow of all remaining feudal institutions and monarchical control of parliaments and the spontaneous uprisings of the immiserated underclasses in the wake of rapid industrialization and urbanization. The wretched circumstances

³⁶ Galatians 3:26-28, NIV.

under which the latter subsisted, which was known in the early part of the nineteenth century as the “social question”, collided with the political ambitions of the liberal bourgeoisie, most of whom feared the underclasses as much as the old aristocracy. The suppression of the 1848 uprisings ironically constituted a political setback for the bourgeoisie on much of the Continent with liberalization of the political system having to wait for several decades, while it opened the way for rapid forced social transformation and modest economic reforms that in the long run made the proletariat less revolutionary than it had been just prior to the onset of the turmoil of those fateful years. Once the social revolution prophesied in *The Communist Manifesto* came to nought alongside its political counterpart, Marx and Engels were compelled to take refuge in England, and Marx spent the next decade scraping to keep his family alive while devoting himself exclusively to research at the British Museum. Marx the scholar replaced Marx the revolutionary, and his agenda turned to coming up with a truly credible and “scientific” strategy for theorizing both the demise of capitalism and the historical necessity of proletarian revolution.

In his *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* (“Outline for the Critique of Political Economy”, customarily referenced merely as the *Grundrisse*), published in 1857 and often considered the ground plan as well for the later three volumes of *Capital*, Marx makes his new methodology clear. On the one hand, Marx offers the familiar refrain that “It seems to be correct to begin with the real and the concrete.” Yet in the same sentence he changes the starting point for any future *Kritik* which is “the real precondition, thus to begin, in economics, with e.g. the population, which is the foundation and the subject of the entire social act of production.”³⁷ The allusion here to “the population” smacks oddly of what Foucault would later tab as the idea of biopolitics, the conceptual architecture for the advent in the next century for neoliberalism. Marxism, of course, is not per se a forerunner to neoliberalism, but the routine resort to neoliberal forms of rhetoric by identity theorists with overt sympathies for Marx’s work, misleadingly but not altogether wrongly branded by conservatives as “cultural Marxists”, indicates perhaps why Marxism as an empirical philosophy of social and economic change has lost its clout. It is at this point that Marx, having flirted with it and even rejected the labor theory of value in the previous period, adopted it once and for all. The labor theory of value, routinely but falsely attributed to Marx, was already a well-accepted principle of political economy, first clearly enunciated by Smith in the 1770s but tracing its way implicitly all the way back to Locke. Marx at this

³⁷ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 100.

point also cast his lot with the nascent “science” of econometrics, seeking to quantify in a rather elementary manner the various iterations of the notion of “value”, familiar to political economists, from labor to land to capital. It was out of these simple econometric exercises, first evident in the *Grundrisse*, that Marx’s complex theory of capital as *surplus value*, both fixed and variable, emerges. It is for this reason that Marx can authentically be said to be the first to analyze “capitalism” as we understand it today, rather than merely finding a new name for productive surpluses as the output of market interactions, which the classical economists had already adequately profiled.

What is missing most in Marx’s thought after 1850, however, is his radical political discovery in the 1849s of *sovereignty as community* rather than as a system of political representation, whether monarchial or parliamentary. In many respects it was only a flash that can be discerned here and there among other concerns. Marx never wanted to be right but unrecognized. He wanted to make a difference throughout his lifetime, and it was of course the influence of Engels that lured him away from what might be designated as his “anthropological” preoccupations in his very early career. But it is this anthropological acumen that more than two centuries now after Marx’s birth that make him highly relevant, even after “scientific materialism” has now vanished into the wastebin of outmoded ideas. Marx was never able convincingly, except perhaps in the immediate aftermath of World War I, to advance any theory of the ironclad “laws” of historical change and economic development that could have any sort of predictive capacity, as the social sciences all along have always been determined to accomplish. But in an era when the social sciences themselves are in a major crisis beyond their ability to perform surveys and make trivial descriptive generalizations the “unscientific” proto-Marxism that was relinquished around 1845 may be valuable to assist us in thinking new thoughts about where we stand today. The Marxian suggestion that we must look to the meaning of community as the key to sovereignty with both a political and economic twist may be clues to a new direction in which we find ourselves headed.