How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?

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The Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize Lecture[1]

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I owe at least two debts to Isaac Deutscher. The first is general: his personal example as a historian. Deutscher was not employed as an academic and for at least part of his exile in Britain had to earn his living providing instant Kremlinology for, among other publications, *The Observer* and *The Economist*. It is unlikely that the Memorial Prize would be the honour it is, or that it would even exist, if these were his only writings. Nevertheless, his journalism enabled him to produce the great biographies of Stalin and Trotsky, and the several substantial essays which are his real legacy. For someone like me, working outside of the university system, Deutscher has been a model of how to write history which combines respect for scholarly standards with political engagement. I did not always agree with the political conclusions which Deutscher reached, but the clarity of his style meant that, at the very least, it was always possible to say what these conclusions were – something that is not always true of the theoretical idols of the Left.[2]

My second debt to Deutscher is more specific and directly relates to my theme: his comments on the nature of the bourgeois revolutions. Deutscher was not alone in thinking creatively about bourgeois revolutions during the latter half of the twentieth century, of course, but as I hope to demonstrate, he was the first person to properly articulate the scattered insights on this subject by thinkers in what he called the Classical Marxist tradition.[3]

[1] Delivered on 9 October 2004 at the *Historical Materialism* Conference 'Capital, Empire and Revolution'. This version also incorporates elements of Neil Davidson's response to a paper by George Comninel, 'The Feudal Roots of Modern Europe', delivered at the same conference on the following day. Davidson was awarded the Prize for his book *Discovering the Scottish Revolution, 1692-1746* (2003). The second part will appear in the next issue of *Historical Materialism*.
[2] Davidson 2004b, pp. 97-9, 101-8.
[3] Deutscher 1972, pp. 17-20.

I am conscious of the difficulties which I face, not only in seeking to defend the scientific validity of bourgeois revolution as a theory, but also attempting to add a hitherto unknown case (and potentially others) to the existing roster. Since Scotland never featured on the lists of great bourgeois revolutions, even in the days when the theory was part of the common sense of the left, arguments for adding the Scottish Revolution to a list whose very existence has been called into question might seem Quixotic, to say the least. Therefore, although I will occasionally refer to the specifics of the Scottish experience, my task is the more general one of persuading comrades - particularly those who think me engaged in an outmoded form of knight errantry - of the necessity for a theory of bourgeois revolution.

Bourgeois revolutions are supposed to have two main characteristics. Beforehand, an urban class of capitalists is in conflict with a rural class of feudal lords, whose interests are represented by the absolutist state. Afterwards, the former have taken control of the state from the latter and, in some versions at least, reconstructed it on the basis of representative democracy. Socialists have found this model of bourgeois revolution ideologically useful in two ways. On the one hand, the examples of decisive historical change associated with it allow us to argue that, having happened before, revolutions can happen again, albeit on a different class basis. (This aspect is particularly important in countries like Britain and, to a still greater extent, the USA, where the dominant national myths have been constructed to exclude or minimise the impact of class struggle on national history.) On the other hand, it allows us expose the hypocrisy of a bourgeoisie which itself came to power by revolutionary means, but which now seeks to deny the same means to the working class.

Whether this model actually corresponds to the historical record is, however, another matter. For it is doubtful whether any countries have undergone an experience of the sort which the model describes, even England and France, the cases from which it was generalised in the first place. This point has been made, with increasing self-confidence, by a group of self-consciously ‘revisionist’ writers from the 1950s and, particularly, from the early 1970s onwards, in virtually every country where a bourgeois revolution had previously been identified. Their arguments are broadly similar, irrespective of national origin: prior to the revolution, the bourgeoisie was not ‘rising’ and may even have been indistinguishable from the feudal lords; during the revolution, the bourgeoisie was not in the vanguard of the movement and may even have been found on the opposing side; after the revolution, the bourgeoisie was not in power and may even have been further removed from control of the state than previously. In short, these conflicts were just what they appeared to be on the surface, expressions of inter-elite competition, religious difference or regional autonomy.

Even though the high tide of revisionism has now receded, many on the Left have effectively accepted the case for the irrelevance of the bourgeois revolutions - or perhaps I should call them the Events Formerly Known as Bourgeois Revolutions - to the transition from feudalism to capitalism. There are, of course, different and conflicting schools of thought concerning why they are irrelevant, four of which have been particularly influential.

From Society to Politics

The first retains the term 'bourgeois revolution', but dilutes its social content until it becomes almost entirely political in nature. The theoretical starting point here is the claim by Arno Mayer that the landed ruling classes of Europe effectively remained in power until nearly half-way through the twentieth century, long after the events usually described as the bourgeois revolutions took place.[4] One conclusion drawn from Mayer's work by Perry Anderson was that the completion of the bourgeois revolution, in Western Europe and Japan at least, was the result of invasion and occupation by the American-led Allies during the Second World War.[5] The wider implication is that the bourgeois revolution should not be restricted to the initial process of establishing a state conducive to capitalist development, but should be expanded to include subsequent restructuring in which the bourgeoisie assume political rule directly, rather than indirectly through the landowning classes. But if the concept can be extended in this way, why confine it to the aftermath of the Second World War, when direct bourgeois rule had still to be achieved across most of the world? In *The Enchanted Glass* (1988), Anderson's old colleague Tom Nairn also drew on Mayer's work to date the triumph of capitalism still later in the twentieth century, 'to allow for France's last fling with the quasi-Monarchy of General de Gaulle, and the end of military dictatorship in Spain, Portugal and Greece'.[6] If the definitive 'triumph' of capitalism requires the internationalisation of a particular set of political institutions then it had still not been achieved at the time these words were written. By the time the second edition was published in 1994, however, the Eastern European Stalinist states had either collapsed or been overthrown by their own populations, events which had clear parallels with the end of the Mediterranean dictatorships during the 1970s.

These revisions mean that the theory no longer just applies to those decisive socio-political turning-points which removed obstacles to capitalist development. Instead, it now extends to any subsequent changes to existing capitalist states that bring them into more perfect alignment with the requirements of capital accumulation. But there can be no end to these realignments this side of the socialist revolution, which suggests that bourgeois revolutions are a permanent feature of capitalism, rather than one associated with its consolidation and extension. Instead of categorising events like the Indonesian Revolution or the revolutions now opening up in the former Soviet Republics as bourgeois revolutions, as we would have to on this basis, they seem to me far better understood as examples of the broader category of *political* revolution - political because they start and finish within the confines of the capitalist mode of production. In other words, I am suggesting that the bourgeois revolutions are, like socialist revolutions, examples of that very rare occurrence, a *social* or *societal* revolution. These are epochal events involving change from one type of society into another and certainly not only changes

[4] Mayer 1981, pp. 3-4, 11; Mayer 1990, pp. 3, 32.
[5] Anderson 1987, pp. 26, 27, 47-8.
[6] Nairn 1994, p. 375.

of government, however violently achieved.[7] But there are political as well as theoretical problems involved. If we accept that the USA could bring about the – or 'a' - bourgeois revolution in Germany or Japan during the Second World War, there is no logical reason why they cannot bring one about 'from above' in Iraq (or Iran, or Syria, or Saudi Arabia) today. Christopher Hitchens used precisely this argument to justify his support for the invasion and occupation of Iraq.[8] Here, 'bourgeois revolution' simply means conforming to the political arrangements acceptable to the dominant imperialist powers.

From Event to Process

A second way in which the meaning of bourgeois revolution has been reduced in significance is through extending its duration in time until it becomes indistinguishable from the general process of historical development. The first interpretations of bourgeois revolution as a process were serious attempts to deal with perceived weaknesses in the theory.[9] And there is nothing inherently implausible about bourgeois revolutions taking this form rather than that of a single decisive event. (In fact I argue precisely this in relation to the Scottish Revolution.[10]) The problem is rather that adherents of 'process' have tended to expand the chronological boundaries of the bourgeois revolutions to such an extent that it is difficult to see how the term 'revolution' can be applied in any meaningful way, other than, perhaps, as a metaphor. As a general proposition this dovetails with the influential views of the French *Annales* school of historiography, which has always been distrustful of event-based history. Whatever there is to be said for these views, they are incompatible with any conception of bourgeois revolution involving decisive moments of transition, particularly where, as in several recent variants, there is no concluding episode.

On this basis bourgeois revolutions are no longer even political transformations that bring the state into line with the needs of capital, but can be detected in every restructuring of the system, including the prior process of economic change itself. Some writers on the left have even begun to speak of capitalist globalisation as 'a second bourgeois revolution'.[11] But by now enumeration is clearly meaningless, since 'bourgeois revolution' has simply become a metaphor for an ongoing process of capitalist restructuring that will continue as long as the system exists. Aside from devaluing the analytic value of the concept, such a redefinition is – once again – open to appropriation by ex-revolutionaries seeking a 'progressive' justification for supporting the system. Nigel Harris, one ex-Marxist convert to neo-liberalism, writes that the 'original' bourgeois revolutions were 'far from establishing business control of the state': 'Thus, it is only now that we can see the real "bourgeois

[7] Davidson 2003, p. 5.
[8] Hitchens 2003, pp. 32-3, 48.
[9] See, for example, Thompson 1965, p. 321.
[10] Davidson 2003, p. 10.
[11] See, for example, Teeple 2000, Chapter 7, 'Globalisation as the Second Bourgeois Revolution'.

revolution", the establishment of the power of world markets and of businessmen over the states of the world.'[12]

'The Capitalist World System'

The third position that I want to consider is a component of the capitalist world-system theory associated with Immanuel Wallerstein and his co-thinkers. Here, the focus completely shifts from revolution - however conceived - to the transition to capitalism itself. Unlike the first two positions Wallerstein thinks that bourgeois revolutions are no longer necessary, but his position is also more extreme in that he thinks they have *never* been necessary. Wallerstein regards the feudal states of the sixteenth century, like the nominally socialist states of the twentieth, as inherently capitalist through their participation in the world economy. Bourgeois revolutions are therefore not irrelevant because they failed to completely overthrow the feudal landed classes, but because, long before these revolutions took place, the lords had already transformed themselves into capitalist landowners. Capitalism emerged as a conscious response by the lords to the fourteenth-century crisis of feudalism, the social collapse which followed and the adoption, by the oppressed and exploited, of ideologies hostile to lordly rule. The lords therefore changed the basis on which they extracted surplus value over an extended period lasting two centuries.

Two aspects of this account are notable. One is that the key social actors are the very class of feudal lords regarded as the enemy to be overthrown in the conventional model of bourgeois revolution. Although Wallerstein and his school do not deny the existence of a bourgeoisie proper, it is the self-transformation of the lords which is decisive, not the actions of the pre-existing bourgeoisie. The other is that the nature of the capitalist world system which the lords are responsible for bringing into being is defined by the dominance of commercial relationships. Indeed, Wallerstein defines 'the essential feature of the capitalist world economy' as 'production for sale in a market in which the object is to realise the maximum profit'.[13] Although wage labour certainly exists at the core, it is insertion into the world market which defines the system as a whole as capitalist, since productive relations in the periphery continue to include modified forms of slavery and serfdom, in addition to wage labour. Anyone who produces for the market can therefore be described as a capitalist.

The strengths of this position should not be underestimated. It treats the question - so important for Mayer and those influenced by him - of whether the ruling classes possessed land and title or not as less significant than whether income from these sources was derived from feudal or capitalist methods of exploitation. It also gives due weight to the fact that the advanced nature of the 'core' of the system is at least partly dependent on the enforced backwardness of the 'periphery'.

But there are problems too. World systems theory certainly does not see episodes of bourgeois revolution in every political upheaval that changes the relationship of the state to capital, but it equally

[12] Harris 2003, pp. 89, 264.
[13] Wallerstein 1974, p. 398.

wants to dissociate them from the ascendancy of capitalism. Wallerstein himself continues to use the term, but it has lost all relation to the creation of a capitalist world economy. Theoretical pluralists, for whom there are no necessary connections between aspects of human existence, might find this acceptable, but Marxists surely cannot. However, there are also difficulties with the theory that must be equally evident to non-Marxists. One is the voluntarism which underlies it. Capitalism apparently arose because the existing class of lords made a conscious decision to transform the basis on which they exploited their tenants and labourers. But, if they were already in such a commanding position, why did they feel the need to change? The most fundamental issue, however, is whether the system described by Wallerstein is actually capitalist at all. It is not only in relation to the periphery, but also the metropolitan centres themselves that a definition of capitalism based on the realisation of profit through trade is problematic. The key issue, which Robert Brenner more than anyone else has placed on the agenda, is whether the formation of a world market is equivalent to the establishment of capitalism. As Brenner has pointed out, the argument that expansion of trade is the prime mover in generating capitalist development is often assumed to be that of Marx himself, but it is in fact derived from Adam Smith. Hence, despite their differences, Brenner can legitimately describe Sweezy, Gunder Frank and Wallerstein as 'neo-Smithian' Marxists. Brenner's own definition of capitalism, to which we will turn next, is also deeply unsatisfactory, but his negative critique is well founded in this respect.

'Capitalist Social Property Relations'

The fourth and final position that I want to consider is the 'capitalist social property relations' approach of Brenner himself. Unlike Wallerstein, Brenner does not see the mechanism by which capitalist development occurs as being the expansion of trade and commerce, but rather the introduction of a distinctive set of 'social property relations'. (He uses the latter term in place of the more conventional Marxist concept of 'relations of production', although the two are by no means synonymous.) So distinctive are these relations that, rather than encompassing the entire world by the sixteenth century, as capitalism does for Wallerstein, they were still restricted to a handful of territories even a hundred years later. Where Wallerstein is broad, Brenner is narrow. But there are also similarities. Like Wallerstein, Brenner treats bourgeois revolution as irrelevant and does so for essentially the same reasons, namely that capitalist development - albeit confined to a very limited number of countries - occurred prior to and independently of the events which are usually described in this way.

I regard the Brenner thesis as the most serious of the four theoretical tendencies under review here. No serious attempt to construct a defensible version of the theory of bourgeois revolutions can avoid meeting the challenge it poses. I should perhaps begin by saying that the comments which follow are not offered, as it were, in self-defence of my own views. In fact, my position on Scottish capitalist development is - and I choose my words carefully here - not incompatible with the Brenner thesis. Nevertheless, I think the thesis is wrong, although wrong in a stimulating and productive way which has forced those of us who disagree with it to think rather more seriously than we might otherwise have

done about, for example, the very nature of capitalism. Discussion of the thesis is complicated by the fact that there is far from complete unanimity among 'the Brenner school', by which I mean those hard core supporters - Ellen Wood, George Comninel and my fellow Deutscher Memorial Prize winner, Benno Teschke - who in many respects have taken up more extreme positions than Brenner himself. We can not hold Brenner directly responsible for every interpretation they have made of his original thesis, or even assume that he is necessarily in agreement with all of them. In what follows, I will therefore try to distinguish between Brenner's own positions, those which are common to the entire school, and those which are held by individual members.

Elements of the Brenner thesis are less original than some of his supporters appear to realise.[14] Nevertheless, it is also true that these elements have never before been brought together into such a coherent synthesis. Originality may in any case be an over-rated virtue in these days of instant revisionism. What is more important is that the Brenner school has rightly challenged several positions which Marxists have carelessly adopted in common with their intellectual opponents - above all, the assumption that capitalism is somehow innate, always existing in some subordinate form and only waiting to be released from feudal or other constraints. Many Marxists make this assumption by default through their inability to explain how capitalism comes into existence, thus inadvertently aligning themselves with the position of Adam Smith and his contemporaries, for whom the emergence of capitalism is, in Brenner's own words, 'human nature reassert[ing] itself'.[15] If it were true that capitalism had existed virtually since the emergence of civilization, then the possibility of socialism, at least in the form of anything but a totalitarian dictatorship, would be non-existent, for capitalism would indeed have been shown to be congruent with human nature - a point which bourgeois ideologues have been making with increasing stridency since the fall of Stalinism in 1989-91. The insistence of the Brenner school on the radical break which capitalism involves in human history therefore retains all its relevance. On a less obviously ideological level, Brenner's work has made it more difficult - if not, alas, impossible - for historians of the late medieval or early modern periods to write about 'economic development' or 'economic growth' as if these automatically involved capitalist economic development and growth, and without specifying the social relations within which economic activity took place. These qualities have ensured that Brenner's work has received an acceptance which is wide, but often not, I think, very deep. Beyond the fairly narrow ranks of the Brenner school proper his thesis is often cited approvingly, but without the full implications necessarily being understood. In fact, in its initial form at least, the thesis is not one which can be accepted in part, or synthesised with other interpretations. On the contrary, its rigour and internal consistency is such that the positive alternative which it offers can really only be accepted or rejected in full. Although Brenner has correctly identified

[14] For example, on the differences between English and French agriculture, see Weber 1961, pp. 69-70, 72, 76-7, 85-6; on the specificity of economic rationality under feudalism, see Kula 1976, pp. 165-75; on the uniqueness of English economic development, see Perkin 1968, pp. 135-6; on the initial development of capitalism by English landlords see Neale 1975, pp. 92-102; on both the integration of the towns into the feudal economy and, more generally, on the misidentification of markets for capitalism, see Merrington 1976, pp. 173-87.

major problems with the way historians, including Marxist historians, have dealt with the development of capitalism, his alternative involves a different set of problems.

Brenner argues that ‘modern economic growth’ - the systematic growth associated with capitalism and with no other exploitative mode of production - only takes place when two conditions are satisfied. One is that the direct producers are separated from both their means of production and their means of subsistence, and therefore have no alternative but to satisfy their needs by recourse to the market. The other is where the exploiters can no longer sustain themselves by simply intensifying extra-economic pressure on the direct producers, but instead have to increase their efficiency. Unlike in pre-capitalist economic formations, both sides are compelled to be competitive, most importantly by cutting costs. Without these conditions there is no incentive for either class to innovate. Any direct producers who attempted to introduce new techniques would meet resistance from their fellow agriculturalists who would regard it as a breach of collectivist solidarity. Any exploiters who attempted to introduce new techniques would require a labour force motivated to adopt them and, in its absence, they would be more likely to invest instead in more effective methods of coercion. Even if new methods were successfully adopted by individuals of either class, there is no reason to expect them that they would be adopted by anybody else, not least because technical advances introduced once and for all do not themselves bring economic development or the compulsion to innovate with a view to reducing costs. Brenner is of course aware that, for example, peasants adopted more efficient ploughs from the eleventh century onwards, but denies that this had any significant impact on social relations because community control resisted systematic improvement, specialisation and market dependence. 'The only significant method by which the feudal economy could achieve real growth was by opening up new land for cultivation.'[16] Nor was the situation different in the towns, since they were also unable to act as spontaneous generators of capitalism: 'their potential for growth was strictly limited because urban industry was almost entirely dependent upon lordly demand (as subsistence-orientated peasants had only limited ability to make market purchases) and lordly demand was itself limited by the size of agricultural surplus, which was itself constrained by limited growth potential of the agrarian productive forces'.[17]

How could this closed circuit, in which the same feudal relations of production are endlessly reproduced according to a given set of 'rules', ever be broken? In the case of peasant communities where the means of production were collectively owned, Brenner thinks that they would never have been. Where peasants possessed the means of production individually, he proposes three possible alternatives, all unintended consequences of actions designed to produce quite other results. First, peasants could lose land through selling it or through demographic growth. Second, the lords could increase the level of surplus extraction to such an extent that peasants could no longer pay their rent or,

[15] Brenner 1989, p. 281.
[16] Brenner 1997, p. 23.
[17] Brenner 1997, p. 25.

if they could pay it, could no longer retain enough produce for their own subsistence. Third, the lords might be forced to expropriate those peasants who had asserted their independence to such an extent that they were virtually defining themselves as owners, not merely in effective possession. From the enormous difficulties involved in subverting feudal 'rules for reproduction', Brenner draws two conclusions:

> The first is that pre-capitalist economies have an internal logic and solidity which should not be underestimated. The second is that capitalist economic development is perhaps an historically more limited, surprising and peculiar phenomenon than is often appreciated.[18]

If Brenner is right, peasant small production could have carried on almost indefinitely beneath the surface of pre-capitalist social structures had it not been for the unhappy accident which gave rise to capitalism. What was the nature of this apparently unfortunate series of events?

Recall the two sets of economic actors which Brenner claims must be present and compelled to accumulate capital: an exploited class of direct producers who are forced to sustain themselves through the market and an exploiting class of property owners who cannot sustain themselves through forcible extraction of a surplus. In England, both classes become simultaneously subject to these conditions. Following the non-Marxist historian Lawrence Stone, Brenner argues that, by the accession of the Tudor dynasty in 1485, non-economic coercion was of declining significance to the English lords, since the peasantry were no longer subject to the serfdom which required it and, in the aftermath of the Wars of the Roses, an exhausted nobility faced a strengthened state which would no longer tolerate magnate insubordination. But they could increase their incomes through the exploitation of their lands, or more precisely, the exploitation of commercial tenants who increasingly came to occupy their lands.[19] We are offered an explanation here for why the lords were increasingly compelled to turn to systematic commercialisation of their estates, but what allowed the peasants to abolish serfdom while preventing them from successfully resisting when the lords attempted to turn them into commercial tenants? Brenner has a two-fold answer to this question, both of which involve comparisons with nations which did not take the road to capitalist development at the same time as England.

The first part concerns different outcomes of the class struggle in Eastern and Western Europe. After the period of demographic collapse during the second half of the fourteenth century, the lords attempted to discipline a numerically reduced peasantry which was consequently in a much stronger bargaining position. Successful peasant resistance to these impositions permanently ended serfdom in Western Europe, but failed to do so in Eastern Europe, where it was either reimposed in areas where it had been weakened or imposed for the first time in areas which had previously escaped subjugation. These differences could be seen most clearly on either side of the Elbe. Brenner rejects the relative

[18] Brenner 1986, p. 53.
[19] Brenner 1989, pp. 300-01.

weight of the urban sector as the main explanation for this divergence.[20] Instead he identifies another factor as decisive: 'The development of peasant solidarity and strength in western Europe – especially as this was manifested in the peasant's organisation at the level of the village – appears to have been far greater in western than in eastern Europe; and this superior institutionalisation of the peasant's class power in the west may have been central to its superior ability to resist seigniorial reaction.'[21] But outcomes were by no means uniform even within Western Europe.

The second part of his answer identifies the source of this further divergence as the extent to which of the various peasantries of Western Europe were able to retain possession of the land won during the late feudal revolts from actual or potential exploiters: 'This is not to say that such outcomes were arbitrary, but rather that they tended to be bound up with certain historically specific patterns of the development of the contending agrarian classes and their relative strength in the different European societies: their relative levels of internal solidarity, their self consciousness and organisation, and their general political resources – especially their relationships to the non-agricultural classes (in particular, potential urban class allies) and to the state (in particular, whether or not the state developed as a class-like competitor of the lords for the peasants surplus).'[22] It is the last point which is crucial for Brenner in explaining the difference between England and France. The English feudal state was centralised, but not in the sense that it drew in power from the periphery. It was established with the consent of the feudal ruling class and largely ruled in alliance with it. As a result its power was less than the French state which centralised later on an absolutist basis and in opposition to the individual interests of the lords. In England, the absolutist project was aborted leaving the peasants free from the burden of state taxation, but also without protection from the lords: 'It was the English lord's inability either to re-enserf the peasants or to move in the direction of absolutism (as had their French counterparts) which forced them in the long run to seek novel ways out of their revenue crisis.'[23] In France, 'the centralised state appears to have developed (at least in large part) as a class-like phenomenon - that is as an independent extractor of the surplus, in particular on the basis of its arbitrary power to tax the land.'[24] The very success of the French peasantry in resisting the power of the lords left them exposed as potential sources of taxation by a much more powerful opponent – the absolutist state – which was in competition with the lords for surplus which the peasants produced. Paradoxically, however, the French state also protected the peasants from lordly impositions, in rather the same way as a farmer protects his chickens from the fox. The English lords, constrained by neither peasant ownership nor absolutist restriction, were able to consolidate their lands in the interest of economies of scale by forcing some peasants to accept competitive leases. Those peasants who were unsuccessful in gaining leases were either compelled to become wage-labourers for now-capitalist farmers or to leave the land

[20] Brenner 1985a, pp. 38-40; Brenner 1978, p. 130.
[21] Brenner 1985a, pp. 40-41.
[22] Brenner 1985a, p. 36.
[23] Brenner 1985b, p. 293.
[24] Brenner 1985a, p. 55.

altogether in search of work elsewhere. In both cases their labour power had become a commodity to be bought and sold on the market.

In the Brenner thesis the emergence of capitalism is therefore an unintended outcome of the actions of the two main feudal social classes, peasants and lords. One former Deutscher Memorial Prize winner, James Holstun, has written that this position provides socialists with an approach which 'resists the binary blackmail threatened by revisionists or postmodernists, for the results are neither inevitable nor purely contingent'.[25] But contingency is precisely what is involved. In a position which has curious parallels with Althusserianism, Brenner conceives of feudalism as of a self-enclosed, self-perpetuating system which cannot be undermined by its own internal contradictions. It is claimed that Brenner has an explanation for the - in his terms, highly unlikely - appearance of capitalism: the class struggle. Even outside the Brenner school proper the claim is repeated by writers with quite different attitudes to the thesis. Consequently, many socialist readers must have gone to Brenner's key articles, eagerly anticipating detailed accounts of peasant resistance to the lords, only to be disappointed by the scant attention which he actually devotes to the subject. In fact, it is the outcome of such class conflicts that Brenner is interested in, not the conflicts themselves. The rural class struggle only acts as a mechanism for explaining why capitalist social relations of production supposedly emerged only in England, and not in Prussia, France or China. But why does Brenner need such a mechanism?

Marxists have previously argued that capitalism emerged in the countryside through a series of transitional forms, initially combining different modes of production, but progressively becoming more purely capitalist in nature. Lenin's discussion of Russian agriculture after the abolition of serfdom in 1861, in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, is one of the most outstanding examples of this type of analysis. Brenner might well agree with this assessment in relation to nineteenth-century Tsarist Russia. From his perspective such gradual transformations were possible because the system which began in England established an international context in which other countries were both pressurised into adopting capitalist social property relations and provided with a model to which they could aspire. Russian landowners therefore have a motivation for introducing capitalism, albeit under tightly controlled conditions. But since English landowners and peasants were the first to be subject to these relations they could have had no such motivation. The outcome of class struggle provides Brenner with the situation in which the necessary determinations come into effect.

Marx saw no need for a special mechanism with which to explain the appearance of capitalism in England (or the United Provinces and Catalonia, the other areas where Brenner, if not his followers, concedes that capitalism had emerged). The most obvious explanation for this omission on his part is that he did not think that the development of capitalism was unique to England, but a general phenomenon, at least in Europe. Consequently, the entire elaborate hypothesis about the different outcomes of the class struggle is totally unnecessary. In effect, members of the Brenner school do not

[25] Holstun 2000, p. 119.

seem to recognise that there is an abstract model in *Capital*. Brenner himself apart, they think that England was the only site of endogenous capitalist development and therefore assume that Marx takes English development as a model for the origin of capitalism because, in effect, it was the only example he had. Now, I do not dispute that England was the country where capitalism developed to the greatest extent. It was for this reason that Marx made it the basis of his analysis, in the same way that he always took the most developed form of any phenomena as the basis of his analysis. But in his mature work Marx repeatedly states that capitalist development took place beyond England in space and before England in time.[26] He certainly believed that by 1648 the capitalist mode of production had become *dominant* in England to a greater extent than anywhere else, but that was perfectly compatible with believing that capitalist production had developed elsewhere, within otherwise fundamentally feudal economies.[27]

If, as I have suggested, the argument from contingency is a speculative answer to a non-question, then it may explain why Brenner has some difficulty explaining why the class struggle resulted in such different outcomes across Europe. His attempts to deal with this problem are among the least convincing aspects of the entire thesis. Brenner points to the different capacities deployed by the classes involved: these lords had better organisation, those peasants displayed less solidarity; but without an explanation for the prior processes by which these classes acquired their organisational or solidaristic qualities, these are mere descriptions which, to borrow a favourite expression of Ellen Wood's, 'assume precisely what has to be explained'. His inability to explain the differing levels of peasant resistance to the lords (as opposed to the consequences of that resistance) means that he has to fall back on what Stephen Rigby calls 'a host of particular historical factors which cannot be reduced to expressions of class structure or of class struggle'.[28] It was for this quite specific reason that Guy Bois described Brenner's Marxism as involving 'a voluntarist vision of history in which the class struggle is divorced from all other objective contingencies".[29] But he is only a voluntarist in relation to that part of the period before the different settlements of the land question occurred. After, precisely the opposite applies and his interpretation becomes overly determinist. In the case of England, far from being free to opt for a particular course of action, he sees no alternative for either the lords or the peasants but to become market-dependent. As soon as the mechanism has produced the required result, the element of choice disappears from his account, to be replaced by that of constraint.

However, let us accept, for the sake of argument, that capitalist social property relations arose only in the English countryside and that they did indeed do so as a result of the indeterminate outcome of

[26] See, for example, Marx 1973a, pp. 510-1 and Marx 1976, pp. 876 and note 1, 915-6. When confronted with those sections of Marx's writings which contradict their views, members of the Brenner school either, like Ellen Wood, pretend that they mean something else or, like George Comninel, issue disapprovingly admonitions about Marx's failure to understand his own theory. See, for example, Wood, 1999, p. 175 and Comninel 1987, p. 92. Rather than speculate on what Marx really meant, would it not be simpler to accept that Marx meant exactly what he said and that, consequently, they and their co-thinkers have a theory of capitalism which is different from his?
[27] See, for example, Marx 1973a, p. 278 and Marx 1976, p. 875.
[28] Rigby 1998, p. xii.
[29] Bois 1985, p. 115.

the class struggle. There are still other problems. Brenner is surely right to reject the counterposition of a supposedly feudal countryside to supposedly capitalist towns, but are we not being asked to accept an equally implausible reversal of these terms? Indeed, it is difficult to envisage how there could have been an inescapable 'market compulsion' in the countryside in the first place while the urban economy remained untouched by capitalist social property relations, given that the former was not and could not have been isolated from the latter. Furthermore, it is by no means clear how capitalist social property relations were then extended to the towns, which presumably remained feudal, or post-feudal, or at any rate non-capitalist until something – but what? – brought about the introduction of these relations. Members of the Brenner school are either silent on this issue or apparently fail to realise that it represents a problem. To whom did the dispossessed peasants sell their labour-power, given that no capitalist class existed outside of the landlords and tenant farmers in the English countryside? In order to buy the commodities they required the new work force needed jobs. Who employed them? Could it be that enterprising merchants or artisans saw - whisper who dares - an *opportunity*? For urban employers could not, at this stage, have been subject to market compulsion. At the very least there is a missing link in the chain of argument here. I am not suggesting, of course, that agrarian capitalism had no effect on other sectors of the economy. It both transformed the existing service sector and generated a requirement for new services, but this does not explain the emergence of capitalist production in the towns or - for that matter - the non-agricultural areas of the countryside. I understand how the Brenner school accounts for the establishment of capitalism in the English countryside. I also understand how the Brenner school accounts for the spread of capitalism beyond Britain. I do not understand how capitalist social property relations spread from the English countryside to the rest of England. Nor, for that matter, how the same process took place in Holland or Catalonia, the other areas where Brenner himself thinks that capitalism existed.

This is not a problem in Marx's own discussions of the rise of capitalism. In a section of the *Grundrisse* ('The Chapter on Capital') much admired by the Brenner school, Marx argues that 'the dissolution of the old relations of production' has to take place in both the towns and the countryside, and that the process in the former is partly responsible for it in the latter: 'Urban labour itself had created means of production for which the guilds became just as confining as were the old relations of landownership to an improved agriculture, which was in part itself a consequence of the larger market for agricultural products in the cities etc.'[30] Marx had earlier presented this argument specifically in relation to England in an 1850 review of Francois Guizot's book, *Why Was The English Revolution so Successful?* (Which should, incidentally, be required reading for anyone who believes that Marx simply adopted the views of the French Restoration historians as to the nature of bourgeois revolutions.) Two aspects of this argument are particularly interesting. First, Marx is already fully aware of the capitalist nature of the majority of the English landowners, but he does not consider that

[30] Marx 1973a, p. 508, where he also refers to the tenants of the landed proprietors as 'already semi-capitalists', albeit ‘still very hemmed in ones'.

they are the only capitalists in England. Second, despite the pre-existence of capitalist social relations, Marx did not regard the transition to capitalism as having been completed, even by 1688: 'In reality…the momentous development and transformation of bourgeois society in England only began with the consolidation of the constitutional monarchy.'[31] In other words, Marx conceptualises an uneven, but broadly simultaneous development across the rural and urban sectors with mutually reinforcing results. Such an explanation is impossible for members of the Brenner school, however, as it would involve conceding that, in some circumstances at least, people could willingly choose to become capitalists rather than only do so when the role was imposed on them. As a result they have no explanation at all for urban capitalist development, other than by osmosis.

For the members of the Brenner school, capitalism is defined by the existence of what they call market compulsion – the removal of the means of production and subsistence from the direct producers so that they are forced to rely on the market to survive. There is of course a venerable tradition of thought which defines capitalism solely in market terms, but it is not Marxism, it is the Austrian economic school whose leading representatives were Ludwig von Mises and Frederick von Hayek. In the Hayekian version of their argument the reductionism involved has a clear ideological purpose. It is to declare any forms of state intervention or suppression of market mechanisms, from the most modest public provision of welfare services through to full nationalisation of the economy, as socialist, incompatible with capitalism and consequently liable to lead down 'the road to serfdom'. The members of the Brenner school are obviously on the other side of the intellectual barricades from Hayek and his followers, but this is why I find it so curious that they similarly define any kind of economic activity which does not involve 'market compulsion' as non-capitalist, particularly since Hayek's position is extreme even by the standards of contemporary bourgeois ideology. It might be worth recalling, in this connection, what John Maynard Keynes said of Hayek, since the remark evidently has wider application: 'It is an extraordinary example of how, starting with a mistake, a remorseless logician can end up in Bedlam.'[32] For Marx, capitalism was defined, not as a system of market compulsion, but as one of *competitive accumulation based on wage labour*. Both aspects are equally important.

Marx starts with wage-labour. He writes in *Capital* Volume 1 that the emergence of capital as a social relation is the result of two types of commodity owners: on the one hand, 'the owners of money, means of production, means of subsistence' and 'one the other hand, free workers, the sellers of their own labour power, and therefore the sellers of labour'. He concludes: 'With the polarization of the commodity market into these two classes, the fundamental conditions of capitalist production are present.'[33] Wage-labour was by no means universal in England by 1789, let alone by 1688. But since the Brenner thesis is insistent that capitalist social relations were already completely dominant in England before the Civil War, what were these great social struggles for 'moral economy' against

[31] Marx 1973b, pp. 252-5.
[32] Keynes 1972, p. 243.
[33] Marx 1976, pp. 874, 975. See also Marx 1973a, p. 505.

'political economy', for 'just price' against 'market price', which occurred as late as the end of the eighteenth century actually about? The logic of this position is that the origins of capitalism need not involve wage labour. Wood in particular has followed this logic through to its conclusion and claimed that, rather than being constitutive of capitalism as Marx had thought, wage-labour is in fact a consequence of it:

> In the specific property relations of early modern England, landlords and their tenants became dependent on the market for their self-reproduction and hence subject to the imperatives of competition and increasing productivity, whether or not they employed wage-labour. … The fact that market-dependence and competition preceded proletarianisation tells us something about the relations of competition and their autonomy from the relations between capital and labour. It means that producers and possessors of the means of production, who are not themselves wage-labourers, can be market-dependent without employing wage-labour.[34]

For Wood, the removal of the means of *subsistence* from the direct producers is the fundamental moment in their subjection to market compulsion. It is true, of course, that in a context where the economy is already dominated by the capitalist mode of production, tenant farmers can play the role of capitalists whether or not they employ wage-labour, but this has nothing to do with whether or not they possess the means of subsistence. Independent farmers in the south-west of Scotland, and even in parts of the Highlands, were already dependent on the market long before the transition to capitalism was imposed during the second half of the eighteenth century, for the simple reason that they were restricted by environmental constraints to pastoral farming and could not meet their needs in any other way. If capitalism is based on a particular form of exploitation, on the extraction of surplus value from the direct producers through wage labour, then I fail to see how capitalism can exist in the absence of wage labourers. Where does surplus value come from in a model which contains only capitalist landlords and capitalist farmers? Surplus value may be realised through market transactions, but it can scarcely be produced by them. The only means by which Wood proposes that surplus value can be extracted is the competition for leases among tenant farmers (i.e. in that the latter compete to hand over the greatest proportion of their output to the landlord in order to acquire or retain a tenancy). But there is nothing distinctly capitalist about this mechanism. In seventeenth-century Scotland it was common for feudal landlords to conduct a ‘roup’ or auction of leases which included the full panoply of labour services as part of the rent. Indeed, pioneering improvers like Fletcher of Saltoun and Seton of Pitmedden regarded this as one of the main means through which the peasantry was exploited.[35]

Is Wood therefore right to claim that all critiques of Brenner, including this one, assume 'that there can be no such thing as a Marxist theory of competition'?[36] By no means, but it important to be clear

[34] Wood 1999, pp. 176, 177. See also Teschke 2003, pp. 140-1.
[35] Davidson 2003, pp. 25-6.
[36] Wood 1999, p. 171.

what such a theory must involve. I referred earlier to competitive accumulation, rather than market competition. The watchword of Moses and the prophets, it will be recalled, was 'accumulate! accumulate!'. Accumulation takes place in the context of competition, but not all competition between capitals is market-based. Nikolai Bukharin pointed this out in *The Economics of the Transition Period* (1920), one of a series of classic works which, it seems, have still to be fully absorbed into the Marxist tradition:

> …every economic phenomenon in the capitalist world is, in some way or another, bound up with price and, hence, the market. This does not mean, however, that every economic phenomenon is a market phenomenon. It is the same with competition. Up to now, the chief consideration has been of market competition, which was characteristic of the pattern of horizontal competition in general, but competition, i.e., the struggle between capitalist enterprises, can also be waged outside the market in the strict sense of the word. Such, for example, is the struggle for spheres of capital investment, i.e. for the very opportunity to expand the production process. In this case too, it is clear that other methods of struggle will be used than those of the classical case of horizontal market competition.[37]

What were these 'other methods of struggle'? The most important, at least among state-capitals, is war and preparation for war. Contrary to a widely held misconception, the classical Marxist theory of imperialism, to which Bukharin made a significant contribution, was not mainly concerned with the domination of the colonial or semi-colonial world by the advanced capitalist states. Its main concern was with inter-imperialist conflicts *between* the advanced capitalist states, and these conflicts were seen as the inevitable expression of their capitalist nature.

An over-emphasis on markets as the defining characteristic of capitalism is not the only curious affinity between the Brenner school and the Austrians. There also appears to be a common conception of human nature. Hayek focussed on the emergence of a market order – 'the spontaneous extended human order created by competitive capitalism' - and held that it was a formation which evolved over several thousands of years with the gradual development of institutions, rules and laws which are quite contrary to the instincts of human beings.[38] These instincts remain essentially egalitarian and collectivist, biological remnants of the attitudes which were appropriate to tribal groups of foragers, but which are destructive of the market order if they were given free reign, as he believed would happen under socialism. According to Hayek, the very amorality of the market order, the fact that it often rewards the worst and penalises the best, means that it runs counter to the instincts of the mass of people. But the market is the only rational means of economic organisation, and so these instincts must be suppressed in the interests of what Hayek calls, following the terminology of Adam Smith, 'the Great Society'. For Hayek, capitalism is only possible through the transformation of human nature, or

[37] Bukharin 1979, p. 78.
[38] Hayek 1988, p. 7.

rather the suppression of the behaviour characteristic of human nature from almost the entire period since we completed our evolution from the primates.[39]

The Brenner school obviously rejects the positive value that Hayek ascribes to the overthrow of these supposedly ancient human characteristics, but it nevertheless makes very similar assumptions. As Ricardo Duchesne writes: '[Wood] thinks that capitalism is too unnatural and too destructive of human relations for anyone to have wanted it, least of all a collectivist peasantry.'[40] But there are as many problems with a conception of human nature which sees it as being uninterested in economic development as there are with a definition of capitalism based on the existence of market compulsion. The rejection of one form of bourgeois ideology should not blind us to the dangers of accepting another, albeit with the inversion of its value system; there is no advantage to us in rejecting Smithian Marxism only to embrace Hayekian Marxism instead.

No mode of production is intrinsically alien to human nature. This is not to imagine that human nature is infinitely plastic or malleable, and has no stable qualities at all. The point was made in a wonderful passage – perhaps my favourite from the entire Scottish Enlightenment - by Adam Ferguson in *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*:

> If we are asked therefore, where the state of nature is to be found? We may answer, it is here; and it matters not whether we are understood to speak in the island of Great Britain, at the Cape of Good Hope, or the Straits of Mallegan. While this active being is in the train of employing his talents, and of operating on the subjects around him, all situations are equally natural.[41]

In other words, human beings may not have a 'natural propensity to truck and barter', as Adam Smith thought, but they can develop such a propensity under certain conditions. What I am suggesting, therefore, is that the entire elaborate edifice of the Brenner thesis is based upon a conception of human nature in which it is seen as innately opposed to capitalism - indeed, in which it is seen as innately opposed to economic development as such - and will only be induced to accept capitalist relations under duress. While this may allow us the comforting thought that capitalism need not have happened, it also has certain implications for socialism. For if capitalism is essentially a contingent or accidental historical outcome, then so too is the possibility of socialism. One does not have to accept, in classic Second International or Stalinist style, that human social development has gone through a succession of inevitable stages to reject the ascription of absolute randomness to key historical turning points as a viable alternative. Marx's own position lends support to neither of these positions. For Marx, the core human quality, the one which distinguishes us from the rest of the animal world, is the need and ability to produce and reproduce our means of existence. This is why production, not property, is the *sine qua*

[39] In Freudian terms, capitalism is the triumph of the market Super-Ego over the collectivist Id.
[40] Duchesne 2002, p. 135.
[41] Ferguson 1966, p. 8.

non of Marx's own Marxism, and why his theory of social development privileges the development of the productive forces over productive relations.

For several decades now the left has tended to downplay or deny altogether the significance of the development of the productive forces and the Brenner school has played a leading role in providing intellectual support for this tendency. Whatever their differences with the capitalist world systems theorists, members of the Brenner school are equally dismissive of the development of the productive forces in explaining the transition from feudalism to capitalism. One consequence is a tendency to portray peasant life before capitalism as essentially based on a natural economy of self-governing communities, which have no incentive to develop the productive forces, and into which the lords or the Church only intrude superficially and occasionally in order to acquire their surplus. I do not recognise this picture. In a great passage from one of the early classics of Scottish vernacular literature, *The Complaynt of Scotland*, published anonymously in 1549 (and which I have here translated into modern English), the character of 'the labourer' rages against the misery of his life:

> I labour night and day with my hands to feed lazy and useless men, and they repay me with hunger and the sword. I sustain their life with the toil and sweat of my body, and they persecute my body with hardship, until I am become a beggar. They live through me and I die through them.[42]

Four centuries later the power of that final sentence is undiminished. Developing the productive forces seems to me to be at least as rational a response to the feudal exploitation it so vividly describes as 'fight or flight', the alternatives which are usually posed. Let us assume, as Brenner does, that fear of risk is the main factor preventing peasants from opting for profit maximisation. What could overcome these concerns? Only such insecurity that the risk was worth taking because it could scarcely be worse than current conditions. In situations where the direct producers have to hand over part of what they have produced to someone else, a part which tends to fluctuate upwards, they clearly have a motive – one might almost say, an imperative – to increase their output, a motive which need not have anything to do with markets. Increasing production, if it leads to greater disposable income, might give peasants the wherewithal to buy their way out of performing labour services, to hire wage labour to carry out work which would otherwise destroy the health and shorten the life of family members, or perhaps even to acquire heritable property which would remove them from feudal jurisdictions altogether. 'Rather than retreating from the market', writes Jane Whittle, 'peasants used the market to escape from serfdom.'[43] And in conditions of crisis, such as those which shook European feudalism in the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, the pressure on the ruling class to raise the level of exploitation, and consequently on the peasantry to look for ways of escape, was of course heightened still further.

[42] Wedderburn 1822, p. 123.
[43] Whittle 2000, p. 310.

There is a very limited number of ways in which human beings can economically exploit each other. 'Slavery, serfdom and wage labour are historically and socially different solutions to a universal problem', writes Fernand Braudel, 'which remains fundamentally the same.'[44] Given this highly restricted range of options, the chances of something like capitalism arising were actually rather high, given certain conditions. The slave, tributary and feudal modes of production emerged directly from pre-class societies and so did the elements - wage labour, commodity production, market competition - which eventually combined to create the capitalist mode. The Brenner school is quite right to insist that the existence of these elements does not indicate the existence of capitalism as such. One can further agree that the socio-economic activities which ultimately ended producing capitalism were not, initially at any rate, necessarily undertaken with capitalism as a conscious goal. One can, however, explain the original making of the capitalist system without reference to either the commercialisation model or to the prior necessity for changed 'social property relations', by drawing on Marx's own model of the development of the productive forces. The desire of peasants to escape from feudal constraints was only one cause for their being developed. Another, much more important for industry than agriculture, was the increased need for armaments and other instruments of war by absolutist states engaged in the great dynastic and territorial struggles of the early modern period. Cannon, let alone battle-ships, could not be manufactured by a handful of artisans in a workshop. And from this certain necessities followed, including the expansion of wage labour and dismantling of feudal guild restrictions on who could be involved in production.

If, as I have suggested, Brenner is wrong about the geographically limited and socially contingent nature of capitalist development, then this has certain implications for his critique of the theory of bourgeois revolution. Brenner claims that the theory is 'based on a mechanically-determined theory of transition' which 'renders revolution unnecessary in a double sense':

> First, there really is no transition to accomplish: since the model starts with bourgeois society in the towns, foresees its evolution as taking place via bourgeois mechanisms, and has feudalism transform itself in consequence of its exposure to trade, the problem of how one type of society is transformed into another is simply assumed away and never posed. Second, since bourgeois society self-develops and dissolves feudalism, the bourgeois revolution can hardly play a necessary role.[45]

The first point is valid as a criticism of many accounts of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, but the second misses its target. The theory of bourgeois revolution is not about the origins and development of capitalism as a socio-economic system, but the removal of backward-looking threats to its continued existence and the overthrow of restrictions to its further expansion. The source of these threats and restrictions has, historically, been the pre-capitalist state, whether estates-monarchy,

[44] Braudel 1985, p. 63
[45] Brenner 1989, p. 280.

absolutist or tributary in nature. It is perfectly possible for capitalism to erode the feudal social order in the way Brenner describes while leaving the feudal state intact and still requiring to be overthrown if the capitalist triumph is to be complete and secure. Fortunately, there is no need for me to pursue this argument because Brenner himself has already done so.

In his critique of the work of Maurice Dobb, Brenner suggested in a footnote that an interpretation of the English Civil War as bourgeois revolution was not 'ruled out'.[46] The postscript to his massive monograph, *Merchants and Revolution*, is essentially an attempt to substantiate that footnote. In order to maintain consistency with his earlier work, Brenner has to maintain that feudal relations had been virtually overcome in England by 1640. The effect, however, is that he also has to treat the English state as virtually an autonomous body. It apparently has interests opposed to that of the dominant capitalist class, but these neither embody those of a feudal class, nor balance between the capitalist and feudal classes, since the latter no longer exists. There were, of course, states based on what Brenner calls 'politically constituted property' at this stage in history, but these were the great tributary empires of China, Byzantium and Russia. In these cases the state acted as a collective feudal overlord, exploiting the peasantry through taxation and, where capitalist production had begun to emerge (as it had in China), successfully preventing it from developing to the point where a capitalist class might challenge the political rule of the dynastic regime.

Any serious comparison of the resources available to the Ming Emperors and the Stuart Kings would show the sheer *absence* of autonomous state power available to the latter. According to Brenner, Charles I relied for support on three forces, his courtiers, the High Anglican clergy and the traditional merchants, but it is difficult to believe that the war would have lasted longer than a handful of months if this was all that he could muster. Brenner places great emphasis on the fear of popular intervention in forcing capitalist aristocrats into supporting the Crown. This certainly took place and Charles consciously played on these fears in his search for support among the nobility and gentry. Yet this will not do as a complete explanation. First, Charles had already assembled formidable forces to his side before the interventions of the London crowd in December 1641. Second, Parliament was just as anxious as the Crown to gain the support of the (decidedly feudal) Scottish Covenanting armies after hostilities broke out, precisely as an alternative to relying on the people. Third, even after the Independents had taken over from the moderate Presbyterians, Cromwell was ultimately prepared to crush the Levellers, who were the largest, but by no means the most radical of the social movements. In short, distrust and opposition to the mass movement was quite compatible with support for Parliament, even after its radicalisation and militarisation. The most obvious answer to the question of where Royal support came from, but one which Brenner is unable to accept, is that at least part of it came from sections of English society whose socio-economic position derived from local 'patrimonial' (i.e. feudal) interests comparable to those of Charles himself. Charles did not, after all, simply invoke

[46] Brenner 1978, p. 139, note.

the general threat of disorder in his search for support, but the fact that any weakening of the monarchy, even such as that proposed by Parliament prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, would lead to commensurate weakening of the aristocracy. But weakening in what sense? Not their position of capitalists, surely.

Even with these difficulties, Brenner's complex argument shows why a revolution - let us leave aside for the moment whether the designation of 'bourgeois' is appropriate or not - was necessary in England, even though the economy was already largely capitalist. However, Brenner's position *only* allows for revolutions under such conditions. Effectively, this reduces the field to England and the similarly capitalist Holland, where the threat to capitalism came not from the native dynasty, but from the foreign rule of the Spanish Hapsburgs. What happened in the rest of the world? Brenner has not explicitly dealt with this question, but his fellow-thinkers have offered answers based on his theoretical framework.

As with Brenner, the autonomous role of the state is decisive, although in the opposite direction from that of the English state under the Stuarts. Benno Teschke claims that European capitalist development was entirely due to the competitive pressure of the British state on other states and did not, even to a limited extent, emerge from processes internal to the latter. Teschke talks about ‘revolutions from above’, but not bourgeois revolutions, presumably on the grounds that the bourgeoisie was not involved in these events, although they did lead to the development of capitalism. His timing, however, closely resembles that of the Mayer thesis with which I began this survey: 'This long period of transformation lasted from 1688 to the first World War for Europe, and beyond for the rest of the world.'[47] In short, Brenner's insistence that the transition to capitalism was virtually complete by the time of the English (and possibly Dutch) revolutions is matched by his follower's insistence that it had barely begun by the time of subsequent 'revolutions from above'.

I have no difficulties with the concept of bourgeois revolution from above and have used the concept in my own work. Yet, as I have already noted in relation to the theory of ‘process’ discussed earlier, it is difficult to say whether the notion of 'revolution' (even if 'from above') is appropriate here, when dealing with such an extended period of time. There are difficulties too with the periodisation. Identifying the crucial period as between 1688 and 1918, as Teschke does, rather elides the inconvenient fact that, outside of Scotland, the major transitions to capitalism occurred not after 1688, but after 1789. And here we come to the elephant in the sitting-room or, if you prefer an allusion to the Scottish Play, the ghost at the feast. I say inconvenient, because every member of the Brenner school, without exception, is committed to the proposition that the Great French Revolution had nothing to do with the development of capitalism either at home or abroad. (This is another respect in which they are at one with Wallerstein and the capitalist world system theorists.) Why? Because the people who made the Revolution were not capitalists. One response might be that at least some of the revolutionaries

[47] Teschke 2003, p. 12

were people who *wanted* to exploit peasants and artisans in new capitalist ways, but were prevented from doing so by the Old Regime. George Comninel will have none of this: 'The French Revolution was essentially an *intra-class* conflict over basic political relations that at the same time directly touched on relations of surplus extraction.'[48] By 'intra-class conflict' Comninel means that the Revolution involved a struggle over the possession of state offices between different wings of a ruling class which combined both nobles and bourgeoisie. So, the most cataclysmic event of the eighteenth century, perhaps of human history down to that point, whose effects were felt across the world from Ireland to Egypt, and which, until 1917 at least, defined the very nature of revolution itself, was…a squabble over who gets to be the local tax-farmer in Picardy.

I find these arguments deeply unsatisfactory. Apart from anything else, the parallels between the English Revolution, which took place in a society where capitalism was supposedly almost fully developed, and the French Revolution, which took place in a society where capitalism had supposedly not developed at all, are remarkable, even down to quite specific incidents, yet these must presumably be coincidental, if the societies were as different as the Brenner school would have us believe. But the difficulties here are not simply reducible to empirical questions about England in the seventeenth century or France in the eighteenth; they stem from a fundamental misunderstanding about what is meant by bourgeois revolution in the Marxist tradition. It is to this issue that will now turn.

Theories of Bourgeois Revolution 1: the Enlightenment

Bourgeois thinkers had been attempting to understand the process that was bringing their class to power for at least 200 years before the emergence of Marxism in the 1840s. The first successful bourgeois revolution, the Dutch, took the form of a war of liberation against the external power of Hapsburg Spain. Consequently, the political theories which emerged, notably those of Hugo Grotius, were less concerned with identifying the relationship between different social classes and forms of private property, as with the rights of the state over its own citizens and with other states. Discussion of revolution as an internal process only came in three subsequent moments of theorisation, as the focus of bourgeois revolution shifted consecutively from Holland to England, from England to Scotland, and finally from Scotland to France.

In England, the development of capitalism preceded the revolutions of the seventeenth century, if not so completely as Brenner claims. In this respect there are interesting similarities between the writings of the moderate republican, James Harrington, before the Restoration and those of the moderate Royalist, Edward Hyde, First Earl of Clarendon, afterwards. Harrington wrote in grand theoretical terms, Clarendon left a rather more empirical reconstruction of landowner behaviour in Somersetshire; but both men made essentially the same point: changes to political attitudes had followed changes in the nature of property ownership, and the conflict between representatives of

[48] Comninel 1987, p. 151.

different forms of property was the underlying cause of the Civil War.[49] But it was only one of two conflicts that emerged in the years. The other arose mainly within the revolutionary camp and concerned the franchise. 'Property, generally, is now with the people', said Adam Baynes in Parliament during 1659, 'government must be there.' But, as Hugh Stubbe in effect replied, 'it is necessary to know who the PEOPLE are'.[50] Baynes identified the key issue as being the triumph of a particular form of property; Stubbe, how much of that form of property people had to possess before they could be said to belong to the People. The first issue was decisively resolved by the Revolution of 1688; the second only by the Reform Act of 1832.

The Scottish moment fell between these two dates. Capitalism had scarcely developed in Scotland before the kingdom was incorporated into the British state in 1707. The Scottish Revolution involved neither decisive popular insurgencies, such as had accompanied the defence of neither London, nor wide-ranging debates on the limits of democracy, such as had taken place within the New Model Army at Putney. Instead, it took the form of the military repression and juridical abolition of feudal power by the British state following the civil war of 1745-6. 'Power follows property', wrote John Dalrymple in 1757, in a phrase redolent of Harrington: England had developed commercial property, Scotland had not and this accounted for the difference between them, a difference which the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment believed could now be overcome.[51] The transition to capitalism in Scotland was therefore a conscious and highly controlled exercise in revolution from above with the specific objective of introducing commercial property, first in agriculture, then more generally. I say 'from above', because it did not involve the popular masses in any sense, but it was not state-led either. On the contrary, this was one of the purest bourgeois experiences in history, precisely because it did not involve the lower orders with their inconvenient demands for representation. Instead, it involved an overlapping alliance of feudal lords and clan chiefs who had been forced to transform themselves into capitalist landowners, Enlightenment intellectuals concerned with national development, and a *cadre* of improving tenant farmers who leased land from the former and drew theoretical inspiration from the latter. The main difference between the English and the Scots in theoretical terms was that the former were simply justifying the outcome of a process which had taken hundreds of years to complete, while the latter were concerned with producing a blueprint for how the process could be reproduced in a period of decades.[52] Interestingly, Adam Smith shared with Brenner a disbelief in the necessity for bourgeois revolution. Smith certainly saw the suppression of noble power as essential for the rise of what he called 'commercial society'. As he explicitly stated in his lectures at Glasgow University during the 1750s the nobles must be 'brought to ruin', 'greatly crushed', before liberty and security could be secured.[53] In his view, however, this had already been largely carried out, at least in England, by the absolutist state whose

[49] Harrington 1977, pp. 405-6; Clarendon 1978, pp. 229-30.
[50] Both quoted in Manning 2003, pp. 10, 60.
[51] Dalrymple 1757, pp. 338-39.
[52] Davidson 2004a; Davidson 2005a.
[53] Smith 1978, p. 264.

ascendancy was followed by the gradual growth of commerce in the towns, once these were freed from parasitism and wastefulness of the feudal nobility. The specifics of how the lords had been defeated in Scotland - which of course depended on their prior transformation in England - was never really discussed in the theoretical works of the Scottish Enlightenment, although it is an essential component of the novels of Sir Walter Scott, the last great representative of Scottish Historical School.

French theory was different again. The 150 years between the outbreak of the English and French Revolutions is at least partly due to the fact that, initially at least, the French ruling class was capable of learning from history and made conscious attempts to prevent the growth of the similar forces to those which had overthrown the Stuarts. (In this respect there are parallels between the Chinese tributary state and French absolutism which do not exist between the former and English absolutism.) French capitalism in 1789 was therefore much less extensive than English capitalism in 1640, especially in the countryside but, as forthcoming work by Henry Heller will demonstrate, it did exist, and often involved far more advanced forms of industrial wage labour than English capitalism had during the previous century. In a speech to the National Assembly of September 1789 the Abbe Sieyes portrayed a world in which 'political systems, today, are founded exclusively on labour: the productive faculties of man are all', and described 'the largest number of men' as 'nothing but labouring machines'.[54] Such a world would have been incomprehensible to John Lilburne and, in reality, it was still far from being achieved even in 1789. But it was the world which the French bourgeoisie wanted to achieve, and which they saw emerging in England after 1688 and Scotland after 1746. Indeed, one semi-anonymous member of the National Assembly wrote an account in 1790 which enviously noted how far Scotland had advanced in 50 years, how superior Scottish intellectual life now was to that of England, and how much wealthier Scottish peasants were than those of France.[55] The problem for the French was that, unlike the Scots, no benevolent state would intervene to remove feudal obstacles to capitalism, since the state itself constituted the main obstacle. The French bourgeoisie had less economic power and a far stronger absolutist opponent than the English. For this reason they had to rely to greater extent on the intervention of a popular majority to overthrow the old regime, but they were also acutely aware that the masses upon whose strength they relied had other views about society, however unrealisable these might have been in the short term. Nevertheless, in spite of their different circumstances, the formulations used by the French theorists are still very similar to those used by their English predecessors, in so far as they see changed property relations as the social basis of the revolution. In 1791, Joseph Barnave noted that the French Revolution had only been possible because of the social forces that had grown up within the feudal system: 'Just as the possession of land gave rise to the aristocracy, industrial property increases the power of the people: they acquire their liberty, they multiply, they begin to influence affairs.' The revolution that ‘the people’ would make would be democratic: ‘The democratic principle, almost stifled in all European governments as long as the

[54] Quoted in Sewell 1994, p. 72.
[55] B-de 1790, pp. 44, 100, 103-4, 116.

feudal regime remained vigorous, has since that time increasingly gathered strength and moved towards its fulfilment.'[56] But who would be exercising the 'democratic principle'? All the bourgeois revolutions down to the French with the exception of the Scottish (and no one outside that country considered it a process separate from the English anyway) had all involved popular interventions to achieve their goals. What was unclear was whether these mobilisations were integral to the process, or contingent, or merely typical of a particular stage in the development of capitalism. The bourgeois theorists themselves had not answered this question, nor could they.

By the time Marx and Engels entered political life, then, there had been for nearly 200 years a consensus, common across quite different local circumstances, which held that the basis of political change lay in prior changes to the nature of property and in the individuals who owned that property. It is perhaps worth pausing for a moment to consider the significance of the theoretical consistency involved. I accept the point made by Lukacs in *History and Class Consciousness* that the bourgeoisie can never achieve a completely scientific understanding of the world, even in its revolutionary phase. But this did not mean that bourgeois intellectuals had no insights into the historical process. It was in the suppression of these insights, after all, which led Marx to identify a transition from 'disinterested research' to 'apologetics' by the 1830s.[57] We have seen that a common position was held fairly consistently by the greatest intellectuals of their epoch, from Harrington and Clarendon in the 1640s, to Dalrymple and Smith in the 1750s, through to Barnave and Sieyes in the 1790s and beyond. Perhaps it is therefore safe to assume that it reflected, in however incomplete a form, real changes in society which were general, in varying degrees, throughout Europe.

None of the French Liberals who survived the Revolution of 1789 doubted that it was a similar event to the English Revolution of 1640. Marx had good political reasons for disliking Francois Guizot (who had, among other things, arranged for him to be deported from Brussels), but for all that, this supreme representative of the post-revolutionary bourgeoisie was not a complete intellectual nullity. Writing in the early 1850s Guizot dismissed as 'superficial and frivolous' attempts to distinguish the English and French Revolutions: 'Originating in the same causes, by the decay of the feudal aristocracy, the Church, and the royal power, they laboured to affect the same work - to secure the domination of the people in public affairs.' His final judgement was that, 'although deceived in many premature expectations, it liberated English society, to an immense extent, from the monstrous inequality of the feudal regime; - in a word, such is the analogy between the two Revolutions, *that the first would never have been properly understood unless the second had occurred*'.[58] In this respect at least he was in agreement with his class enemies, Marx and Engels. The latter were also quite clear that, apart from the common presence of the absolutist state, there were differences between the class forces involved in the English and French cases. Nevertheless, the patterns of development were

[56] Barnave 1971, p. 122.
[57] Marx 1976, p. 174.
[58] Guizot 1854, pp. xvi, xviii, xix. My emphasis.

similar enough for these to be classifiable as the same kind of event. Does this level of agreement mean that Marx and Engels simply endorsed the views of their bourgeois forerunners and contemporaries, that they were responsible for perpetuating a 'bourgeois paradigm', and the rest? By no means.

Theories of Bourgeois Revolution 2: Marx, Engels and the Classical Tradition

Brenner and his supporters have claimed that, although Marx and Engels used different terminology, they initially conflated two bourgeois explanatory models to produce the theory of bourgeois revolution. On the one hand, they used the same commercial model of socio-economic development as the political economists of the Scottish Enlightenment to explain how capitalism emerged from within feudal society. On the other, they used the same revolutionary model of political development as the liberal historians of Restoration France to explain how the bourgeoisie were able to overcome the absolutist obstacles to their ascendancy. Marx (Engels tends to vanish from these accounts) supposedly produced his own model of capitalist development, based on the establishment of changed social property relations rather than commercial expansion, only during the 1850s while drafting the notebooks subsequently published as the *Grundrisse*, which then formed the basis of the discussion in *Capital*. The theory of bourgeois revolution, however, retained the impress of its Liberal origins and therefore remains at odds with his mature critique of political economy. Opinion within the Brenner camp seems to be divided over whether Marx actually abandoned the theory or not, but the issue is in any case irrelevant for them, since they claim it was rendered redundant by Marx's discovery that the key to the origin of capitalism lay in social property relations.[59]

Before discussing these claims, it is perhaps worth pointing out, for those who imagine that influences only come from books, that Marx was born and lived until young manhood in the Prussian Rhineland, one part of the German Lands where the influence of the French Revolution was most directly experienced, not least because of the French occupation. For Marx, therefore, the French Revolution was not something only to be absorbed from the works of French Liberals, but an historical experience only recently past, whose effects and unfulfilled promises still defined the politics of the time. In particular, they defined the debate over the forthcoming German Revolution. And this was not an abstract debate. There was going to be some sort of revolution - everybody but the dullest Prussian bureaucrat knew that. But what kind of revolution? What would its objectives be? What should 'extreme democrats' - socialists like Marx and Engels - argue for its objectives to be? In other words, Marx and Engels had to develop a theory of bourgeois revolution at least partly because they expected to be taking part in one, and needed to establish what the attitude of the working class movement should be in these circumstances. This is the context. However, even if we attempt to isolate their theoretical influences from their social environment, neither of the claims made by the Brenner school can be sustained.

[59] Comninel 1987, Chapter 3; Brenner 1989, pp. 280-5; Wood 1991, pp. 2-8; Teschke 2003, pp. 165-7.

First, Marx and Engels arrived at their mature theory of socio-economic transition long before the composition of the *Grundrisse* and it remained unchanged afterwards. Marx and Engels did, of course, inherit a series of important distinctions from their Enlightenment forebears. The distinction between one stage of subsistence and another (pastoral, agrarian, agricultural and commercial) they inherited from the French and the Scots; the distinction between no property and property they inherited from the Dutch and the English. But they abandoned the term 'mode of subsistence' and subsumed the process it describes within what they called the productive forces. And, while they continued to refer to property relations, it was now as part of the broader category that they called productive relations. When did the break from - or rather, the radicalisation of - their Enlightenment inheritance take place? The Brenner school is correct to say that *The German Ideology*, jointly written between 1845 and 1846, is in some ways still heavily dominated by the Scottish Historical School. Here, the concept of the productive forces is not yet twinned with the productive relations, but with 'forms of intercourse', which include, in addition to property relations, such aspects of 'social intercourse' as methods of transportation, which Marx in would subsequently assign to the forces of production. Nevertheless, although the terminology is sometimes inconsistent and consequently confusing, it is not the case that Marx and Engels simply identify economic development with the expansion of commerce and the resulting increased complexity of the division of labour. On the contrary, the latter has another source altogether: 'How far the productive forces of a nation are developed is shown most manifestly by the degree to which the division of labour has been carried.'[60] In other words, the extension of the division of labour is a function of the development of the productive forces, not the expansion of trade. But whatever problems there are with *The German Ideology*, it is clear that their mature position on socio-economic development was fully worked out by 1847 at the latest, in *The Poverty of Philosophy* and the original lecture upon which *Wage Labour and Capital* is based. That position did not subsequently change, as can be seen by comparing these texts with subsequent works from the *Grundrisse* through the 'Preface' to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* - a text which has always proved rather inconvenient for the Brenner school - to *Capital* itself.[61] Most of the references to bourgeois revolution by Marx and Engels post-date the turning point of 1847. Indeed, as late as *Capital* Volume I (1867), Marx refers to total dominance of the money-form only being implemented 'on a national scale' towards the end of the eighteenth century 'during the French bourgeois revolution'.[62]

Second, Marx and Engels did not simply take over the theory of bourgeois revolution from the French Liberals and give it a name for the first time. Marx famously wrote in a letter of 1852 to Joseph Weydemeyer: 'Long before me bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this

[60] Marx and Engels 1975-2004, p. 32.
[61] Marx 1975-2004a (1847), p. 166; Marx 1975-2004c (1847/9), p. 211; Marx and Engels 1973 (1848), p. 72; Marx 1973a (1857-8), p. 277; Marx 1975 (1859), p. 425; Marx 1976 (1867), p. 175, note 35; Engels 1975-2004d (1886), p. 390; Marx 1981 (1894), pp. 927-8, 1024.
[62] Marx 1976, p. 183.

class struggle and bourgeois economists the economic anatomy of classes.'[63] But these comments refer to the class struggle, not to the bourgeois revolution. The bourgeoisie's own conception of their revolution had in any case begun to change by the early 1830s, a process which coincides too closely with the end of political economy as a science and the turn to naked ideological support for the system to be accidental. We can see the change, in a British context, in the writings of Thomas Babington Macaulay. On 2 March 1831 Macaulay made an incendiary speech in the House of Commons in support of the Reform Bill, in which he argued that political forms had to adapt to changed property relations and gave examples from history, including the French Revolution, of how this had happened. Yet, if we turn to his great work, *The History of England from the Accession of James II* (1848-1857) which actually describes how those property forms were consolidated in the Revolution of 1688, the subject has changed to that of constitutional liberty, and it is the continuity of English history – from which both James and his uncle had temporarily broken - which is both celebrated and contrasted with that of France, where continuity was lost. Is it too much too suggest that this change in attitude was produced, even unconsciously, by the new fear of working-class revolution? The English were of course fortunate in having what Macaulay called the 'preserving revolution' of 1688 to point to as their decisive turning point. The French did not and consequently could not simply ignore or downplay the events of 1789 in the same way as the English did those of 1640. Nevertheless, we are dealing here with a general ideological shift. The consolidation of capitalist society increasingly led to the separation of economics and politics. In parallel, the bourgeoisie increasingly rewrote the history of their own revolutionary rise to power so that each individual moment appeared to be a political rather than social revolution.

In other words, by the time Marx and Engels came to consider the issue, bourgeois thought had begun to reinterpret the great revolutions in terms which gave greater emphasis to 'liberty', or the achievement of constitutional government, than to ‘property’, or the unshackling of a new economic order. Faced with this retreat, to have retained the original insights of the revolutionary bourgeois thinkers would in itself have been an intellectual achievement, but in fact Marx and Engels moved beyond their predecessors. Just as they did not restrict themselves to defending Classical Political Economy from the 'hired prize-fighters of capital', but undertook a critique of the entire intellectual tradition, neither did they confine themselves to restating the political doctrines of French (or more properly, Franco-British) Liberalism, but separated out the issues of liberty, property and agency in a way that bourgeois thinkers themselves were ideologically incapable of doing. As a result they transformed conceptions of revolutionary change to at least the same extent as they did to, say, the law of value.

Confusion over this issue may be due to the fact that Marx and Engels theorised both bourgeois and proletarian revolutions at the same time, and in both cases drew heavily from the example of the

[63] Marx to Weydemeyer 1975-2005, p. 60.

French Revolution. This is not in itself a problem, since, as Lukacs later noted: 'From the Great French Revolution on, all revolutions exhibit the same pattern with increasing intensity.'[64] Marx and Engels drew, however, on different aspects of the French experience in relation to these two types of social revolution. If the *form* of the French Revolution (mass popular democratic upheavals) foreshadowed the process of proletarian revolution, the *consequences* (overthrow of absolutist restrictions on capitalist development) defined the nature of bourgeois revolutions. It was this consequentialism which they saw as linking the French with the Dutch and English Revolutions, despite their other differences. And it is in this respect that Marx and Engels differ most significantly from their contemporaries like Guizot. As far as I am aware, their position was anticipated only once, by Pierre-Louis Roederer (1754-1835), a participant in the French Revolution who, unlike Barnave, survived to re-enter political life during the Restoration.

We should first note Roederer's exasperated dismissal of the argument that the French Revolution was simply a political squabble - a view that was already circulating in the 1830s: 'And what a goal for a nation of twenty-five million men, what a deplorable goal for such a deployment of forces and wills - the overthrow of a king and his replacement by some upstart!' Like Barnave, Roederer too noted the ideological change that had already taken place prior to 1789: 'The revolution was made in men's minds and habits before it was made into law.' And Roederer thought he knew in whose minds these changes had occurred: 'It was the opinion of the middle class that gave the signal to the lower classes.' But Roederer did not believe that the revolution had been made for economic reasons:

> The principal motive of the revolution was not free lands and persons from all servitude, and industry from all restraint. It was not the interest of property nor that of liberty. It was impatience with the inequalities of right that existed at that time; it was the passion for equality.

But just because the revolution was not directly made for economic reasons did not mean that it had no effect on economic development: 'What the nation did for liberty and property was only the consequence and side effect of what it did to achieve equality of rights.' Here Roederer was breaking new ground by suggesting that the release of new forms of property and production by the overthrow of absolutism might not have been the intention of the majority of actors, who may have had quite other objectives.[65] I have no idea whether Marx and Engels read Roederer or not, but this is relatively unimportant. Roederer's insight, to which he refers only in passing, is central to Marx' and Engels' conception of bourgeois revolution.

Take, for example, the 'Manifesto of the Communist Party' itself. One interesting fact which is revealed by actually reading this immortal work is that it mentions the French Revolution precisely twice, once in passing as an example of changes in property relations, and once on the final page in the

[64] Lukacs 1971c, p. 308.
[65] Roederer 1989, pp. 4, 5, 6, 7.

context of a discussion on the nature of the forthcoming German revolution. The latter page also contains the only reference to the bourgeois revolution in the entire pamphlet.[66] Moreover, if we turn to the pages in which Marx and Engels discuss the achievements of the bourgeoisie, the revolutions to which it does refer are 'in the modes of production and exchange'. The hymns of praise to the bourgeoisie with which the 'Manifesto' itself opens refer to its economic and social achievements, not to its political capacity for seizing power. In this context, it is by no means clear that Marx and Engels expected the bourgeoisie itself to burst asunder the fetters invoked in the famous metaphor that follows.[67] Marx and Engels did invoke the revolutionary role of the bourgeoisie, for quite specific reasons closely related to the politics of the time. During the brief revolutionary period between 1847 and 1849 Marx and Engels took every opportunity both to identify and explain the inadequacies of the German bourgeoisie, which 'had developed so sluggishly, so pusillanimously and so slowly, that it saw itself threateningly confronted by the proletariat, and all those sections of the urban population related to the proletariat in interests and ideas, at the very moment of its own threatening confrontation with feudalism and absolutism.'[68] One way of drawing attention to the shortcomings of the contemporary bourgeoisie in Germany was by highlighting the virtues of the historical bourgeoisie in England and - especially - France. 'Reading these texts', comments Michael Lowy, 'one often gets the impression that Marx only extolled the virtues of the revolutionary bourgeoisie of 1789 the more effectively to stigmatise the "misbegotten" German version of 1848.'[69] Comprehensible in the context of arguments over political alliances at the time, these claims nevertheless involved a degree of exaggeration. In 1848, for example, Marx wrote of the English and French Revolutions that 'the bourgeoisie was the class which was genuinely to be found at the head of the movement' - a statement which is true only in a very qualified sense. And Marx does indeed go on to qualify it. Marx points out that what he called 'plebeian' methods were required to achieve and defend both the English and French Revolutions, methods from which the bourgeoisie themselves shrank, but that these could not have been successful if the economic conditions had not themselves developed to the extent that the new social order of the bourgeoisie could inherit; otherwise absolutist rule would simply have re-established itself.[70]

None of this suggests a fixation on the revolutionary bourgeoisie. Indeed, Engels much later generalised 'a law of evolution of bourgeois society' from these observations in a discussion of the English case.[71] Whether Engels is actually describing a general law is open to doubt; it seems rather to be one specific to the early period of capitalist development, since plebeian activity is no longer decisive after the Revolutions of 1848. Marx made the same point more generally in *Capital*: "The

[66] Marx and Engels 1973, pp. 80, 98. Indeed, some writers seem to believe that the Manifesto does not refer to the bourgeois revolution at all. See Anderson 1992, p. 107.
[67] Marx and Engels 1973, pp. 69, 70, 72.
[68] Marx 1973b, pp. 193.
[69] Lowy 1989, p. 115.
[70] Marx 1975-2004a, p. 319; Marx 1973b, p. 192.
[71] Engels 1975-2004f, pp. 291-2.

knights of industry, however, only succeeded in supplanting the knights of the sword by making use of events in which they had played no part whatsoever.'[72]

However, it was not only plebeians or proto-proletarians that could clear the way for capitalist development on behalf of the bourgeoisie. 'Since it is an army of officers', wrote Engels of the bourgeoisie, 'it must ensure the support of the workers or it must buy political power piecemeal from those forces confronting it from above, in particular, from the monarchy.'[73] As Engels subsequently noted, however, There were situations, however, where money was insufficient and sections of the existing feudal ruling class were prepared to take political action to advance the development of capitalism, which the bourgeoisie itself was unwilling or unable to take. The notion of 'revolution from above' was first used by Engels in relation to Germany and took two forms. First, that brought 'from above and outside' by the French Revolution.[74] Second, those brought 'from above and within' by a section of the old Prussian ruling class.[75] This involved an ironic reversal of roles: 'The grave-diggers of the Revolution of 1848 had become the executors of its will.'[76] Nor was his analysis restricted to Germany:

> The Revolution of 1848, not less than many of its predecessors, has had strange bedfellows and successors. The very people who put it down have become, as Karl Marx used to say, its testamentary executors. Louis Napoleon had to create an independent and united Italy, Bismarck had to revolutionise Germany and to restore Hungarian independence, and the English manufacturers had to enact the People's Charter.[77]

Such an analysis is as incompatible with 'bourgeois paradigms' as Marx' and Engels' earlier discussions of 1649, 1792 and 1848.

Marx' and Engels' own analysis was continued by those Marxists who remained faithful to their method. Lenin's starting position, for example, was the same one with which Engels finished: 'If you want to consider the question "historically", the example of any European country will show you that it was a series of governments, not by any means "provisional", that carried out the historical aims of the bourgeois revolution, that even the governments which defeated the revolution were nonetheless forced to carry out the historical aims of that defeated revolution.'[78] This position had specific implications for Russia. In his reflections on the fiftieth anniversary of the 'peasant reform' of 1861 Lenin described it as 'a bourgeois reform carried out by feudal landowners', at the instigation of the greatest feudal landowner of all, Tsar Alexander II, who had 'to admit that it would be better to emancipate *from above* than to wait until he was overthrown *from below*'. Lenin identified three main reasons for these

[72] Marx 1976, p. 875.
[73] Engels 1974, p. 122.
[74] Engels 1975-2004b, p. 155.
[75] Engels 1975-2004e, pp. 464-6.
[76] Engels 1975-2004g, p. 513.
[77] Engels 1975-2004c, p. 297.
[78] Lenin 1960-70b, p. 42.

initiatives: the growth of capitalist relations of production through the increase in trade, military failure in the Crimea and the upsurge in peasant insurgency in the countryside. But even the reforms were only achieved through 'a struggle waged *within* the ruling class, a struggle waged for the most part *within the ranks of the landowner class*. As a result, 'the year 1861 begat the year 1905', the period in Russian history which Lenin describes as ‘the era of her bourgeois revolutions'.[79]

Lenin here introduces the idea that a bourgeois revolution can be spread over a prolonged period - an 'era' - although it is a period that has a definite end point. Characteristically, however, he envisages the resolution of the Russian bourgeois revolution as one that could take more than one form. Lenin saw 'revolution from above' as one of two alternative paths to bourgeois revolution in Russia, based on the 'two types of bourgeois agrarian evolution' which had occurred in Europe and its overseas extensions. In the first, the 'Prussian' (or reformist) path, the landowners of the great estates would gradually replace feudal methods of exploitation those of capitalism, retaining feudal instruments of social control over their tenants (at least in the medium term), but ultimately transforming themselves into large capitalist landowners or farmers. In the second, the 'American' (or revolutionary) path, the landowners are overthrown, feudal or other pre-capitalist controls are removed and the estates redistributed among the previous tenants, who now emerge as a new class of medium capitalist farmers.[80] The 'Prussian' path had been underway in Russia since 1861. Was the alternative American path a possibility? If so, who would lead it?

> Does not the very concept 'bourgeois revolution' imply that it can be accomplished only by the bourgeoisie? … A liberation movement that it bourgeois in social and economic content is not such because of its motive forces. The motive force may be, not the bourgeoisie, but the proletariat and the peasantry. Why is this possible? Because the proletariat and the peasantry suffer even more than the bourgeoisie from the survivals of serfdom, because they are in greater need of freedom and the abolition of landlord oppression. For the bourgeoisie, on the contrary, complete victory constitutes a danger, since the proletariat will make use of full freedom against the bourgeoisie, and the fuller that freedom and the more completely the power of the landlords has been destroyed, the easier will it be for the proletariat to do so. Hence the bourgeoisie strives to put an end to the bourgeois revolution half-way from its destination, when freedom has been only half-won, by a deal with the old authorities and the landlords.[81]

During the same period Trotsky took the argument still further, asking in 1906, 'is it inevitable that the proletarian dictatorship should be shattered against the barriers of the bourgeois revolution, or is it possible that in the given *world-historical* conditions, it may discover before it the prospect of victory on breaking through those barriers?' His answer was that such a self-denying ordinance should be rejected by socialists for the strategy of permanent revolution made possible by the growth and

[79] Lenin 1960-70d, pp. 120-2, 125, 128.
[80] Lenin 1960-70a, p. 239.
[81] Lenin 1960-70c, pp. 334-5. See also Lenin 1960-70b, pp. 49-51.

interconnectedness of the world economy.[82] Like Engels, Trotsky rejected the idea that the bourgeoisie itself had ever been at the forefront of revolutionary struggle, writing in 1923: 'When the movement of the lower layers overflowed and when the old social order or political regime was overthrown, then power dropped almost automatically into the hands of the liberal bourgeoisie.' Unlike the petty-bourgeoisie who actually carried out the early bourgeois revolutions, they had no need to consciously organise for the seizure of power: 'The liberal bourgeoisie (the French in 1789, the Russian in 1917) can content itself with waiting for the elemental mass movement and then at the last moment throw into the scales its wealth, its education, its connection with the state apparatus, and in this way seize the helm.'[83]

Other Marxists associated with the early years of the Third International advanced the analysis further. What if a mass movement of the petty bourgeoisie was not forthcoming? In this connection Georg Lukacs made a number of important observations in *History and Class Consciousness* (1922), at one point going beyond even the notion of 'revolution from above':

> The true revolutionary element is the economic transformation of the feudal system of production into a capitalist one so that it would be possible in theory for this process to take place *without a bourgeois revolution*, without political upheaval on the part of the revolutionary bourgeoisie. And in that case those parts of the feudal and absolutist superstructure that were not eliminated by ‘revolutions from above’ would collapse of their own accord when capitalism was already fully developed. (The German situation fits this pattern in certain respects.)[84]

In fact, the 'feudal and absolutist superstructures' rarely 'collapsed of their own accord', but they certainly collapsed. When the Hapsburg Empire disintegrated under the weight of military defeat, and nationalist and working-class pressure, Austro-Hungary fragmented into several different states which were already dominated by the capitalist mode of production to a greater (Austria, Czechoslovakia) or lesser (Hungary) extent. No revolution was required and, indeed, the only ones that threatened were socialist revolutions that were in each case defeated. But the essential point is correct: not every country is required to undergo a bourgeois revolution. Once a sufficient number of countries had undergone the process to establish a capitalist world economy, the need to compete within it ensured that most ruling classes would implement a series of incremental adaptations to the new order. But the creation of such of a capitalist world economy was not in the gift of Britain alone to deliver; it only emerged in the last quarter of the nineteenth century - indeed, the opening of the imperialist stage of capitalist development is itself indicative of the fact that such an economy had formed. The dominance of capitalist economy does mean, however, that the bourgeoisie has to be in direct control of the state: 'The necessary link between the economic premises of the bourgeoisie and its demands for political

[82] Trotsky 1969, pp. 67, 77.
[83] Trotsky 1974a, p. 348.
[84] Lukacs 1971b, p. 282.

democracy or the rule of law, which - even if only partially - as established by in the great French Revolution on the ruins of feudal absolutism, has grown looser.'[85] However, as Lukacs explains elsewhere, the bourgeoisie, more than any previous ruling class, has never needed to take direct control of the state apparatus; all it required was that the apparatus functioned on its behalf.[86]

A similar point was made independently by Antonio Gramsci in his fascist prison during the late 1920s and early 1930s. In these writings Gramsci developed the analysis of Germany which had first been made by Engels. Gramsci draws a comparison between the English and German revolutions which may appear counter-intuitive, but only to those who mistakenly consider socio-political developments in the former country to be unique. In fact, as Gramsci suggests, the link is in the continued role of the nobility, in the case of England where a majority some had already made the transition to capitalist forms of exploitation by the revolutionary era, and in the case of Germany, where a majority saw the necessity to make such a transition. Gramsci extended the analysis to his native Italy, where the kingdom of Piedmont played the role taken by Prussia in relation to Germany: 'This fact is of the greatest importance for the concept of "passive revolution" - the fact, that is, that what was involved was not a social group which "led" other groups, but a State which, even though it had limitations as a power, "led" the group which should have been "leading" and was able to put at the latter's disposal an army and politico-diplomatic strength.'[87] The concept of 'passive revolution' is perhaps the most evocative one to describe the process of ‘revolution from above' developed within the classical tradition: the dignity of action is reserved, in the main, for the state and the forces which it can bring into play, rather than the masses themselves.

These views were not, however, restricted to the writings of a handful of important theorists. They were widespread in the scholarship of the Lenin era. One work of the early 1920s by O. V. Pletner, *The History of the Meiji Era*, noted that 'the class of feudal lords remained in power' in Japan after 1868, but that they 'rejected all outmoded feudal norms and started the rapid development of capitalism on the new economic basis'. Pletner took the view that it was the consequences that were important rather than the role of the bourgeoisie:

> Hence the term 'revolution' may be used in relation to the Meiji Ishin only conventionally. It may be called 'bourgeois' only from the viewpoint of its results, which does not mean at all that the bourgeoisie played the most important role at that time.[88]

Perhaps the most interesting comments of all, however, were made relatively late (1932) by Georges Lefebvre, one of the historians often criticised for presenting too heroic a picture of the 'rising

[85] Lukacs 1970, p. 20.
[86] Lukacs 1971c, p. 307.
[87] Gramsci 1971, pp. 82-3, 105.
[88] Quoted in Mikhailova 1993, pp. 33-34.

bourgeoisie'. Here he is criticising the interpretation of the French Revolution associated with Jean Jaures:

> Today this view strikes us as excessively summary. In the first place, it does not explain why the advent of the bourgeoisie occurred at that moment and not at some other time, and, more particularly, why in France it took the form of a sudden mutation, whereas it could well have taken the form of a gradual, if not an entirely peaceful, evolution, as occurred elsewhere. … It is thus clear that the economic interpretation of history does not commit us to simple views. The rise of a revolutionary class is not necessarily the only cause of its triumph, and it is not *inevitable* that it should be victorious or, in any case, victorious in a violent manner. In the present case the Revolution was launched by those whom it was going to sweep away, not by those who were to be its beneficiaries.[89]

I could go on, but it should be clear by now that the classical Marxist tradition was never committed to the conventional version of the bourgeois revolution, in which a fully conscious bourgeois class announces the abolition of feudalism, executes the king and then proclaims the republic to the thunderous applause of Parliament, the Assembly, or their local equivalents. In so far as the French Revolution could be described in these terms, it was seen as an exception.

In so far as there was a weakness in the classical tradition, it stemmed from adopting a similar polemical strategies of unfavourably comparing the historical and contemporary bourgeoisies that had earlier been adopted by Marx and Engels themselves. In 1905, for example, Trotsky used the French example to attack the Russian bourgeoisie, which was then displaying even greater political cowardice than the German bourgeoisie had 60 years earlier. These modern liberals were repelled by their Jacobin ancestors, Trotsky noted, but the working class was not: 'The proletariat, however radically it may have, in practice, broken with the revolutionary traditions of the bourgeoisie, nevertheless preserves them, as a sacred tradition of great passions, heroism and initiative, and its heart beats in sympathy with the speeches and acts of the Jacobin Convention.'[90] In addition to invoking the heroic bourgeois past, Trotsky also introduces a notion to which we will have cause to return, that of the 'revolutionary traditions'. These could be turned against, not only the modern bourgeoisie, but reformist tendencies within the working class. In 'Where is Britain Going?' (1925) Trotsky was careful to state that Cromwell and the Independents are no sense forerunners of socialism, but nevertheless uses their revolutionary example to expose claims by Ramsay MacDonald and others that British development is characterised by 'gradualness'. What emerges is the idea - which Trotsky elsewhere rejected - that Communists within the working class movement play the same role as the Independents and Jacobins played within the bourgeoisie: 'It can be with some justice said that Lenin is the proletarian twentieth-century Cromwell.'[91]

[89] Reproduced in Hobsbawm 1990, p. 133,
[90] Trotsky 1969, p. 54.
[91] Trotsky 1974, p. 86.

Overall, however, the theoretical resources of classical Marxism in relation to this subject are therefore far richer, far subtler, than is usually supposed by most critics. It comes as no surprise to discover, therefore, that whatever their specific conclusions, all attempts to revise or abandon the theory of bourgeois revolution have one aspect in common: the theory which they criticise is significantly different from the one held by Marx and Engels and their followers in the classical Marxist tradition. What the revisionists are criticising is therefore itself a revision, a departure from the complexity of the original position. How and why did it take place?

Theories of Bourgeois Revolution 3: from the Second International to Stalinism

The origin of what I will call the conventional theory of bourgeois revolution also lie within classical Marxism, but not in the discussions that I have just surveyed. Rather, it is derived from the general formula contained in the first section of the 'Manifesto of the Communist Party': 'The [written] history of hitherto existing society is the history class struggles.'[92] More precisely, it derives from how this formula was codified within the Second International. In the opening paragraphs of the pamphlet Marx and Engels give a list of pairs of antagonistic classes. The list is so familiar, the rhetoric in which it is presented so overwhelming, that the difficulties it represents are often overlooked. Partly these stem from inconsistencies within the pairings: as Geoffrey de Ste Croix has pointed out, in so far as the opposing classes are divided between exploiters and exploited, the first couple identified by Marx and Engels should be slaveowners and slaves, rather than freemen and slaves.[93] Nevertheless, with this exception, the pairs listed are indeed 'exploiter and exploited'. Marx and Engels, however, refer to them as 'oppressor and oppressed'. Furthermore, they claim that these are binary oppositions in which the victory of one side is associated with 'either a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes'.[94] Let us leave aside - for now - questions of whether slaves or serfs were capable of 'reconstituting society', and of the absence of the bourgeoisie from the list. The problem is that we are invited to view history, not only as involving a series of class struggles, but as involving a series of class struggles in which one hitherto subordinate class overthrows and takes over from its predecessor, until the working class, the 'universal class', overthrows the bourgeoisie and puts an end to the process by initiating the dissolution of all classes. These paragraphs tended to be read together with a set of key texts that appeared to suggest that history was a succession of ever more developed modes of production. In the 1859 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* Marx famously wrote that 'the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development of society'.[95] Marx is not proposing a universal succession of modes of production. Those listed here are only chronological in two senses. One is that, as Eric Hobsbawm puts it, 'each of these systems is in crucial

[92] Marx and Engels 1973, p. 67.
[93] Ste Croix 1981, p. 66.
[94] Marx and Engels 1973, p. 68.

respects further removed from the primitive state of man'.[96] The other is that this is the order in which these modes of production arose historically. Neither sense suggests that every social formation is fated to pass under the dominance of each mode of production in succession. Nevertheless, this passage was interpreted to mean that history should be understood as a universal succession of increasingly more developed modes of production - an understanding compatible with broader, non-Marxist, notions of evolutionary progress. In other words, the conventional theory of bourgeois revolution arose as a specific application of the general theory of historical development, in this case that the defeat of the lords by the bourgeoisie leads to (or even is equivalent to) the supersession of feudalism by capitalism.

What made this application more plausible than it might otherwise have been was the fact that Marx, Engels and some later Marxists like Trotsky did invoke the revolutionary role of the bourgeoisie, for quite specific reasons closely related to the politics of the time. The danger was that, shorn of context or qualification, statements like those that I quoted earlier by Marx and Trotsky could be used to licence, not only an overly heroic view of the bourgeoisie's political role, but the notion that the bourgeois revolution was essentially the same kind of experience as the socialist revolution, complete with political leadership and organisation, the only real difference being their class basis. The point here is not to deny the significance of the Independents or the Jacobins, or to dispute their relevance to the bourgeois revolutions, but to question how typical they were of the bourgeoisie and how typical their revolutions were of the ways in which capitalism was consolidated.

The second source of the conventional theory of bourgeois revolution emerged from the historic memory of broader labour movement. The early Atlantic working class was by experience and instinct international in orientation, as Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have shown in *The Many-Headed Hydra*. But as the same authors also demonstrate, after the initial period of formation it fragmented on an increasingly national basis.[97] As these movements stabilised in the second half of the nineteenth century and moved to establish permanent parties and trade unions, reformism emerged as a coherent form of ideology and organisation. One consequence was the search for predecessors from which to construct a native radical tradition - a tradition that was, by definition, non-working class. Where Marxism distinguished between historical classes on the basis of different positions within the relations of production and consequently the different capacities that each possessed, these traditions made 'the people' their central category. What then was their unifying theme, if not the succession of classes? It was democracy. It became important to identify struggles that could be retrospectively endorsed and assimilated into a narrative of democratic advance, the closing episode of which had opened with the formation of the labour movement. In most cases the radical traditions were directly inherited from left liberalism, particularly in those countries – above all, Britain, but also France – where Marxism was initially weakest and where liberal connections with labour were political and organisational as well as

[95] Marx 1975, p. 426.
[96] Hobsbawm, 1965, p. 38.
[97] Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, p. 352.

ideological. In effect, these traditions tended to become a populist alternative narrative to what one early radical liberal historian, John Richard Green, called 'drum and trumpet' histories.[98] In Britain, for example, the official ruling class conception of 'Our Island Story' highlighted the Magna Charta and the Bill of Rights as the foundations of English liberty; but in 'the People's Story' it was the Peasant's Revolt and the Cromwellian Commonwealth which feature as the crucial episodes. (Discussion of divisions *within* the Parliamentary side, notably those between the Levellers and Independents, only really began after the First World War.) The view of history as the unfolding of representative democracy was deeply influential within the emerging worker's movements over the second half of the nineteenth century - understandably, since gaining the male franchise was one of its main objectives. And, of course, there was a Marxist justification for this emphasis since the 'Manifesto' had argued that that winning the 'battle for democracy' was the road to working class power.[99] 'Between the 1860s and the First World War', writes Geoff Eley, 'socialist parties became the torchbearers of democracy in Europe.'[100]

Two strands of thought about historical development had therefore emerged within the socialist and labour movement by the second half of the nineteenth century. One, embedded in the codified Marxism of the Second International but accepted in diluted form far more generally across the movement, saw history as a progression of successively more advanced modes of production, emerging and overtaking their predecessors through the mechanism of the class struggle, and which would culminate in socialism. The other, which predated the widespread adoption of Marxism by the movement but maintained its influence afterwards, saw history as the ongoing struggle for democratic representation for the majority of the population that would also culminate in socialism. By the period between the founding of the Second International in 1889 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, most national labour movements, even those nominally committed to Marxism, had incorporated both strands, which converged on periods of bourgeois revolution. In the resulting synthesis, the bourgeoisie were presumed to have been the leading actors in the struggle to supplant the feudal lords and to have done so (in alliance with other classes) through the demand for democracy. The failure of the bourgeoisie to establish full democracy meant that it now had to be accomplished by the working class and in so doing would open up the road to socialism. The problems with this conception, both in respect of the role of the bourgeoisie in the bourgeois revolutions and the relationship of the bourgeois revolutions to democracy, should not require restatement by now. A more realistic viw was maintained by the left-wing of Social Democracy, particularly in Russia; yet it was from Russia that the third and final component of the conventional view of the bourgeois revolution was eventually to emerge.

The Russian Marxist tradition, as it emerged from the 1880s onwards, was virtually the only one within the Second International to devote serious discussion to the question of the bourgeois

[98] Green 1888, p. xviii.
[99] Marx and Engels 1973, p. 86.
[100] Eley 2002, p. 109.

revolution; unsurprisingly, since Russia was the major area in Europe which still had to undergo this experience. However, with main exception of Trotsky, virtually every tendency within Russian Marxism referred to the forthcoming revolution as bourgeois-*democratic* in nature – a compound term which had not appeared in the work of Marx or Engels. The use of this term did not mean they necessarily regarded the earlier bourgeois revolutions as having been democratic in either their goals or their accomplishments. It meant rather that the Russian revolution would be both bourgeois in content (i.e. it would establish the unimpeded development of capitalism) and that it would introduce democratic politics which the working class could use to further its own demands. In the early 1920s the Communist International – still a revolutionary organisation at this point, of course – extended this analysis to the colonial or semi-colonial world in which (with some important exceptions like China and India) the working class was even weaker than it had been in Russia forty years earlier. In these countries socialism was not immediately on the agenda, but democratic rights were a necessary prerequisite for the organisation of movements for socialism and national liberation. (In the early theses on the subject Lenin insisted that the phrase 'bourgeois-democratic' be replaced by 'national-revolutionary', as the former tended to disguise the reformist, if not totally accommodating role which the local bourgeoisies played in relation to the colonial powers.[101]) This was a serious strategy at the time, as not even Trotsky believed that permanent revolution was feasible outside of Russia. Furthermore, the conception did not distort the understanding of historical bourgeois revolutions within the Communist International - indeed, as we have seen this achieved a new level of sophistication, particularly in the work of Lukacs.

However, as the Communist International degenerated along with the Russian Revolution which gave it birth, the concept of the 'bourgeois-democratic revolution' began to shift from one which advocated allying with bourgeois (or even pre-bourgeois) forces only where they were genuinely involved in fighting imperialism, to a stages theory in which support had to be given to the supposedly 'revolutionary' bourgeoisie as a matter of course, in line with Stalin's foreign policy. This was disastrous enough politically, most of all in the Chinese Revolution of the late 1920s, but it also affected how history was written. From the onset of the period of the Popular Front in 1935, there was effectively a fusion of Stalinist conceptions with the two pre-existing theories of historical stages on the one hand and the struggle for democracy on the other. This involved two retreats from the classical Marxist conception of bourgeois revolution.

One was that the notion of a 'bourgeois–democratic' revolution was now read back into history and applied to England, France, and the other countries where bourgeois revolutions had been identified. The main problem is that, although a minority of the bourgeois revolutions involved episodes of democracy, none resulted in the establishment of permanent representative institutions; most did not involve popular insurgencies of any sort. Nor was this the only distortion. In the Stalinist model,

[101] Lenin 1977, pp. 110-1.

democracy became one of a checklist of 'tasks' borrowed from the French Revolution - the others were the agrarian question and national unification – which had to be ticked off before the bourgeois revolution could be declared complete. If these 'tasks' were really taken seriously, then the Japanese revolution was incomplete until the agrarian reforms imposed by the US occupiers after 1945. Unfortunately this introduces further problems since the American Revolution itself was presumably unfinished until the black civil rights legislation of the mid-1960s. And in relation to my own country, the Scottish Revolution has presumably still to be consummated in the absence of an independent Scottish state. The absurdity of such notions should be obvious. There are still important unresolved democratic issues in most countries in the world, but they have nothing to do with the accomplishment or consolidation of capitalism. It is important to understand how widely these misconceptions about 'the tasks of the bourgeois revolution' were accepted, even by Trotsky, Stalin's greatest opponent. As we have seen, Trotsky was clear that, in terms of agency, the French Revolution was led by the petty bourgeoisie rather than the bourgeoisie as such; but he still accepted that the 'tasks' which it allegedly accomplished were necessary components of any bourgeois revolution. It was for this reason that he tended to treat events like the Meiji Revolution - which of course failed to accomplish all of these 'tasks' - as substitutes for, or means of avoiding bourgeois revolutions, rather than bourgeois revolutions themselves.[102] But as Alex Callinicos writes: 'Surely it is more sensible, rather than invoke the metaphysical concept of a "'complete and genuine solution" [to the tasks of the bourgeois revolution], to judge a bourgeois revolution by the degree to which it succeeds in establishing an autonomous centre of capital accumulation, even if it fails to democratise the political order, or to eliminate feudal social relations.'[103]

The other shift was, if anything, even more damaging to historical understanding. Rather than being the beneficiaries of the revolutions that bear their name - revolutions in which they played a greater or lesser role depending on specific circumstances - the bourgeoisie was presented as the social class directly responsible for bringing them about. But to discuss the bourgeoisie as if it had been a revolutionary class then in the same way that the proletariat is a revolutionary class now is to go beyond making an analogy between bourgeois and proletarian revolutions: it is to claim that they share a common structure.

Isaac Deutscher and the Recovery of the Classical Tradition

I want now to return to my starting point in the work of Isaac Deutscher. As a survivor of the 'midnight in the century' who had been personally involved in the Communist movement at the end of the classical epoch, he stood in direct line of continuity with the traditions of pre-Stalinist Marxism on bourgeois revolutions. Deutscher's work is not above criticism; indeed, he also claimed that bourgeois

[102] Trotsky 1972, p. 291. Compare two writers from the Stalinist tradition: Hobsbawm 1975, p. 151 and Soboul 1977, pp. 167-68.
[103] Callinicos 1982, p. 110.

and proletarian revolutions shared a common structure, but in his case it was because he thought that the proletarian revolution could be assimilated to the bourgeois revolution, rather than the other way round. In other words, the difficulty is with his top-down conception of socialism, not his view of the bourgeois revolutions, which was uncompromisingly realistic and quite unencumbered with fallacious assumptions about the relationship between them and popular democracy.[104] Deutscher specifically wrote about the subject in two lengthy passages.

The first is from his 1949 biography, *Stalin*:

> Europe, in the nineteenth century, saw how the feudal order, outside France, crumbled and was replaced by the bourgeois one. But east of the Rhine, feudalism was not overthrown by a series of upheavals on the pattern of the French Revolution, by explosions of popular despair and anger, by revolutions from below, for the spread of which some of the Jacobins had hoped in 1794. Instead, European feudalism was either destroyed or undermined by a series of revolutions from above. Napoleon, the tamer of Jacobitism at home, carried the revolution into foreign lands, to Italy, to the Rhineland, and to Poland, where he abolished serfdom, completely or in part, and where his code destroyed many of the feudal privileges. *Malgré lui-meme*, he executed parts of the political testament of Jacobitism. More paradoxically, the Conservative Junker, Bismarck, performed a similar function when he freed Germany from many survivals of feudalism which encumbered her bourgeois development. The second generation after the French Revolution witnessed an even stranger spectacle, when the Russian Tsar himself abolished serfdom in Russia and Poland, a deed of which not so long before only 'Jacobins' had dreamt. The feudal order had been too moribund to survive; but outside France the popular forces arrayed against it were too weak to overthrow it 'from below'; and so it was swept away 'from above'.[105]

Here Deutscher identifies two different types of revolutions from above. One is where states established by revolutions from below, like those of Cromwell or Napoleon, spread the revolution externally by military intervention. The other is where the *ancien regime* itself – or elements within it – imposes capitalist social relations internally through their control of the existing state apparatus.

The second passage comes from the 1967 Trevelyan lectures, which formed the basis of his last book, *The Unfinished Revolution*:

> The traditional view [of the bourgeois revolution], widely accepted by Marxists and non-marxists alike, is that in such revolutions, in Western Europe, the bourgeois played the leading part, stood at the head of the insurgent people, and seized power. This view underlies many controversies among historians; the recent exchanges, for example, between Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper and Mr Christopher Hill on whether the Cromwellian revolution was or was not bourgeois in character. It seems to me that this conception, to whatever authorities it may be attributed, is schematic and unreal. From it one may well arrive at the conclusion that bourgeois revolution is almost a myth, and that it has hardly ever occurred, even in the West.

[104] Davidson 2004b, pp. 105-6.

> Capitalist entrepreneurs, merchants, and bankers were not conspicuous among the leaders of the Puritans or the commanders of the Ironsides, in the Jacobin Club or at the head of the crowds that stormed the Bastille or invaded the Tuileries. Nor did they seize the reins of government during the revolution nor for a long time afterwards, either in England or in France. The lower middle classes, the urban poor, the plebeians and *sans culottes* made up the big insurgent battalions. The leaders were mostly 'gentlemen farmers' in England and lawyers, doctors, journalists and other intellectuals in France. Here and there the upheavals ended in military dictatorship. Yet the bourgeois character of these revolutions will not appear at all mythical, if we approach them with a broader criterion and view their general impact on society. Their most substantial and enduring achievement was to sweep way the social and political institutions that that had hindered the growth of bourgeois property and of the social relationships that went with it. When the Puritans denied the Crown the right of arbitrary taxation, when Cromwell secured for English shipowners a monopolistic position in England's trading with foreign countries, and when the Jacobins abolished feudal prerogatives and privileges and, they created, often unknowingly, the conditions in which manufacturers, merchants, and bankers were bound to gain economic predominance, and, in the long run, social and even political supremacy. Bourgeois revolution creates the conditions in which bourgeois property can flourish. In this, rather than in the particular alignments of the struggle, lies its *differentia specifica*.[106]

The second type of revolution from above is important in relation to his more general argument concerning the definition of bourgeois revolutions. These cannot be defined by reference to class position of the social forces that carried them out, since in neither case were these composed of capitalists or even members of the bourgeoisie. Nor can they be defined by their intentions, since neither the English Independents nor the French Jacobins were primarily motivated by establishing capitalist relations of production; the Prussian Junkers and Japanese Samurai were concerned with this outcome, but more as a means of strengthening the international political and military positions of their respective states than with the profitability of their individual estates.

Deutscher was not alone in identifying two characteristics of bourgeois revolutions as being 'revolution from above' as a possible means and their consequences as being the decisive factor in assessing whether they had occurred. Several other writers from the Trotskyist tradition - including those who were the most critical of his views on Stalinism, like Max Shachtman and Tony Cliff - took essentially the same positions. In relation to the first, Cliff wrote in 1949: ‘The "Bismarckian" path was not the exception for the bourgeoisie, but the rule, the exception was the French revolution.'[107] This scarcely suggests an obsessive focus on the French Revolution as a model. In relation to the second, Shachtman wrote during the same year:

> Once the work of destruction was accomplished, the work of constructing bourgeois society could proceed automatically by the spontaneous expansion of capital as regulated automatically by the market. To the

105 Deutscher 1949, pp. 554-5.
[106] Deutscher 1967a, pp. 27-8; Deutscher 1967b, pp. 21-2.
[107] Cliff 1984, p. 66.

> bourgeoisie, therefore, it could not make a fundamental difference whether the work of destruction was begun or carried out by the plebeian Jacobin terror against the aristocracy, as in France, or by the aristocracy itself in promotion of its own interests, as in Germany.[108]

These remarks were made in the course of a very critical review of Deutscher's *Stalin*, but on this point both the criticised and the critic were as one. What this indicates, I think, is that in this, as in so may other respects, Trotskyism was responsible for preserving important elements of the classical Marxist tradition which would otherwise have been even more deeply buried than they were.

In 1965, Edward Thompson wrote that, 'mill-owners, accountants, company-promoters, provincial bankers, are not historically notorious for their desperate propensity to rush, bandoliers on their shoulders, to the barricades. More generally they arrive on the scene when the climatic battles of the bourgeois revolution have already been fought.'[109] At the time, these comments may have seemed simply another example of the iconoclasm with which Thompson tended to approach what he regarded as Marxist dogma. In this occasion, however, it was actually Thompson, rather than the targets of his critique (Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn) that was nearer to the classical tradition.

It was rare for Thompson to theoretically converge with Trotskyism. It is ironic, therefore, that one of the first historians outside the ranks of that movement to recognise the importance of Deutscher's comments on the bourgeois revolution was one of Thompson's comrades from the Historian's Group of the Communist Party of Great Britain: Christopher Hill. Hill is an historian usually identified as one of the stalwarts of the conventional model of bourgeois revolution and it is true that his early writings, particularly his famous essay of 1940, 'The English Revolution', are in this mode. The problem here is not in his claim that the revolution allowed free capitalist development, but that it placed the bourgeoisie in power. Yet it is also true that Hill abandoned this aspect of his interpretation, and much more quickly than is usually thought. In writings of the 1950s, such as *Economic Problems of the Church* (1956) and 'Recent Interpretations of the Civil War' (1958) he had already separated capitalism and democracy. It was in an essay of 1971 commemorating Deutscher's work as a historian of revolution, however, that Hill noted the significance of his conception of 'revolution from above' ('although he never seems to have worked it out fully') and his consequentialism, commenting that 'Deutscher was quite right to say that historians of seventeenth England have spent too much time in analysing the participants rather than the consequences of the Revolution.'[110] By 1974 Hill had came to regard Deutscher's comments on his own earlier work in *The Unfinished Revolution* as legitimate criticism and subsequently quoted them in defence of his revised definition.[111] Finally, by 1980, Hill had abandoned the conscious role of the bourgeoisie entirely: '"Bourgeois revolution" is an unfortunate phrase if it suggests a revolution willed by the bourgeoisie'. In the same essay Hill noted that he drew

[108] Shachtman 1962, pp. 230-1.
[109] Thompson 1965, p. 325.
[110] Hill 1971, pp. 124-125, 127-128.
[111] Hill 1974, pp. 279-80;

on Deutscher, not as an innovator, but as a representative of the Classical Marxist tradition.[112] And as we have seen, in this respect he was entirely accurate.

Ellen Wood claims that the term 'bourgeois revolutions' has 'undergone many redefinitions', to the point that it now means 'any revolutionary upheaval that, in one way or another, sooner or later, advances the rise of capitalism, by changing property forms or the nature of the state, irrespective of the class forces involved'.[113] If these claims were true then attempts to defend the theory of bourgeois revolution would be examples of what Imre Lakatos called a 'degenerating research programme', involving the construction of endless auxiliary hypotheses to protect an inner core of theory which has in fact little or no explanatory value.[114] But we can see that they are completely false. In fact, writers who regard the theory as retaining its scientific value have returned to the *original* research programme, after decades in which it was gradually abandoned. Far from 'redefining' the term bourgeois revolution we have in effect rediscovered the pristine meaning of the term.[115] Nor is the term simply an all-embracing redescription of the events which preceded the establishment of capitalism in individual countries: the class forces involved are limited to two main configurations, each with their own distinct forms of the revolutionary process, both of which were directly connected with transformation of the state into one capable of fostering capitalist development. It possible to add a third variant, which only emerged during the twentieth century in the post-colonial world. But even so, this scarcely involves the infinite permutations suggested by Wood.

The Place of the Bourgeois Revolution in History

Is there a general process through which societies move from the dominance of one mode production to another? If so, what aspects are specific to the bourgeois revolution? Marx initially considered the issue solely in relation to the transition from capitalism to socialism:

> While this general prosperity lasts, enabling the productive forces of bourgeois society to develop to the full extent possible within the bourgeois system, there can be no question of a real revolution. Such a revolution is only possible at a time when *two factors* come into *conflict: the modern productive forces* and the *bourgeois forms of production*.'[116]

Subsequently, he generalised the argument to transitions more generally, most famously in the 1859 'Preface':

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[112] Hill 1980, pp. 131, 110.
[113] Wood 2002, p. 118.
[114] Lakatos 1970, pp. 117-8.
[115] Indeed, the problem with even the most important recent discussions of the theory - and an indication of how far the insights of the classical Marxist tradition have been lost in this respect - is their failure to recognise the extent to which they are revisiting positions which had been established and lost in an earlier period. See, for example, Blackbourne and Eley 1984, Callinicos 1989 and Anderson 1992.
[116] Marx 1973c, p. 131.

> At a certain stage of development, the material forces of society come into conflict with existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution.[117]

Marx is describing here what Daniel Bensaid calls a 'law of tendency' (Bensaid is thinking of 'the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall' introduced by Marx in the third volume of *Capital*): 'In an open system, like political economy, the empirical regularities and constant conjunctions of events are in fact manifested as tendencies.'[118] There are reasons specific to the German politics of the period why Marx emphasised structure rather than agency in these passages, but even so, it does not represent a fundamental break from or retreat behind the positions he and Engels had worked out in the late 1840s.[119] For the sake of variety I will take an example from outwith the Brenner school, in this case by Carlos Castoriadis, once a leading figure in the French post-Trotskyist group, Socialism or Barbarism. Castoriadis argues that the contradictions between the forces and relations of production do not apply to any period of history except that of the bourgeois revolution:

> It more or less faithfully describes what took place at the time of the transition from feudal society: from the hybrid societies of western Europe from 1650 to 1850 (where a well-developed and economically dominant bourgeoisie ran up against absolute monarchy and the remains of feudalism in agrarian property and in legal and political structures) to capitalist society. But it corresponds neither to the breakdown of ancient society and the subsequent appearance of the feudal world, nor to the birth of the bourgeoisie, which emerged precisely outside of and on the fringes of feudal relations. It corresponds neither to the constitution of the bureaucracy as the dominant order today in countries that are in the process of industrialisation, nor finally to the evolution of non-European peoples. In none of these cases can we speak of a development of the productive forces embodied in the emergence of a social class within the given social system, a development which 'at a certain stage' would have become incompatible with the maintenance of the system and would have led to a revolution giving the power to the 'rising class'.[120]

This is more generous than most critiques, since it at least it grants that the bourgeois revolution can be explained in these terms; most critics would deny even that. Yet the problem is essentially the same: critics assume that Marx is illegitimately generalising from the experience of the transition to capitalism and the bourgeois revolutions that both resulted from and further stimulated this process. In fact what Marx is saying is far les prescriptive than is usually thought. He did not think, for example

[117] Marx 1975, p. 426.
[118] Bensaid 2002, p. 282.
[119] Marx was anxious to make his work available to workers in the German lands, where he still considered his main audience to be, particularly since his rival Ferdinand Lassalle appeared to be gaining support there. In order to guarantee that *A Contribution to The Critique Of Political Economy* would reach them, however, he had to ensure that it would not be banned from publication by the censors, hence the absence of reference to the class struggle in the somewhat mechanistic formulations in the 'Preface'. See Prinz 1969.

that the 'eras of social revolution' had taken the same form in the past or would do so in the future. Eras of social revolution - understood as the decisive moment in the transition between one mode of production and another - are in any case extremely rare, as rare as modes of production themselves, and class struggle has not always played the decisive role in bringing them to a conclusion. As Perry Anderson notes: 'The maturing of such a contradiction [between the forces and relations of production] need involve no conscious class agency on either side, by exploiters and exploited – no set battle for the future of economy and society; although its subsequent unfolding, on the other hand, is likely to unleash relentless social struggles between opposing forces.'[121] The outcome of such a crisis can vary. What is decisive? 'In the first place historical materialism specifies the structural capacities possessed by agents by virtue of their position in the productive relations, i.e. their class position. Secondly, it claims that these capacities, and also the class interests which agents share, have primacy in explaining their actual behaviour.'[122] The decisive issue is therefore the role played by social classes and, in particular, by their very different capacity to transform society in their own interests. In other words, to what extent were these different social revolutions brought about by the triumph of one class over another?

Given the centrality of class struggle for historical materialism, it is surprising how often the complexity of the Marxist position is ignored, in favour of treating the opening paragraphs of the 'Manifesto of the Communist Party' as the last word on the subject. As I have already suggested, these resounding passages are in some respects misleading. It is indeed important to understand that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles, but it is equally important to understand that these struggles have taken two different forms.

One is where the classes involved are exploiter and exploited. The issues here are relatively straightforward. Slaveowners extract surplus value from slaves, feudal lords and tributary bureaucrats do the same to peasants, and capitalists do the same to workers. In each case the exploited class resists to the extent that material conditions allow, but it is not always possible for them to go beyond resistance to create a new society based on a different mode of production. Exploited classes, in other words, do not always have the structural capacity to make a social revolution: slaves did not; the peasantry did not; the working class does, and in this respect - among several others - it is unique among the exploited classes in history.

The other is where the classes involved are oppressor and oppressed. The issues here are considerably more complex. For one thing, while all exploited classes (slaves, peasants, workers) are oppressed, not all oppressed classes are exploited and may even be exploiters themselves. The class struggle can therefore be between two exploitative classes, but nevertheless still be the means of bringing about social revolution, provided that the modes of production represented by these classes

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[120] Castoriadis 1987, pp. 18-19
[121] Anderson 1992, p. 17. See also Anderson 1980, pp. 55-56.
[122] Callinicos 1987, pp. 93-94.

are different. However, the number of oppressed classes which have the capacity to remake society is as limited as the number of exploited classes with that capacity. Among oppressed classes it is the bourgeoisie which is unique.

The class struggle in history has therefore taken multi-faceted forms. It is a permanent feature of the relationship between exploiting and exploited classes, but can also occur between dominant and subordinate exploiting classes, or between existing and potential exploiting classes. And these different class struggles have taken place simultaneously, have intertwined and overlapped. The precise combinations have been or (in the case of socialism) will be different in relation the case of each of the great social revolutions.

(i) The Fall of the Roman Empire and the Transition to Feudalism

The first transition involved the passage from primitive communism through 'Asiaticism' to a variety of social formations dominated by different modes of production: a relatively short-lived slave mode, the tributary mode or its feudal variant, or by combinations of some or all of these. Can we therefore speak of a feudal revolution? In parts of the north and far west of Europe, such as Scandinavia and Scotland, clearly not: feudalism evolved spontaneously out of primitive communism and through the Asiatic mode. But even if we accept (as I do) that feudal relations of production also existed within the territories of the Roman Empire in the West before the Fall, it is clear that feudalism only became the dominant mode there after 500 AD. The rise of feudalism in the former territories of the Empire therefore represents the first direct passage in history from one exploitative mode of production (slavery) to another. How was it accomplished? For our purposes there are five important aspects this initial transition from one exploitative mode of production to another.

First, the impetus for the transition came from the increasing failure of the previously dominant slave mode of production to sustain, let alone increase, levels of ruling class income. The decisive element in the crisis is therefore the inability of the existing ruling class to further develop the forces of production. The decline of slavery began towards the end of the second century AD. What caused it? Once the territorial limits of the Empire were reached, the only way in which landowners could expand was by acquiring land from other, usually smaller landowners who would then be reduced in status. From the reign of Augustus, the freedom of the peasant-citizen began to be eroded as the state no longer permitted him to vote or required him to fight, with the restriction of the franchise to what were now openly called the *honestiores* (‘upper classes’) and the recruitment of armies by enlistment rather than as a duty of citizenship. Increasingly taxed to pay for the wars and the burgeoning bureaucracy, including that of the Christian Church, peasants began to seek the protection of great landowners, protection which came at the price of their independence and what remained of their citizenship. In other words, an unfree labour force now began to emerge which rendered slavery redundant. The end result, through a series of mediations too complex to trace here, was the collapse of political superstructure of the Roman Empire in the West, and the failure of subsequent attempts, notably by

Charlemagne, to recreate it on anything like the original basis. The slave-owners transformed their former slaves into serfs or peasants with tenure in order to maintain or increase productivity; the latter were prepared to try new methods of production as their own subsistence - or at least continued tenure - now depended on their doing so in a way that it did not for slaves; their success in achieving greater productivity encouraged the slave-owners-cum-lords to orient still further towards non-slave agriculture. 'Slavery became extinct against a background of almost continuous and increasingly more marked development of the forces of production.'[123]

Second, as these remarks suggest, the exploited class on which the dominant slave mode of production was based was not responsible for overthrowing the slaveowners. Indeed we know of only three major slave revolts in Roman history, two on Sicily during the second century BC and the most famous, that of Spartacus, on the Italian mainland during the first century BC. Some other, smaller revolts have more recently come to light, but the fundamental picture remains unchanged. The class struggle in the Roman world was conducted between the free citizens, over an overwhelmingly passive slave population. But the inheritors were no more the peasants and plebeians of Ancient Rome than they were the slaves (although the slaves who obtained their freedom clearly benefited). The new ruling class were rather an alliance of the two forces which had actually been responsible for the Fall: from within, the landowners who withdrew support the state in opposition to its increasing demands for taxation; from without, the tribal chiefs and their retinues who led the barbarian invasions. The struggles of the exploited and oppressed classes obviously continued throughout the process, but contributed little to the outcome.

Third, the transition was therefore not an accidental or unintended consequence, but one consciously achieved through a series of pragmatic adaptations in the ways production and exploitation took place. The former slave-owners consciously changed the relations of production by lifting up the slaves they owned to the status of serfs while forcing down the free peasants tenanted on their land to the same level, as a response to the growing shortage of captured slaves and the expense of raising them. The tribal chiefs were unconsciously evolving into settled communities with stable and inherited social divisions between the warrior caste and the peasantry, a process hastened by the establishment of permanent settlements on the former territories of the Empire. Both were moving from different directions towards what would become, over several hundred years, a new feudal ruling class. There was also a two-way movement of the exploited, particularly between the ninth and eleventh centuries. On the on hand, the supply of slaves dried up and those that did remain were settled as serfs. On the other, the previously free peasants were increasingly brought into a servile condition.

Fourth, the process took place first at the socio-economic level and only towards the very end gave rise to the political and ideological forms (the estates monarchy, the 'three orders') which we now regard as characteristic of feudalism. Indeed, we might say that the transition to feudalism *is* the feudal

[123] Bonnassie 1991, pp. 38-46.

'revolution'; there is no seizure of power - from who could it be seized given that ruling class personnel were simply changing their roles? - but a gradual transformation of political forms to meet new socio-economic realities. What George Duby, Guy Bois and other refer to as the 'feudal revolution' around 1000 AD is in fact the final episode in a process that had taken over 500 years to complete.

Fifth, the societies that were transformed on feudal lines occupied a relatively small region of Western and Central Europe (although a similar society also developed independently in Japan). Feudalism did not contain an inherent tendency towards expansion did not require a world or even continental system either for exploitation (the territorial acquisitions of the Crusaders in the Middle East and later of the Hispanic states in the Americas were ‘opportunities’ rather than ‘necessities’) or for self-defence (since the great tributary states of the East were almost completely uninterested in these undeveloped formations, so obviously inferior to them in every respect except that of warfare).

(ii) The Socialist Revolution

The socialist revolution will differ from the feudal ‘revolution’ in each of these five aspects. Clearly we are at a disadvantage here since, unlike the transition to feudalism we are discussing a process that has still to occur. The only socialist revolution to have sustained itself for years rather than months, the Russian Revolution of October 1917, was thrown into reverse by the triumph of the Stalinist counter-revolution by 1928, and the transition it initiated has still to be successfully resumed. Nevertheless, from that experience and those of the brief but illuminating moments both before (the Paris Commune) and after (Germany 1918-23, Spain 1936, Hungary 1956, Portugal 1974-5, etc), it is possible to make some general comments.

First, the impetus for the transition arises not only from the meaningless, alienating repetitions experienced at the point of production, but a tendency to regularly go into crisis and consequently subject the working class to insecurity, poverty, social breakdown, disease, repression – and ultimately starvation and war. Capitalism has no purely economic limits; unlike slavery or feudalism it cannot reach the limits of the productive forces, although once unleashed they can destroy the world through war or environmental collapse. These are excellent reasons to dispense with it, but – and here the question of consciousness is paramount – the duty of revolutionaries and their organisations is to persuade other members of the working class that capitalism is responsible for existing disasters and those that threaten us in the future.

Second, the exploited class under capitalism, the working class will achieve the socialist revolution, or it will not be achieved at all. The working class is the first exploited (as opposed to oppressed) class in history which is able to make a revolution on its own behalf. Unlike the peasantry, the working class is structured collectively and is therefore the basis of a new form of social organisation in a way that the peasantry can never be. Unlike the bourgeoisie, the working class itself has the numeric size and structural capacity to rebuild the world on its own behalf, without using another class as a battering ram to break down the existing system on its behalf. The working class is not an alternative exploiting

class to the bourgeoisie and it will not be transformed into one by victory. (Even those writers who believe that socialism is impossible and that revolution will only lead to a new form of managerial or bureaucratic society do not claim that the proletariat itself will constitute the ruling class, but rather that it will consist of a technocratic elite or 'new class'.) Consequently, the 'everyday' class struggles between exploiters and exploited, and the 'transformative' struggles for social revolution are linked by the fact that the same classes are involved. This is what Lenin meant by saying that the germ of revolution was present in every strike. Clearly the working class will not be the only class involved in the socialist revolution, although its potential allies have changed in the course of the last hundred years – if the Russian Revolution had successfully spread after 1917 then the peasantry would have played a far greater role than they will now, just as the 'new' middle or technical-managerial class will play a far greater role now than they would have done in 1917.

Third, and because the transition starts with the seizure of power, it must be a conscious process. No socialist economy will blindly emerge from the struggle to develop the productive forces, or to find new ways of exploiting the direct producers who set those forces to work. The struggle for power by the working class requires organisation to awaken, consolidate and maintain class consciousness. But it also requires organisation to counterpose to that of the state. If there is any comparison between working class organisation and that of the bourgeoisie, it does not involve their respective revolutionary organisations. As Trotsky wrote in 1923:

> Consciousness, premeditation, and planning played a far smaller part in bourgeois revolutions than they are destined to play, and already doplay, in proletarian revolutions. … The part played in bourgeois revolutions by the econoic power of the bourgeoisie, by its education, by its municipalities and universities, is a part which can be filled in a proletarian revolution only by the party of the proletariat.[124]

In short, what the proletariat has to match is not the organisational structures within which the bourgeoisie conducted their struggle for power (in the minority of examples where, as with the Independents and the Jacobins, it did in fact play this role), but the centralising role the state and ideological forms established by the bourgeoisie after its ascendancy.

Fourth, the process *begins* with the smashing of the old state and the construction of the new. If the feudal 'revolution' was a process of socio-economic transition out of whose completion new political forms eventually emerged, then the socialist revolution will be a socio-political struggle for power whose completion will allow a new economic order to be constructed. Because the working class is non-exploitative there is no prior development of an alternative socialist or communist mode of production. As Lukacs noted:

[124] Trotsky 1975, p. 252.

> …it would be a utopian fantasy to imagine that anything tending towards socialism could arise within capitalism apart from, on the one hand, the *objective economic premises that make it a possibility* which, however, can only be *transformed* in to the true elements of a socialist system of production after and in consequence of the the collapse of capitalism; and, on the other hand, the development of the proletariat as a class. … But even the most highly developed capitaalist concentration will still be qualitatively diffeent, even economically, from a socialist ssystem and can neither change into one 'by itself' nor will be amenable to such change 'through legal devices' within the framework of capitalist society. [125]

Eight months after the October Revolution, Lenin noted that the Russian economy still contained five intermingled 'socio-economic structures'; patriarchal or 'natural' peasant farming, small commodity production, private capitalism, state capitalism and socialism. His point - sadly lost on subsequent generations of would-be Leninists - was that state ownership of the economy did not define the nature of the worker's state, but by whether the working class was in political control of the state.[126] Democracy is not merely a desirable feature, but a necessity for socialism. Indeed, it will be defined by the way in which democracy becomes the basis for those aspects of human existence from which either the market or the bureaucratic state currently excludes it.

Fifth, the socialist revolution is a global event. As long as it remains isolated it remains susceptible to counter-revolution, either from without or from within. The latter point perhaps bears some elaboration. The threat to the Russian Revolution, which was eventually realised, was not simply the backwardness of the economy, but the fact that in the capitalist world system, the pressures of competitive accumulation would ultimately make themselves felt, to the point of determining what happened in Russian factories. Crudely, if the West has tanks and missiles, then so must we. Greater levels of economic development might enable a state to hold out from internal degeneration longer than Russia was able, but can not ultimately protect against this process. That is why the international nature of the socialist revolution is a necessity, not a desirable but optional extra. Space has implications for time: the territorial extent of the socialist revolution exercises severe restraints over its temporality.

(iii) The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism and the Bourgeois Revolution

Between these two polar extremes of social revolution repesented by the transition to feudalism and the socialist revolution lies the bourgeois revolution itself. Behind many attempts to deny the historical existence of the bourgeois revolution lies a conception which identifies all social revolutions with the socialist revolution – a fully conscious class subject setting out to overthrow the state as a prelude to transforming all social relations. Because the bourgeois revolutions do not conform to this model, do

[125] Lukacs 1971c, p. 283.
[126] Lenin 1960-70e, pp. 335-6. It was of course Trotsky who first redefined the definition of a worker's state from one in which the working class held power to one in which property was nationalised. For an account which is rightly critical, but sensitive to the pressures which pushed him in this direction, see Cliff 2003, pp. 3-4.

not share these structures, it is easy to reject their revolutionary provenance, and dissolve them back into the broader process of the transitions to capitalism. These arguments are valid in relation to the transition from slavery to feudalism, where, as I have argued, 'revolution' does indeed have a metaphoric character. But to treat the events that I continue to call the bourgeois revolutions in this way is to reduce all of the great religious, military, social and political struggles of five centuries to superstructural or epiphenomenal status. The bourgeois revolutions may not resemble the revolutions that we are trying to make, but they were revolutionary for all that. They do not share the same structure with either their feudal predecessors or their socialist successors, in some respects looking back to former, in others looking forwards to the latter and in still others distinct from them both.

First, the impetus for the bourgeois revolutions also has two sources. The first examples, extending in this case down to the French, were in response to the crisis of the absolutist state, a crisis which was manifested in the attempts to impose both economic and ideological controls over society. But this crisis had still deeper roots in the periodic stagnation and decline of the feudal economy. If the 'revolutions from below' were less-than-fully conscious mechanisms for breaking out of the cycle of feudal decline, the 'revolutions from above' which followed 1848 were attempts to avoid military and economic eclipse by those states that had already made the transition.

Second, a single class did not make the bourgeois revolutions. Michael Mann has suggested that a variation of the schema supposedly advocated by Lenin in *What is to Be Done* (1902), whereby ideological leadership can only be brought to the working class 'from outside', might in fact be relevant in relation to the bourgeoisie: 'Left to itself the bourgeoisie was only capable of economism - in the eighteenth century of segmental manipulative deference.'[127] It is nevertheless possible argue that only outsiders, only people without direct material interests in the process of production could supply the leadership for bourgeoisies who were by definition divided in segmented interests. The bourgeoisie includes both urban and rural capitalists, in the literal sense of those who owned or controlled capital, but also encompassed a larger social group over which this class was hegemonic. Hal Draper describes the bourgeoisie in this sense as 'a social penumbra around the hard core of capitalists proper, shading out into the diverse social elements that function as servitors or hangers-on of capital without themselves owning capital'.[128] The bourgeoisie needs this penumbra. For Anderson: 'This mass is typically composed…of the gamut of professional, administrative and technical groups that enjoy life-conditions to capitalists proper - everything customarily included in the broader term "bourgeoisie" as opposed to "capital". But the distinction between capitalist and bourgeoisie is not only one operative here. As Anderson continues, 'this same bourgeoisie will normally lack a clear-cut frontier with layers of the petty bourgeoisie below it, for the difference between the two in the ranks of the small employer

[127] Mann 1993, p. 229. Mann claims to have discovered this concept in the work of Lucien Goldmann, but his discussion of leadership is more specific to the Jansenist movement in seventeenth-century France than to the bourgeoisie as a whole. See Goldmann 1964, p. 117.
[128] Draper 1978b, p. 169.

is often quantitative rather than qualitative'.[129] But this relationship could not persist. As Gareth Stedman Jones writes:

> In general, the more industrial capitalism develop, the stronger was the economic power of the *grande bourgeoisie* in relation to the masses of small producers and dealers from which it had sprung, and the greater the distance between their respective aims. Conversely, the less developed the bourgeoisie, the smaller the gulf between 'bourgeois' and 'petit bourgeois', and the greater the preponderance and cohesion of the popular movement.[130]

The earliest successful examples of bourgeois revolution, in the Netherlands and England, did involve leadership by mercantile, agrarian and even industrial capitalists (although the latter tended to be based in the colonies rather than the metropolitan centres), but – precisely because they belonged to a minority, exploiting class – they were forced to involve other forces, who were exploited by both feudal lords and themselves, in order to overthrow the absolutist state. But this reliance brought with it the danger that these other forces would seek to pursue their own interests. The English capitalist class had learned the lesson as early as 1688, when called on a Dutch invasion to complete their work for them, precisely to avoid the upheavals that had characterised the years from 1640-60. For the European bourgeoisie who developed later, it was the French Revolution which provided the lesson. The actual involvement of capitalists was actually less in France than in the earlier events in the Netherlands or England, partly because capitalist development had been consciously restrained by the absolutist state, but partly because those capitalists which did exist were more inclined to reform, not least because of the risk which revolution posed to property, which in their case was more industrial than agrarian or mercantile. The petty bourgeoisie therefore play a far greater role, and where this is shared with classes higher in the social structure, it is with the broader bourgeoisie, the journalists, lawyers, and schoolteachers who were remote from the actual productive process, than with capitalists in the purely economic sense. Further shifts followed. The political semi-paralysis of the European bourgeois after 1849 meant that the only social force capable of forcing through revolutionary change without having to rely on the 'dangerous' classes were sections of the existing ruling class like Prussian Junkers or Japanese Samurai. In the absence of even this instrument, Lenin thought that the working class would have to accomplish the bourgeois revolution. As we know, this was not required, but there is at least a case for arguing that the counter-revolution of the Stalinist bureaucracy after 1928 was the functional equivalent of the Russian bourgeois revolution, adding another, and final, class force to the list of those responsible.

[129] Anderson 1992, p. 112.
[130] Stedman Jones 1977, p. 87.

Third, the bourgeois revolutions display a range of different levels of consciousness, depending on the classes involved and the period during which each one took place. As Alex Callinicos suggests, it is in this respect that the intermediary role of the bourgeois revolutions is most pronounced:

> The balance between the role played by structural contradictions and conscious human agency in resolving organic crisis has shifted from the former to the latter in the course of the past 1,500 years. The transition from feudalism to capitalism occupies an intermediate position in this respect between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Russian Revolution.[131]

Although the earliest revolutions did involve actual capitalists to an extent that was later rare, their motivations were far more concerned with religious or constitutional liberties than with the allowing them to exploit their workforce more effectively, although - through several mediations – that was indeed the outcome. The reason for this lies in the very fusion of the economic and political (and the ideological) which was characteristic of feudalism and which reached it apogee in the absolutist state. Whatever the reason social actors had for destroying absolutism, once its integrated structures collapsed, the only viable economic alternatives left standing were those of capitalism. Full consciousness was not required in the early 'revolutions from below' because behind the revolutionaries lay the solid basis of the capitalist economic development. In so far as the capitalist leaderships were conscious of their underlying economic aims, they could scarcely declare these openly to their allies in other classes, who were the very ones likely to find themselves simply with a change of master. In the later 'revolutions from above' the protagonists were interested in capitalist development as a means of competing militarily with their more advanced rivals. They only examples where a fully conscious capitalist bourgeoisie set out establish capitalism were in the transformation of Scottish agriculture after 1746 and in the American Civil War where, exceptionally, it was also an industrial bourgeoisie. But in both cases their ability to do so was dependent on prior control of an overarching territorial state apparatus.

Fourth, the bourgeois revolution is both a product and a cause of the transition to feudalism. Ellen Wood asks: 'Was a revolution necessary to bring about capitalism, or simply to facilitate the development of an already existing capitalism? Was it a cause or an effect of capitalism?'[132] The answer, of course, is that depending upon which stage of the transition a specific bourgeois revolution takes place, it can be either. In some cases it was primarily a means of facilitating the development of capitalism (the Dutch Revolt, the English Civil War, the French Revolution, the American Civil War) and that in others it was primarily a precondition for the emergence of capitalism (the Scottish Revolution, the Italian Risorgimento, German Unification, the Japanese Meiji Restoration), but in no case was capitalism either completely dominant or completely non-existent, even in Scotland. Early capitalist developments had

[131] Callinicos 1987, p. 229.
[132] Wood 2002, p. 118.

been thrown back in the Italian city states and Bohemia, and once the initial breakthroughs took place in the Netherlands and England, the forces of European absolutism mobilised both in both their own domains and on a continental scale to prevent any further revolutions taking place along these lines. Consequently, in no other country after England did a capitalist economy grow up relatively unhindered until the point where the classes associated with it could lead an assault on feudal absolutism. Even in the case of England, the French state tried for decades to undo the effects of 1688, mainly by supporting Jacobite reaction in Scotland, an intervention which only stopped with their decisive defeat at Culloden in 1746. As a consequence of the relative success of the absolutist regimes in retarding the development of capitalism, when Prussian, Piedmontese and Japanese ruling class fractions did move to establish unified states with which to compete with Britain and France, they were staring from much further back than their competitors had done at a comparable stage in their development as capitalist economies.

Fifth, the bourgeois revolution as whole has to be wider than a mere regional phenomenon like feudalism, but does not have to resolve at a global level like socialism. Feudalism was essentially a more backward variant of the tributary mode and consequently posed the states in which it was dominant no real threat – indeed, absolutism can be seen as the mutation of European feudalism into state forms comparable to the Chinese and Byzantine.[133] Capitalism was fundamentally different from both the Eastern tributary states and - more immediately - the Western absolutist states. That is why the Spanish tried so hard to suppress the Dutch revolt and why the French tried even harder to overthrow the English Revolution; their rulers realised, without fully understanding why, that these new forms were their deadly enemies, were ultimately incompatible with their system. The Soviet historian Alexander Chistozvonov has argued that the concept of 'irreversibility': 'the process of the genesis of capitalism may assume, and does assume, a reversible character whenever there are only some of the combined factors of the genetical transformational series in the country, when they happen to be subjugated to factors of the formational reproduction series and embrace only some centres (regions, branches), while the ruling feudal class and the political superstructure of the feudal society are able for the time being to regulate the development of the process with the aim of preserving the feudal basis, and to overcome or suppress socio-economic conflicts'.[134] But this did not mean that the entire world had to be transformed along capitalist lines for the bourgeois revolution to be safe, let alone complete. On the contrary, for at least part of the history of the system, the capitalist states depended on the existence of areas that were forcefully prevented from repeating the experience of bourgeois revolution. The imposition of global capitalism is only really happening now, but the moment when the bourgeois revolution ended can be dated with some precision to October 1917 - in other words when it became evident that socialism now possible, rather than simply being an aspiration for some future point. There were of course individual and often extremely important national transitions after that

[133] Davidson 2005b.
[134] Chistozvonov 1975, pp. 9-10.

date, usually along state capitalist lines, but the existence of an alternative signalled that epoch in which the bourgeois revolution was a relatively progressive phenomenon was now over.

Conclusion

I want to conclude with some considerations on why Marxists should be so anxious to dismiss the bourgeois revolutions, these events which did so much to shape the contemporary world. There is probably no single answer to this question. One is a healthy reaction against Social Democratic and – especially – Stalinist stages theory. Another reason, however, appears to be precisely the question of 'relative progressiveness', to which I have just referred. I detect an increasing unwillingness to credit historical capitalism and, by extension, the bourgeoisie, with any positive contribution to human development. Understandable though this position is, given the horrors for which the system continues to be responsible, Marxists must nevertheless reject it. Without capitalism, we would have no possibility of developing the forces of production to the extent that will enable the whole of the world's population to enjoy what is currently denied most of them - a fully human life. In fact, without capitalism there would be no 'us' - in the sense of a working class - to seriously consider accomplishing such a goal in the first place. To me, at any rate, it seems to be completely implausible to think that if only capitalism had not come into existence we could all be living in a happy hobbit-land of free peasants and independent small producers. You may think that I exaggerate, but at least two of the very finest Marxist historical works of recent years - James Holstun's *Ehud's Dagger* and Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's *The Many Headed Hydra* - are undermined, in my opinion, by literally incredible claims about the possibilities of bypassing capitalism for non-exploitative societies of small commodity producers, possibly in alliance with the indigenous peoples of the Americas, whose 'communism' is supposed to have affinities with European 'commonism'.[135] It is true that capitalism was not inevitable, of course, but the alternative was probably a world divided between endlessly warring absolutist and tributary states without even the possibility of escape that capitalism provides.

This is only a more extreme example of a reaction to the Stalinist celebration of the bourgeoisie as a revolutionary class that seeks to find more revolutionary forces with which contemporary radicals can identify. Hence, in an English context, the attempts to diminish the role of Oliver Cromwell in favour of the Levellers and of the Levellers in favour of the Diggers, and so on. (The latter two groups, which are often spoken of together, were of course different in ideology, class composition, size of membership and virtually every other respect.) This seems to me to be both completely mistaken and completely unnecessary. In *Discovering the Scottish Revolution* I argue that we have to distinguish between two different sets of historical actor in the bourgeois revolutions. One set consists of our socialist *predecessors* - that is, those who looked towards collectivist solutions which were unachievable in their own time, like the Diggers in England or the Conspiracy of Equals in France. The

[135] Linebaugh and Rediker 2000, pp. 24-6. See also Holstun, pp. 432-3.

other set consists of our bourgeois *equivalents* - that is, those who actually carried the only revolutions possible at the time, which were, whatever their formal goals, to establish the dominance of capital.[136] Clearly, our attitude to these groups is very different. But since one aspect of bourgeois revolutions is to establish the most successful system of exploitation ever seen, it is scarcely surprising that the people who carried them through should, like Cromwell, leave a complex and contradictory legacy.

I want, however, to end on a note which recognises the fact that the bourgeoisie, in the hour of their greatness, did more for the possibility of human liberation than simply provide the material basis for future socialist development. I think here of the universalism of Enlightenment thought at its best. In the context of my own country, the thinkers of the Scottish bourgeoisie were engaged in changing their world, not merely interpreting it - *The Wealth of Nations* is a programme for transforming Scottish society as much as it is a history of the world economy. But what Smith and his colleagues wanted - 'commercial society', in their terminology - was not the same as the capitalist society they eventually helped bring into being. Lukács once wrote of the Enlightenment hope that 'democratic bourgeois freedom and the supremacy of economics would one day lead to the salvation of all mankind'.[137] As we know only too well, it did not. I think that the more perceptive of the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers - above all, Smith himself, Adam Ferguson and John Millar - were aware of this and that awareness is responsible for their studied ambiguity towards 'actually existing capitalism' as it emerged towards the end of the 18th century. To paraphrase William Morris, the thing that they fought for turned out to be not what they meant, and other people have since had to fight for what they meant under another name.[138] We in the movements against globalisation and imperialist war are those 'other people'. But what we fight for is not to accomplish outstanding 'tasks of the bourgeois revolution' in the sense I have already rejected, but those universal principles of freedom and justice which the bourgeois revolutions brought onto the historical agenda but, for all their epochal significance, were unable to achieve.

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[136] Davidson 2003, pp. 290-4.
[137] Lukacs 1971a, p. 225.
[138] Morris 1888, p. 31.

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