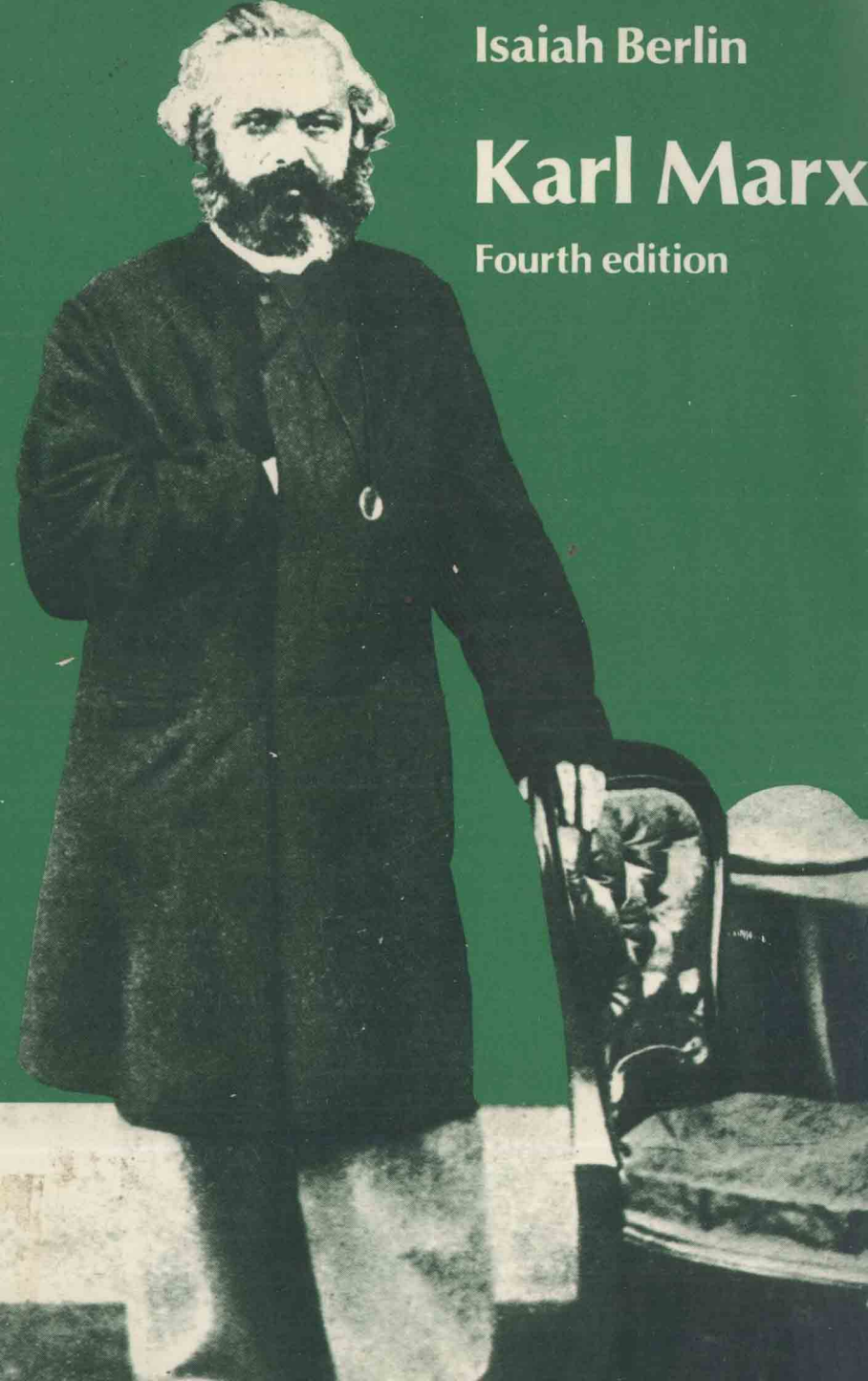


Isaiah Berlin

Karl Marx

Fourth edition



ISAIAH BERLI

KARL MARX

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Fourth Edition

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An OPUS book

Karl Marx

Preface

I WROTE this book almost forty years ago. My original text was more than twice its present size, but the requirements of the editors of the Home University Library were strict, and I was persuaded to shorten it by eliminating most of the discussion of philosophical, economic, and sociological issues and concentrating on intellectual biography. Since then, in particular after the social transformation of the world after the Second World War, a vast expansion of Marxist studies has taken place. Many hitherto unpublished writings by Marx saw the light; in particular the publication of the *Grundrisse*—the rough draft of *Das Kapital*—has vitally affected the interpretation of his thought. Moreover, events themselves have inevitably altered the perspective in which his work is seen; its relevance to the theory and practice of our time cannot be denied even by his most implacable critics. Such issues as the relationship of his ideas to those of preceding thinkers, especially Hegel (in the light of new interpretations of Hegel's own doctrines which have come thick and fast); the emphasis on the value and importance of his early 'humanist' writings, stimulated in part by the desire to rescue Marx from Stalinist (or, in some quarters, Plekhanov's, Kautsky's, Lenin's and even Engels's) interpretations and 'distortions'; the growing differences between the 'revisionist' and 'orthodox' expositions, principally in Paris, of the doctrines of *Das Kapital*; discussions of such themes as that of alienation—its cause and cure—especially by neo-Freudians, or of the doctrine of the unity of theory and practice by neo-Marxists of many denominations (and the sharp reaction to ideological deviations by Soviet writers and their allies)—all this has generated a hermeneutic and critical literature which by its sheer and rapidly increasing volume dwarfs earlier discussions. While some of these disputes resemble nothing so much as the controversies of his erstwhile Young Hegelian allies, whom Marx accused of wishing to exploit and adulterate the dead body of Hegelian doctrine, this ideological debate has

added a good deal to knowledge and understanding both of Marx's own ideas and of their relation to the history of our own times.

The fierce controversies, especially during the last twenty years, about the meaning and validity of Marx's central doctrines cannot have left any serious student of Marxism wholly unaffected. Consequently, if I were writing about Marx's life and ideas now, I should inevitably have written a different book, if only because my view of what he meant by such central concepts as the science of society, the relation of ideas to institutions and the forces of production, and the correct strategy for the leaders of the proletariat at various stages of its development, have undergone some change. This is so, even though I should not now claim to be acquainted with the entire field of Marxist studies. When I was preparing this book in the early 1930s I was perhaps too deeply influenced by the classical interpretations of Engels, Plekhanov, Mehring, on which Marxism as a movement was founded, and also by the admirable (never reprinted) critical biography by E. H. Carr. But when I began to revise the text, I realised that I was engaged on writing a new, more comprehensive and ambitious work which would go far beyond the purpose of this series. I therefore thought it best to confine myself, in successive revisions, to correcting mistakes of fact and emphasis, qualifying over-bold generalisations, amplifying one or two points treated in a cursory manner, and adopting relatively minor changes of interpretation.

Marx is not the clearest of writers, nor was it his purpose to construct a single, all-embracing system of ideas in the sense in which this could be said to be the aim of such thinkers as Spinoza or Hegel or Comte. Those who, like Lukács, steadfastly maintain that what Marx wished to do (and in their view achieved) was a radical transformation of the methods of thinking, of arriving at the truth, rather than the replacing of one set of doctrines by another, can find plenty of evidence for this in Marx's own words; and since he insisted throughout his life that both the meaning and the reality of a belief consisted in the practice which expressed it, it is not perhaps surprising that his views on a number of central topics, and those not the least original or influential, are not set down systematically but must be gleaned and inferred from scattered passages in his works and, above all, from the concrete forms of action which he advocated or initiated.

It was natural that a doctrine at once so radical and so directly

allied to, indeed, identical with, revolutionary practice, should have led to a variety of interpretations and strategies. This began in his own lifetime and led to his famous and characteristic remark that he was himself anything but a Marxist. The publication of early essays by him, which tended to differ in tone and emphasis, and, to some degree, subject-matter (and, some would say, on central issues of doctrine) from his later work, vastly increased the area of disagreement among the later theorists of Marxism. And not only among theorists: it led to fierce conflicts between and within socialist and communist parties, in due course, between states and governments in our day, and has led to realignments of power which have altered the history of mankind and are likely to continue to do so. This great ferment, and the ideological positions and doctrines that are the theoretical expressions of these battles, are, however, beyond the scope of this book. The story I wish to tell is solely that of the life and views of the thinker and fighter in whose name Marxist parties were in the first place created in many countries, and the ideas on which I have concentrated are those which have historically formed the central core of Marxism as a theory and a practice. The vicissitudes of the movement and the ideas that he originated, the schisms and the heresies, and the changes of perspective which have turned notions bold and paradoxical in his day into accepted truths, while some among his pre-communist views and *obiter dicta* have grown in prominence and stimulated contemporary debate, do not, for the most part, belong to the scope of this study, although the bibliography provides guidance to the reader who wishes to pursue the further history of this, the most transforming movement of our time.

The (inevitably selective) annotated list of recommended works available in English has been brought up to date by Mr Terrell Carver, to whom my thanks are due, both by the omission of some which have been clearly superseded, and by the addition of a good many new titles to the list of books, the sheer variety of which alone is an indication of the vastly increased range both of knowledge and of ideas and novel approaches in the field of Marxist scholarship.

I should also like to express my gratitude to two friends: Professor Leszek Kolakowski for reading the text and making valuable suggestions by which I have greatly profited; and Mr G. A. Cohen for his penetrating critical comments and his encouragement, both of which I greatly needed. I should also like

to thank my friend Mr Francis Graham-Harrison for revising the index, and the officers of the Oxford University Press for their exemplary courtesy and patience.

Oxford, 1977

I.B.

Note to Third Edition

I HAVE taken the opportunity offered by a new edition to correct errors of fact and of judgement, and to repair omissions in the expositions of Marx's views, both social and philosophical, in particular of ideas which were neglected by the first generation of his disciples and his critics and came into prominence only after the Russian Revolution. The most important of these is his conception of the relation between the alienation and the freedom of men. I have also done my best to bring the bibliography up to date (although I have had to confine myself to secondary works in English) and should like to thank Mr C. Abramsky and Mr T. B. Bottomore for their valuable help and advice. I should also like to thank Professor S. N. Hampshire for re-reading the first half of the book, and for suggesting many improvements.

Oxford, 1963

I.B.

Note to First Edition

My thanks are due to my friends and colleagues who have been good enough to read this book in manuscript, and have contributed valuable suggestions, by which I have greatly profited; in particular to Mr A. J. Ayer, Mr Ian Bowen, Mr G. E. F. Chilver, Mr S. N. Hampshire and Mr S. Rachmilewitch; I am further greatly indebted to Mr Francis Graham-Harrison for compiling the index; to Mrs H. A. L. Fisher and Mr David Stephens for reading the proofs; to Messrs Methuen for permission to make use of the passage quoted on pages 142-3; and, most of all, to the Warden and Fellows of All Souls College for permitting me to devote a part of the time during which I held a Fellowship of the college to a subject wholly outside the scope of my proper studies.

Oxford, May 1939

I.B.

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1

Introduction

Things and actions are what they are, and their consequences will be what they will be: why then should we seek to be deceived?

BISHOP BUTLER

No thinker in the nineteenth century has had so direct, deliberate and powerful an influence upon mankind as Karl Marx. Both during his lifetime and after it he exercised an intellectual and moral ascendancy over his followers, the strength of which was unique even in that golden age of democratic nationalism, an age which saw the rise of great popular heroes and martyrs, romantic, almost legendary figures, whose lives and words dominated the imagination of the masses and created a new revolutionary tradition in Europe. Yet Marx could not, at any time, be called a popular figure in the ordinary sense: certainly he was in no sense a popular writer or orator. He wrote extensively, but his works were not, during his lifetime, read widely; and when, in the late seventies, they began to reach the immense public which several among them afterwards obtained, their reputation was due not so much to their intellectual authority as to the growth of the fame and notoriety of the movement with which he was identified.

Marx totally lacked the qualities of a great popular leader or agitator; he was not a publicist of genius, like the Russian democrat Alexander Herzen, nor did he possess Bakunin's spell-binding eloquence; the greater part of his working life was spent in comparative obscurity in London, at his writing-table and in the reading-room of the British Museum. He was little known to the general public, and while towards the end of his life he became the recognised and admired leader of a powerful international movement, nothing in his life or character stirred the imagination or evoked the boundless devotion, the intense, almost religious, worship, with which such men as Kossuth, Mazzini, and even Lassalle in his last years, were regarded by their followers.

His public appearances were neither frequent nor notably successful. On the few occasions on which he addressed banquets or public meetings, his speeches were overloaded with matter, and delivered with a combination of monotony and brusqueness, which commanded the respect, but not the enthusiasm, of his audience. He was by temperament a theorist and an intellectual, and instinctively avoided direct contact with the masses to the study of whose interests his entire life was devoted. To many of his followers he appeared in the role of a dogmatic and sententious German schoolmaster, prepared to repeat his theses indefinitely, with rising sharpness, until their essence became irremovably lodged in his disciples' minds. The greater part of his economic teaching was given its first expression in lectures to working men: his exposition under these circumstances was by all accounts a model of lucidity and conciseness. But he wrote slowly and painfully, as sometimes happens with rapid and fertile thinkers, scarcely able to cope with the speed of their own ideas, impatient at once to communicate a new doctrine, and to forestall every possible objection;¹ the published versions, when dealing with abstract issues, tended at times to be unbalanced and obscure in detail, although the central doctrine is never in serious doubt. He was acutely conscious of this, and once compared himself with the hero of Balzac's *Unknown Masterpiece*, who tries to paint the picture which has formed itself in his mind, touches and retouches the canvas endlessly, to produce at last a formless mass of colours, which to his eye seems to express the vision in his imagination. He belonged to a generation which cultivated the imagination more intensely and deliberately than its predecessors, and was brought up among men to whom ideas were often more real than facts, and personal relations meant more than the events of the external world; by whom indeed public life was at times understood and interpreted in terms of the rich and elaborate world of their own private experience. Marx was by nature not introspective, and took little interest in persons or states of mind or soul; the failure on the part of so many of his contemporaries to assess the importance of the revolutionary transformation of the society of their day, due to the swift advance of technology with its accompaniment of sudden increase of wealth, and, at the same time, of social

¹ Anyone interested in Marx's method of composition would be well advised to read the *Grundrisse* (see Guide to Further Reading, pp. 210, 212), which remained in manuscript until 1939 and contains the main doctrines both of *Das Kapital* and of earlier studies of alienation.

and cultural dislocation and confusion, merely excited his anger and contempt.

He was endowed with a powerful, active, concrete, unsentimental mind, an acute sense of injustice, and little sensibility, and was repelled as much by the rhetoric and emotionalism of the intellectuals as by the stupidity and complacency of the bourgeoisie; the first seemed to him, as often as not, aimless chatter, remote from reality and, whether sincere or false, equally irritating; the second at once hypocritical and self-deceived, blinded to the salient social features of its time by absorption in the pursuit of wealth and social status.

This sense of living in a hostile and vulgar world (intensified perhaps by his latent dislike of the fact that he was born a Jew) increased his natural harshness and aggressiveness, and produced the formidable figure of popular imagination. His greatest admirers would find it difficult to maintain that he was a responsive or tender-hearted man, or concerned about the feelings of most of those with whom he came into contact; the majority of the men he met were, in his opinion, either fools or sycophants, and towards them he behaved with open suspicion or contempt. But if his attitude in public was overbearing and offensive, in the intimate circle composed of his family and his friends, in which he felt completely secure, he was considerate and gentle; his married life was essentially not unhappy, he was warmly attached to his children, and he treated his lifelong friend and collaborator, Engels, with almost unbroken loyalty and devotion. He had little charm, his behaviour was often boorish, and he was prey to blinding hatreds, but even his enemies were fascinated by the strength and vehemence of his personality, the boldness and sweep of his views, and the breadth and brilliance of his analyses of the contemporary situation.

He remained all his life an oddly isolated figure among the revolutionaries of his time, equally unfriendly to their persons, their methods and their ends. His isolation was not, however, due merely to temperament or to the accident of time and place. However widely the majority of European democrats differed in character, aims and historical environment, they resembled each other in one fundamental attribute, which made co-operation between them possible, at least in principle. Whether or not they believed in violent revolution, the great majority of them, in the last analysis, appealed to moral standards common to all mankind. They criticised and condemned the existing condition of

humanity in terms of some preconceived ideal, some system, whose desirability at least needed no demonstration, being self-evident to all men with normal moral vision; their schemes differed in the degree to which they could be realised in practice, and could accordingly be classified as less or more Utopian, but broad agreement existed between the schools of democratic thought about the ultimate ends to be pursued. They disagreed about the effectiveness of the proposed means, about the extent to which compromise with the existing powers was morally or practically advisable, about the character and value of specific social institutions, and consequently about the policy to be adopted with regard to them. But even the most violent among them—Jacobins and terrorists—and they, perhaps, more than others—believed that there was little which could not be altered by the determined will of individuals; they believed, too, that powerfully held moral ends were sufficient springs of action, themselves justified by an appeal to some universally accepted scale of values. It followed that it was proper first to ascertain what one wished the world to be; next, one had to consider in the light of this how much of the existing social fabric should be retained, how much condemned; finally, one was obliged to look for the most effective means of accomplishing the necessary transformation.

With this attitude, common to the vast majority of revolutionaries and reformers at all times, Marx came to be wholly out of sympathy. He was convinced that human history is governed by laws which cannot be altered by the mere intervention of individuals actuated by this or that ideal. He believed, indeed, that the inner experience to which men appeal to justify their ends, so far from revealing a special kind of truth called moral or religious, tends, in the case of men historically placed in certain situations, to engender myths and illusions, individual and collective. Being conditioned by the material circumstances in which they come to birth, the myths at times embody in the guise of objective truth whatever men in their misery wish to believe; under their treacherous influence men misinterpret the nature of the world in which they live, misunderstand their own position in it, and therefore miscalculate the range of their own and others' power, and the consequences both of their own and their opponents' acts. In opposition to the majority of the democratic theorists of his time, Marx believed that values could not be contemplated in isolation from facts, but necessarily depended upon the manner in which the facts were viewed. True insight into the

nature and laws of the historical process will of itself, without the aid of independently known moral standards, make clear to a rational being what step it is proper for him to adopt, that is, what course would most accord with the requirements of the order to which he belongs. Consequently Marx had no new ethical or social ideal to press upon mankind; he did not plead for a change of heart; a mere change of heart was but the substitution of one set of illusions for another. He differed from the other great ideologists of his generation by making his appeal, at least in his own view, to reason, to the practical intelligence, denouncing intellectual vice or blindness, insisting that all that men need, in order to know how to save themselves from the chaos in which they are involved, is to seek to understand their actual condition; believing that a correct estimate of the precise balance of forces in the society to which men belong will itself indicate the form of life which it is rational to pursue. Marx denounces the existing order by appealing not to ideals but to history: he denounces it, as a rule, not as unjust, or unfortunate, or due to human wickedness or folly, but as being the effect of laws of social development which make it inevitable that at a certain stage of history one class, pursuing its interests with varying degrees of rationality, should dispossess and exploit another, and so lead to the repression and crippling of men. The oppressors are threatened not with deliberate retribution on the part of their victims, but with the inevitable destruction which history (in the form of activity rooted in the interests of an antagonistic social group) has in store for them, as a class that has performed its social task and is consequently doomed shortly to disappear from the stage of human events.

Yet, designed though it is to appeal to the intellect, his language is that of a herald and a prophet, speaking in the name not so much of human beings as of the universal law itself, seeking not to rescue, nor to improve, but to warn and to condemn, to reveal the truth and, above all, to refute falsehood. *Destruam et aedificabo* ('I shall destroy and I shall build'), which Proudhon placed at the head of one of his works, far more aptly describes Marx's conception of his own appointed task. By 1845 he had completed the first stage of his programme, and acquainted himself with the nature, history and laws of the evolution of the society in which he found himself. He concluded that the history of society is the history of man seeking to attain to mastery of himself and of the external world by means of his creative labour. This activity is

incarnated in the struggles of opposed classes, one of which must emerge triumphant, although in a much altered form: progress is constituted by the succession of victories of one class over the other. These in the long run embody the advance of reason. Those men alone are rational who identify themselves with the progressive, i.e. ascendant class in their society, either, if need be, by deliberately abandoning their past and allying themselves with it, or, if history has already placed them there, by consciously recognising their situation and acting in the light of it.

Accordingly Marx, having identified the rising class in the struggles of his own time with the proletariat, devoted the rest of his own life to planning victory for those at whose head he had decided to place himself. This victory the process of history would in any case secure, but human courage, determination and ingenuity could bring it nearer and make the transition less painful, accompanied by less friction and less waste of human substance. His position henceforth is that of a commander, actually engaged in a campaign, who therefore does not continually call upon himself and others to show reason for engaging in a war at all, or for being on one side of it rather than the other: the state of war and one's own position in it are given; they are facts not to be questioned, but accepted and examined; one's sole business is to defeat the enemy; all other problems are academic, based on unrealised hypothetical conditions, and so beside the point. Hence the almost complete absence in Marx's later works of discussions of ultimate principles, of all attempts to justify his opposition to the bourgeoisie. The merits or defects of the enemy, or what might have been, if the enemy or the war had been other than they were, is of no interest during the battle. To introduce these irrelevant issues during the period of actual fighting is to divert the attention of one's supporters from the crucial issues with which, whether or not they recognise them, they are faced, and so to weaken their power of resistance.

All that is important during the actual war is accurate knowledge of one's own resources and of those of the adversary, and knowledge of the previous history of society, and the laws which govern it, is indispensable to this end. *Das Kapital* is an attempt to provide such an analysis. The almost complete absence from it of explicit moral argument, of appeals to conscience or to principle, and the equally striking absence of detailed prediction of what will or should happen after the victory, follow from the concentration of attention on the practical problems of action. The

conceptions of unalterable, universal, natural rights, and of conscience, as belonging to every man irrespective of his position in the class struggle, are rejected as self-protecting liberal illusions. Socialism does not appeal, it demands; it speaks not of rights, but of the new form of life, liberated from constricting social structures, before whose inexorable approach the old social order has visibly begun to disintegrate. Moral, political, economic conceptions and ideals alter with the social conditions from which they spring: to regard any one of them as universal and immutable is tantamount to believing that the order to which they belong—in this case the bourgeois order—is eternal. This fallacy is held to underlie the ethical and psychological doctrines of idealistic humanitarians from the eighteenth century onwards. Hence the contempt and loathing poured by Marx upon the common assumption made by liberals and utilitarians, that since the interests of all men are ultimately, and have always been, the same, a measure of understanding, goodwill and benevolence on the part of everyone may yet make it possible to arrive at some sort of general consensus satisfactory to all. If the class war is real, these interests are totally incompatible. A denial of this fact can be due only to stupid or cynical disregard of the truth, a peculiarly vicious form of hypocrisy or self-deception repeatedly exposed by history. This fundamental difference of outlook, and no mere dissimilarity of temperament or natural gifts, is what distinguishes Marx sharply from the bourgeois radicals and Utopian socialists whom, to their own bewildered indignation, he fought and abused savagely and unremittingly for more than forty years.

He detested romanticism, emotionalism, and humanitarian appeals of every kind, and, in his anxiety to avoid any appeal to the idealistic feelings of his audience, systematically tried to remove every trace of the old democratic rhetoric from the propagandist literature of his movement. He neither offered nor invited concessions at any time, and did not enter into any dubious political alliances, since he declined all forms of compromise. The manifestos, professions of faith and programmes of action to which he appended his name contain scarcely any references to moral progress, eternal justice, the equality of man, the rights of individuals or nations, the liberty of conscience, the fight for civilisation, and other such phrases which were the stock-in-trade (and had once genuinely embodied ideals) of the democratic movements of his time; he looked upon these as so much worth-

less cant, indicating confusion of thought and ineffectiveness in action.¹

The war must be fought on every front, and, since contemporary society is politically organised, a political party must be formed out of those elements which in accordance with the laws of historical development are destined to emerge as the conquering class. They must ceaselessly be taught that what seems so secure in existing society is, in reality, doomed to swift extinction, a fact which men may find it difficult to believe because of the immense protective façade of moral, religious, political and economic assumptions and beliefs, which the moribund class consciously or unconsciously creates, blinding itself and others to its own approaching fate. It requires both intellectual courage and acuteness of vision to penetrate this smoke-screen and perceive the real structure of events. The spectacle of chaos, and the imminence of the crisis in which it is bound to end, will of itself convince a clear-eyed and interested observer—for no one who is not virtually dead or dying can be a disinterested spectator of the fate of the society with which his own life is bound up—of what he must be and do in order to survive. Not a subjective scale of values revealed differently to different men, determined by the light of an inner vision, but knowledge of the facts themselves, must, according to Marx, determine rational behaviour. A society is judged to be progressive, and so worthy of support, if it is one whose institutions are capable of the further development of its productive forces without subverting its entire basis. A society is reactionary when it is inevitably moving into an impasse, unable to avoid internal chaos and ultimate collapse in spite of the most desperate efforts to survive, efforts which themselves create irrational faith in its own ultimate stability, the anodyne with which all dying orders necessarily conceal from themselves the symptoms of their true condition. Nevertheless, what history has condemned will be inevitably swept away: to say that something ought to be saved, even when that is not possible, is to deny the rational plan of the universe. To denounce the process itself—the painful conflicts through and by which mankind struggles to achieve the full realisation of its powers—was for Marx a form of childish subjectivism, due to a morbid or shallow view of life, to

¹ His remarks, in a letter to Engels, about his attitude to such expressions in the draft of the declaration of its principles which the First International Workingmen's Association submitted to him, are highly instructive in this connection.