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Karl Marx: 'Howling Gigantic Curses'

KARL MARX has had more impact on actual events, as well minds of men and women, than any other intellectual in modern times. The reason for this is not primarily the attraction of his concepts and methodology, though both have a strong appeal to unrigorous minds, but the fact that his philosophy has been institutionalized in two of the world's largest countries, Russia and China, and their many satellites. In this sense he resembles St Augustine, whose writings were most widely read among church leaders from the fifth to the thirteenth century and therefore played a predominant role in the shaping of medieval Christendom. But the influence of Marx has been even more direct, since the kind of personal dictatorship he envisaged for himself (as we shall see) was actually carried into effect, with incalculable consequences for mankind, by his three most important followers, Lenin, Stalin and Mao Tse-tung, all of whom, in this respect, were faithful Marxists.

Marx was a child of his time, the mid-nineteenth century, and Marxism was a characteristic nineteenth-century philosophy in that it claimed to be scientific. 'Scientific' was Marx's strongest expression of approval, which he habitually used to distinguish himself from his many enemies. He and his work were 'scientific'; they were not. He felt he had found a scientific explanation of human behaviour in history akin to Darwin's theory of evolution. The notion that Marxism is a science, in a way that no other philosophy ever has been or could be, is implanted in the public doctrine of the states his followers founded, so that it colours the teaching of all subjects in their schools and universities. This has

spilled over into the non-Marxist world, for intellectuals, especially academics, are fascinated by power, and the identification of Marxism with massive physical authority has tempted many teachers to admit Marxist 'science' to their own disciplines, especially such inexact or quasi-exact subjects as economics, sociology, history and geography. No doubt if Hitler, rather than Stalin, had won the struggle for Central and Eastern Europe in 1941-45, and so imposed his will on a great part of the world, Nazi doctrines which also claimed to be scientific, such as its race-theory, would have been given an academic gloss and penetrated universities throughout the world. But military victory ensured that Marxist, rather than Nazi, science would prevail.

The first thing we must ask about Marx, therefore, is: in what sense, if any, was he a scientist? That is, to what extent was he engaged in the pursuit of objective knowledge by the careful search for and evaluation of evidence? On the face of it, Marx's biography reveals him as primarily a scholar. He was descended on both sides from lines of scholars. His father Heinrich Marx, a lawyer, whose name originally was Hirschel ha-Levi Marx, was the son of a rabbi and Talmudic scholar, descended from the famous Rabbi Elieser ha-Levi of Mainz, whose son Jehuda Minz was head of the Talmudic School of Padua. Marx's mother Henrietta Pressborck was the daughter of a rabbi likewise descended from famous scholars and sages. Marx was born in Trier (then Prussian territory) on 5 May 1818, one of nine children but the only son to survive into middle age; his sisters married respectively an engineer, a bookseller, a lawyer. The family was quintessentially middle-class and rising in the world. The father was a liberal and described as 'a real eighteenth-century Frenchman, who knew his Voltaire and Rousseau inside out'.¹ Following a Prussian decree of 1816 which banned Jews from the higher ranks of law and medicine, he became a Protestant and on 26 August 1824 he had his six children baptised. Marx was confirmed at fifteen and for a time seems to have been a passionate Christian. He attended a former Jesuit high school, then secularized, and Bonn University. From there he went on to Berlin University, then the finest in the world. He never received any Jewish education or attempted to acquire any, or showed any interest in Jewish causes.² But it must be said that he developed traits characteristic of a certain type of scholar, especially Talmudic ones: a tendency to accumulate immense masses of half-assimilated materials and to plan encyclopedic works which were never completed; a withering contempt for all non-scholars; and extreme assertiveness and irascibility in dealing with other scholars. Virtually all his work, indeed, has the hallmark of Talmudic study: it is essentially a commentary on, a critique of the work of others in his field.

Marx became a good classical scholar and later specialized in philosophy, in the prevailing Hegelian mode. He took a doctorate, but from Jena University, which had lower standards than Berlin; he never seems to have been quite good enough to get an academic post. In 1842 he became a journalist with the *Rheinische Zeitung* and edited it for five months until it was banned in 1843; thereafter he wrote for the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* and other journals in Paris until his expulsion in 1845, and then in Brussels. There he became involved in organizing the Communist League and wrote its manifesto in 1848. After the failure of the revolution he was forced to move (1849) and settled in London, this time for good. For a few years, in the 1860s and 1870s, he was again involved in revolutionary politics, running the International Working Men's Association. But most of his time in London, until his death on 14 March 1883—that is, thirty-four years—was spent in the British Museum, finding material for a gigantic study of capital, and trying to get it into publishable shape. He saw one volume through the press (1867) but the second and third were compiled from his notes by his colleague Friedrich Engels and published after his death.

Marx, then, led a scholar's life. He once complained: 'I am a machine condemned to devour books.'³ But in a deeper sense he was not really a scholar and not a scientist at all. He was not interested in finding the truth but in proclaiming it. There were three strands in Marx: the poet, the journalist and the moralist. Each was important. Together, and in combination with his enormous will, they made him a formidable writer and seer. But there was nothing scientific about him; indeed, in all that matters he was anti-scientific.

The poet in Marx was much more important than is generally supposed, even though his poetic imagery soon became absorbed in his political vision. He began writing poetry as a boy, around two main themes: his love for the girl next door, Jenny von Westphalen, of Prussian-Scotch descent, whom he married in 1841; and world destruction. He wrote a great deal of poetry, three manuscript volumes of which were sent to Jenny, were inherited by their daughter Laura and vanished after her death in 1911. But copies of forty poems have survived, including a verse tragedy, *Oulanen*, which Marx hoped would be the *Faust* of his time. Two poems were published in the Berlin *Athenaeum*, 23 January 1841. They were entitled 'Savage Songs', and savagery is a characteristic note of his verse, together with intense pessimism about the human condition, hatred, a fascination with corruption and violence, suicide pacts and pacts with the devil. 'We are chained, shattered, empty, frightened/Eternally chained to this marble block of being,' wrote the young Marx, '...We are the apes of a cold God.' He has himself, in the person

of God, say: 'I shall howl gigantic curses at mankind,' and below the surface of much of his poetry is the notion of a general world-crisis building up.⁴ He was fond of quoting Mephistopheles' line from Goethe's *Faust*, 'Everything that exists deserves to perish'; he used it, for instance, in his tract against Napoleon III, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire', and this apocalyptic vision of an immense, impending catastrophe on the existing system remained with him throughout his life: it is there in the poetry, it is the background to the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, and it is the climax of *Capital* itself.

Marx, in short, is an eschatological writer from start to finish. It is notable, for instance, that in the original draft of *The German Ideology* (1845-46) he included a passage strongly reminiscent of his poems, dealing with 'the Day of Judgment', 'when the reflections of burning cities are seen in the heavens...and when the "celestial harmonies" consist of the melodies of the *Marseillaise* and the *Carmagnole*, to the accompaniment of thundering cannon, while the guillotine beats time and the inflamed masses scream *Ça ira, ça ira*, and self-consciousness is hanged on the lamppost'.⁵ Then again, there are echoes of *Oulanen* in the *Communist Manifesto*, with the proletariat taking on the hero's mantle.⁶ The apocalyptic note of the poems again erupts in his horror-speech of 14 April 1856: 'History is the judge, its executioner the proletariat'-the terror, the houses marked with the red cross, catastrophic metaphors, earthquakes, lava boiling up as the earth's crust cracks.⁷ The point is that Marx's concept of a Doomsday, whether in its lurid poetic version or its eventually economic one, is an artistic not a scientific vision. It was always in Marx's mind, and as a political economist he worked backwards from it, seeking the evidence that made it inevitable, rather than forward to it, from objectively examined data. And of course it is the poetic element which gives Marx's historical projection its drama and its fascination to radical readers, who want to believe that the death and judgment of capitalism is coming. The poetic gift manifests itself intermittently in Marx's pages, producing some memorable passages. In the sense that he intuited rather than reasoned or calculated, Marx remained a poet to the end.

But he was also a journalist, in some ways a good one. Marx found planning, let alone writing, a major book not only difficult but impossible: even *Capital* is a series of essays glued together without any real form. But he was well suited to write short, sharp, opinionated reactions to events as they occurred. He believed, as his poetic imagination told him, that society was on the verge of collapse. So almost every big news story could be related to this general principle, giving his journalism a remarkable consistency. In August 1851, a follower of the early socialist

Robert Owen, Charles Anderson Dana, who had become a senior executive on the *New York Daily Tribune*, asked Marx to become the European political correspondent of the paper, writing two articles a week at £1 each. Over the next ten years Marx contributed nearly five hundred articles, of which about one hundred and twenty-five were ghosted for him by Engels. They were heavily subbed and rewritten in New York, but the sinewy arguments are pure Marx and therein lies their power. In fact his greatest gift was as a polemical journalist. He made brilliant use of epigrams and aphorisms. Many of these were not his invention. Marat produced the phrases 'The workers have no country' and 'The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains.' The famous joke about the bourgeoisie wearing feudal coats-of-arms on their backsides came from Heine, as did 'Religion is the opium of the people.' Louis Blanc provided 'From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.' From Karl Schapper came 'Workers of all countries, unite!' and from Blanqui 'the dictatorship of the proletariat'. But Marx was capable of producing his own: 'In politics the Germans have *thought* what other nations have *done*.' 'Religion is only the illusory sun around which man revolves, until he begins to revolve around himself.' 'Bourgeois marriage is the community of wives.' 'The revolutionary daring which hurls at its adversaries the defiant words: "*I am nothing and I must be everything*".' 'The ruling ideas of each age have been the ideas of its ruling class.' Moreover he had a rare gift for pointing up the sayings of others and using them at exactly the right stage in the argument, and in deadly combination. No political writer has ever excelled the last three sentences of the *Manifesto*: 'The workers have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to gain. Workers of the world, unite!' It was Marx's journalistic eye for the short, pithy sentence which, more than anything else, saved his entire philosophy from oblivion in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

But if poetry supplied the vision, and journalistic aphorism the highlights of Marx's work, its ballast was academic jargon. Marx was an academic; or rather, and worse, he was a failed academic. An embittered, would-be don, he wanted to astonish the world by founding a new philosophical school, which was also a plan of action designed to give him power. Hence his ambivalent attitude to Hegel. Marx says in his preface to the second German edition of *Capital*: 'I frankly proclaimed myself a disciple of that great thinker' and 'toyed with the use of Hegelian terminology when discussing the theory of value' in *Capital*. But, he says, his own 'dialectical method' is in 'direct opposition' to Hegel's. For Hegel, the thought-process is the creator of the real, whereas 'in my view, on the other hand, the ideal is nothing more than the material

when it has been transposed and translated inside the human head.' Hence, he argues, 'in Hegel's writings, dialectic stands on its head. You must turn it the right way up again if you want to discover the rational kernel that is hidden away within the wrappings of mystification.'⁸

Marx, then, sought academic fame by what he saw as his sensational discovery of the fatal flaw in Hegel's method, which enabled him to replace the entire Hegelian system with a new philosophy; indeed, a super-philosophy which would make all existing philosophies outmoded. But he continued to accept that Hegel's dialectic was 'the key to human understanding', and he not only used it but remained its prisoner till the end of his life. For the dialectic and its 'contradictions' explained the culminating universal crisis which was his original poetic vision as a teenager. As he wrote towards the end of his life (14 January 1873), business cycles express 'the contradictions inherent in capitalist society' and will produce 'the culminating point of these cycles, a universal crisis'. This will 'drum dialectics' into the heads even of 'the upstarts of the new German empire'.

What did any of this have to do with the politics and economics of the real world? Nothing whatever. Just as the origin of Marx's philosophy lay in a poetic vision, so its elaboration was an exercise in academic jargonizing. What it needed, however, to set Marx's intellectual machinery in motion was a moral impulse. He found it in his hatred of usury and moneylenders, a passionate feeling directly related (as we shall see) to his own money difficulties. This found expression in Marx's first serious writings, two essays 'On the Jewish Questions' published in 1844 in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*. Hegel's followers were all in varying degrees anti-Semitic, and in 1843 Bruno Bauer, the anti-Semitic leader of the Hegelian left, published an essay demanding that the Jews abandon Judaism completely. Marx's essays were a reply to this. He did not object to Bauer's anti-Semitism; indeed he shared it, endorsed it and quoted it with approval. But he disagreed with Bauer's solution. Marx rejected Bauer's belief that the anti-social nature of the Jew was religious in origin and could be remedied by tearing the Jew away from his faith. In Marx's opinion, the evil was social and economic. He wrote: 'Let us consider the real Jew. Not the *Sabbath Jew*...but the *everyday Jew*.' What, he asked, was 'the profane basis of Judaism? *Practical need, self-interest*. What is the worldly cult of the Jew? *Huckstering*. What is his worldly god? *Money*.' The Jews had gradually spread this 'practical' religion to all society:

Money is the jealous god of Israel, beside which no other god may exist. Money abases all the gods of mankind and changes them into

commodities. Money is the self-sufficient *value* of all things. It has, therefore, deprived the whole world, both the human world and Nature, of their own proper value. Money is the alienated essence of man's work and existence: this essence dominates him and he worships it. The god of the Jews has been secularized and has become the god of the world.

The Jew had corrupted the Christian and convinced him 'he has no other destiny here below than to become richer than his neighbours' and that 'the world is a stock-exchange.' Political power had become the 'bondsman' of money power. Hence the solution was economic. The 'money-Jew' had become 'the universal *anti-social* element of the present time' and to 'make the Jew impossible' it was necessary to abolish the 'preconditions', the 'very possibility' of the kind of money activities which produced him. Abolish the Jewish attitude to money and both the Jew and his religion, and the corrupt version of Christianity he had imposed on the world, would disappear: 'In emancipating itself from *hucksterism* and *money*, and thus from real and practical Judaism, our age would emancipate itself.'⁹

Thus far Marx's explanation of what was wrong with the world was a combination of student-café anti-Semitism and Rousseau. He broadened it into his mature philosophy over the next three years, 1844-46, during which he decided that the evil element in society, the agents of the usurious money-power from which he revolted, were not just the Jews but the bourgeois class as a whole.¹⁰ To do this he made elaborate use of Hegel's dialectic. On the one hand there was the money-power, wealth, capital, the instrument of the bourgeois class. On the other, there was the new redemptive force, the proletariat. The argument is expressed in strict Hegelian terms, using all the considerable resources of German philosophical jargon at its academic worst, though the underlying impulse is clearly moral and the ultimate vision (the apocalyptic crisis) is still poetic. Thus: the revolution is coming, which in Germany will be philosophic: 'A sphere which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all the other spheres, which is in short a *total loss* of humanity capable of redeeming itself only by a *total redemption* of humanity. This dissolution of society, as a particular class, is the *proletariat*.' What Marx seems to be saying is that the proletariat, the class which is not a class, the dissolvent of class and classes, is a redemptive force which has no history, is not subject to historical laws and ultimately ends history-in itself, curiously enough, a very Jewish concept, the proletariat being the Messiah or redeemer. The revolution consists of two elements: 'the head of the emancipation is *philosophy*, its heart is the

proletariat.' Thus the intellectuals would form the elite, the generals, the workers the foot-soldiers.

Having defined wealth as Jewish money-power expanded into the bourgeois class as a whole, and having defined the proletariat in his new philosophical sense, Marx then proceeds, using Hegelian dialectic, to the heart of his philosophy, the events leading up to the great crisis. The key passage ends:

The proletariat executes the sentence that private property pronounced on itself by begetting the proletariat, just as it carries out the sentence which wage-labour pronounced for itself by bringing forth wealth for others and misery for itself. If the proletariat is victorious it does not at all mean that it becomes the absolute side of society, for it is victorious only by abolishing itself and its opposite. Then the proletariat and its determining opposite, private property, disappear.

Marx had thus succeeded in defining the cataclysmic event he had first seen as a poetic vision. But the definition is in German academic terms. It does not actually mean anything in terms of the real world beyond the university lecture room.

Even when Marx goes on to politicize the events, he still uses philosophical jargon: '*Socialism* cannot be brought into existence without *revolution*. When the *organizing activity* begins, when the *soul*, the thing-in-itself appears, then socialism can toss aside all the political veils.' Marx was a true Victorian; he underlined words as often as Queen Victoria herself in her letters. But his underlining does not actually help much to convey his meaning, which remains sunk in the obscurity of the concepts of German academic philosophy. To ram his points home, Marx likewise resorts to a habitual gigantism, stressing the global nature of the process he is describing, but this too is cumbered with jargon. Thus: 'the proletariat can only exist *world-historically*, just as communism, its actions, can only have world-historical existence.' Or: 'Communism is empirically only possible as the act of the ruling people all at once and simultaneously, which presupposes the universal development of productive power and the world commerce which depends on it.' However, even when Marx's meaning is clear, his statements do not necessarily have any validity; they are no more than the *obiter dicta* of a moral philosopher.¹¹ Some of the sentences I have quoted above would sound equally plausible or implausible if they were altered to say the opposite. Where, then, were the facts, the evidence from the real world, to turn these prophetic utterances of a moral philosopher, these revelations, into a science?

Marx had an ambivalent attitude to facts, as he had to Hegel's philosophy. On the one hand he spent entire decades of his life amassing facts, which accumulated in over a hundred enormous notebooks. But these were the facts to be found in libraries, Blue Book facts. The kind of facts which did not interest Marx were the facts to be discovered by examining the world and the people who live in it with his own eyes and ears. He was totally and incorrigibly deskbound. Nothing on earth would get him out of the library and the study. His interest in poverty and exploitation went back to the autumn of 1842, when he was twenty-four and wrote a series of articles on the laws governing the right of local peasants to gather wood. According to Engels, Marx told him 'it was his study of the law concerning the theft of wood, and his investigation of the Moselle peasantry, which turned his attention from mere politics to economic conditions and thus to socialism.'¹² But there is no evidence that Marx actually talked to the peasants and the landowners and looked at the conditions on the spot. Again, in 1844 he wrote for the financial weekly *Vorwärts* (*forward*) an article on the plight of the Silesian weavers. But he never went to Silesia or, so far as we know, ever talked to a weaver of any description: it would have been very uncharacteristic of him if he had. Marx wrote about finance and industry all his life but he only knew two people connected with financial and industrial processes. One was his uncle in Holland, Lion Philips, a successful businessman who created what eventually became the vast Philips Electric Company. Uncle Philips' views on the whole capitalist process would have been well-informed and interesting, had Marx troubled to explore them. But he only once consulted him, on a technical matter of high finance, and though he visited Philips four times, these concerned purely personal matters of family money. The other knowledgeable man was Engels himself. But Marx declined Engels's invitation to accompany him on a visit to a cotton mill, and so far as we know Marx never set foot in a mill, factory, mine or other industrial workplace in the whole of his life.

What is even more striking is Marx's hostility to fellow revolutionaries who had such experience—that is, working men who had become politically conscious. He met such people for the first time only in 1845, when he paid a brief visit to London, and attended a meeting of the German Workers' Education Society. He did not like what he saw. These men were mostly skilled workers, watchmakers, printers, shoemakers; their leader was a forester. They were self-educated, disciplined, solemn, well-mannered, very anti-bohemian, anxious to transform society but moderate about the practical steps to this end. They did not share Marx's apocalyptic visions and, above all, they did not talk his academic jargon. He

viewed them with contempt: revolutionary cannon-fodder, no more. Marx always preferred to associate with middle-class intellectuals like himself. When he and Engels created the Communist League, and again when they formed the International, Marx made sure that working-class socialists were eliminated from any positions of influence and sat on committees merely as statutory proles. His motive was partly intellectual snobbery, partly that men with actual experience of factory conditions tended to be anti-violence and in favour of modest, progressive improvements: they were knowledgeably sceptical about the apocalyptic revolution he claimed was not only necessary but inevitable. Some of Marx's most venomous assaults were directed against men of this type. Thus in March 1846 he subjected William Weitling to a kind of trial before a meeting of the Communist League in Brussels. Weitling was the poor, illegitimate son of a laundress who never knew his father's name, a tailor's apprentice who by sheer hard work and self-education had won himself a large following among German workers. The object of the trial was to insist on 'correctness' of doctrine and to put down any uppity working-class type who lacked the philosophical training Marx thought essential. Marx's attack on Weitling was extraordinarily aggressive. He was guilty, said Marx, of conducting an agitation without doctrine. This was all very well in barbarous Russia where 'you can build up successful unions with stupid young men and apostles. But in a civilized country like Germany you must realize that nothing can be achieved without our doctrine.' Again: 'If you attempt to influence the workers, especially the German workers, without a body of doctrine and clear scientific ideas, then you are merely playing an empty and unscrupulous game of propaganda, leading inevitably to the setting-up on the one hand of an inspired apostle and, on the other, of open-mouthed donkeys listening to him.' Weitling replied he had not become a socialist to learn about doctrines manufactured in a study; he spoke for actual working men and would not submit to the views of mere theoreticians who were remote from the suffering world of real labour. This, said an eyewitness, 'so enraged Marx that he struck his fist on the table so violently that the lamp shook. Jumping to his feet he shouted, "Ignorance has never helped anybody yet."' The meeting ended with Marx 'still striding up and down the room in violent rage'.¹³

This was the pattern for further assaults, both on socialists of working-class origin and on any leaders who had secured a large following of working men by preaching practical solutions to actual problems of work and wages, rather than doctrinaire revolution. Thus Marx went for the former compositor Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the agricultural reformer Hermann Kriege and the first really important German social democrat

and labour organizer, Ferdinand Lassalle. In his *Manifesto Against Kriege*, Marx, who knew nothing about agriculture, especially in the United States where Kriege had settled, denounced his proposal to give 160 acres of public land to each peasant; he said that peasants should be recruited by promises of land, but once a communist society was set up, land had to be collectively held. Proudhon was an anti-dogmatist: 'For Gods sake,' he wrote, 'after we have demolished all the [religious] dogmatism a priori, let us not of all things attempt to instil another kind of dogma into the people...let us not make ourselves the leaders of a new intolerance.' Marx hated this line. In his violent diatribe against Proudhon, the *Misère de la Philosophie*, written in June 1846, he accused him of 'infantilism', gross 'ignorance' of economics and philosophy and, above all, misuse of Hegel's ideas and techniques-'Monsieur Proudhon knows no more of the Hegelian dialectic than its idiom.' As for Lassalle, he became the victim of Marx's most brutal anti-Semitic and racial sneers: he was 'Baron Itzig', 'the Jewish Nigger', 'a greasy Jew disguised under brilliantine and cheap jewels'. 'It is now perfectly clear to me,' Marx wrote to Engels on 30 July 1862, 'that, as the shape of his head and the growth of his hair indicates, he is descended from the Negroes who joined in Moses' flight from Egypt (unless his mother or grandmother on the father's side was crossed with a nigger). This union of Jew and German on a Negro base was bound to produce an extraordinary hybrid.'¹⁴

Marx, then, was unwilling either to investigate working conditions in industry himself or to learn from intelligent working men who had experienced them. Why should he? In all essentials, using the Hegelian dialectic, he had reached his conclusions about the fate of humanity by the late 1840s. All that remained was to find the facts to substantiate them, and these could be garnered from newspaper reports, government blue books and evidence collected by earlier writers; and all this material could be found in libraries. Why look further? The problem, as it appeared to Marx, was to find the right kind of facts: the facts that fitted. His method has been well summarized by the philosopher Karl Jaspers:

The style of Marx's writings is not that of the investigator...he does not quote examples or adduce facts which run counter to his own theory but only those which clearly support or confirm that which he considers the ultimate truth. The whole approach is one of vindication, not investigation, but it is a vindication of something proclaimed as the perfect truth with the conviction not of the scientist but of the believer.¹⁵

In this sense, then, the 'facts' are not central to Marx's work; they are ancillary, buttressing conclusions already reached independently of them. *Capital*, the monument around which his life as a scholar revolved, should be seen, then, not as a scientific investigation of the nature of the economic process it purported to describe but as an exercise in moral philosophy, a tract comparable to those of Carlyle or Ruskin. It is a huge and often incoherent sermon, an attack on the industrial process and the principle of ownership by a man who had conceived a powerful but essential irrational hatred for them. Curiously enough, it does not have a central argument which acts as an organizing principle. Marx originally, in 1857, conceived the work as consisting of six volumes: capital, land, wages and labour, the state, trade and a final volume on the world market and crises.¹⁶ But the methodical self-discipline needed to carry through such a plan proved beyond his power. The only volume he actually produced (which, confusingly, is two volumes) really has no logical pattern; it is a series of individual expositions arranged in arbitrary order. The French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser found its structure so confusing that he thought it 'imperative' that readers ignore Part One and begin with Part Two, Chapter Four.¹⁷ But other Marxist exegetes have hotly repudiated this interpretation. In fact, Althusser's approach does not help much. Engels's own synopsis of *Capital* Volume One merely serves to underline the weakness or rather absence of structure.¹⁸ After Marx died, Engels produced Volume Two from 1500 folio pages of Marx's notes, a quarter of which he rewrote. The result is 600 dull, messy pages on the circulation of capital, chiefly on the economic theories of the 1860s. Volume Three, on which Engels worked from 1885-93, surveys all aspects of capital not already covered but is no more than a series of notes, including 1000 pages on usury, most of them Marx's memoranda. The material nearly all dates from the early 1860s, accumulated at the same time as Marx was working on the first volume. There was, in fact, nothing to have prevented Marx from completing the book himself, other than lack of energy and the knowledge that it simply did not cohere.

The second and third volumes are not our concern, as it is most unlikely that Marx would have produced them in this form, or indeed at all, since he had in effect stopped work on them for a decade and a half. Of Volume One, which was his work, only two chapters really matter, Chapter Eight, 'The Working Day', and Chapter Twenty-Four, towards the end of the second volume, 'Primary Accumulation', which includes the famous Section 7, 'Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation'. This is not a scientific analysis in any sense but a simple prophecy. There will be, Marx says, (1) 'a progressive diminution in the number

of the capitalist magnates'; (2) 'a corresponding increase in the mass of poverty, oppression, enslavement, degeneration and exploitation'; (3) 'a steady intensification of the wrath of the working class'. These three forces, working together, produce the Hegelian crisis, or the politico-economic version of the poetic catastrophe he had imagined as a teenager: 'The centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labour reach a point where they prove incompatible with their capitalist husk. This bursts asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated.'¹⁹ This is very exciting and has delighted generations of socialist zealots. But it has no more claim to be a scientific projection than an astrologer's almanac.

Chapter Eight, 'The Working Day', does, by contrast, present itself as a factual analysis of the impact of capitalism on the lives of the British proletariat; indeed, it is the only part of Marx's work which actually deals with the workers, the ostensible subjects of his entire philosophy. It is therefore worth examining for its 'scientific' value.²⁰ Since, as we have already noted, Marx only really looked for facts which fitted his preconceptions, and since this militates against all the principles of scientific method, the chapter has a radical weakness from the start. But did Marx, in addition to a tendentious selection of facts, also misrepresent or falsify them? That we must now consider.

What the chapter seeks to argue, and it is the core of Marx's moral case, is that capitalism, by its very nature, involves the progressive and increasing exploitation of the workers; thus the more capital employed, the more the workers will be exploited, and it is this great moral evil which produces the final crisis. In order to justify his thesis scientifically, he has to prove that, (1) bad as conditions in pre-capitalist workshops were, they have become far worse under industrial capitalism; (2) granted the impersonal, implacable nature of capital, exploitation of workers rises to a crescendo in the most highly capitalized industries. Marx does not even attempt to do (1). He writes: 'As far as concerns the period from the beginning of large-scale industry in England down to the year 1845, I shall only touch on this here and there, referring the reader for fuller details to Friedrich Engels's *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England* (Leipzig, 1845).' Marx adds that subsequent government publications, especially factory inspectors' reports, have confirmed 'Engels's insight into the nature of the capitalist method' and showed 'with what an admirable fidelity to detail he depicted the circumstances'.²¹

In short, all the first part of Marx's scientific examination of working conditions under capitalism in the mid-1860s is based upon a single work, Engels's *Condition of the Working Class in England*, published twenty years before. And what scientific value, in turn, can be attached to this

single source? Engels was born in 1820, the son of a prosperous cotton manufacturer at Barmen in the Rhineland, and entered the family business in 1837. In 1842 he was sent to the Manchester office of the firm, spending twenty months in England. During that time he visited London, Oldham, Rochdale, Ashton, Leeds, Bradford and Huddersfield as well as Manchester. He thus had direct experience of the textile trades but otherwise knew nothing first-hand about English conditions. For instance, he knew nothing about mining and never went down a mine; he knew nothing of the country districts or rural labour. Yet he devotes two entire chapters to 'The Miners' and 'The Proletariat on the Land'. In 1958 two exact scholars, W.O. Henderson and W.H. Challoner, retranslated and edited Engels's book and examined his sources and the original text of all his quotations.²² The effect of their analysis was to destroy the objective historical value of the book almost entirely, and reduce it to what it undoubtedly was: a work of political polemic, a tract, a tirade. Engels wrote to Marx, as he was working on the book: 'At the bar of world opinion, I charge the English middle classes with mass murder, wholesale robbery and all the other crimes in the calendar.'²³

That just about sums up the book: it was the case for the prosecution. A great deal of the book, including all the examination of the pre-capitalist era and the early stages of industrialization, was based not on primary sources but on a few secondary sources of dubious value, especially Peter Gaskell's *The Manufacturing Population of England* (1833), a work of Romantic mythology which attempted to show that the eighteenth century had been a golden age for English yeomen and craftsmen. In fact, as the Royal Commission on Children's Employment of 1842 conclusively demonstrated, working conditions in the small, pre-capitalist workshops and cottages were far worse than in the big new Lancashire cotton mills. Printed primary sources used by Engels were five, ten, twenty, twenty-five or even forty years out of date, though he usually presents them as contemporary. Giving figures for the births of illegitimate babies attributed to night-shifts, he omitted to state that these dated from 1801. He quoted a paper on sanitation in Edinburgh without letting his readers know it was written in 1818. On various occasions he omitted facts and events which invalidated his out-of-date evidence completely.

It is not always clear whether Engels's misrepresentations are deliberate deception of the reader or self-deception. But sometimes the deceit is clearly intentional. He used evidence of bad conditions unearthed by the Factories Enquiry Commission of 1833 without telling readers that Lord Althorp's Factory Act of 1833 had been passed, and had long been in operation, precisely to eliminate the conditions the report

described. He used the same deception in handling one of his main sources, Dr J.P. Kay's *Physical and Moral Conditions of the Working Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester* (1832), which had helped to produce fundamental reforms in local government sanitation; Engels does not mention them. He misinterpreted the criminal statistics, or ignored them when they did not support his thesis. Indeed he constantly and knowingly suppresses facts that contradict his argument or explain away a particular 'iniquity' he is seeking to expose. Careful checking of Engels's extracts from his secondary sources show these are often truncated, condensed, garbled or twisted, but invariably put in quotation marks as though given verbatim. Throughout the Henderson and Challoner edition of the book, footnotes catalogue Engels's distortions and dishonesties. In one section alone, Chapter Seven, 'The Proletariat', falsehoods, including errors of fact and transcription.²⁴

Marx cannot have been unaware of the weaknesses, indeed dishonesties, of Engels's book since many of them were exposed in detail as early as 1848 by the German economist Bruno Hildebrand, in a publication with which Marx was familiar.²⁵ Moreover Marx himself compounds Engels's misrepresentations knowingly by omitting to tell the reader of the enormous improvements brought about by enforcement of the Factory Acts and other remedial legislation since the book was published and which affected precisely the type of conditions he had highlighted. In any case, Marx brought to the use of primary and secondary written sources the same spirit of gross carelessness, tendentious distortion and downright dishonesty which marked Engels's work.²⁶ Indeed they were often collaborators in deception, though Marx was the more audacious forger. In one particularly flagrant case he outreached himself. This was the so-called 'Inaugural Address' to the International Working Men's Association, founded in September 1864. With the object of stirring the English working class from its apathy, and anxious therefore to prove that living standards were falling, he deliberately falsified a sentence from W. E. Gladstone's Budget speech of 1863. What Gladstone said, commenting on the increase in national wealth, was: 'I should look almost with apprehension and with pain upon this intoxicating augmentation of wealth and power if it were my belief that it was confined to the class who are in easy circumstances.' But, he added, 'the average condition of the British labourer, we have the happiness to know, has improved during the last twenty years in a degree which we know to be extraordinary, and which we may almost pronounce to be unexampled in the history of any country and of any age.'²⁷ Marx, in his address,

has Gladstone say: 'This intoxicating augmentation of wealth and power is entirely confined to classes of property.' Since what Gladstone actually said was true, and confirmed by a mass of statistical evidence, and since in any case he was known to be obsessed with the need to ensure that wealth was distributed as widely as possible, it would be hard to conceive of a more outrageous reversal of his meaning. Marx gave as his sources the *Morning Star* newspaper; but the *Star*, along with the other newspapers and *Hansard*, gives Gladstone's words correctly. Marx's misquotation was pointed out. Nonetheless, he reproduced it in *Capital*, along with other discrepancies, and when the falsification was again noticed and denounced, he let out a huge discharge of obfuscating ink; he, Engels and later his daughter Eleanor were involved in the row, attempting to defend the indefensible, for twenty years. None of them would ever admit the original, clear falsification and the result of the debate is that some readers are left with the impression, as Marx intended, that there are two sides to the controversy. There are not. Marx knew Gladstone never said any such thing and the cheat was deliberate.²⁸ It was not unique. Marx similarly falsified quotations from Adam Smith.²⁹

Marx's systematic misuse of sources attracted the attention of two Cambridge scholars in the 1880s. Using the revised French edition of *Capital* (1872-75), they produced a paper for the Cambridge Economic Club, 'Comments on the use of the Blue Books by Karl Marx in Chapter XV of *Le Capital*' (1885).³⁰ They say they first checked Marx's references 'to derive fuller information on some points', but being struck by the 'accumulating discrepancies' they decided to examine 'the scope and importance of the errors so plainly existing'. They discovered that the differences between the Blue Book texts and Marx's quotations from them were not the result solely of inaccuracy but 'showed signs of a distorting influence'. In one class of cases they found that quotations had often been 'conveniently shortened by the omission of passages which would be likely to weigh against the conclusions which Marx was trying to establish'. Another category 'consists in piecing together fictitious quotations out of isolated statements contained in different parts of a Report. These are then foisted upon the reader in inverted commas with all the authority of direct quotations from the Blue Books themselves.' On one topic, the sewing machine, 'he uses the Blue Books with a recklessness which is appalling...to prove just the contrary of what they really establish.' They concluded that their evidence might not be 'sufficient to sustain a charge of deliberate falsification' but certainly showed 'an almost criminal recklessness in the use of authorities' and warranted treating any 'other parts of Marx's work with suspicion'.³¹

The truth is, even the most superficial inquiry into Marx's use of

evidence forces one to treat with scepticism everything he wrote which relies on factual data. He can never be trusted. The whole of the key Chapter Eight of *Capital* is a deliberate and systematic falsification to prove a thesis which an objective examination of the facts showed was untenable. His crimes against the truth fall under four heads. First, he uses out-of-date material because up-to-date material does not support his case. Second he selects certain industries, where conditions were particularly bad, as typical of capitalism. This cheat was particularly important to Marx because without it he would not really have had Chapter Eight at all. His thesis was that capitalism produces ever-worsening conditions; the more capital employed, the more badly the workers had to be treated to secure adequate returns. The evidence he quotes at length to justify it comes almost entirely from small, inefficient, undercapitalized firms in archaic industries which in most cases were pre-capitalist-pottery, dressmaking, blacksmiths, baking, matches, wallpaper, lace, for instance. In many of the specific cases he cites (e.g., baking) conditions were bad precisely because the firm had not been able to afford to introduce machinery, since it lacked capital. In effect, Marx is dealing with pre-capitalist conditions, and ignoring the truth which stared him in the face: the more capital, the less suffering. Where he does treat a modern, highly-capitalized industry, he finds a dearth of evidence; thus, dealing with steel, he has to fall back on interpolated comments ('What cynical frankness!' 'What mealy-mouthed phraseology!'), and with railways he is driven to use yellowing clippings of old accidents ('fresh railway catastrophes'): it was necessary to his thesis that the accident rate per passenger mile travelled should be rising, whereas it was falling dramatically and by the time *Capital* was published railways were already becoming the safest mode of mass travel in world history.

Thirdly, using reports of the factory inspectorate, Marx quotes examples of bad conditions and ill-treatment of workers as though they were the inevitable norm of the system; in fact these were the responsibility of what the inspectors themselves call 'the fraudulent mill-owner', whom they were appointed to detect and prosecute and who was thus in the process of being eliminated. Fourthly the fact that Marx's main evidence came from this source, the inspectorate, betrays his biggest cheat of all. It was his thesis that capitalism was, by its nature, incorrigible and, further, that in the miseries it inflicted on the workers, the bourgeois State was its associate since the State, he wrote, 'is an executive committee for managing the affairs of the governing class a whole'. But if that were true Parliament would never have passed the Factory Acts, nor the State enforced them. Virtually all Marx's facts, selectively

deployed (and sometimes falsified) as they were, came from the efforts of the State (inspectors, courts, Justices of the Peace) to improve conditions, which necessarily involved exposing and punishing those responsible for bad ones. If the system had not been in the process of reforming itself, which by Marx's reasoning was impossible, *Capital* could not have been written. As he was unwilling to do any on-the-spot investigating himself, he was forced to rely precisely on the evidence of those, whom he designated 'the governing class', who were trying to put things right and to an increasing extent succeeding. Thus Marx had to distort his main source of evidence, or abandon his thesis. The book was, and is, structurally dishonest.

What Marx could not or would not grasp, because he made no effort to understand how industry worked, was that from the very dawn of the Industrial Revolution, 1760-90, the most efficient manufacturers, who had ample access to capital, habitually favoured better conditions for their workforce; they therefore tended to support factory legislation and, what was equally important, its effective enforcement, because it eliminated what they regarded as unfair competition. So conditions improved, and because conditions improved, the workers failed to rise, as Marx predicted they would. The prophet was thus confounded. What emerges from a reading of *Capital* is Marx's fundamental failure to understand capitalism. He failed precisely because he was unscientific: he would not investigate the facts himself, or use objectively the facts investigated by others. From start to finish, not just *Capital* but all his work reflects a disregard for truth which at times amounts to contempt. That is the primary reason why Marxism, as a system, cannot produce the results claimed for it; and to call it 'scientific' is preposterous.

If Marx, then, though in appearance a scholar, was not motivated by a love of truth, what was the energizing force in his life? To discover this we have to look much more closely at his personal character. It is a fact, and in some ways a melancholy fact, that massive works of the intellect do not spring from the abstract workings of the brain and the imagination; they are deeply rooted in the personality. Marx is an outstanding example of this principle. We have already considered the presentation of his philosophy as the amalgam of his poetic vision, his journalistic skill and his academicism. But it can also be shown that its actual content can be related to four aspects of his character: his taste for violence, his appetite for power, his inability to handle money and, above all, his tendency to exploit those around him.

The undertone of violence always present in Marxism and constantly exhibited by the actual behaviour of Marxist regimes was a projection of the man himself. Marx lived his life in an atmosphere of extreme

verbal violence, periodically exploding into violent rows and sometimes physical assault. Marx's family quarrels were almost the first thing his future wife, Jenny von Westphalen, noticed about him. At Bonn University the police arrested him for possessing a pistol and he was very nearly sent down; the university archives show he engaged in student warfare, fought a duel and got a gash on his left eye. His rows within the family darkened his father's last years and led eventually to a total breach with his mother. One of Jenny's earliest surviving letters reads: 'Please do not write with so much rancour and irritation,' and it is clear that many of his incessant rows arose from the violent expressions he was prone to use in writing and still more in speech, the latter often aggravated by alcohol. Marx was not an alcoholic but he drank regularly, often heavily and sometimes engaged in serious drinking bouts. Part of his trouble was that, from his mid-twenties, Marx was always an exile living almost exclusively in expatriate, mainly German, communities in foreign cities. He rarely sought acquaintances outside them and never tried to integrate himself. Moreover, the expatriates with whom he always associated were themselves a very narrow group interested wholly in revolutionary politics. This in itself helps to explain Marx's tunnel-vision of life, and it would be difficult to imagine a social background more likely to encourage his quarrelsome nature, for such circles are notorious for their ferocious disputes. According to Jenny, the rows were perpetual except in Brussels. In Paris his editorial meetings in the Rue des Moulins had to be held behind closed windows so that people outside could not hear the endless shouting.

These rows were not aimless, however. Marx quarrelled with everyone with whom he associated, from Bruno Bauer onwards, unless he succeeded in dominating them completely. As a result there are many descriptions, mainly hostile, of the furious Marx in action. Bauer's brother even wrote a poem about him: 'Dark fellow from Trier in fury raging, / His evil fist is clenched, he roars interminably, / As though ten thousand devils had him by the hair.'³² Marx was short, broad, black-haired and bearded, with a sallow skin (his children called him 'Moor') and Prussian-style monocle. Pavel Annenkov, who saw him at the 'trial' of Weitling, described his 'thick black mane of hair, his hairy hands and crookedly buttoned frock coat'; he had no manners, was 'proud and faintly contemptuous'; his 'sharp, metallic voice was well suited to the radical judgments he was continually delivering on men and things'; everything he said had a 'jarring tone'.³³ His favourite Shakespeare was *Troilus and Cressida*, which he relished for the violent abuse of Ajax and Thersites. He enjoyed quoting it, and the victim of one passage ('Thou sodden-witted lord: thou hast no more brain than I have

in mine elbow') was his fellow revolutionary Karl Heinzen, who retaliated with a memorable portrait of the angry little man. He found Marx 'intolerably dirty', a 'cross between a cat and an ape'; with 'dishevelled coal-black hair and dirty yellow complexion'. It was, he said, impossible to say whether his clothes and skin were naturally mud-coloured or just filthy. He had small, fierce, malicious eyes, 'spitting out spurts of wicked fire'; he had a habit of saying: 'I will annihilate you.'³⁴

Much of Marx's time, in fact, was spent in collecting elaborate dossiers about his political rivals and enemies, which he did not scruple to feed to the police if he thought it would serve his turn. The big public rows, as for instance at the meeting of the International at the Hague in 1872, adumbrated the *réglements des comptes* of Soviet Russia: there is nothing in the Stalinist epoch which is not distantly prefigured in Marx's behaviour. Occasionally blood was indeed spilt. Marx was so abusive during his row with August von Willich in 1850 that the latter challenged him to a duel. Marx, though a former duellist, said he 'would not engage in the frolics of Prussian officers' but he made no attempt to stop his young assistant, Konrad Schramm, from taking his place, though Schramm had never used a pistol in his life and Willich was an excellent shot. Schramm was wounded. Willich's second on this occasion was a particularly sinister associate of Marx, Gustav Techow, rightly detested by Jenny, who killed at least one fellow revolutionary and was eventually hanged for murdering a police officer. Marx himself did not reject violence or even terrorism when it suited his tactics. Addressing the Prussian government in 1849, he threatened: 'We are ruthless and ask no quarter from you. When our turn comes we shall not disguise our terrorism.'³⁵ The following year, the 'Plan of Action' he had distributed in Germany specifically encouraged mob violence: 'Far from opposing the so-called excesses, those examples of popular vengeance against hated individuals or public buildings which have acquired hateful memories, we must not only condone these examples but lend them a helping hand.'³⁶ On occasions he was willing to support assassination, provided it was effective. A fellow revolutionary, Maxim Kovalevsky, who was present when Marx got the news of a failed attempt to murder the Emperor Wilhelm I in the Unter den Linden in 1878, records his fury, 'heaping curses on this terrorist who had failed to carry out his act of terror'.³⁷ That Marx, once established in power, would have been capable of great violence and cruelty seems certain. But of course he was never in a position to carry out large-scale revolution, violent or otherwise, and his pent-up rage therefore passed into his books, which always have a tone of intransigence and extremism. Many passages give the impression that they have actually been written in a state of fury. In due course Lenin, Stalin

and Mao Tse-tung practiced, on an enormous scale, the violence which Marx felt in his heart and which his works exude.

How Marx actually saw the morality of his actions, whether distorting truth or encouraging violence, it is impossible to say. In one sense he was a strongly moral being. He was filled with a burning desire to create a better world. Yet he ridiculed morality in *The German Ideology*; he argued it was 'unscientific' and could be an obstacle to the revolution. He seems to have thought that it would be dispensed with as a result of the quasi-metaphysical change in human behaviour that the advent of communism would bring about.³⁸ Like many self-centred individuals, he tended to think that moral laws did not apply to himself, or rather to identify his interests with morality as such. Certainly he came to see the interests of the proletariat and the fulfilment of his own views as co-extensive. The anarchist Michael Bakunin noted that he had 'an earnest devotion to the cause of the proletariat though it always had in it an admixture of personal vanity'.³⁹ He was always self-obsessed; a huge, youthful letter survives, ostensibly written to his father, in reality written to, as well as about, himself.⁴⁰ The feelings and views of others were never of much interest or concern to him. He had to run, single-handed, any enterprise in which he was engaged. Of his editorship of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, Engels observed: 'The organization of the editorial staff was a simple dictatorship by Marx.'⁴¹ He had no time or interest in democracy, except in the special and perverse sense he attached to the word; elections of any kind were abhorrent to him-in his journalism he dismissed British general elections as mere drunken orgies.⁴²

In the testimony about Marx's political aims and behaviour, from a variety of sources, it is notable how often the word 'dictator' crops up. Annenkov called him 'the personification of a democratic dictator' (1846). An unusually intelligent Prussian police agent who reported on him in London noted: 'The dominating trait of his character is an unlimited ambition and love of power...he is the absolute ruler of his party...he does everything on his own and he gives orders on his own responsibility and will endure no contradiction.' Techow (Willich's sinister second), who once managed to get Marx drunk and to pour forth his soul, gives a brilliant pen-portrait of him. He was 'a man of outstanding personality' with 'a rare intellectual superiority' and 'if his heart had matched his intellect and he had possessed as much love as hate, I would have gone through fire for him.' But 'he is lacking in nobility of soul. I am convinced that a most dangerous personal ambition has eaten away all the good in him...the acquisition of personal power [is] the aim of all his endeavours.' Bakunin's final judgment on Marx struck the same note: 'Marx does not believe in God but he believes

much in himself and makes everyone serve himself. His heart is not full of love but of bitterness and he has very little sympathy for the human race.⁴³

Marx's habitual anger, his dictatorial habits and his bitterness reflected no doubt his justified consciousness of great powers and his intense frustration at his inability to exercise them more effectively. As a young man he led a bohemian, often idle and dissolute life; in early middle age he still found it difficult to work sensibly and systematically, often sitting up all night talking, then lying half-asleep on the sofa for most of the day. In late middle age he kept more regular hours but he never became self-disciplined about work. Yet he resented the smallest criticism. It was one of the characteristics he shared with Rousseau that he tended to quarrel with friends and benefactors, especially if they gave him good advice. When his devoted colleague Dr Ludwig Kugelmann suggested in 1874 that he would find no difficulty in finishing *Capital* if only he would organize his life a little better, Marx broke with him for good and subjected him to relentless abuse.⁴⁴

His angry egoism had physical as well as psychological roots. He led a peculiarly unhealthy life, took very little exercise, ate highly spiced food, often in large quantities, smoked heavily, drank a lot, especially strong ale, and as a result had constant trouble with his liver. He rarely took baths or washed much at all. This, plus his unsuitable diet, may explain the veritable plague of boils from which he suffered for a quarter of a century. They increased his natural irritability and seem to have been at their worst while he was writing *Capital*. 'Whatever happens,' he wrote grimly to Engels, 'I hope the bourgeoisie as long as they exist will have cause to remember my carbuncles.'⁴⁵ The boils varied in numbers, size and intensity but at one time or another they appeared on all parts of his body, including his cheeks, the bridge of his nose, his bottom, which meant he could not write, and his penis. In 1873 they brought on a nervous collapse marked by trembling and huge bursts of rage.

Still more central to his anger and frustration, and lying perhaps at the very roots of his hatred for the capitalist system, was his grotesque incompetence in handling money. As a young man it drove him into the hands of moneylenders at high rates of interest, and a passionate hatred of usury was the real emotional dynamic of his whole moral philosophy. It explains why he devoted so much time and space to the subject, why his entire theory of class is rooted in anti-Semitism, and why he included in *Capital* a long and violent passage denouncing usury which he culled from one of Luther's anti-Semitic diatribes.⁴⁶

Marx's money troubles began at university and lasted his entire life.

They arose from an essentially childish attitude. Marx borrowed money heedlessly, spent it, then was invariably astounded and angry when the heavily discounted bills, plus interest, became due. He saw the charging of interest, essential as it is to any system based on capital, as a crime against humanity, and at the root of the exploitation of man by man which his entire system was designed to eliminate. That was in general terms. But in the particular context of his own case he responded to his difficulties by himself exploiting anyone within reach, and in the first place his own family. Money dominates his family correspondence. The last letter from his father, written in February 1838 when he was already dying, reiterates his complaint that Marx was indifferent to his family except for the purpose of getting their help and complains: 'You are now in the fourth month of your law course and you have already spent 280 thalers. I have not earned so much throughout the entire winter.'⁴⁷ Three months later he was dead. Marx did not trouble to attend his funeral. Instead he started putting pressure on his mother. He had already adopted a pattern of living off loans from friends and gouging periodic sums from the family. He argued that the family was 'quite rich' and had a duty to support him in his important work. Apart from his intermittent journalism, the purpose of which was political rather than to earn money, Marx never seriously attempted to get a job, though he once in London (September 1862) applied for a post as a railway clerk, being turned down on the grounds that his handwriting was too poor. Marx's unwillingness to pursue a career seems to have been the main reason why his family was unsympathetic to his pleas for handouts. His mother not only refused to pay his debts, believing he would then simply contract more, but eventually cut him off completely. Thereafter their relations were minimal. She is credited with the bitter wish that 'Karl would accumulate capital instead of just writing about it'.

All the same, one way or another Marx got considerable sums of money by inheritance. His father's death brought him 6000 gold francs, some of which he spent on arming Belgian workmen. His mother's death in 1856 brought him less than he expected, but this was because he had anticipated the legacy by borrowing from his Uncle Philips. He also received a substantial sum from the estate of Wilhelm Wolf in 1864. Other sums came in through his wife and her family (she also brought with her as part of her wedding portion a silver dinner service with the coat of arms of her Argyll ancestors, crested cutlery and bedlinen). Between them they received enough money, sensibly invested, to provide a competence, and at no point did their actual income fall below £200 a year, three times the average wage of a skilled workman. But neither Marx himself nor Jenny had any interest in money except to

spend it. Legacies and loans alike went in dribs and drabs and they were never a penny better off permanently. Indeed they were always in debt, often seriously, and the silver dinner service regularly went to the pawn-brokers along with much else, including the family's clothing. At one point Marx alone was in a position to leave the house, retaining one pair of trousers. Jenny's family, like Marx's own, refused further help to a son-in-law they regarded as incorrigibly idle and improvident. In March 1851, writing to Engels to announce the birth of a daughter, Marx complained: 'I have literally not a farthing in the house.'⁴⁸

By this time, of course, Engels was the new subject of exploitation. From the mid-1840s, when they first came together, until Marx's death, Engels was the main source of income for the Marx family. He probably handed over more than half of what he received himself. But the total is impossible to compute because for a quarter of a century he provided it in irregular sums, believing Marx's repeated assurances that, provided the next donation was forthcoming, he would soon put himself to rights. The relationship was exploitative on Marx's side and unequal altogether since he was always the dominant and sometimes the domineering partner. Yet in a curious way each needed the other, like a pair of stage-comedians in a double act, unable to perform separately, frequently grumbling but always in the end sticking together. The partnership almost broke down in 1863 when Engels felt Marx's insensitive cadging had gone too far, Engels kept two houses in Manchester, one for business entertaining, one for his mistress, Mary Burns. When she died Engels was deeply distressed. He was furious to receive from Marx an unfeeling letter (dated 6 January 1863), which briefly acknowledged his loss and then instantly got down to the more important business of asking for money.⁴⁹ Nothing illustrates better Marx's adamant egocentricity. Engels replied coldly, and the incident almost ended their relationship. In some ways it was never the same again, for it brought home to Engels the limitations of Marx's character. He seems to have decided, about this time, that Marx would never be able to get a job or support his family or indeed get his affairs into any kind of order. The only thing to do was to pay him a regular dole. So in 1869 Engels sold out of the business, securing for himself an income of rather more than £800 a year. Of this £350 went to Marx. For the last fifteen years of his life, therefore, Marx was the pensioner of a *rentier*, and enjoyed a certain security. Nevertheless, he seems to have lived at the rate of about £500 a year, or even more, justifying himself to Engels: 'even looked at commercially, a purely proletarian set-up would be unsuitable here.'⁵⁰ Hence the letters requesting additional handouts from Engels continued.⁵¹

But of course the principal victims of Marx's improvidence and unwill-

ingness to work were his own household, his wife above all. Jenny Marx is one of the tragic, pitiful figures of socialist history. She had the clear Scottish colouring, pale skin, green eyes and auburn hair of her paternal grandmother, descended from the second Earl of Argyll, killed at Flodden. She was a beauty and Marx loved her—his poems prove it—and she loved him passionately, fighting his battles both with her family and his own; it took many years of bitterness for her love to die. How could an egoist like Marx inspire such affection? The answer, I think, is that he was strong, masterful, in youth and early manhood handsome, though always dirty; not least, he was funny. Historians pay too little attention to this quality; it often helps to explain an appeal otherwise mysterious (it was one of Hitler's assets, both in private and as a public speaker). Marx's humour was often biting and savage. Nonetheless his excellent jokes made people laugh. Had he been humourless, his many unpleasant characteristics would have denied him a following at all, and his womenfolk would have turned their backs on him. But jokes are the surest way to the hearts of much-tried women, whose lives are even harder than men's. Marx and Jenny were often heard laughing together, and later it was Marx's jokes, more than anything else, which bound his daughters to him.

Marx was proud of his wife's noble Scottish descent (he exaggerated it) and her position as the daughter of a baron and senior official in the Prussian government. Printed invitations to a ball which he issued in London in the 1860s refer to her as '*née* von Westphalen'. He often asserted that he got on better with genuine aristocrats than with the grasping bourgeoisie (a word, say witnesses, he pronounced with a peculiar rasping contempt). But Jenny, once the horrific reality of marriage to a stateless, workless revolutionary had dawned on her, would willingly have settled for a bourgeois existence, however petty. From the beginning of 1848 and for at least the next ten years, her life was a nightmare. On 3 March 1848 a Belgian expulsion order was issued against Marx and he was taken to prison; Jenny spent the night in a cell too, with a crowd of prostitutes; the next day the family was taken under police escort to the frontier. Much of the next year Marx was on the run or on trial. By June 1849 he was destitute. Next month he confessed to a friend: 'already the last piece of jewellery belonging to my wife has found its way to the pawnshop.'⁵² He kept up his own spirits by an absurd, perennial revolutionary optimism, writing to Engels: 'In spite of everything a colossal outbreak of the revolutionary volcano was never more imminent. Details later.' But for her there was no such consolation, and she was pregnant. They found safety in England, but degradation too. She now had three children, Jenny, Laura and Edgar, and gave

birth to a fourth, Guy or Guido, in November 1849. Five months later they were evicted from their rooms in Chelsea for nonpayment of rent, being turned out onto the pavement before (wrote Jenny) 'the entire mob of Chelsea'. Their beds were sold to pay the butcher, milkman, chemist and baker. They found refuge in a squalid German boardinghouse in Leicester Square and there, that winter, the baby Guido died. Jenny left a despairing account of these days, from which her spirits, and her affection for Marx, never really recovered.⁵³

On 24 May 1850 the British Ambassador in Berlin, the Earl of Westmoreland, was given a copy of a report by a clever Prussian police spy describing in great detail the activities of the German revolutionaries centred around Marx. Nothing more clearly conveys what Jenny had to put up with:

[Marx] leads the existence of a Bohemian intellectual. Washing, grooming and changing his linen are things he does rarely, and he is often drunk. Though he is frequently idle for days on end, he will work day and night with tireless endurance when he has much work to do. He has no fixed time for going to sleep or waking up. He often stays up all night and then lies down fully clothed on the sofa at midday, and sleeps till evening, untroubled by the whole world coming and going through their room [there were only two altogether].... There is not one clean and solid piece of furniture. Everything is broken, tattered and torn, with half an inch of dust over everything and the greatest disorder everywhere. In the middle of the [living room] there is a large, old-fashioned table covered with oilcloth and on it lie manuscripts, books and newspapers, as well as the children's toys, rags and tatters of his wife's sewing basket, several cups with chipped rims, knives, forks, lamps, an inkpot, tumblers, Dutch clay pipes, tobacco, ash...a junk-shop owner would be ashamed to give away such a remarkable collection of odds and ends. When you enter Marx's room smoke and tobacco fumes make your eyes water...Everything is dirty and covered with dust, so that to sit down becomes a hazardous business. Here is a chair with three legs. On another chair the children are playing at cooking. This chair happens to have four legs. This is the one that is offered to the visitor, but the children's cooking has not been wiped away and if you sit down you risk a pair of trousers.⁵⁴

This report, dating from 1850, probably described the lowest point of the family fortunes. But other blows fell in the next few years. A daughter Franziska, born in 1851, died the following year. Edgar, the much-loved son, Marx's favourite whom he called *Musch* (Little Fly),

Edward Aveling, writer and would-be left-wing politician, was a philanderer and sponger who specialized in seducing actresses. Eleanor wanted to be an actress, and was a natural victim. By one of history's sharp little ironies, he, Eleanor and George Bernard Shaw took part in the first private reading, in London, of Ibsen's brilliant plea for women's freedom, *A Doll's House*, Eleanor playing Nora. Shortly before Marx died, she became Aveling's mistress, and from then on his suffering slave, as her mother Jenny had once been her father's.⁵⁷

Marx, however, may have needed his wife more than he cared to admit. After her death in 1881 he faded rapidly himself, doing no work, taking the cure at various European spas or travelling to Algiers, Monte Carlo and Switzerland in search of sun or pure air. In December 1882 he exulted at his growing influence in Russia: 'Nowhere is my success more delightful.' Destructive to the end, he boasted that 'it gives me the satisfaction that I damage a power which, next to England, is the true bulwark of the old society.' Three months later he died in his dressing-gown, sitting near the fire. One of his daughters, Jenny, had died a few weeks before. The ends of the other two were also tragic. Eleanor, heartbroken by her husband's conduct, took an overdose of opium in 1898, possibly in a suicide pact from which he wriggled out. Thirteen years later Laura and Lafargue also agreed a suicide pact, and both carried it through.

There was, however, one curious, obscure survivor of this tragic family, the product of Marx's most bizarre act of personal exploitation. In all his researches into the iniquities of British capitalists, he came across many instances of low-paid workers but he never succeeded in unearthing one who was paid literally no wages at all. Yet such a worker did exist, in his own household. When Marx took his family on their formal Sunday walks, bringing up the rear, carrying the picnic basket and other impedimenta, was a stumpy female figure. This was Helen Demuth, known in the family as 'Lenchen'. Born in 1823, of peasant stock, she had joined the von Westphalen family at the age of eight as a nursery-maid. She got her keep but was paid nothing. In 1845 the Baroness, who felt sorrow and anxiety for her married daughter, gave Lenchen, then twenty-two, to Jenny Marx to ease her lot. She remained in the Marx family until her death in 1890. Eleanor called her 'the most tender of beings to others, while throughout her life a stoic to herself'.⁵⁸ She was a ferociously hard worker, not only cooking and scrubbing but managing the family budget, which Jenny was incapable of handling, Marx never paid her a penny. In 1849-50, during the darkest period of the family's existence, Lenchen became Marx's mistress and conceived a child. The little boy Guido had recently died, but Jenny, too, was

pregnant again. The entire household was living in two rooms, and Marx had to conceal Lenchen's state not only from his wife but from his endless revolutionary visitors. Eventually Jenny found out or had to be told and, on top of her other miseries at this time, it probably marked the end of her love for Marx. She called it 'an event which I shall not dwell upon further, though it brought about a great increase in our private and public sorrows'. This occurs in an autobiographical sketch she wrote in 1865, of which twenty-nine out of thirty-seven pages survive: the remainder, describing her quarrels with Marx, were destroyed, probably by Eleanor.⁵⁹

Lenchen's child was born at the Soho address, 28 Dean Street, on 23 June 1851.⁶⁰ It was a son, registered as Henry Frederick Demuth. Marx refused to acknowledge his responsibility, then or ever, and flatly denied the rumours that he was the father. He may well have wished to do a Rousseau and put the child in an orphanage, or have him permanently adopted. But Lenchen was a stronger character than Rousseau's mistress. She insisted on acknowledging the boy herself. He was put out to be fostered by a working-class family called Lewis but allowed to visit the Marx household. He was, however, forbidden to use the front door and obliged to see his mother only in the kitchen. Marx was terrified that Freddy's paternity would be discovered and that this would do him fatal damage as a revolutionary leader and seer. One obscure reference to the event survives in his letters; others have been suppressed by various hands. He eventually persuaded Engels to acknowledge Freddy privately, as a cover-story for family consumption. That, for instance, was what Eleanor believed. But Engels, though prepared as usual to submit himself to Marx's demands for the sake of their joint work, was not willing to take the secret to the grave. Engels died, of cancer of the throat, on 5 August 1895; unable to speak but unwilling that Eleanor (Tussy as she was called) should continue to think her father unsullied, he wrote on a slate: 'Freddy is Marx's son. Tussy wants to make an idol of her father.' Engels's secretary-housekeeper, Louise Freyberger, in a letter to August Bebel, of 2 September 1898, said Engels himself told her the truth, adding: 'Freddy looks ridiculously like Marx and, with that typically Jewish face and blue-black hair, it was really only blind prejudice that could see in him any resemblance to General' (her name for Engels). Eleanor herself accepted that Freddy was her half-brother, and became attached to him; nine of her letters to him have survived.⁶¹ She did not bring him any luck, since her lover Aveling succeeded in borrowing Freddy's life savings, which were never repaid.

Lenchen was the only member of the working class that Marx ever knew at all well, his one real contact with the proletariat. Freddy might

have been another, since he was brought up as a working-class lad and in 1888, when he was thirty-six, he got his coveted certificate as a qualified engineer-fitter. He spent virtually all his life in King's Cross and Hackney and was a regular member of the engineers' union. But Marx never knew him. They met only once, presumably when Freddy was coming up the outside steps from the kitchen, and he had no idea then that the revolutionary philosopher was his father. He died in January 1929, by which time Marx's vision of the dictatorship of the proletariat had taken concrete and terrifying shape, and Stalin-the ruler who achieved the absolute power for which Marx had yearned-was just beginning his catastrophic assault on the Russian peasantry.