

Crisis and Revolution

The relationship between crisis and revolution has loomed large in the thinking of both Marx and Engels and in that of many of their followers. The reasons are obvious enough. Looking back, I showed in my historical sketch in Chapter 2, how both men perceived a relationship between the two phenomena, mainly in the likelihood that a crisis involving high levels of unemployment and widespread suffering among workers had, in the past, and would probably continue to provoke uprisings, revolts and ultimately revolutions. Their world, after all had already experienced a whole series of revolutions before these two young men turned their attention to the study of the possibilities in the world around them.

The rise and spread of capitalism throughout the world in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries – whose imposition Marx eventually analyzed in terms of primitive accumulation – provoked resistance, sometimes passive but often involving violent rebellion and revolution. A very short list, all of which were known to them, includes Germany in 1524, England in 1549, England, Portugal and Spain in 1640, Jamaica in 1728, America in 1775, France in 1789, Haiti in 1791, France, Belgium, Poland and Switzerland in 1830.¹ Moreover, the one revolution in which they directly participated – that in Germany in 1848 – exploded in the wake of the crisis of 1847, providing another confirmation that crisis could lead to revolution. As we saw, their subsequent analysis of that revolution (and the others which broke out in country after country that same year) examined the relationship between that crisis and these upheavals on the Continent. That analysis was one reason why, ten years later, as the crisis of 1857 deepened, Marx anticipated another revolution and set to work night after night pulling his thoughts together in the *Grundrisse* notebooks.

Their analyses, as interpreted by many of their followers in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, tended to be simplified into a cause-and-effect relationship: crises can give rise to uprisings, large-scale breakdowns can give rise to revolutions. Among those whose analyses of crisis focused purely on the “laws” emanating from intra-capitalist dynamics, such as the anarchy of competition, tendencies to overproduction and the exhaustion of markets, the

1 This list includes only a few of the many, many rebellions and revolutions. A more comprehensive list is provided by Wikipedia.

corollary to this perception of cause and effect sometimes led to a politics of simply waiting for the system to breakdown and the subsequent, inevitable revolution. In the worst case, it involved “la politique du pire,” i.e., embracing whatever makes the suffering of workers worse, and thus, supposedly, their revolt more likely. Less passive responses involved efforts to organize workers – through strikes that Marx and Engels had seen as training grounds – and to build organizations prepared to lead other workers in the revolutionary overthrow of the system when the crisis occurs.

1 Revolution: Another Amoebic Term

I have devoted most of this essay to analyzing Marx and Engels’ writings on crisis and the meanings they gave to the concept, but before assessing their analysis of the relationship between crisis and revolution, I think it worthwhile to pause and consider the meanings of the term “revolution.” It has become one of those amoebic terms whose meanings change from usage to usage. From a word evoking massive social upheavals with the potential to change society, its use has devolved so much as to warrant some dissection.

In day-to-day life, except for historians and lefties who have absorbed Marxist or anarchist traditions, the term has become trivialized. In the onslaught of advertising with which capitalists bombard us endlessly, every small new variation in some commodity is declared “revolutionary” – supposedly warranting immediate purchase by anyone who usually buys “the next big thing.” On such use of the term, I know no better commentary/parody than Tom Waits’ song “Step Right Up” in his album *Small Change* (1976).

Unfortunately, intellectuals are also prone to declaring each new formulation in concept or theory “revolutionary.” For example, in economics, the substitution of utility for labor as the source of value and the use of the calculus in formulating economic theories in the late nineteenth century is called the “Marginalist Revolution.” Similarly, the reworking of Adam Smith’s eighteenth-century preoccupation with the aggregate “Wealth of Nations” by John Maynard Keynes in the mid-twentieth century into what came to be called “macroeconomics” is dubbed the “Keynesian Revolution.”

The use of such terminology by economists, of course, amounts to mimicry of its use by historians of science. The discovery in the sixteenth century by Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) that the earth revolves around the sun, instead of the reverse, is celebrated as the “Copernican Revolution.” Then came the seventeenth century Newtonian Revolution in which the capitalist

machine age gave birth to Isaac Newton's mechanics, and the twentieth century Einstein Revolution² in which his theory of relativity eclipsed Newton's mechanics which by then had become "classical," and so on.³

The term "revolution" is also used in less promotional, more mundane ways denoting not some supposedly earth-shaking radical change but merely repetition, a "going-around" in which some moving object returns to its original position. This is the case when scientists talk about celestial revolutions (and their duration) – of the earth around the sun (one year), or of the moon around the earth (a sidereal or synodic month), or of the rotation of the earth on its axis (a sidereal or stellar day). It is also the case when engineers who design, or industrial workers who use, machines talk about aspects of their operations that involve simple mechanical revolutions, such as those of a drill press or a lathe. Among those who can afford them, some cars sport tachometers, which monitor engine rpm's, revolutions per minute.

2 "Revolution" as Used by Marx and Engels

In Marx's analysis of capitalism, the closest analogy to such scientific and engineering uses are his concepts of "circuits" and of "reproduction." As capitalists successfully complete a circuit, they wind up back where they started, and ready to start over. They have reproduced their operations, albeit, if as successfully as hoped, on a larger scale. Although these are biological, rather than mechanical metaphors, the concept of reproduction nevertheless denotes processes in which the combined effect of all circuits merely recreates the original situation. In "simple" reproduction, the values of all the components – means of production, labor power, commodities and money – remain the same; in "expanded" reproduction there is also a return to the beginning, qualitatively speaking, but on a larger scale. When ruptured in some way, this hoped for eternal return is not realized, in either quality or quantity, thus crisis.

When the forces at work that repeatedly disrupt circuits and reproduction – especially antagonistic class forces – not only disrupt capitalist plans but also impose more profound shakeups in the way reproduction is organized there is no true "return," regardless of the scale. The overall pattern remains, e.g., $M - C - M'$, but the whole set of relationships is reshaped into something new. Such

2 For those with a sense of humor, Einsteins Revolution is also the name of a \$2 million dollar quarter horse available for stud.

3 Thomas Kuhn's concept of paradigm shifts in the evolution of science has provided support for viewing such shifts as "revolutions."

reshaping often includes changes in technology for which Marx (and many historians) did use the term “revolutions.”⁴ The use of the term “revolutions” for such changes is closer to its use in designating major social upheavals, not only because major technological changes alter the technical class relations but because Marx judged that even those introduced against workers’ struggles ultimately advanced the class conflict toward more profound revolutions. Such was the introduction of steam engines and the power looms they made possible – looms that were introduced to destroy the power of handicraft, handloom weavers but contributed to the creation of an industrial proletariat.⁵ Such changes/revolutions do not immediately threaten the existence of capitalism but result in new processes of worker self-organization, on an ever-broader basis. Factories and their power looms gave capitalists more immediate control over workers, by subjecting every minute of work to supervision. But by bringing workers together in one place they facilitated the collective formation of unions – a whole new organization of workers’ power, which renewed their struggles on a new basis. For Marx and Engels such limited “revolutions” and their results were steps toward the kind that interested them most: those that threatened to overthrow the whole system.

It was that kind of revolution which inspired them, whether they succeeded or failed. In Germany in 1848, Marx and Engels saw themselves fighting in support of the replacement of an absolutist regime by a more liberal one, which they expected would provide more scope for workers’ struggles. They had seen, of course, how the American Revolution in 1775, the one in France in 1789 and those in Haiti in 1791 all succeeded in overthrowing the existing *political* organization of capitalism, even if not the system itself. They also knew the one in France in 1830 and those in Europe in 1848 failed even in that limited goal. Yet they called them all Revolutions. Why? Because those fighting in the streets

4 Such was the “Green Revolution” in agricultural technology of the 1950s and 1960s – the development of high yielding varieties of wheat and rice – financed by capitalist philanthropies (the Ford and Rockefeller foundations) in response to peasant revolt in the Global South. Although, understood politically, those technological changes might more properly be described as a “Green Counter-Revolution,” they were, nevertheless, modern versions of those changes Marx saw as “the most powerful weapon for suppressing strikes” (*Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 562, *MECW*, Vol. 35, p. 438). See H. Cleaver, “The Contradictions of the Green Revolution,” *op. cit.*

5 This pattern of reorganizing production to increase control over skilled workers through deskilling was repeated, years later, by Frederick Taylor, whose “principles of scientific management” were developed to extract more work and increase productivity. His first paper on “A Piece Rate System” was published in 1895, the year Engels died. In the decades that have followed, historians have identified a whole series of “revolutions” including that of electricity, of the automobile, of nuclear power, and most recently the computer or informational “revolution.”

were demanding fundamental changes in society. The Americans, the French and Haitians wanted independence from monarchy and a chance to form a new system of government and, in Haiti an end to slavery. The French in 1789 wanted to overthrow the monarchy and establish a new system of government with greater “rights of man.”

Win or lose, they saw that struggles against capitalism itself are inevitably renewed – along with the crises they induce and at least the possibility of fundamental change. Why? Because the capitalist way of life for most people means the endless subordination of life to work, exploitation and alienation. By pitting people against each other, capitalists against workers and workers against each other, this system has fundamental, inescapable antagonisms that make crisis permanently imminent in the system. By reducing the lives of most people to that of mere worker, it has effectively created and maintained a class division, between a capitalist class imposing work and a working class resisting it. This working class has developed from a capitalist-defined “class-in-itself” to a self-defined “class-for-itself,” a class that has developed its subjectivity from that of living labor to that of a potentially revolutionary class subject. Marx’s writings show how capitalist crises are often, from the point of view of workers, moments not of breakdown but of breakthrough, opening new opportunities. Where crises for capital result from its loss of control (direct or indirect) over workers, they are simultaneously moments of eruptions of working-class subjectivity rejecting the way things are and demanding something new.

The rupture of accumulation by workers’ struggles is a moment of conquest. It is the opening of a breach in the enemy lines in the class war. When struggle circulates rapidly, the breach is widened and whole lines may give way, widening the scope for workers’ own self-organization and mobilization. The circulation of struggle to more and more sectors of the class and the increasing of the space, time, and resources available for organizing further struggle, strengthens the ability to resist. Even if the struggles that produce and grow out of a crisis are ultimately crushed by capital, they are still important experiences in the development of the working class as revolutionary subject. As Engels wrote in 1845, they are still “the military school of the working-men in which they prepare themselves for the great struggle which cannot be avoided.”⁶

Marx repeated this theme almost two decades later in *Value, Price and Profit* where he saw each and every struggle as a conditioning prelude to revolution. He also took up this theme in *Capital*, Volume 1, where he not only chronicled the growth of working-class struggle and capitalist crisis (for example, in

6 “The Condition of the Working Class in England” (1845), *MECW*, Vol. 4, p. 512.

Chapter 10 on the working day) but also outlined the “historical tendency of capitalist accumulation” (in Chapter 32). There, he argued that along with the growth of accumulation, centralization and monopoly went, hand in hand, “the revolt of the working class” – a revolt which could ultimately lead to the final rupture of the “integument” of capitalist control and the expropriation of the expropriators.⁷

But what do “expropriation,” and “revolution,” mean? This can only be answered with reference to our understanding of the nature of capitalist control. I have argued that the central characteristic of the capitalist organization and control of society is the generalized imposition of commodity producing work, which includes both the production of goods and services upon which it can earn a profit and its efforts to organize the rest of society so that its activities contribute to the reproduction of human life as the capacity and willingness to work, i.e., as labor-power. If this is the central substance of capitalist control, then in class terms, *revolution against capitalism must be defined in terms of the overthrow of capitalist-imposed work and of the subordination of life to that work.*

This essay has shown how Marx’s analysis of crisis can be interpreted in a non-objectivist way. How we can understand the value concepts, accumulation, and its interruption in terms of the class struggle over work. How, therefore, the pattern of development of capitalist society (including its crises) is the outcome of the confrontation of two active class subjects and involves the growth of the working class along with the expansion of capital. From this perspective, struggles become revolutions which succeed when they throw capital into a crisis to which it is unable to fashion a solution, when there is no “second moment” of crisis, or that second moment fails. The rupture of capitalist control spreads and grows, overthrowing more and more of the social relations that capital created to reinforce its imposition of work. The capitalist “integument is burst asunder,” when the entire capitalist social system shaped around imposed labor is ripped apart and people build something new out of its ruins.

The expropriation of the capitalists is not simply the expropriation of their “property” in any usual sense, it is rather the appropriation of the whole of society. Moreover, it is clear enough in Marx and Engels’ writings that expropriation means freeing society from capitalist organization in such a way that wholly new kinds of social relationships can be elaborated. Thus, it means the end of the commodity form and money, of the fetishism of production, of the

⁷ *Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 929, or *MECW*, Vol. 35, p. 750.

hierarchy of work, of the alienation of labor, through the transformation of relationships both among humans and between humans and the rest of nature.

Marx and Engels' observations of the pattern and content of working-class struggle led them again and again to emphasize how the revolutionary destruction of capital would involve, in a fundamental way, the liberation of people from a life sentence of hard labor. I already noted how Engels argued in his "Outline of a Critique of Political Economy" how the development of productivity during the capitalist period would create the possibility of reducing "to a minimum the labor falling to the share of mankind."⁸ And how he argued at Elberfeld, in detail, that providing the unemployed with jobs and liberating people from many wasteful activities, would cut in half the amount each person needs to work.⁹

This early insight received extensive theoretical elaboration by Marx in the *Grundrisse*. He saw how the growing use of machinery and the associated productivity of labor reduced the need for work, making its imposition more and more difficult. This creates a problem only for capital. For workers, on the other hand, it is a continual expansion of the potential for reducing the labor required to meet their needs and desires to a minimum while freeing more and more time and energy for non-work activities. Revolution must involve the creation of a new historical situation in which, as Marx wrote in the *Grundrisse*, "disposable time will grow for all ... The measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labor-time, but rather disposable time."¹⁰ Of the content of this time, Marx spoke only of the "free development of individualities," of the expansion of the multidimensional, self-defined needs and activities of ex-members of the working class.

Ultimately, what defines people as revolutionary subjects is not only their *negative power* to abolish capital, exploitation, alienation, and their own status as members of a class of "mere workers." It is their *positive power* to increasingly define their own needs and desires, to carve out expanding spheres of their own autonomy and to create new worlds in the place of capitalism. New worlds? While, to the end of their days, Marx and Engels refused to offer their own outlines of post-capitalist utopias, I have already mentioned in Chapter 2 how they did see – alongside the reduction of necessary work time – some steps being taken in the creation of alternatives to the capitalist organization

8 *MECW*, Vol. 3, p. 436.

9 "... the present customary labor time of the individual will be reduced by half simply by making use of the labor which is either not used at all or used disadvantageously," *MECW*, Vol. 4, p. 251.

10 *Grundrisse*, p. 708; or *MECW*, Vol. 28, p. 94.

of society. The most obvious examples were co-operatives created by workers from the bottom up.

In his 1864 Inaugural Address to the First International, after recounting workers' successes in reducing the hours of labor, Marx turned to their positive power.

But there was in store a still greater victory of the political economy of labour over the political economy of property. We speak of the co-operative movement, especially the co-operative factories raised by the unassisted efforts of a few "bold hands". The value of these great social experiments cannot be over-rated. By deed, instead of by argument, they have shown that production on a large scale, and in accord with the behests of modern science, may be carried on without the existence of a class of masters employing a class of hands; that to bear fruit, the means of labour need not be monopolized as a means of domination over, and of extortion against, the labouring man himself; and that, like slave labour, like serf labour, hired labour is but a transitory and inferior form, destined to disappear before associated labour plying its toil with a willing hand, a ready mind, and a joyous heart.¹¹

Three years later in the newly published Volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx inscribed a whole chapter (13) on "Co-operation" arguing that despite its usurpation by capitalists, co-operation is an inherent power of collective human beings as "social animals."¹² "When the worker co-operates in a planned way with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species."¹³ This is a power that long predated capitalism, too often commanded by some ruling class but one that workers take back into their own hands when and where they can. While modern co-operation depends on large numbers of workers being brought together and coordinated, when that is forced by capital for purposes of "the greatest possible exploitation of labour-power," the inevitable, "unavoidable antagonism" generates resistance and struggle.¹⁴ Marx noted that workers had already demonstrated how, once in control, they could take over and ordinate co-operation among themselves. He noted with

11 Marx, "Inaugural Address of the Working Men's International Association," October 21–27, 1864, *MECW*, Vol. 20, p.11.

12 *Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 444, "man, if not as Aristotle thought a political animal, is at all events a social animal." Or, *MECW*, Vol. 35, p. 331.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 447, or *MECW*, Vol. 35, p. 334.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 449, or *MECW*, Vol. 35, p. 336.

humor how capitalists knew this full well and feared the obvious implication: the end of any justification for capitalist control.

As evidence, he cited an article from “the philistine English periodical, the *Spectator*” lamenting how this was being revealed in the success of an Owen-inspired co-operative in Rochdale, a town in the Manchester industrial region. The Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society began as a consumer co-operative but soon laid down general principles, including for the organization of production. The danger of this example of worker self-organization, the paper lamented was that it “showed that associations of workmen could manage shops, mills and almost all forms of industry with success, and they immediately improved the condition of the men, but then they did not leave a clear place for masters.” “*Quelle horreur!*” Marx quips.¹⁵ A nightmarish horror for capitalists, but a promise for workers as this example demonstrated how workers could do just fine without capitalists in organizing both production and distribution to meet their needs. While the Rochdale co-operative turned out to be fundamental in the development of the co-operative movement in England (and beyond), for Marx its importance lay not just in its practical success but in its demonstration of how workers could do away with capitalism and manage society on their own.

Thirteen years later, in his *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Engels echoed this theme. Amplifying his critique of Dühring’s ignorant criticism, Engels not only praised Owen for his perception of how “co-operative societies for retail trade and production” could be “transition measures to the complete communistic organization of society,” but also pointed out how such actual societies “have since that time, at least given practical proof that the merchant and the manufacturer are socially quite unnecessary.”¹⁶ What the Utopians had imagined, workers were putting into practice based on their evolving material circumstances. As those circumstances changed, Marx and Engels argued, so would the nature of the revolutionary changes necessary to move beyond capitalism, its exploitation, and its crises.

So, how to get from here to there, where “there” is defined as the replacement of capitalist society, in all its aspects? As the historical sketch of Chapter 2 showed, Marx and Engels’ ideas about the solution to this problem changed over time. In 1848 they thought workers needed to support bourgeois revolutions against absolutism because it would facilitate subsequent worker efforts to replace capitalism with communism. In the wake of their experience with the failure of the uprising in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, having seen

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 449, fn., or *MECW*, Vol. 35, pp. 336–37, fn.

¹⁶ *MECW*, Vol. 24, p. 296.

how the liberals they supported sold out workers' interests, they argued that from the get-go workers needed to fight for their own goals, independently of those of capitalists and their liberal supporters. But how to do that?

Their basic principle, reiterated many times, was that workers had to carve out the path from here to there through their own initiatives. Workers, they saw, were progressively organizing themselves along two lines. One was the formation of workers' autonomous organizations in and around their direct relationships with capitalists. The primary and most obvious such organization was the union – formal collective self-organization by workers to fight with their bosses over relationships both in the labor market and in production. While battles in production involved waged workers, those in the labor market also involved the unwaged, i.e., those in the reserve army who mobilized against the suffering imposed by the capitalist practice of only providing meaningful income to those working for them directly. The inclusion of conditions off-the-job, in the larger society, meant unions were always under pressure from workers to fight for the needs of both waged and unwaged. So naturally both men supported these kinds of struggles.

The other line of worker self-activity, which was growing fast in Marx and Engels' later years and in which they participated, was the formation of worker organizations fighting for access to roles in government, i.e., the ballot box and through elected representatives, influence in the formation of laws which would help them in their daily lives and in their struggles. Here too, Marx and Engels supported such "political" engagement, from the Chartist Movement through the formation of working-class political parties to elect representatives. As previously discussed, in this they differed from those anarchists, such as Bakunin, who dismissed such activity as hopeless drains on energy better channeled into struggles for the things workers wanted changed in their lives. Of this these critics of working-class political parties were never able to convince either Marx or Engels. Instead, the two men studied the rise of such parties and the different tendencies among those organizing them. They critiqued directions they found counterproductive – such as the failure to be inclusive of different kinds of workers – and embraced those they judged working in more effective directions.

Question: "All in all, what are we left with?" Answer: Marx and Engels left us legacies of both methodology and commitment. They showed us how to study workers' struggles, their circulation, their relation to crises, and the possibilities of overthrowing capitalism and getting beyond it. But they also demonstrated by their own actions how the point of all this study and effort to understand the world was to participate in the struggle to change it.