

Marx and Engels and the Communist Movement

The following article is a chapter from *The Idea: Anarchist Communism, Past, Present and Future* by Nick Heath. We should point out that whilst we regard Marx's analysis of capitalism and class society as a very important contribution to revolutionary ideas, we are critical of his attitudes and behaviour within both the Communist League and the First International.

Marx was to re-iterate his ideas and to put them into practice in all his time in the working class movement. "Without parties no development, without division no progress" he was to write (polemic with the *Kölnische Zeitung* newspaper, 1842). In a much later letter to Bebel written in 1873, Engels sums up this approach:

"For the rest, old Hegel has already said it; a party proves itself a victorious party by the fact that it splits and can stand the split. The movement of the proletariat necessarily passes through stages of development; at every stage one section of the people lags behind and does not join in the further advance; and this alone explains why it is that actually the "solidarity of the proletariat" is everywhere realised in different party groupings which carry on life and death feuds with one another".

The mythology of Marxism implies that the theory of communism was perfected by Marx and Engels without really taking into consideration all that had gone before and that communism, organised more or less into a loose movement, was created by artisans and workers as a result of their practical experiences in the French Revolution and the events of the 1830s, as well as their continuing theoretical labours. Marx and Engels' involvement in this communist movement was one of continual political struggle with what they saw as their opponents in it, a recurrent series of attacks often using slander as a weapon.

Marx was won over to communism in 1842 by Moses Hess. In the same year, Marx familiarised himself with the writings of Proudhon and Dézamy as well as Pierre Leroux and Considerant in order to gain a grasp of the currents of French socialism and communism. During a short stay in London in 1845, Marx and Engels made contact with the German exiles and radical elements among the British Chartist movement. After Marx had been kicked out of France, he made the acquaintance of Weitling in Brussels in 1846. Brussels acted as a focal point for the clandestine movement across Western Europe. Not only were there a number of exiles here from France and Germany, but it was a distribution point for the spreading of radical literature in Germany, and was a stopping off point for German workers and intellectuals. Elliot Eriksson has argued that Marx did not fight his extradition from France, and was pleased to be exiled to Brussels, and that he was able to use its importance as a focal point to establish a stranglehold on all propaganda being smuggled into Germany. Marx put forward the idea of convening a congress of all communists to create the first international organisation of all communists. The Belgian city of Verviers was decided upon as the venue- it was close to the border with Germany and convenient too for those coming from France.

Before preparations for this could be finalised, delegates of the League of the Just arrived in Brussels and invited Marx and Engels to join their organisation. The League had, as we have seen, established itself as an international organisation, in contact with English and French revolutionaries. It now sought to enlist the mind of Marx.

Marx and Engels then entered into struggle with Weitling, who had defended Kriege. Up to then Weitling had been seen as the leading light of the League. The League had commissioned him in 1838 to write *Mankind As It Is and As It Ought To Be*, which had acted as a sort of Manifesto for the League. However, Weitling's ideas were increasingly being seen by others in the League as outmoded. The League's leading lights in London, Karl Schapper, Heinrich Bauer and Josef Moll had rejected the communist colonies advocated by Cabet, and now Weitling's concept of communism was in turn rejected as too militaristic

and putschist. In addition, Weitling frequently made reference to Christ as a pioneer of communism, often quoting the Bible, and atheistic views were growing among League members. In addition Weitling now advocated the need for a dictator to bring about the advent of communism, and he strongly implied this dictator should be himself. His self-importance alienated other communists like Schapper and Moll.

Both Weitling and the Russian Pavel Annenkov have left accounts of a plenary meeting in Brussels of the Communist League in spring 1846. Marx viciously attacked Weitling, whom before he had praised to the heavens for his Guarantee during his sojourn in Paris. Weitling's work *Craft Workers' Communism* was severely criticised. Both Annenkov and Weitling affirm that Marx demanded a thorough cleansing of the ranks of the communists, as Weitling says "human feeling must be derided". Despite the often asserted claim that Weitling was opposed to propaganda preparing the way for a social revolution, it was the Marx camp that opposed "oral propaganda, no provision for secret propaganda, in general the word propaganda not to be used in the future". Marx firmly stated that the realisation of communism in the near future was out of the question, and that first the bourgeoisie must be at the helm. (Letter from Weitling to Moses Hess April 1, 1846).

It's worth quoting extensively from this letter. "I believe Marx and Engels will end by criticising themselves through their own criticism. In Marx's brain, I see nothing more than a good encyclopaedia, but no genius. His influence is felt through other personalities. Rich men made him editor, voila tout (there you have it all, tr. NH). Indeed, rich men who make sacrifices have a right to see or have investigations made into what they want to support. They have the power to assert this right, but the writer also has this power, no matter how poor he is, not to sacrifice his convictions for money. I am capable of sacrificing my conviction for the sake of unity. I put aside my work on my system when I received protests against it from all directions. But when I heard in Brussels that the opponents of my system intended to publish splendid systems in well-financed translations, I completed mine and made an effort to bring it to the man (Karl Marx). If this is not supported, then it is entirely in order to make an examination. Jackass that I was, I had hitherto believed that it would be better if we used all our own qualities against our enemies and encouraged especially those that bring forth persecutions in the struggle. I had thought it would be better to influence the people, and, above all, to organise a portion of them for the propagation of our popular writings. But Marx and Engels do not share this view, and in this they are strengthened by their rich supporters. All right! Very good! Splendid!" This meeting was extremely acrimonious with both Marx and Engels arguing vehemently against Weitling, who responded in kind, Marx finally jumping up and down in his office.

The final break between the Marx group and Weitling came in the following month of May and only two years after Marx had called Weitling's book "an exuberant and brilliant debut of the German workers". Weitling soon left for the United States, from where he was not to return till the 1848 Revolution.

Marx and Engels next denounced the German communist Hermann Kriege, who had emigrated to America. Engels had at first put great faith in Kriege and had recommended him to Marx. When Kriege arrived in London shortly after he had joined the League of the Just. He then emigrated to New York in 1845 He led the League of Just there into the Social-Reform Association, which advocated radical land reform. He brought out a paper called *Volks-Tribun* to support this move. There he wrote of a vague communism based on brotherly love. And came out with statements like "We have no wish to lay bands on the private property of any man; what the usurer now has, let him keep; we merely wish to forestall the further pillaging of the people's assets and prevent capital from continuing to withhold from labour its rightful property" and: "Every poor man ... will instantly become a useful member of human society as soon as he is offered the opportunity of productive work." The land should be nationalised and then leased in rent free in plots of 150 acres to small holders.

On hearing of this Marx and Engels were quite rightly appalled. They issued a renunciation of Kriege's ideas, the "Circular Against Kriege", described by Gareth Stedman Jones as a "grossly self-important missive".. What was disturbing about this was the viciousness of the attack, which was highly vitriolic and personalised. The Committee in London wrote to Marx: "aren't you being too harsh against Kriege? . . . Kriege is still young and can still learn. "(Kriege was only twenty five years old). Another member of the League, Joseph Weydemeyer wrote that there was 'widespread regret that you have again got involved in such polemics'.

Moses Hess, who had been Marx's mentor, was next to be targeted, choosing to resign rather than be expelled. "In the struggle between Marx and Weitling, Hess had taken Weitling's side, and this was enough to infuriate Marx, and to make him look for a means of crushing Hess. Nevertheless, Moses Hess, despite many deviations and peculiarities had in the course of his socialist development come so near to Marx's standpoint, that, as late as July 28, 1846, Hess wrote to Marx: "I am in full agreement with your views concerning communist authorship. However necessary it may have been at the outset that communist endeavours should be linked to German ideology, it is no less necessary now that they should be based upon historical and economic premises, for otherwise we shall never be able to settle accounts either with the 'socialists' or with the adversaries of all shades of opinion" (Rühle).

Marx and Engels now set up a Workers Educational Society in Brussels, modelled on the London organisation of the same name animated by Schapper. They gradually built up contacts in Britain, Germany, France and Switzerland, gathering those of like mind round them. They then decided to set up an international organisation, to create cells in Brussels, Paris and London. It seems likely that this, the second attempt at an international, was at the initiative of the London group around Schapper. These groups were to set up correspondence committees to maintain links with other communist groups. These became known as the Communist Correspondence Committees. One such Committee was established in Brussels by Marx, Engels and their associate Philippe Gigot. It would appear that the preparatory work for these committees had already been put into place by the middle of 1846 and that Joseph Moll, who came to Brussels to invite Marx and Engels to join the League of the Just, was acting as a representative of the Communist Correspondence Committee in London. The London group of the League of the Just had answered favourably to the idea of increased communication between communists and made clear that they had broken with the conspiratorial tactics of the Blanquists and the outlook of Weitling, which sought to rouse the masses through spiritual inspiration. However, they warned against the vicious denunciations that Marx had made against Weitling and Kriege and emphasised that correspondence between communists was to encourage ideas not to curb political debate. Later they wrote another letter where they stated:

"We believe that all these different orientations must be expressed and that only through a communist congress, where all the orientations are represented in a cold-blooded and brotherly discussion, can unity be brought to our propaganda...If people from all the communist positions were sent, if intellectuals and workers from all lands met together, then there is no doubt that a lot of barriers, which still stand in the way, would fall. In this congress all of the different orientations and types of communism would be discussed peacefully and without bitterness and the truth would certainly come through and win the day".

After Marx had been persuaded by Moll that most of the London group had broken with the ideas of Weitling, a Congress was decided upon at the initiative of the Brussels Committee. For his part, Engels, active in the Paris Committee, used all the wiles of a politician to persuade those who had not broken completely with Weitling. Weitling was portrayed as a "reactionary" and falsely accused of not having written his books alone. In his reports back to Marx all the contempt of these two for workers is manifest with constant references to "those fools" "those asses", " those stupid workers who believe everything" with their "drowsiness and petty jealousy" In Engels' own words he was able "to put it over" with some

and “bamboozled” others. Engels was able to report that “The remainder of the Weitlingites, a little clique of tailors, is on the point of being thrown out”.

Karl Grün was next to be targeted. A populariser of Proudhon’s ideas in Germany, he was not a member of the League, but had a following in its groups. He was accused of embezzling 300 francs on flimsy grounds by Marx and Engels. The Grünites explained that they had raised the money themselves, and considered it as a loan. First Eisermann, “Grün’s chief follower” according to Engels, was expelled, followed in a few months by the most closet of the Grünites. “The last Grünites- a whole commune- were thrown out” crowed Engels. As a result only 30 members of the League were left in Paris. Only two members survived in one Paris group of the League. The League was purged in Switzerland, Hamburg and Leipzig as well, and any supporters of Weitling, Proudhon and Karl Grün expelled or forced to leave.

Jonathan Sperber notes that:” Ideological differences do not entirely explain the vigour of Marx’s attacks on Grün, since there was a lot in Grün’s work on French and Belgian socialism that was congenial to Marx. Grün denounced the liberal regime in Belgium as facilitating capitalist exploitation of the workers, under the guise of protecting civil rights; he spoke of the concentration of capital and the impoverishment of the proletariat; he was critical of the efforts of Fourier and his followers to get wealthy individuals to finance his socialist schemes. Grün called for the abolition of wage labour, and for the proletariat to assume political power; he expressly associated his socialism with atheism.”

The campaign against Hess did not proceed so well in Paris. Engels reported that: “Moses’s tittle-tattle produces the devil of a confusion for me, and exposes me to the most long-winded counter-speeches from the workers. Whole meetings have been wasted over it, and it is not even possible to make a decisive attack on this stale nonsense”.

The League of the Just had been decimated. As Otto Rühle remarked: “The net upshot of the visit was that Engels, though he did indeed put an end to Grün’s influence, only increased the confusion, so that the “Straubinger” ceased to be possible recruits for an international communist league such as Marx and Engels already hoped to found ”(Straubinger being Engels’ put down term for travelling journeymen).

The projected Congress convened in London in 1847, without the presence of Marx, but with the participation of Engels. There were few delegates. Despite what Engels says, the League of the Just was not reorganised into the Communist League. The Communist League was a new organisation.

The Communist League established a constitution, and its first paragraph proclaimed that “The aim of the League is the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, the rule of the proletariat, the abolition of the old bourgeois society based on class antagonisms, and the establishment of a new society without either classes or private property”. The organisation was based on “democratic centralism”, with all members expected to espouse communism and to be in accordance with its aims. Groups of members, styled “communes” were the basic unit of the League. These made up into districts with their own committees. The districts were combined under the control of a special “leading district”. These leading districts answered to a central committee.

The central committee itself was not elected by the conference of the League. Its powers were delegated to the district committee of any city appointed by the conference as the seat of the central committee. So a district thus designated would elect a central committee of at least 5 members.

Marx and Engels suggest that the Communist League was the direct successor of the League of the Just, and its predecessor the League of Outlaws. We have seen that this is not completely true. They also give the impression that the lineage of these organisations was one of centralist organisation. But the central committee of the League of the Just was not just elected but broadly controlled by the membership as a

whole. The original constitution of the Communist League was similar, and Marx and Engels' usurped this constitution, with the establishment of their highly centralised Central Committee in 1848. This arrangement was convenient for the perpetuation of a ruling clique.

The congress also decided to work on a programme for the League, and each district was to offer its own project at the next congress. Further, a paper was to be produced. Only one pioneer edition appeared. It was the first paper that openly proclaimed itself communist on the masthead. It was mostly written by London members of the League. It quite correctly argued against Cabet, who was encouraging people to emigrate to America to found communist colonies there. It urged people to remain in Europe and fight for the establishment of communism there. The paper also distinguished its communism from those of Weitling and the French groups.

A second congress was held, at the end of 1847 with Marx present this time. There were days of violent disagreement over a programme (it appears both Engels and Marx had drafted separate proposals). The Paris groups had commissioned Hess to write a text, approving this by a large majority. As a member of the committee, Engels arranged that his own text, and not that of Hess, be sent to London contrary to the members' votes and as Engels admitted "behind their backs". "But of course, not a soul must notice this or we shall all be deposed and there will be an unholy row". The majority of the Congress was finally persuaded to accept Marx and Engels's proposals and Marx was charged by Congress to write a Manifesto in the name of the League.

It should be remarked upon that the Manifesto commissioned by the League took a considerable time to write. Schapper and his associates as members of the Central Committee had to write angrily to Marx that "If the Manifesto of the Communist Party does not reach us before Tuesday, February 1, further measures will be taken against him (Marx)"

Marx and Engels argue in the Manifesto for a working class revolution in stages. Political power would be captured, all banks would be amalgamated into one State bank, and the means of production, transport and credit would also be controlled by the State. As Bakunin was to later comment: This revolution will consist of the expropriation, either successive or violent of the actual landowners and capitalists, and in the appropriation of all the lands and all of capital by the State, which, so that it can fulfil its great economic as well as political mission, must necessarily be very powerful and very strongly concentrated. The State will administer and direct the cultivation of the land by means of its appointed engineers commanding armies of rural workers, organised and disciplined for this cultivation. At the same time, on the ruin of all the existing banks, it will establish a single bank, sleeping partner of all labour and all commerce of the nation".

It should be pointed out that the Manifesto should not be seen as completely Marx and Engels' work, as the input of other League members, notably Karl Schapper, can be detected. During the first months of 1848 Marx was an enthusiastic supporter of the section of the bourgeoisie that was struggling for democratic rights. At the same time, he had contempt for the democratic leaders, unlike some other members of the League, who admired their heroism and military capabilities (see Lattek). He clashed with Doctor Andreas Gottschalk and his grouping the Workers Association in Cologne for separating the proletariat from the democratic bourgeois camp.

(Gottschalk and co. were members of the Communist League). He accused this group of isolating itself from the struggle. The agitation of Gottschalk and his circle had increased the size of the Workers Society to 5,000 members. Finding himself in a minority, Marx first of all dissolved the Central Committee. Despite the Cologne group being a section of the Communist League, he set up a rival organisation, the Democratic Association and launched an electoral campaign for the Frankfurt Parliament, supporting a dubious left candidate. In June of the same year, he and Engels set up a daily paper the Neue Rheinische

Zeitung: organ of democracy. Previously describing themselves as communists, Marx and his associates now described themselves as “we other democrats”. They advocated a united front between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, as long as the former remained on the “revolutionary” road, in other words as long as they struggled for a democratic society. There was not a word of the antagonism between the democracy of the bourgeoisie and the communism of the proletariat, and nothing about the immediate economic problems of the workers as the paper of the Workers Society was quick to point out. In fact, not once did the words “communist” or “communistic” “socialist” or “socialistic” appear in any article in the NRZ. During all of this, the Communist League was dropped and allowed to fizzle out.

As Marx said in an article in the paper (22nd January 1849) “The revolution must be first of all a revolution for the bourgeoisie. The revolution of the proletariat is solely possible after capitalist economy has created the conditions”. Gottschalk responded in his own paper Freiheit, Arbeit (Freedom, Labour): “Must we, after finally escaping the hell of the Middle Age, throw ourselves voluntarily into the purgatory of a decrepit capitalist power?..”

He went to say: “You have never been serious about the emancipation of the repressed. The misery of the worker, the hunger of the poor has for you only a scientific, a doctrinaire interest... You do not believe in the revolt of the working people, whose rising flood begins already to prepare the destruction of capital, you do not believe in the permanence of the revolution, you do not even believe in the revolution.”

The criticisms of Gottschalk hit home among the German workers.

As Hunt says, “Gottschalk was unusually inconsistent and vacillating in his political views and could move from permanent revolution to social monarchism within a few weeks, but his popularity with and closeness to the Cologne working classes probably makes him a good weathervane of their sentiments”. Gottschalk was close to the ideas of Hess and Grün. Devoid of notions of class struggle, he believed in a peaceful transition to communism. Nevertheless, his position vis-à-vis a united front with the progressive bourgeoisie put him on a collision course with Marx and Engels.

The German bourgeoisie signally failed in its endeavours to bring about a revolution for democracy and Marx was obliged to break with the bourgeois democrats in April 1849 and resurrect the Communist League. It had been a complete debacle for Marx and Engels. Not only had Marx and Engels attempted to hitch working class communism to the democratic desires of the bourgeoisie (already outlined in the Babouvists’ dangerous flirtation with it) but he had denounced the fundamental principles of international solidarity between the peoples. Positing the theory of “historic nations”- Germany, Poland, Hungary and Italy- and lesser nations doomed to be germanised or disappear altogether, they argued that strong nation states had to be created in order to facilitate the fall of absolutism. The Poles were only useful as long as they fought against Russian despotism. After they had fulfilled this task, they would have to be relegated to the second division of nations doomed to extinction. In a totally inaccurate prediction, Engels foresaw the extinction of the Czechs and Slovaks and the South Slavs. Chillingly, he saw these nations as backwards and obsolete.

He warned in a veiled attack on the then Pan-Slavist Russian Bakunin that “We shall fight an ‘implacable life-and-death struggle’ with Slavdom, which has betrayed the revolution; a war of annihilation and ruthless terrorism, not in the interests of Germany but in the interests of the revolution!”, that “we can only secure the revolution against these Slav peoples by the most decisive acts of terrorism”. In a profoundly racist language against the Slavs he belly-aches that no gratitude was shown “for the pains the Germans have taken to civilize the obstinate Czechs and Slovenes, and to introduce amongst them trade, industry, a tolerable agriculture and education!” (Democratic Pan-Slavism, 14th February 1848). Even more chilling was Engels’ pronouncement that “the next world war will not only cause reactionary classes

and dynasties to disappear from the face of the earth, but also entire reactionary peoples. And that too is an advance". (The Magyar struggle, 13th January 1850).

Just as appalling was Marx's belief in progressive wars. He was to support a war against Denmark by Germany in 1848 because it would strengthen the German nation and German democracy. "The real capital of Denmark is Hamburg, not Copenhagen" Marx blustered. (1) This was to be a continuing policy of Marx's, as witness his support for Germany in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870.

Ending up in London later in the year, Marx formed an alliance with French Blanquist exiles and the revolutionary wing of Chartism to set up a Universal Society of Revolutionary Communists. The idea had come from Julian Harney, the communist Chartist leader. With Engels, he drafted an Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League in 1850 refuting the opportunistic tactic of 1848-9, wrongly believing that a proletarian social revolution was about to break out, and developing the need for a Permanent Revolution until communism had been achieved. They linked to this the need for a dictatorship of the proletariat, a concept which had been invented by Blanqui inspired by the Babouvists.

But soon Marx took a turn away from revolutionary activity, stating that no revolution was possible for the present because of the economic recovery. Further, a coming revolution did not just depend on another trade crisis, which he had seen as the cause of the 1848 Revolutions, but a massive development of the productive forces. Leading workers in the Communist League like Schapper, Fraenkel, Lehmann and Willich fell out with him over this. Worse was to follow. The communist Techow testifies that "Marx and his friends set Schramm, their champion, on to Willich. Schramm attacked him with the coarsest invective, and finally challenged him to a duel....there are bound to be repercussions, not only in the local émigré set-up, but probably also in the Communist League. If this happens, then the disgusting intrigues and the mean gossip which Marx and Co. have been organizing on a small scale will probably have a more far-reaching effect, principally on their literary activity. It is really too bad that men of such real talent should end by making it impossible for anyone but the dregs of humanity to make common cause with them". The duel was fought and Schramm was injured. This resulted in outrage against Marx. He was expelled from the German aid committee and from the Workers Educational Association. In behaviour that was echoed in Marx's later tactics in the First International, he had the Central Committee transferred to Cologne. As Schapper noted: "Just as the proletariat cut itself off from the Montagne and the press in France, so here the people who speak for the party on matters of principle are cutting themselves off from those who organize within the proletariat".

Harney had originally insisted that Willich be involved in the Universal Society. He refused to take sides now. Following this, Marx and Engels wrote to the Blanquists saying that as far as they were concerned the World Society was no longer existent. The Cologne section and indeed the whole German organisation of the minority section of League controlled by Marx and Engels was closed down by police action, as was the German majority section in 1851. The police infiltrated both Leagues, but in his pamphlet on the Cologne events, Engels went out of his way to falsely blame the Willich group for shopping them to the police.

Marx followed this up with another pamphlet *The Knight of the Noble Conscience* attacking Willich in the most vicious way. Following this, Marx dissolved his section of the League in 1852. The German exiles found it hard to forgive his dismantling of the League. Being predominantly workers, it confirmed their suspicions of university-educated intellectuals and their "arrogance".

Marx and Engels had done considerable damage to important sections of the nascent communist movement with their tactic of allying the cause of the working class with that of the bourgeoisie. They had further strengthened the pro-Statist currents within this loose communist movement and had prepared the way for the mass social-democratic parties to come. They had separated off the different and loose

currents of thought within the workers movement from each other by their purges of the League of the Just, thwarting fruitful dialogue and increasing division. None of the international endeavours had been at their instigation, though they claimed credit for them, and all had been sabotaged by them. As Christine Lattek points out it was never a case of the League having come under the sway of Marx and Engels, and that what occurred was a certain convergence of opinions between them.

As the German Marxist Otto Rühle was to write: "Since Marx and Engels were ruthlessly endeavouring to reach self-understanding, self-laceration could not be avoided. This self-laceration conjured up an army of adversaries, and involved them for five years or more in the most venomous personal quarrels. A further result was that the proletarian united front, which was already in course of formation, was, prematurely and without any sufficient objective reason, broken for decades to come. The intolerant way in which the purging of the communist ranks was effected and in which the cleavage in the communist camp was brought about, was not the outcome of unavoidable necessity, not dependent upon the progress of economic evolution. Its primary cause was Marx's craving for exclusive personal predominance, which he rationalized into a fanatical confidence in the conquering power of his own idea."

Now they had the luxury of retreating into theoretical work until 1864, whilst communist workers endeavoured to carry on their organisational work within the working class. Marx and Engels dropped the term "communist" to describe their politics from now on, preferring the terms "socialist" or "social-democrat".

On the positive side Marx and Engels had brought much clarity to the League with their ideas on class struggle and exploitation. With their departure many of the German communists returned to vague notions of oppression and tyranny, pointing to their influence being only passing.

It would be false to think that the communist movement vanished with the departure of Marx and Engels. Activities continued in London and elsewhere for decades to come, with the Willich League pursuing alliances with bourgeois democrats in efforts to overthrow the existing system in Germany. In addition, particularly in the two years after the 1848 defeat, the notion of a transitional dictatorship was taken up by these German exiles.

The exile German communist movement in London, embodied in the Communistischer ArbeiterBildungsVerein (CABV)-Communist Workers Educational Association, established by Schapper and his associates in 1840, continued to exist and was still there when Johann Most -who was to turn it in an increasingly anarchist direction -and later Rudolf Rocker arrived in London.

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Notes:

(1) <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/09/10a.htm>

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