

Interview

1818-2018 Bicentenary of Marx

The following text is an interview with René Berthier conducted in several times, between April and May 2018 by monde-nouveau.net, on the occasion of the bicentenary of Karl Marx's birth. It was published on the online edition of Le Monde Libertaire, the journal of the Fédération anarchiste". For a better understanding of the subjects that were discussed and in order to clarify or supplement the information or opinions expressed, we have deemed it necessary to add notes. These notes are placed at the end of the text.

How did you come to be interested in Marxism?

It dates back to the time of the strikes of May '68. I was 22 years old, I was a student, totally ignorant, and I found myself caught up in a maelstrom of debates of incredible dogmatism that opposed in the amphitheatres the tenors of all the Marxist chapels on questions that in my opinion were perfectly futile. In any case, that's how I saw things at the time. However, I must not have been totally wrong because I recently leafed through a book written at that time or shortly after by one of the Marxist thinkers of the movement: I was appalled by the way he expressed himself. It was unreadable. It was totally outdated. Which is surprising, because when you read Marx, his discourse is perfectly clear, except for his earlier texts, which are Hegelian muddle strangely similar to the situationist muddle.

To come back to your question, I became interested in Marx so as not to look like a red-neck and to be able to decipher the meaning of what was being said around me...

And did that help you?

Yes and no. In any case, I finally realised that Marx was much more intelligible and interesting than most Marxists. There is a gap.

In a way, my theoretical training in anarchism and Marxism was parallel. Somehow Marxism and anarchism feed off each other. I didn't really have to make a choice: at one point I realized that it wasn't possible to be Marxist because it's the doctrine elaborated by one author and you have to take it all or leave it all, which didn't seem satisfactory to me; and that you could be an anarchist because it's a movement made up of multiple facets, with multiple authors, but that didn't really seem satisfactory to me either, but it was a lesser evil.

In short, are you an anarchist by default?

In a way, yes, but in fact I don't see myself as an anarchist but as an anarcho-syndicalist. It is less to a doctrine that I adhere to than to a set of practices.

Another element that has contributed to my rejection of Marxism comes from my union experience at a time when Brezhnevian communism was hegemonic. The Marxists (in fact, the communists) that I have met at the CGT since 1972 did not urge me to adhere to this doctrine. But there again, it was necessary to distinguish between the Marx in its original version and the Marx subtitled in Russian, if I may use this metaphor. It's an interesting exercise that stimulates the critical mind. For example, I categorically reject this attitude, which consists in making Marx bear responsibility for the totalitarian excesses of so-called Soviet Russia. We'll come back to this if you like.

Well, then let's talk about Marx in the “original version”. What do you get out of it?

A lot of very interesting things, in fact. When I mention Marx in the “original version”, I'm referring to what Marx actually said, not to the Marx reinterpreted by a whole lot of people.

Let's just say that I distinguish between several Marx's.

- The so-called “young Marx”, the one from the 1840s, who, in my opinion, is not yet “Marxist”. These are the 1844 Manuscripts, for example.

- The Marx who promoted bourgeois democracy in 1848-1849 in Germany.
- The author of works of a historical nature. It is on purpose that I do not speak of “Marx the historian”: I do not consider him a historian, but he is someone who had an encyclopedic knowledge of history.
- The author of economic works.
- The “strategist” of social democracy.

In your enumeration, it seems to me that you forget the Marx of the period of the First International, don't you?

Not at all. That Marx is included in the chapter “The Strategist of Social Democracy.

So since you have concocted a plan with the different facets of Marx, let's start at the beginning, young Marx...

In 1840, Marx was 22 years old. He was part of a current of young radical followers of Hegel whose ideas and behaviour were in fact very similar to what the situationists of May '68 would later be: ostensible, stirring, provocative, and bawling. In this group were the sharpest philosophical minds of the time, among them Bakunin and Stirner, whom most Marxist commentators fail to mention.

Because of censorship, which was very effective at the time, the authors used pseudonyms: in this rather closed environment where everyone knew each other, when a text was published the game was to find out who was its author. This is how one of Bakunin's texts was attributed to Engels¹. Stirner's *Unique* managed to pass the censorship because the guys in charge of the job didn't understand anything about it.

All this little world, including Bakunin – but not Stirner – was under the influence of a disciple of Hegel named Ludwig Feuerbach. This Feuerbach was the author of a revolutionary scoop for the time: he said

¹ Engels' first brochure, *Schelling and the Revelation*, anonymous, was attributed by contemporaries to Bakunin! Referring to that text, Arnold Ruge wrote to a friend in April 1842: “I recommend you to read the brochure written by a Russian, Bakunin by name, who now lives here...” On the other hand, Bakunin's *Reaction in Germany*, written under the pseudonym of Jules Elysard, was attributed at the time of its publication to... Engels!

that God was nothing but the image of man in the collective consciousness. In other words, it was not God who created man in his own image, it was man who created God in his own image. This guy was much more revolutionary than some members of today's so-called "radical" left, and even more revolutionary than some anarchists I know.

Feuerbach also had another whim: the generic man, humanism. Marx was full of praise for Feuerbach, but Bakunin was also one of his fans, since he wrote a book about him, the manuscript of which has disappeared. For Marx, the generic being of man gave a philosophical foundation to communism. All this did not last long, for in 1845 Stirner wrote a book entitled *The Unique and its Property*, in which he showed in a striking, and often very obscure way, that this generic man is only a new form of the divine, that he only reproduces Christian morality. For Stirner, philosophy was a lie, its role was socially religious.

Things were going badly for Marx, because he wanted to base his communism on humanism, and now Stirner shows that communism is an avatar of the religious. When Marx says in the *1844 Manuscripts* that communism as such is not the goal of human development, he means that the goal is not the proletariat, it is Man. Things were going all the worse as Stirner's theses had much success and began to attract the German intelligentsia. Marx had to react.

Marx radically modified his approach to the problem of communism, not without exorcising his youthful demons in *German Ideology*, with a voluminous attack on Stirner, of unprecedented violence and bad faith. After that, Marx rejected those concepts whose idealism was too apparent: the "Total Man", "Real Humanism", the "Generic Being", etc. Henceforth, there will be no more talk of humanism in Marx's work.

The funny thing about this story is not only that no Marxist will recognize the decisive role played by Stirner, who gave Marx a philosophical kick in the ass which was essential in his evolution. What is also curious is that every time an author wants to insist on Marx's so-called "humanism", he finds very little to lean upon in his mature work and is forced to refer to the pre-Marxist works of his youth. But the *1844 Manuscripts* are not yet "Marxism".

I would add that the Stirner-Marx "debate" has nothing to do with the anarchism-Marxism problematic, because I consider that Stirner was not an anarchist, which does not prevent him from being a considerable author. However, this "debate" does show to what extent many Marxists, Marxologists and other commentators on Marxism are deaf and blind to any rational, historical and critical approach to Marx's thought.

One funny thing: when Marx and Engels met, Engels was then very attracted by Stirner's theses, which he intended to support. Marx had to

seriously rebuke him to make him change his mind². This too is rarely mentioned by Marxist commentators, which is normal because one must discard anything that might lend credence to the idea that Stirner's thought could have the slightest consistency. There's a guy named Émile Bottigelli who explains that Stirner is not worth reading³. But Bottigelli doesn't explain why Marx spent 300 pages refuting him. It's a typical Marxist attitude: Marx is the only reference, he sets the tone, so it's not worth reading anything else. All this is not very “scientific” for people who refer to “scientific socialism”.

Okay, so Stirner, who is not an anarchist, according to you, is kicking Marx in the ass. What happens next?

A *philosophical* kick in the ass, I mean. The years 1845-1846 are not good years for Marx because he will suffer many setbacks. Until 1846, he was full of praise for Proudhon and his “penetrating works”. Even Engels praised *What is property?* Proudhon was then the revolutionary thinker par excellence. All the German doctors of philosophy who had taken refuge in Paris courted him, trying to convert him to Hegelian philosophy. In January 1845 Proudhon was, in *The Holy Family*, the one who revolutionized political economy, who laid the scientific basis for the critique of capitalism. It was Proudhon, moreover, who invented the formula “scientific socialism” in *What is property?*

At first glance, then, everything was fine.

Unfortunately, Proudhon published his *System of Economic*

² On November 19, 1844, he wrote to Marx, his brand new friend, informing him that Stirner, their former comrade from the Doktorklub, had just published a book that made a buzz in the circle of Young Hegelians. Stirner was then defined by Engels as “the most talented, independent and hard-working of the ‘Free’”. Engels thought he could base himself on Stirner's selfishness to achieve communism. Stirner's selfishness, he wrote to Marx, “cannot maintain itself even for an instant in its one-sidedness, but must immediately change into communism. In the first place it's a simple matter to prove to Stirner that his egoistic man is bound to become communist out of sheer egoism”. (Letter, Engels to Marx, 19 November 1844, MECW, vol. 38, p. 13) Marx reacted vigorously, but the letter was lost. However, a letter from Engels dated January 20, 1845, shows that Marx was radically opposed to this approach. Engels, embarrassed, admits that he got carried away: “As regards Stirner, I entirely agree with you. When I wrote to you, I was still too much under the immediate impression made upon me by the book. Since I laid it aside and had time to think it over, I feel the same as you. ...” (Engels to Marx, MECW, Lawrence & Wishart, vol. 38, p. 16)

³ Émile Bottigelli, *Genèse du socialisme scientifique*, Éditions sociales, 1967.

Contradictions in 1846. From then on, nothing went right.

And why not?

Well, Marx had announced the publication of a book on economics for the end of the year. He and Engels were in the process of “inventing” a new conception of history, which only appears new to those who have not read the historians of the Restoration, that is, Augustin Thierry, Mignet and others⁴. So Marx and Engels thought that their new approach to history would allow them to unravel the mysteries of how capitalism works. By anticipating him, involuntarily of course, Proudhon showed that he was not playing the role of precursor to which Marx wanted to confine him.

In fact, the problem is quite complex, but it is important to grasp the ins and outs of it in order to understand the subsequent evolution of Marxism. Between 1845 and 1846, Marx and Engels worked on a text that would become known as *The German Ideology*, but only much later because it found no publisher, probably because the greatest part of this large volume consisted of acerbic polemics against Bruno Bauer and especially Stirner.

In the elementary courses of Marxist training, only a small part of the book is known, which is published separately: it is a kind of systematic exposition of the materialist conception of history that Marx and Engels “invented”. Note that the expression “historical materialism” does not appear in it, neither in this book nor in any other for that matter. But that is what it is all about.

In short, Marx thinks that he will be able to decipher the mechanisms of the functioning of capitalism from a materialist and historical perspective. That's exactly what Proudhon wants, except that he's using a completely different method, and that's going to trigger a violent reaction in Marx and provoke a rupture between the two men. Well, when I talk about rupture it's easy to say because if at one point Marx wanted to win Proudhon's favour, Proudhon had been suspicious of Marx from the start: for example, he politely but firmly rejected a proposal for Franco-German collaboration which in fact consisted in spying on German refugees in Paris. Proudhon's response is an example of moderation and dignity: basically he said: let's debate, let's polemic, but let's not denounce our comrades.

Proudhon does not use a historical method in his *System of Economic Contradictions*. Let me summarize: if one wants to unveil the mechanisms of the capitalist system by having recourse to history, the question is : at

4 What is known in French as “Restauration” is the restoration of the monarchy after the fall of the Napoleonic Empire until the revolution of 1848, which definitively put an end to the monarchy in France.

what point should you start ? when should one begin? In the 16th century? In the 11th century? In Antiquity? And then, how can we explain all the mechanisms that operate simultaneously? The historical method does not provide an answer.

This is the point that kept Marx stuck for more than ten years, as his correspondence attests⁵. Proudhon thus resorts to economic categories, which Marx sharply criticized in *Misery of Philosophy*, accusing Proudhon of idealism. But Proudhon's method is perfectly commonplace, it is the hypothetico-deductive method which is used in the scientific field. The genius of Proudhon is to have applied it to political economy. Instead of attempting to expose how the capitalist system works by making its historical genesis, he resorts to a logical approach. The capitalist system is a totality whose elements function simultaneously, which makes it impossible to make a chronological explanation of it. Proudhon's method will therefore consist in defining a certain number of basic economic categories that follow one another, not chronologically, but *logically*: value, division of labour, mechanization, competition, monopolies, etc. Proudhon defines *value* as the fundamental category.

From these categories, he tries to provide an image, a snapshot of the system. These categories underlie social relations full of contradictions. To sum up, Proudhon builds what he calls a “scaffolding”, today we would call it a “simulation” of the capitalist system. This approach comes up against the total incomprehension of Marx, who accuses Proudhon of “idealism”. But Marx persists in his historical approach and for years produces nothing, so much so that he writes to Engels that he is about to give up.

And then, all of a sudden, a miracle! After having “leafed through” a copy of Hegel's *Logic*, he finds the right method. He explains this method in the Afterword to *Capital*. And what he says is very precisely what he had fiercely criticized twenty years earlier in the *System of Economic Contradictions*! And the irony of the story is that this sample of Hegel's *Logic* had belonged to Bakunin!

If I understand correctly, you are explaining to us that Proudhon adopts in

5 Marx's disillusioned comments on political economy in a letter to Engels on April 2, 1852, testify to his dismay: “Ça commence à m'ennuyer. Au fond*, this science has made no progress since A. Smith and D. Ricardo, however much has been done in the way of individual research, often extremely discerning.” [*In French: “It's beginning to bore me. Basically”] (MECW, Laurence & Wishart, vol. 38, p. 325)

1846 a method that Marx then vigorously criticized, that Marx did not produce much more for more than ten years in the field of economics, that in 1867, when *Capital* was published, he takes over Proudhon's method the revelation of which was brought to him by a book which had belonged to Bakunin?

When you say it like that it sounds a little weird, but it's true. In fact, Marx had found a new toy, the historical method, which he absolutely wanted to use. It didn't work for political economy, but he stubbornly insisted. In my opinion, the explanation of Hegel's "Logic" as a trigger for finding the "correct" method is bogus, because the problem of the "mode of exposition" is not to be found in this book but in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. But, well, it's a detail, and I wouldn't bet my pay-check on it. In any case, I think that Marx wanted to be able to say that he owed the key to his problem of mode of exposition to a German thinker, especially not to Proudhon. But that's just an opinion.

The fact remains that if we look at the Summary of Proudhon's *System of Economic Contradictions* and that of *Capital*, we see on the one hand that value is the central category of both works, and on the other hand that the logical succession of categories is more or less the same. This remains troubling. I discussed this hypothesis with some Marxist friends, but I was met with a very strong rejection.

All right, but what do you deduce from all this?

Lots of things, but I must point out that *Capital* appears twenty years after the *System of Economic Contradictions* and that economic thinking has evolved all the same. So I would like to say that you obviously can't compare the two works. If you want to make comparisons, you must compare two books written more or less at the same time, that is the *System of Economic Contradictions* and *Misery of Philosophy*.

Marx sent Book I of *Capital* to Bakunin when it was published, and the latter gave a very complimentary opinion of it, saying simply that it was too complicated for the workers. To overcome this drawback, Carlo

Cafiero wrote an *Abrégé*, with a preface by James Guillaume. All this shows that *Capital* is by right part of a “common heritage” to Marxism and anarchism, and that the *System of Economic Contradictions* was a step in this process: in short, there are bridges between the two currents. But while anarchists do not hesitate to recognize Marx's contribution, it is unlikely that any Marxist will agree to recognize Proudhon's contribution.

I have the impression that the question is not exhausted and that there are still many things to talk about.

That's true, but in an interview it's difficult to deal exhaustively with quite complex problems. I think that what should be remembered is that if one really wanted to establish a dialogue between anarchism and Marxism, a certain number of perfectly verifiable historical facts would have to be accepted by Marxists. This is obviously something they can hardly do.

You are right. But in the meantime, let's move on to the next point. You said that Marx had made himself the promoter of bourgeois democracy. Here again, I ask you: are you serious? All the same, the *Communist Manifesto* is not a bourgeois manifesto.

The formula is a bit provocative, but the facts are there. And there again, we raise a question that goes completely against the Marxist point of view. Let me explain.

The *Communist Manifesto*, which is in fact the program of the League of Communists, which can be considered as the first Communist party in history, was published a fortnight before a revolution had broken out in France and that would spread throughout Europe. But while the main question posed in France was already the social question, everywhere else in Europe what was on the agenda was national unity and national emancipation, *of which the Manifesto does not say a word.*

What is interesting is the attitude that Marx and Engels adopted for Germany. They indeed invested themselves passionately in this revolution, but their project was to encourage the liberal bourgeois to make their

bourgeois revolution. They had a scheme in mind, which they wanted to see implemented in Germany. They wanted Germany to carry out in 1848 the revolution that the French bourgeoisie carried out in 1789 because, according to them, it was the only way to achieve national unity. At that time, Germany was divided into several dozen states. Since Marx and Engel's strategic vision was that the proletariat would come to power through elections, that is, through democracy, it was indispensable that Germany be unified into one state.

But the *Manifesto* does speak of revolution...

It is true, the *Manifesto* speaks of revolution, but it is the democratic revolution that will establish a parliamentary system. It says that the first thing the proletariat must do is to conquer democracy. That seems clear to me. But there is one thing that must be understood: in basing his strategy on the conquest of democracy, Marx (and Engels by the way) takes it for granted that the working class will be in the majority and that democracy will bring it to power⁶. There is a double illusion here: the working class is *not* a majority, and even if it were, nothing says that the proletarians would *all* vote for the communists. This illusion is incredible. In France, universal suffrage brought the bourgeoisie to power in 1848! It was arithmetically inevitable. Proudhon had been elected in 1848 as a deputy in the Constituent Assembly and had found at his expense that it was impossible to use this institution to improve the situation of the workers.

The opposition of the anarchists to the parliamentary regime is not of a metaphysical nature, it results from a very practical observation. Bakunin would later say that if an election brought to power a government truly determined to carry out fundamental socialist reforms, the bourgeoisie would overthrow it without hesitation. We saw what happened in Chile in 1973, for example.

But Marx and Engels really believed that an initial bourgeois revolution was necessary. There is the famous formula of the *Manifesto* that struck Bakunin so much: "It is to Germany that the attention of the communists turns above all." The *Manifesto* says verbatim that Germany is on the eve of a bourgeois revolution, which will be the prelude to proletarian revolution. At first glance, one might have thought that the authors of the *Manifesto* would strive to promote proletarian revolution in

6 The *Communist Manifesto*: "The first step in the workers revolution is the constitution of the proletariat as a ruling class, the conquest of democracy."

Germany, but they were locked into their preconceived schemes, which were the result of their recent “discovery” of a materialist conception of history. In a certain way, the *Manifesto* is the practical illustration of an ideological text, the *German Ideology*, but also of another, less known text: *The Moralizing Criticism*, where we read that the bourgeoisie must have exhausted its existence in order for the proletariat to appear on the scene, or something like that: in short, bourgeois revolution is the condition of workers' revolution, therefore the workers must support the bourgeois revolution, even if they don't like it. I'm not joking⁷.

So from the beginning of the revolution in Germany, and the ink of the *Manifesto* being barely dry, Marx and Engels did everything to prevent its distribution in Germany. They wanted to collect funds from liberal subscribers to found a magazine, the *New Rhine Gazette*, in which they would expose their views and try to awaken the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie. Engels, who was in Barmen and was trying to find shareholders for their publication, wrote a letter to Marx in which he said that if only one copy of the *Manifesto* was circulated there, all would be lost. In the same letter, Engels expressed his concern about the rising agitation of the textile workers, who were beginning to stir up a mass movement, and, think, *they even formed coalitions!* All this, says Engels, is very embarrassing for us. Again, you can verify what I'm saying by reading their correspondence. It's all the more amusing because the *Manifesto* says somewhere that the communists are not concealing their objectives.

Having said that, the work accomplished by the *New Rhine Gazette* remains remarkable with hot analyses on the situation in Germany and Central Europe at the time. But there are also some rather embarrassing points. The fact remains that Marx and Engels published a political programme a few weeks before a revolution, but during the revolution they did the opposite of what this programme said. Once the revolution was over, their party comrades demanded that they account for their orientations.

Can you explain?

I remind you that the *Manifesto* was simply the political programme of the League of Communists. At the time of the revolution, the party had published a 17-point programme inspired by the *Manifesto* but a little watered down, and it was in fact this document that Engels was panicking to see circulating.

⁷ The workers “know that their own struggle with the bourgeoisie can only break out on the day the bourgeoisie triumphs”. Marx, “Moralizing criticism and critical morality”, 1844

In fact, Marx and Engels did not approach the German revolution as revolutionary militants concerned with advancing the workers' cause by inciting the workers to organize. They approached it as a field of experimentation to test the conceptual framework they had just elaborated. This is why from the very beginning of the revolution they tried to slow down the development of an autonomous workers' movement by minimising its relative importance. For them, events had to conform to the initial matrix of all revolutions inspired by the French Revolution. The first task of the proletariat was to work for the constitution of a national state liberated from absolutism. For this, the bourgeoisie was to take power first. But insofar as the accession of the bourgeoisie to power was an inescapable condition of the subsequent social revolution, the struggle alongside the liberal bourgeoisie for a constitution, for democratic liberties, became a priority, a task with which the proletariat was to associate itself, not conditionally, but by abandoning its own demands, its own programme.

Then there was an important workers' agitation in the country: Engels spoke of the textile workers who were agitating *en masse*. But this was also the case elsewhere. Workers' associations were created everywhere. In Cologne there was a meeting of the League of Communists at the beginning of the revolution. Marx attended this meeting. He was in a minority, but he used the full powers at his disposal – in what capacity, one wonders – to dissolve the organisation! Almost a year later, he opposed its reconstitution!⁸ And he joined an organisation composed of bourgeois

8 “Soon after his arrival Marx dissolved the Communist League. Since there was no possibility of reaching agreement about this, he did it simply on the basis of his dictatorial powers, arguing that the task of the League was propaganda, which could now be carried on quite publicly. Therefore the newspaper took over the leadership of the 'Party'. It was a 'movement', and there was no thought of any organization. There was a workers' association in Cologne, but it considered Marx's democratic policy 'opportunistic'.” (Werner Blumenberg, *Karl Marx, an illustrated History*, Verso 1998, p. 90.)

Marx's decision to dissolve the League of Communists is not only explained by the idea that bourgeois revolution was to be the inevitable prelude to communist revolution. It also lies in the fact that in 1848 Marx had no idea what a political party in the modern sense of the word could be. The “communist party” in question is not an organisation, it is the group of people who take sides in the communist cause. Marx actually had no intention of creating an organisation, because he considered that since freedom of the press and propaganda was now established, it was no longer necessary. For him, the need to organise was only justified in clandestinity. According to one of the members of the League of Communists, quoted by Fernando Claudin, Marx considered that “the existence of the League was no longer necessary since it was a propaganda organisation and not an organisation to conspire and that, in the new conditions of freedom of the press and propaganda, it could be done openly, without going through a secret organisation”.

According to Marx, the role of the communist “party” was thus limited to

liberals, the Cologne Democratic Association, and took over the management of the *New Rhine Gazette*, sponsored by liberals. In other words, Marx dissolved the first Communist party in history in the midst of a revolution and joined a bourgeois organisation! The way in which Marxist scholars subsequently tried to conceal or justify this unfortunate episode in the political career of Marx and Engels is a very interesting illustration of the inventiveness of the human mind..

Marx's view was that the German proletariat was still embryonic and had no chance of achieving social revolution.

You're right, but that's not the problem. In fact there was a real workers' agitation, which Engels would confirm much later. Was it necessary to ignore it? For example, some militants of the League of Communists had founded a Workers' Association in Cologne which organised up to 10% of the population. At the beginning of the revolution, this association grouped a few hundred workers, but three months later they were almost 10,000. There was then a multitude of workers' associations in Germany with hundreds of thousands of members. Initiatives were taken to try to unify them on a national level. Clearly, a body capable of unifying these initiatives, of being their spokesman, was tragically lacking, and that's when Marx dissolved the party, when it was most necessary!

The workers could have taken advantage of the situation to strengthen their ascending movement. The working class would undoubtedly have failed, but they would have had the historical experience of autonomous action. Instead, Marx and Engels put it in the wake of the bourgeoisie.

The attitude of Marxist writers on this matter is often quite disgusting. Some, for example, play on the confusion between the Democratic Association, the liberal organisation to which Marx belonged, and the Workers' Association. Added to this is the fact that Marx reluctantly took over the head of the Workers' Association for a short period of time, which is obviously enough for the Marxist authors to attribute to him a major role in this association: a bit like those who say that he “founded” the First

propaganda, it was not intended to organise the workers for any action. It is obvious that the communist authors could not accept the idea that Marx, even for a moment, might not have known what the communist party could be used for. There is a whole literature which tries to hide Marx's hesitation (which is natural enough after all) by offering smoky explanations about the existence of a “formal, practical party” and a “historical, theoretical party”, which justifies the fact that, when Marx and Engels found themselves totally isolated after the revolution of 1848, but also and after the congress of Saint-Imier in September 1872, they alone were able to represent the “historical party”.

International. *In extremis*, at the collapse of the revolution and just before fleeing to England, Marx re-joined the League of Communists, which he had done everything to conceal.

What you're saying is quite fascinating because it doesn't correspond at all to the image one has of Marx, even if one doesn't follow his ideas. For anarchists in general, Marx's activity during the revolution of 1848 was that of a revolutionary, that is, a Marxist revolutionary. But what you're saying totally contradicts this preconceived notion. I suppose that you can justify everything you say with references?

Of course, I'm not making it up. But it's obvious that in the context of an interview I don't have all the references in mind, and if I did, it would be rather boring.

So how did this story end?

Quite sordidly, in fact. They got away with a pirouette which, in my opinion, was a huge mystification. It happened in two stages: they were excluded from the League of Communists; they wrote a document which is a grandiose revolutionary proclamation, but which is in fact a masked self-criticism, which nobody seems to have noticed.

The suspense. Tell the story...

Well, now... Let me summarise. Marx and Engels retracted the *Manifesto*, or rather the 17-point programme of the League which emanates from it, because they feared it would scare off the liberal bourgeoisie which they expected to finance their newspaper. Marx adhered to a liberal organization. He dissolved the League of Communists, *i.e.* the Communist Party. The militants of the League declared that there was a strong workers' agitation and that all this should be coordinated, Marx ignored it. A few months later he opposed the reconstitution of the League. By the way, German communists are curious people. Nobody, it seems, had dared to tell Marx: "F... you, we're reconstituting the League whether you like it or not".

In fact Marx only became interested in the German labour movement at the end of the revolution, too late. A bit like with the Commune, which he supported only at the moment when he could no longer do otherwise. It's a habit with him.

You're joking, certainly...

Not at all. You only have to read their correspondence.

Well, to go back to 1849, Marx fled to England. The League of Communists was reconstituted in London and the section of which he and Engels were members excluded them. Just imagine: Marx and Engels excluded from the first Communist Party in history! The reasons for their exclusion are particularly interesting⁹.

What do you mean?

There were basically two tendencies in the League of Communists : a moderate, some would say “realist” tendency with Marx, and a “leftist” tendency. The moderates thought that the working class could not succeed in a revolution in Germany, and they were right, but they obscured the fact that the task of revolutionaries was to stand with workers and encourage them to organize, not to encourage them to support bourgeois liberals. The “leftists” thought, like all leftists, that it was possible to make revolution at any time. What is interesting in this case are the grounds for exclusion, and these grounds are directly related to the activity of Marx and Engels during the revolution in Germany. You can find all this in an already old book by a certain Fernando Claudin, from his doctoral thesis I think, entitled (in French) *Marx, Engels and the 1848 revolution*. It's a very interesting book¹⁰.

In short, among the grounds for exclusion, it is said that Marx and Engels should have focused on strengthening the League rather than publishing gazettes – an obvious allusion to the *New Rhine Gazette*. Marx and Engels were accused of having surrounded themselves with a camarilla of literary figures and fantasising about their future political power, of having used the League for personal purposes, etc. That's pretty harsh.

The communists in exile in London therefore asked Marx and Engels to account for their activity, and they replied in a very curious document, known as the “Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League”¹¹. This is an incredibly hypocritical text. They accused others of being responsible for their own faults. In their text, they make a very harsh

9 See: “1848 : Quand Marx liquide le premier parti communiste de l’histoire... et s’en fait exclure” [“1848: When Marx liquidates the first communist party in history... and is excluded from it”], <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article602>

10 Éditions Maspéro, 1980.

11 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/communist-league/1850-ad1.htm>

criticism of everything they did during the revolution but without ever saying that they are talking about themselves! The naive reader can only approve of this criticism without ever understanding that it is in fact self-criticism. Apparently nobody saw the manipulation, and this document went down in history as a model revolutionary text. Think, then, that it is in this Address that they speak of “permanent revolution”!

Later, Engels wrote a text¹² in which he declared that the defeat of the workers' movement could not be blamed on the decisions of a few leaders but on the social conditions that prevailed. In short, it was not their fault. But Engels obviously did not say that if you dissolve a revolutionary party at the beginning of a revolution, and if a few months later you refuse to reconstitute it, that doesn't create the conditions for success. In the “Address”, they never say “I” or “we” made such and such mistakes. They refer to themselves as “the petty-bourgeois”, “bourgeois democrats”, “editors of democratic newspapers”, etc. without saying of course that they are talking about themselves. The uninformed reader really believes that they are attacking the petit bourgeois. They call on the workers not to be the cheerleaders of the bourgeois democrats (which is precisely what they did), and to create an autonomous party organization (which existed and was dissolved by Marx!). All this is comical when one thinks of Engels' panic at the idea of the League's programme being distributed¹³.

This self-criticism of their own activity as bourgeois democrats in the form of a virulent critique of bourgeois-democratic politics explains why so many readers have fallen victim to the mystification. But there are also the dishonest ones, those who show bad faith. Those who deny that Marx dissolved the League justify themselves by saying that if Marx had done such a thing, it would be admitting that he would have hidden it all his life! It is obvious that he was not going to brag about it; but he *did* speak about it, in the “Address of the Central Committee to the League of Communists”, without naming himself, of course...

Communist orthodoxy treated this matter in a very curious way, as one might expect. It is said, for example, that Marx dissolved the Central Committee of the League but not the League itself, which obviously makes no sense. That's a bit of a Jesuitical argument. But the the medal of the falsification goes to Étienne Balibar, who attributes to Marx the foundation of the Cologne Workers' Association, which is absurd.

12 “Revolution and counter-revolution in Germany», 1851.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/germany/index.htm>

13 Engels wrote to Marx: “If even a single copy of our 17 points were to circulate here, all would be lost for us”. Engels also told Marx of his fear of the rise of the textile workers, who risked compromising everything: “The workers are beginning to bestir themselves a little, still in a very crude way, but as a mass. They at once formed coalitions. But to us that can only be a hindrance.” (Engels to Marx, 25 April 1848, MECW, Lawrence & Wishart, p.173.)

There's a point that I think you should address: It's the point of view of Marx and Engels on the Slavic question, first in 1848 and of course later.

You're absolutely right. The revolution of 1848 not only revealed Marx and Engels' strategy of alliance with the democratic bourgeoisie, even if in their minds it was something temporary, a prelude, as the *Manifesto* says. But 1848 was somehow the revelation of their positions on the Slavic question and on Russia. And there, indeed, we will be obliged to talk about Bakunin.

Why did they clash on this question?

Marx and Engels had put the organisation of the proletariat under a bushel and revealed themselves as staunch supporters of German unity. I recall that it was through parliamentary strategy that they intended to achieve socialism, and that's why the *Manifesto* tells us that the conquest of democracy is the first task of the working class¹⁴. It is obvious that from the point of view of the realisation of a socialist society, conquering democracy in a nation made up of 49 states, with 49 different parliaments, is of little interest.

So their objective is a unitary state. Chasing a few dukes and princes off the throne was not a problem. The problem was that Marx and Engels wanted to create a unitary German state by keeping within this framework the Slavic territories which, in the course of history, had been annexed by Austria and Prussia. Their project of German national unity was based on the rejection of the national independence of the Slavs. Their argumentation was based on two points: the first was that the national independence of the Slavs in Central Europe was contrary to the interests of Germany (in the general sense: Prussia plus Austria). For example, if you look at a map of the Austrian Empire, you can see that if Bohemia, *i.e.* roughly what will be Czechoslovakia, becomes independent, there will be a huge hole in the eastern border of the Empire. Engels said that without Bohemia, Germany would look like a loaf of bread eaten away by rats¹⁵.

14 "the first step in the revolution by the working class is the constitution of the proletariat into a ruling class, the conquest of democracy" (*Communist Manifesto*).

15 Engels, "Democratic pan-Slavism", *The New Rhine Gazette*, 15 and 16 February. Germany's participation in the dismantling of Poland is blithely dismissed in Engels' article.

Furthermore, Engels declared that it was not permissible for the Slavs to stand in the way of Germany's access to the Mediterranean and the Danube¹⁶. This reasoning belongs to Realpolitik, to pragmatic and bourgeois politics, not to proletarian internationalism. German social democracy will fully share this view. Second, Marx and Engels' argument is based on the idea that Slavs are inferior to Germans in terms of civilization, and that they should be grateful to Germans for having Germanised them.

Aren't you going a bit too far?

Not at all. This idea is developed on pages and pages of their writings, especially Engels, by the way. The Slavs want their independence? Why, is that how they thank the Germans for having Germanised them, for having brought them progress and civilisation, etc. I'm not kidding, that's almost word for word what Engels writes¹⁷. Basically, he was saying out loud what Marx was thinking. Marx never reacted to Engels' racist and hysterical outbursts. For example, when he spoke of exterminating the Czechs¹⁸, or when he spoke of "scum of the people" about Gypsies,

16 Engels takes up this idea several times. In 1882 he again pointed out to Kautsky that no Slavic Balkan state should be allowed to obstruct the railway line between Germany and Constantinople : "...in no circumstances will these little nationalities be granted the right they are presently arrogating to themselves in Serbia, Bulgaria and East Rumelia — of preventing, that is, the extension of the European railway network to Constantinople." (Letter of 7 February 1882, MECW, L&W, vol. 46, p.195)

17 In Northern Europe the Germans germanised large areas of Slavic territory "in the interests of civilisation". In the south, "German industry, German trade, and German culture by themselves served to introduce the German language into the country." In spite of that the Slavs in Austria want their "so-called rights"? But an independent state in Bohemia-Moravia would cut off Austria's natural access to the Adriatic Sea and the Mediterranean, Eastern Germany would be "torn to pieces like a loaf of bread that has been gnawed by rats"; "all that by way of thanks for the Germans having given themselves the trouble of civilizing the stubborn Czechs and Slovenes, and introducing among them trade, industry, a tolerable degree of agriculture, and culture!" All this for preventing "these 12 million Slavs from becoming Turkish!" Engels pays little heed to the fierce struggle of the Slavs of all the nations of Central and South-Eastern Europe – to which the Magyars must be added – against the Turkish threat. In 1683, it was a Slavic army, the Polish army led by Sobieski, that broke the Turkish siege of Vienna, probably saving Western Christendom at the same time. (Engels, "Democratic Pan-Slavism", <https://marxists.architexturez.net/archive/marx/works/1849/02/15.htm>)

18 At the end of his "Democratic Pan-Slavism", Engels writes: "To the sentimental phrases about brotherhood which we are being offered here on behalf of the most counter-revolutionary nations of Europe, we reply that

Albanians, Montenegrins, South Slavs, Basques, Celts, etc.¹⁹, in short all the peoples who, according to him, had no historical future, or past, for that matter. In 1848, Engels invented an interesting but worrying concept, that of “counter-revolutionary nations”, the Slavs, of course.

All this can be found in the articles of the *New Rhine Gazette* and in their correspondence. Roman Rosdolski, a Ukrainian Marxist, makes a very interesting analysis of this question of Engels’ theory of “non-historical” nationalities²⁰.

And then there is Poland, which has been torn apart three times by Russia, Austria and Prussia. Reading Marx and Engels, one gets the impression that Prussia had been forced by the other two powers, Russia and Austria, to participate in the dismemberment of Poland. In fact they had a German nationalist point of view, and Marxists and other Marxologists tried to minimise their positions. I don’t know whether it was Engels or Marx, I think it was Engels, who wrote that if Prussia were one day to return territories to Poland, it would have to give up as little as possible, that such and such a city should never be returned, and that the Poles would always be able to make up for it by recovering territories at the expense of Russia²¹ !!!

hatred of Russians was and still is the primary revolutionary passion among Germans; that since the revolution hatred of Czechs and Croats has been added, and that only by the most determined use of terror against these Slav peoples can we, jointly with the Poles and Magyars, safeguard the revolution.” These and other passages were never denied by Marx.

- 19 “There is no country in Europe which does not have in some corner or other one or several ruined fragments of peoples, the remnant of a former population that was suppressed and held in bondage by the nation which later became the main vehicle of historical development. These relics of a nation mercilessly trampled under foot in the course of history, as Hegel says, these residual fragments of peoples always become fanatical standard-bearers of counter-revolution and remain so until their complete extirpation or loss of their national character, just as their whole existence in general is itself a protest against a great historical revolution.” (Engels, “The Magyar Struggle”, *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* No. 194, January 13, 1849.) Engels refers to the Gaels in Scotland, the Bretons in France, the Basques in Spain and the South Slavs in Austria.
- 20 Roman Rosdolsky, *Engels and the ‘Nonhistoric’ Peoples: the National Question in the Revolution of 1848*. Glasgow: Critique books, 1987. First published in Critique, No.18/19, 1986.
- 21 For Marx and Engels, Poland, although a Slavic nation, had a progressive function because it was a protective buffer between Russia and Prussia. They were therefore in favour of Polish independence on condition that Prussia returned as little territory as possible to Poland, even if this meant that the latter made up for it by annexing as much territory as possible to the East, to the detriment of Russia. Engels writes: “the Poles, by receiving extended territories in the east, would have become more tractable and reasonable in the west...” (Engels, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany in 1848*,

You said that we're going to have to talk about Bakunin. How does he enter the scene?

When the revolution started in France, Bakunin was in Brussels and he made the trip to Paris on foot. Witnesses say that he slept on the straw next to the rioters, armed with his rifle²². Caussidière²³, I believe, told then that Bakounine was doing marvellous things in a revolution but that afterwards he would have to be shot. But Bakunin feels that his revolution is elsewhere. I recall that he is not yet an anarchist, he is a kind of radical socialist democrat, whose concern is to liberate the Slavs from Russian and German oppression. So he goes to Germany to make agitation. One day I had fun following on a map Bakunin's peregrinations in Europe at that time. It is unbelievable how many kilometres he has travelled. Unfortunately I lost the map I had made²⁴.

Well, his idea was very simple and very rational: since the Germans wanted their national unity and the Slavs their national independence, and since the common enemy were all the despotic regimes which dominated Europe, Germans and Slavs should ally and support each other. This approach was totally unacceptable to the German bourgeoisie, but also to Marx and Engels, and for the same reasons. For all these people, an alliance with the Slavs was tantamount to a recognition of the legitimacy of their demands for independence.

To promote his political project of a German-Slav alliance, Bakunin wrote an "Appeal to the Slavs" in which he said that the Slavs should extend a "fraternal hand" to the Germans, etc.²⁵. In the conceptual universe of Marx and Engels, the "fraternal hand" is humanistic sentimentalism. Engels wrote in response a text entitled "Democratic Panslavism", hysterical, full of hatred, contempt and anti-Slavic racism. It is in this text that he says that the "crimes" of which the Slavs accuse the

MECW, 1852, L&W, vol. 11, p. 45)

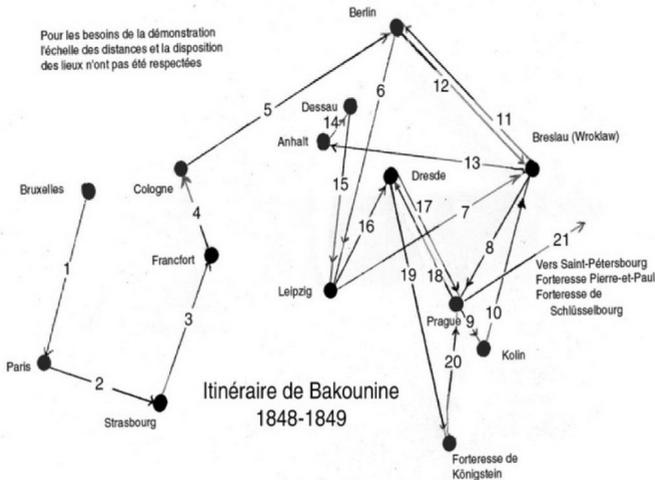
22 "... for more than a week I lived with workers in the barracks on the rue de Tournon, a stone's throw from the Palais du Luxembourg; this barracks, previously reserved for the municipal guard, had then become, like many others, a republican fortress serving as cantonment for Caussidière's army. I had been invited to stay there by a Democrat of my friends who commanded a detachment of five hundred workers. I thus had the opportunity to see the workers and to study them from morning to night." (Bakunin, Confession.)

23 Caussidière, a former participant in the Lyon insurrection of 1834, who had become police prefect, declared: "What a man! What a man! On the first day of the revolution he simply worked wonders, but on the second day he would have to be shot. »

24 I finally found it!

Germans are actually among the best things the Germans can boast of!

Contrary to popular belief, the origin of the opposition between Marx and Bakunin do not date back to the period of the IWA but in their profound differences on the German-Slav question. If we don't know that, we don't understand much of the problem, in my opinion. In particular, we don't understand why Marx somehow “imported” into the IWA the accusations of “pan-Slavism” against Bakunin, in order to discredit him, accusations he and Engels had already made in 1848-1849 to bring him into disrepute.



Can you say a few words about pan-Slavism? What is it?

To sum up and to go very quickly, it is the idea that the salvation of the Slavs of Central Europe lies in their subjugation to Russia. The idea is that Russia is the only independent Slavic nation capable of standing up to competing empires, including Turkey, and that the Slavs have every interest in putting themselves under its protection. Bakunin was ferociously, I say ferociously opposed to this option. He thought that the submission of the Slavs to Russia was the worst thing that could happen to them²⁶. Marx and Engels knew this very well, yet they did not stop accusing Bakunin of pan-Slavism, which affected him enormously. So it was as early as the revolution of 1848 that Bakunin became the mortal enemy because his positions constituted, in their eyes, a real threat to the unity of Germany to which Marx and Engels aspired, but for them “the unity of Germany” was understood including Slavic territories. They developed a fierce hatred against Bakunin and resorted to the worst slander to discredit him, in 1848-1849, but also from 1869 onwards, because on that date an IWA congress took place which revealed that the Bakuninians' positions were in the majority.

Unfortunately, general opinion reduces the Marx-Bakunin conflict to a conflict over the policy of the International. But it is in fact much deeper and more complex than that, because Marx's anti-Slavic and anti-Russian

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- 25 “The absurd pretensions of the Frankfurt parliament, this parliament which has now become the laughing stock of Europe, and which wanted to turn us into Germans, we rejected them while we extended a fraternal hand to the German people, to democratic Germany.” (Bakunin, “Appeal to the Slavs”).
“I wanted to convince the Slavs of the need for a rapprochement with the German democrats, as well as with the Magyar democrats. Circumstances had changed since May: the revolution had weakened, reaction was growing everywhere, and only the united forces of all European democracies could hope to defeat the reactionary alliance of governments.” (Bakunin, *Confession*, 1850).
- 26 “For the Russian and non-Russian peoples, imprisoned today in the empire of all Russia, there is no enemy more dangerous, more deadly than this empire itself.” (Statism and Anarchy, éditions Champ libre, IV, 13.) One could not be any clearer. Later, Bakunin defined the Appeal to the Slavs as “a pamphlet in which I tried to prove to the Slavs that far from having to wait for their emancipation from the support of the Empire of All Russia, they could only hope for its complete destruction.” (L’Empire knouto-germanique, suite, “Dieu et l’État”).

fantasies of 1848 will come out even more after the Basel congress of the IWA in 1869.

You say that Marx and Engels had anti-Slavic positions. You have explained that they were based on the idea of the superiority of German civilisation. What about Russia?

Their position on Russia is more complex, but in 1848 it is linked to the German demand for democracy and national unity. Later on, the two men evolved. Marx says that Russia is a retrograde, despotic power, and that it is at the centre of all initiatives to break the attempts to achieve democracy and national unity in Germany, *which Bakunin does not deny*. Marx is a remarkable analyst of international relations, but his anti-Russian paranoia permeates his analyses so much that it invalidates them to a large extent. Naturally, Bakunin was also the victim of this paranoia, since he was accused of being an agent of the czar.

It is therefore clear that the conflict between the two men dates back well before the founding of the IWA.

Bakunin's political vision in 1848 is much more realistic and rational than that of Marx. When I say that, you have to keep in mind that both of them had an idea of what to do, but neither of them had the means to really influence events. So any reflection on their options at the time remains perfectly academic.

Bakunin does not deny that Russia may have been in the past the centre of reaction in Central Europe, the focus of all initiatives aimed at hindering the development of democracy but, as he rightly says, successive Prussian kings did not need to be encouraged to oppose democracy. Russia did not frustrate them in their burning desire to make democratic concessions to their subjects.

Bakunin's explanation shows that he is much better “Marxist” than Marx. He explains that the gradual rise of Prussia reversed the balance of power in Central Europe. Russia remained a backward country at all levels: economic, political, administrative and military. It was also plagued by corruption. Prussia, on the other hand, had taken steps to develop productive forces; it had an efficient state administration and a well-managed and well-equipped army. Prussia's rise to power, which reached its peak with the founding of the German empire in 1871, blocked the expansion of Russian influence to the west and north-west and forced

Russia to turn its attention to Central Asia, *i.e.* to less developed regions.

So Russia's potential for nuisance diminished with the rise of Prussia and the constitution of the German Empire. From about 1866 onwards, the centre of reaction in Europe was Germany, says Bakunin, who had a much more dialectical vision than Marx²⁷.

Marx was so anxious to absolve Prussia that he wrote that it was at the instigation of Russia that Bismarck waged war on France in 1870!

It should be added, however, that the attitude of Marx and Engels towards Russia changed considerably at the end of the 1870s. Bakunin had never stopped saying that in Russia there was not only a government, there was also an oppressed people. In 1873 or 1874 Bakunin published *Statism and Anarchy*, which is a remarkable work of geopolitics, in which he also makes an analysis of the social relations existing in Russian society. It is known that Marx read and annotated the book. We also know that he had begun to learn Russian. The articles of both men completely change in tone. It was also at this time that Marx completely overturned the fundamental principle of his theory of history in order to rally to Bakunin's point of view (without admitting it, of course). A reversal that went unnoticed by Marxist thinkers, I might add. Bakunin said that the logic of the historical development of the Slavic nations was not the same as that of Western Europe. Now in 1877 and in 1881 Marx recognized this fact in two letters, one to Vera Sassoulitch, the other to a Russian publication²⁸.

27 Austria and Prussia were in constant conflict for domination over Germany. In 1866 Austria suffered a bitter defeat at Sadowa, which established the definitive domination of Prussia.

28 ♦ In November 1877 Marx sent a letter to the editor of the *Otecestvenniye Zapisky* in which he criticized a commentator on *Capital* for wanting to transform his “sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into a historical-philosophical theory of the general march fatally imposed on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they find themselves.”

(<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/11/russia.htm>).

♦ Commenting the genesis of capitalist production founded on “the complete separation of the producer from the means of production”, he writes to Vera Zasulich: “I thus expressly limited the “historical inevitability” of this process to the countries of Western Europe. (First Draft of Letter To Vera Zasulich. *MECW*, Volume 24, p. 346.)

This is Marx's posthumous – and unintended – homage to Bakunin, and limited to his private correspondence, *i.e.*, such statements will have no bearing on the “real Marxism” that has already begun to develop.

You were talking about 1869. What does this date represent?

It's a very important date for Marx because at the Basel congress of the International, which was held that year, he found himself in a minority on one item on the agenda, the question of inheritance. Marx believed that this question had been put on the agenda by a plot organized by Bakunin. So he proposed a counter-motion in the name of the General Council, convinced that it would crush Bakunin, that it would “deal him a decisive blow”, as he later explained²⁹. In fact he shot himself in the foot (a speciality, in Marx's case, when you think about it) because his counter-motion was largely a minority one. For Marx, this was unacceptable.

To be honest, if I remember correctly, Marx's motion seemed to me to be more realistic and better argued than Bakunin's, but this is not the place to debate it here. On the substance they are in agreement, the differences being about the process by which one arrives at the suppression of the inheritance. In fact, this point of the agenda aimed to situate the issues between the two currents, statist and federalist, of the International. It was a bit of a contest between two kids who want to know who pisses the farthest. In any case it traumatised Marx, who was not used to having someone oppose him. The reaction was immediate: anger, threats and so on. One of his disciples, tetanized, murmured: “Marx will be furious”³⁰... From then on, an unbelievable campaign of slander was launched in which all those close to Marx participated. Accusations of pan-Slavism began to rain down on Bakunin again.

As an anecdote, the General Council's report of this congress is astounding. It develops the arguments of the General Council on the issue of inheritance, but does not inform readers that its resolution was rejected by the congress! That's what Marx-style democracy is all about.

29 “Bakunin then sought to achieve his aim – to transform the International into his private instrument – by other means. Through the Geneva Romanish Committee of the General Council he proposed that the “question of inheritance” be put on the agenda of the Basel Congress. The General Council agreed, in order to be able to hit Bakunin on the head directly. Bakunin's plan was this: When the Basel Congress accepts the “principles” (?) he proposed in Bern, he will show the world that he has not gone over to the International, but the International has gone over to him. The simple consequence: The London General Council (whose opposition to the rehashing of the St.-Simonist *vieillerie* [rubbish] was known to Bakunin) must resign and the Basel Congress would *move the General Council to Geneva*; that is, the International would fall under the dictatorship of Bakunin.” (Marx, Confidential Communication, , march 28, 1870.)

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1870/03/28.htm>

30 Johann Georg Eccarius, who had proposed the resolution on behalf of the General Council.

I am well aware that all this may seem trivial, and that it may seem quite abusive to compare Marx's pettiness on the one hand, and the contribution that his monumental work makes to the critique of capitalism on the other. However, I don't think it's possible to separate the two, because the accumulation of all his pettinesses, manipulations, sneaky tricks, has greatly influenced the destiny of the international labour movement, and someone will have to account for it one day in his name. And then I wasn't asked to talk about Marxism but about Marx. This is not the bicentenary of Marxism but of Marx.

Concerning the IWA, it seems that everything has been said, but I think that two essential things need to be repeated: firstly, the conflict that shook it was not a conflict of persons but a conflict linked to two different social projects. Secondly, we are dealing with two opposing strategic visions. For Bakunin, the IWA was a trade union-type structure, organising workers on the basis of their role in the production process. It was created with this perspective in mind. This structure was the model from which the emancipated society was going to organise. That's why I think that the federalist current of the IWA is unquestionably the prefiguration of revolutionary syndicalism.

For Marx, the IWA was a grouping of political parties. He intended to transform the federations of the International into parties whose aim was to present candidates for election, in the hope of thereby conquering political power. It is in this sense that I said that the problem of the International for Marx was reduced to the question of social democracy. The very theoretical German member of the IWA was the socialist party, which had platonically agreed with the principles but actually never got involved in the International. A Bolshevik historian, Yuri Stekhlov, thought that the First International functioned in the mode of "democratic centralism"! An unbelievable anachronism, but this shows how the transmission of the history of the International within social democracy, which was the heir of Marx, had been biased.

This reminds me of James Guillaume who had gone to a congress of Swiss socialists, after he and Bakunin were expelled from the IWA, in the mad hope of starting a reconciliation process. He was stunned to discover that the guys weren't even aware that the congress in The Hague had excluded them and the Jura Federation! Moreover, when he tried to explain the federalist concepts of organisation to them, the socialists simply didn't understand what he was talking about! This means that the dialogue was impossible... In his report, Guillaume evokes the incredible arrogance of these socialists, holders of the truth thanks to "scientific socialism"³¹.

31 See "Le Congrès d'Olten", *L'internationale, documents et souvenirs*, Second volume, tome III, pp. 74-79,

http://www.monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/James_Guillaume_-_Congres_d_Olten2.pdf

It should be noted that within the General Council, Marx's only official function was to be the representative of a German federation that did not exist! In fact, German law prohibited any membership of a foreign organisation, a pretext which was put forward to justify the lack of German members. But in almost all other countries too, the International was banned and activists were victims of repression! This did not prevent them from developing the IWA and organising tens of thousands of workers.

The exclusion of Bakunin and James Guillaume, which took place at the congress in The Hague, had been meticulously prepared. Engels had desperately tried to rally as many workers as possible in order to swell the ranks of the phantom German Federation and gain mandates. But in panic, he wrote to Liebknecht: What, there are only 200 members³²? One can therefore understand the urgent need to falsify the mandates, an activity in which Becker, who had become a sort of executor of Marx's low works, had become a master. I believe it was he who spoke of "delegiertenmacherei", the making of delegates. The falsification of mandates in The Hague would be worth writing a book about.

I have the impression that we are getting bogged down in the details. The fact remains that Marx was a decisive actor in the history of the International, wasn't he? There's no denying that.

Not so much in fact. You reproach me for getting bogged down in events instead of talking about great principles. But history is first of all made up of events. I'm talking about events, facts. I could produce the sources if I were in my library. Once you have examined the facts, as many facts as possible, you can then draw conclusions, make analyses, define the broad outlines. But very often in Marxist texts there are no or few events, only ideological proclamations³³.

32 Four months before the congress in The Hague, which was to endorse the exclusion of Bakunin and James Guillaume which had been decided during a confidential conference held in London one year earlier, Engels wrote an urgent letter to Liebknecht: "How many cards, to how many members and where did you distribute approximately? The 208 calculated by Fink aren't everything!" (Engels to Wilhelm Liebknecht, 22 May 1872).

33 Here is a characteristic example of ideological discourse: "Marx never ceased to speak out against the anti-Western, even Slavophile, messianism of certain Russian intellectuals, and in particular against the ideas of the anarchist Bakunin, a fierce opponent of the methods of struggle which Marx tried to

What do you mean?

Well, I'm thinking of a text by an American academic named August Nimtz, who wrote in a journal called *Science and Society* three pages against Bakunin, a masterpiece of the genre³⁴. I think of this text because I've read it recently, but of course there are others. I replied to it, maybe a little too long, since I wrote about 60 pages, but as my daughter says, just because a guy writes three pages of nonsense doesn't mean you can't write 60 pages to correct the facts³⁵.

So in three pages he accumulates all the preconceptions, prejudices, falsifications that Marxists have accumulated since Marx. His approach does not consist in taking account of the progress of historiography on Bakunin since 1870, which are very important, but to repeat without any critical spirit what Marx, and another guy named Hal Draper, said. Draper died in 1990 I think, he was a Trotskyist at one time, and he wrote a five-volume "Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution"³⁶ in which there are pages of unbelievable partiality, dishonesty, and sectarianism.

Okay, but we're not here to talk about Hal Draper. But guys like that don't take into account the facts, the real events, they only consider the orthodox interpretation of events. The whole strategy of Marx against Bakunin in the International was based on the idea that the Russian wanted to control the General Council. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, Marx stuck to this thesis, whereas Bakunin wanted to reduce the powers of the General Council, or even abolish it!

A typical example of ideological treatment of an event: the book that Marx wrote about the Paris Commune, *The Civil War in France*.

At first, at the beginning of the war of 1870, he and Engels feared above all an insurrection by the Parisians that would have risked overthrowing the balance of power! If only they could keep quiet, they said of the Parisians at first. Their correspondence shows that they were

bring about in the labour movement with the help of the International Workers' Association.... » (M. Rubel, *Marx critique du marxisme*, Payot, p. 157). The "methods of struggle" that Marx tried to bring about in the workers' movement consisted of parliamentary action, as we saw after the French defeat at the hands of the Prussians, when Marx advised the French workers to "do their duty", that is, to participate in the democratic institutions that the Prussian victory had brought them. Naturally when the Parisian uprising broke out, Marx was forced to change his point of view.

34 A.H. Nimtz, "Another "Side" to the "Story"", *Science & Society*, July 2016, Vol. 80, N° 3.

35 See R. Berthier's answer to A.H. Nimtz : "Science & Society, Mr A. H. Nimtz & Bakunin", <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article673>

36 Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, 1977.

extremely worried about a possible upsurge of the French proletariat. They refer to the French Revolution and the national upsurge of 1792, which is one of the founding myths of the French Republic³⁷. The revolution was in serious danger, all the despotic monarchies of Europe were united against it and threatened to restore the king. There was a fantastic mass uprising which brought together a huge army, poorly equipped but which crushed the coalised monarchies. Well, in 1871 Marx and Engels were terrified that the French should repeat the experience. Why? Because the Prussian victory would finally create the conditions for the unification of Germany, which was then their main concern! Of course, to find out all that, you have to search in documents that are rarely mentioned, their correspondence: we read in particular that the Prussian victory would ensure the hegemony of Marxism over Proudhonism and would transfer the centre of gravity of the workers' movement from France to Germany³⁸.

At the beginning of the Commune, Marx and Engels said that the French proletariat had to keep quiet, that the French defeat had made them the gift of a republic³⁹ and that they had to fulfil their duty by voting. After the beginning of the insurrection, of course, they could not refrain from supporting it. It was in this spirit that Marx wrote *The Civil War in France*. But what Marxists, Marxologists and others have retained is Marx's text itself, taken out of context. The *Civil War in France* thus becomes a

37 “The French workmen must perform their duties as citizens; but, at the same time, they must not allow themselves to be swayed by the national *souvenirs* of 1792...” “Let them calmly and resolutely improve the opportunities of republican liberty, for the work of their own class organization” (Marx : “Second address of the General Council”, September 9, 1870). By performing “their duties as citizens”, Marx means voting.

38 Karl Marx, letter to Engels, 20 July 1870: “The French need a thrashing. If the Prussians win, the centralisation of the state power will be useful for the centralisation of the German working class. German predominance would also transfer the centre of gravity of the workers' movement in Western Europe from France to Germany, and one has only to compare the movement in the two countries from 1866 till now to see that the German working class is superior to the French both theoretically and organisationally. Their predominance over the French on the world stage would also mean the predominance of our theory over Proudhon's.”

39 Engels writes to Marx on 7 september 1870: “Having endured Badinguet [*Napoleon III*] for 20 years (...) now that the German victories have made them a *present* of a republic—*et laquelle!* [*and what a republic!*]*—* these people demand that the Germans should leave the sacred soil of France without delay, for otherwise there will be *guerre à outrance* [*war to the knife*] ! It is the same old idea of the superiority of France, of a land consecrated by 1793 which no subsequent French indecencies can profane, of the sanctity of the word: the Republic. (...) I hope that they will all reflect on the matter once more when the first intoxication is past, for if not, it will be damned difficult to have any truck with them at an International level.” (MECW, Lawrence & Wishart, Vol. 44, p. 67.)

history book, an indisputable reference. The funny thing is that by espousing the dominant idea of the Commune, federalism, in particular, Marx was in total contradiction with himself. This is why Bakunin said that the book was a “buffoon” travesty of his thinking⁴⁰. There was at least one honest Marxist who shared Bakunin's point of view, I am referring to Franz Mehring.

Earlier you were talking about Marx social democrat. Can we say that he was its founder?

Yes and no. Marx's relationship with German socialism is complex and ambiguous. He kept on complaining about the German socialists. In fact, the real founder of the socialist movement in this country is Ferdinand Lassalle, who is very poorly known because of Marx's ideological hegemony, which ended up dominating people's minds. Let's say that there is implicit agreement in Germany to designate Marx *and* Lassalle, although they had deep disagreements, as co-founders of social democracy, a thesis that strongly displeases the most sectarian Marxists. Lassalle represented everything that Marx was not. He was immediately recognized by the workers' movement of his time, since the German workers themselves asked him to lead them! It happened in 1862 or 1863, I don't know anymore. That's how the first socialist party was founded in Germany. Lassalle accepted the presidency of the organisation on condition that he was granted full powers!

⁴⁰ Speaking of the Paris Commune, Bakunin wrote: “The effect was so formidable everywhere, that the Marxians themselves, whose ideas had been overthrown by this insurrection, were obliged to pull their hats off in front of it. They did much more: in a reversal of simple logic and their true feelings, they proclaimed that its programme and its goal were theirs. It was a travesty that was truly buffoonish, but forced. They had to do it, otherwise they would have been overwhelmed and abandoned by everyone, so powerful had been the passion that this revolution had provoked in everyone.” ((Œuvres, Champ libre, III, 166.)

Franz Mehring, Marx's Marxist biographer, wrote about Marx's positions on the Paris Commune: “The way in which the Address dealt with these details was brilliant, but there was a certain contradiction between them and the opinions previously held by Marx and Engels for a quarter century and set down in *The Communist Manifesto*.” (...) “These opinions of *The Communist Manifesto* could not be reconciled with the praise lavished by the *Address* of the General Council on the Paris Commune for the vigorous fashion in which it had begun to exterminate the parasitic State.” (Franz Mehring, *Karl Marx, The Story of his Life*, chapter 14.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/mehring/1918/marx/ch14.htm#3>

What's more, Lassalle was rich, whereas Marx was constantly struggling on a shoestring budget to sustain his family. Marx resented Lassalle as a man resents someone who lends him money. One day Lassalle came to visit Marx in London. Marx was furious because in one week his host spent more on cigars than the Marx's spent on food in that same period⁴¹. Lassalle died very early, in the most stupid way, in a duel because of a woman, but despite everything it still posits a man in a machist society. When he died in 1864, his party had only 4 or 5,000 members, but it became the nucleus from which a mass organisation was to develop. Above all, despite Marx's virulent criticisms, the structures and principles established by Lassalle permanently permeated the party, even after its merger in 1869 with the vaguely "Marxist" party of Eisenach.

Until 1864, *i.e.* Lassalle's death, this was Marx's only contact with the German workers' movement. The question would deserve a closer examination, but it seems to me that the attitude of Marx and Engels in 1848-1849 – the ideological collaboration with the bourgeoisie – had not left an imperishable memory with the German workers. It was only much later, after the publication of *Capital* in 1867, when amnesia starts to do its work, that Marx's prestige began to rise⁴².

In the 1860s there were, of course, Liebknecht and Bebel, but they were more concerned with the creation of a democratic opposition to Prussia than with the creation of a socialist party. Socially, they relied on democrats, manual workers, lawyers, teachers, shopkeepers. When the Socialist Party was founded in Eisenach in 1869, its social composition was very varied. After Lassalle's death, Engels wrote to Marx that their only valid contact in Germany was Liebknecht, which did not prevent Marx from considering him as a simpleton who understood nothing of dialectics, a very negative opinion in Marx's pen, as one can guess. In addition, Liebknecht was materially dependent for his living on non-

41 In July 1862 Lassalle spent three weeks at Marx's house. "the visit was largely a personal and political disaster. Lassalle flaunted his money, spending £1 per day on cigars and cab fare, grating to Marx, who smoked foul-smelling cheap stogies and went everywhere on foot." (Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx A Nineteenth-Century Life*, Liveright Publishing Corporation, p. 276. <http://pombo.free.fr/sperbermarx.pdf> When Lassalle went back to Germany, Marx wrote to Engels: "The Jewish nigger Lassalle who, I'm glad to say, is leaving at the end of this week, has happily lost another 5,000 talers in an ill-judged speculation. The chap would sooner throw money down the drain than lend it to a 'friend,' even though his interest and capital were guaranteed." (Marx to Engels, 30 July 1862)

42 "Marx and Engels, like the other émigrés of 1848, had long been forgotten by the mass of the German people, and until the publication of *Das Kapital* late in 1867, which Engels advertised well publicised by Engels most German socialists refused to believe that Lassalle's ideas were anything but original." (Roger Morgan, *The German Social Democrats and the First International 1864-1872*, p. 124.)

socialist organisations, and he always showed, as did Bebel, an extremely moderate interest in the International. Marx spent his time scolding them because they were very lax in their efforts to develop the IWA in Germany⁴³. They were even less motivated as they hid behind the German law that forbade Germans from joining a non-German association. But in France, Spain, Italy, Portugal and all over Europe, the IWA was banned and its activists hunted down by the police, repressed and imprisoned. In fact, German Social Democratic leaders only became interested in the IWA at its end: they used the reference to the IWA only to arbitrate their internal conflicts.

In 1875 a unification congress was held in Gotha between Lassalle's ADAV party and that of Eisenach, which led to the drawing up of a programme, the famous Gotha programme. In fact, it was a victory for Lassalle's ideas, to the great fury of Marx. This congress even ended with a song sung by the congress participants, the “Marseillaise of the Workers”, which said among other things: “We are following the audacious path traced out for us by Lassalle”, which must have made Marx suffocate with rage.

Marx wrote a severe critique of the Gotha programme, but the socialist leaders did not want to hear about Marx's disagreements with it. His critique was not published, and when Marx asked Liebknecht to communicate it to Bebel, Liebknecht refused. When later, in 1891, after Marx's death, Bebel learned of the text, he tried by all means to prevent its publication. This was because Lassalle was seen as *the* man who had given life to the German workers' movement after the failure of 1848. It is possible – and personally I think there's no doubt about it – that if Marx in 1848, instead of flirting with the radical bourgeoisie, had pushed the workers' movement to organize and fight, instead of dissolving the Communist League, Marx would have immediately acquired immense prestige in spite of the inevitable defeat of the workers.

43 “The fellow [*Liebknecht*] does not even have the excuse that he marches with us through thick and thin. He commits his stupidities on his own behalf, betrays us when he sees fit, and identifies us with him as soon as he sees no other way out. [...] The ideas the Germans in general hold about our financial means you will see from the enclosed letter from Kugelmann. The fellows never sent a pfennig here. The General Council owes 5 weeks rent, and is in debt to its secretary. Peculiar conceptions! (Marx à Engels, 22 juillet 1869.) (MECW, Lawrence & Wishart, vol. 43, pp. 326-327)

Let's come back to this Lassalle. He created a party in 1863, died in 1864. How is it possible that under these conditions the impact of this man could have been so important?

In fact, Lassalle was not a newcomer, he had been on the political and social scene for quite some time. He took part in the German revolution of 1848, was arrested in 1849 and served a year in prison. From 1862 onwards he travelled all over Germany, made countless speeches and wrote countless pamphlets to encourage the workers to organise themselves. In other words, he became very “visible”, which is why he was chosen.

Marx had been in correspondence with him since 1848. He was flattered by Lassalle's constant references to his ideas, which he helped to spread. Marx no doubt thought that his intellectual superiority would eventually prevail. But in the meantime he needed Lassalle to borrow money from him and to find publishers in Germany. This explains why he constantly refrained from attacking him publicly – as long as Lassalle was alive. In his private correspondence it was different. We see his bitterness, but also his fear that Lassalle might appropriate his ideas and distort them. We see him flattering Lassalle basely for his doctoral thesis on Heraclitus, but denigrating him with contempt in his correspondence and above all covering him with anti-Semitic insults, such as “Jewish nigger”, etc.⁴⁴

Bakunin is absolutely right that it was only after Lassalle's death that Marx publicly attacked him. But it was too late: Lassallism was already deeply rooted in the German socialist movement. In fact, Lassalle was the man who linked Marx organically to the labour movement. Bakunin is still right to say that Lassalle did what Marx would have wanted to do.

44 Marx à Engels, 30 July 1862. All of Marx's correspondence is peppered with anti-Semitic remarks, especially when it concerns Lassalle. Whenever Marx refers to a person who happens to be Jewish, it is always in a pejorative manner, and he feels compelled to specify that the person is Jewish. The only Jew who finds favour in his eyes is Moses, but he is not called a “Jew”, he is an “Egyptian priest”. Speaking of Lassalle, Marx wrote in his letter to Engels of July 30, 1862: “It is now quite plain to me—as the shape of his head and the way his hair grows also testify—that he is descended from the Negroes who accompanied Moses' flight from Egypt (unless his mother or paternal grandmother interbred with a NIGGER). Now, this blend of Jewishness and Germanness, on the one hand, and basic Negroid stock, on the other, must inevitably give rise to a peculiar product. The fellow's importunity is also nigger-like.” (Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 30 July 1862) MECW, Lawrence & Wishart, vol. 41, p. 390.)

Lassalle, in a way, *incarnated* the German workers' movement. I can imagine the frustration that Marx must have felt for the rest of his life when he was faced with the posthumous victory of his rival.

For the record, a French historian, Sonia Dayan, has written two books on Lassalle, I don't have the titles in mind but they were published by L'Harmattan, so they are easy to find⁴⁵.

So, to answer your question, I think that Marx founded the German socialist movement only very marginally, but that he obviously influenced it a lot afterwards. The changeover, in my opinion, took place in 1913, at the time of the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the ADAV, Lassalle's party. Two men clashed over the respective place of Lassalle and Marx in the genesis of the German workers' movement: Franz Mehring and Karl Kautsky. It can be said that Mehring defended Lassalle in the name of historical truth, Kautsky in the name of what was beginning to become Marxist orthodoxy.

Marxism took a long time to be recognised as a political doctrine in Germany because of the strong permeation of Lassalle's ideas. Very few socialist activists, for example, had read *Capital*; strangely, Lassalian leaders were much more interested in it. Marx said of Liebknecht that he had not read fifteen pages of *Capital*⁴⁶. *It can be said that Marxism was founded in 1913 by Kautsky when it became an orthodoxy.*

Contrary to what many people think, the expansion of Marxism was something very laborious. In France, for example, it became the victim of the sordid quarrels of the half-dozen socialist parties competing for the leadership on the working class; but it was also a victim of the narrow-mindedness and vanity of Marx's closest followers, Paul Lafargue and Jules Guesde. The expansion of Marxism was not the result of a sudden enlightenment among the workers but of laborious trials and attempts.

It sounds as if you are proceeding with a kind of deconstruction.

The word “deconstruction” irritates me. Let's say that I am trying, as far as I can, to bring Marxism back to its real historical dimension. A certain demythification, even demystification, seems necessary to me. When I read that Marx “founded” the First International, it seems to me

45 Sonia Dayan-Herzbrun : L'invention du parti ouvrier. Aux origines de la social-démocratie (1848-1864), Paris : Éd. L'Harmattan, (Coll. “Chemins de la mémoire”), 1990 ;Mythes et mémoire du mouvement ouvrier. Le cas Ferdinand Lassalle, Paris : Éd. L'Harmattan, (Coll. “Logiques sociales”), 1990.

46 Marx to Engels, 25 January 1868. MECW, Lawrence & Wishart, vol. 42, p. 527.

necessary to bring things back to their true measure. The International was founded by a group of British Trade Unionists and French Proudhonians.

I believe it was James Guillaume who wrote that Marx acted like the cuckoo laying its egg in someone else's nest⁴⁷. The picture is a bit forced, but it's pretty true. Of course, the supporters of the ideological approach to the question cannot accept such a vision of things. We rarely talk about the German IWA. It's a subject on which Marxists are not very talkative. As I said, the Social Democrats used the law prohibiting membership of a foreign association as an excuse for the poor development of the International in Germany. But they forget to point out that this law was very rarely applied, and that the same prohibitions, and often fierce repression, never prevented mass membership in other countries.

I said that Marx's only official status in the International was to be the representative of a non-existent German federation: Marx absolutely needed to give the illusion of an active federation to justify his status. The problem was that the social-democratic leaders were not very interested in the IWA, and Marx never stopped scolding them for it: he needed the fiction of an actual German federation to support his position in the General Council. The German workers, for their part, had perfectly understood the importance that the IWA could have in supporting their struggles. Workers' groups addressed themselves directly to the General Council to obtain support for their conflicts. But Marx, as Germany's representative in the General Council, was unable to cope with the many requests for support from German workers' groups who didn't know who to turn to. Only an actual federation, in Germany itself, could have met their needs.

But why this disaffection of German leaders with the International?

That's a good question! In fact the real founder of the IWA in Germany was Becker, a rather odd guy, first of all close to Bakunin, a member of the Alliance in which he defended very "leftist" positions, then who began to hate him after Bakunin had tried to moderate his excesses. So Becker joined Marx, who seemed to be wary of him but who used it. Becker was a free electron. He had the idea, excellent in my opinion, of setting up federations of the International not on a national, but on a linguistic basis.

47 Marx "joined the International at the time when the initiative of English and French workers had just created it. Like the cuckoo, he came to lay his egg in a nest that was not his own. From the very first day, his intention was to make the great workers' organization the instrument of his personal views." James Guillaume: *Karl Marx pangermaniste?*, p. 5. (Reprint from the collection of the University of Michigan Library.)

From his London exile, Marx was fiercely opposed to this idea, which was understandable because on these bases no parliamentary strategy was possible, which needed the existence of national parties. However, he had begun to strongly organise German-speaking workers, and the IWA was developing not only in German-speaking Switzerland, but also in Germany. The consequence of Marx's opposition was that the IWA simply did not develop in Germany. A German Marxist historian, Franz Mehring, noted that wherever national parties were formed, the IWA declined⁴⁸.

Becker was influencing many workers in Germany, Switzerland and the United States, while the German Social Democratic leaders were making all-out attempts to build up an electoral force. These leaders eventually understood what electoral advantage they could gain from the International. Liebknecht and his friends endorsed the principles of the IWA in March 1869. It is important to underline: “the principles”. But Marx complained that they did nothing more. Because theoretically, and I specify *very theoretically*, it was the Socialist Party which in principle constituted the German “federation” of the IWA (in other words a political party), but this membership has always remained platonic, because of German law. Thus the Socialist Party gave its adhesion to the “principles” of the IWA – but nothing more, as I said.

So Becker was literally robbed of the limelight by his socialist comrades who followed Marx's view on the question because it suited them (on other questions the German socialists refrained from following Marx). Indeed, the official legend places the foundation of the first sections of the German IWA at the foundation of the party in Eisenach in 1869, but Becker had started the job *four years earlier*, successfully. Becker's actual role was completely overshadowed by the completely fictitious role attributed to Liebknecht. After the Commune, the International became a mythical event which social democracy appropriated while the German socialist leaders had done virtually nothing but proclamations. However, we must pay tribute to Bebel and Liebknecht for having had an internationalist attitude at the beginning of the Franco-Prussian war, for which, moreover, they were scolded by Marx, for reasons I mentioned earlier: Marx feared that a Prussian defeat would delay the process of German national unification.

In fact the IWA became in Germany a weapon in the fierce controversies that divided the party. After the crushing of the Commune, the recalling of the International's glorious memory became a cause for glory for anyone who could convince people that he had played a role in the dissemination of its ideas in Germany. Thus Liebknecht and Bebel inflated the role they were supposed to have played, and minimised the role Becker – who had died in the meantime anyway – had actually

48 “Wherever national workers' parties formed, the International began to break up”, says Mehring in his biography of Marx, *op. cit.* Chapter 14.

played. The German reader came to accept the idea that Becker had played no role.

Marxist commentators cannot accept the idea that the various federations of the International had come to be simply fed up with Marx. I am talking about the real federations, those that paid their dues and had real members. How else can we explain that all the federations of the IWA, after they realized that they had been manipulated into excluding Bakunin and James Guillaume at the congress held in The Hague in 1872, all disavowed the exclusions, to the point that Marx and Engels ended up excluding from the International the entire organized labour movement of the time⁴⁹?

Let me remind you that in 1848 Marx dissolved the Communist party and in 1872 he excluded from the International the whole organized working class of the time. It's quite a record, when you think about it!

When I read that Marx “fought” during the revolution of 1848, it makes me smile. The only thing Marx “fought” for in 1848 was to awaken the class consciousness of the liberal bourgeoisie, and for that he dissolved the first communist party in history. Engels at least was part of the Cologne militia, he took part in the barricades in Eberfeld for a few days in 1849 and took part in the final phase of the Baden uprising in July 1849. This earned him the status of a “military specialist” in German Social Democracy and led to his relatives calling him “the general”. What should be said of Bakunin, then, who took part in the uprising in Paris in 1848, in that of Prague, in that of Dresden of which he was one of the main organisers. Not to mention the one in Lyon. Engels declared that in Dresden the insurgent workers had found in Bakunin a competent and cold-blooded leader. Coming from Engels speaking of Bakunin, the appreciation is worth mentioning.

49 The New York General Council under the supervision of Sorge and at the request of Engels passed a resolution on May 1873 declaring that all of the federations, sections and individuals who attended the Congresses of Brussels, Cordoba and London “have placed themselves outside of & are no longer members of the International Workingmen’s Association” (Quoted by Wolfgang Eckardt, *The First Socialist Schism*, PM Press, p. ccxii.)

We were engaged in a sort of vagrancy in which we approached many aspects of Marx's life and activity which you focused in a somewhat unusual light. I understand that you could be inexhaustible on these questions, so I will stop here and ask you one last question: What could we learn from Marx today?

A lot of things. But here again, we need to clarify what we're talking about. Let me explain.

There is the legacy of Marx seen from an ideological point of view. I'm thinking in particular of those who today are trying to show that Marxism as a theoretical corpus is still the only instrument for analysing and understanding the functioning of the capitalist system. Marx remains for them the ultimate reference and all their activity consists in trying to show that the situation we live in today can still be explained by Marx alone. These people do a kind of exegesis work aimed at showing that Marx said everything, they think they can find in as yet unpublished manuscripts of Marx truths which have not yet been said. This is scholasticism. It's a bit like the work of medieval monks. Thus, 150 years after the publication of Book I of *Capital*, this work remains for them the essential reference for understanding the society in which we live. They do a meticulous job of proving, including through mathematical formulas, that *Capital* has said it all. Likewise, 170 years after its publication, the *Communist Manifesto* remains the guide for defining a political line. This is absurd. Since the *Manifesto* and *Capital*, the world has changed. This is obviously a reflection that also applies to anarchist authors.

Personally, I think that this legacy is obsolete. Hegel says somewhere that all philosophy is only the philosophy of its time. He said that one could study Plato, recognise his contribution to the evolution of thought, but there is no reason to be a Platonist. Or something like that⁵⁰. The same should be done with Marx. The contribution of his thought is historically

50 "Each philosophy is the philosophy of its time, it is a link in the whole chain of spiritual development; it can therefore only satisfy the interests of its time. (...) This is why there cannot be Platonists, Aristotelians, Stoics, Epicureans today. To resurrect them would mean wanting to bring them back to an earlier degree... Such a return to the past can be seen ... as the refuge of impotence unable to cope with the rich matter of development which requires to be mastered by thought and grasped in depth – impotence which seeks salvation in flight and in destitution." (Hegel, *Course in History of Philosophy*.)

dated. If the reference to his thought can still be useful today as a “reading grid”, the fact remains that the understanding of the world around us must also be based on many authors who, after him, provided tools. In short, I will quote Max Weber, Gurvitch, Schumpeter, Chomsky, and many more recent ones that I do not have in mind at the moment. And don't tell me that since Marx there haven't been economists capable of providing analytical tools. I would like to point out that among English-speaking anarchists, the level of critical reflection around the question of Marxism, anarchism and economic analysis is much higher than in France.

Besides, it makes me think of an incredible gap in the anarchist movement. There was an anarchist called Christiaan Cornelissen, who wrote between 1903 and 1944 a seven-volume *General Treatise on Economics* that was very popular in its time and then fell into oblivion, and which the anarchist movement completely forgot, or ignored. Volume I of the treatise is devoted to value theory, in which the author makes a critique of the value-labour theory. It might be interesting for the libertarian movement to immerse itself in this work to see what Cornelissen tells us, and it could seriously enrich the debate with Marxism on this question.

It is unbelievable that an anarchist author could have written an immense economic work of the magnitude of Marx's *Capital* or more, and that this work was completely ignored by the anarchist movement. I would even say that it is a shame. And meanwhile, some anarchists invented a so-called “libertarian Marxism” because they were unable to find in their own thinkers the theoretical elements on which to rely. The only anarchist who ever spoke to me about Cornelissen was Gaston Leval⁵¹.

But to return to the ideological legacy of Marx, most of the concepts attributed to him are abused. It was not he who invented the concept of class struggle, *i.e.* the idea that the division of classes between those who possess the means of production and those who are excluded from them created insurmountable contradictions.

The question of the dictatorship of the proletariat, another key concept, is a bit of a scam because Marx almost never talked about it and never based his doctrine on it. He mentioned it about it two or three times in his youth, around the 1850s when he was still influenced by Blanqui, who talked about the dictatorship of the plebe or something like that. And after that, Marx didn't talk about dictatorship of the proletariat again until 25 years later, in his *Criticism of the Gotha programme*, which was not meant to be published! The dictatorship of the proletariat is something that was pinned up by Engels, who went so far as to say that the Paris Commune was the dictatorship of the proletariat⁵²!

51 The first volume, “Théorie de la valeur” (1903) is undertitled “Refutation of the theories of Rodbertus, Karl Marx, Stanley & Boehm-Bawerk.

52 Engels : “Well, gentlemen, if you wish to know, what this dictatorship looks

Marx never made it a programmatic issue. By this I mean that he evokes this concept as a sociological statement, a factual situation characterizing a period of transition, but he never says that the dictatorship of the proletariat is textually an element of the program of the Communist Party. It is after him that the dictatorship of the proletariat becomes an obsessive concept under the pen of the communist authors.

Same thing for “historical materialism”. Marx never talks about historical materialism, it was Engels, again, who made a big fuss about it. Marx claims to have elaborated a materialist conception of history, which is already quite good, but then again he is not the inventor of this idea. Marx never mentions either the notion of “dialectical materialism” which is a philosophical absurdity, just as absurd as if I spoke of “spiritualist materialism”.

Etc.

Those who repeat that Marx and Engels invented scientific socialism forget that it was Proudhon who used the term first, and that socialism, that is to say a political doctrine, can in no way be “scientific”. If Marxism is a science, then the postulates on which it is based upon must be subjected to the same fate as the postulates of any science: to be examined in the light of the experimental method, to be refutable and overcome by new postulates. I think nothing is more distant from the thought of Marx than the absurdities of Lenin declaring that Marxism is cast in a block of steel and nothing can be removed from it. Such thoughts disqualify even Lenin as a Marxist, I would say⁵³.

I was saying that there is the ideological legacy of Marx. There is also his political legacy. His political legacy is German social democracy. I know, Bolshevism should be added, but personally I don't consider the Bolsheviks to be Marxists, which means, and I insist on this, that I categorically contest the attitude that consists in attributing to Marx the intellectual responsibility for the concentrationist horrors of so-called Russian communism. The Bolsheviks are people who used Marx's texts opportunistically, but if I had to classify them, I would put them under the heading of “populists”.

Marx's political legacy is German social democracy. But this legacy is biased by the fact that, structurally, German social democracy is totally imbued with Lassalle's positions, and that Marxism is in fact a doctrine that has been superimposed on this Lassalian structure. This question

like, look at the Paris Commune. That was the dictatorship of the proletariat.” (Introduction to The Civil War in France, for the 20th anniversary of the Paris Commune.)

53 “From this Marxist philosophy, which is cast from a single piece of steel, you cannot eliminate one basic premise, one essential part, without departing from objective truth, without falling a prey to a bourgeois-reactionary falsehood.” Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*.

would deserve to be developed. In conclusion, I would say that real Marxism, that of German Social Democracy and the Second International, is an appalling failure.

What you say is awful! So there's nothing to be gained from Marxism?

Of course there is. Marxism is a social doctrine that has many points of conjunction with anarchism. The problem is that Marxists don't seem very willing to admit it, so no dialogue is possible. Of course, I wouldn't go so far as to say with Maximilien Rubel that Marx was a theorist of anarchism⁵⁴. Rubel issued this thesis in the 1970s, I don't know if he came back on it afterwards. But towards the beginning of the 90s, if my memory serves me right, I interviewed him on Radio Libertaire and asked him to explain this thesis. He systematically evaded my questions, saying that it wasn't interesting, which makes me think that he had abandoned the idea. He told me that now he was much more interested in Proudhon, but again he did not give any details. Years later I reread the marginal notes that Marx had written on Bakunin's book, *Statism and Anarchy* – and which Rubel had commented on – and found that Marx seemed to be strangely close to Proudhon. It's a question that would deserve to be seriously investigated. At the end of his life, Marx talked a lot about cooperatives, a fact which is rarely mentioned.

The points of rapprochement between anarchism and Marxism are a fascinating subject to study, there would be a lot to be said on this subject, but it would still be necessary to have a *bona fide* interlocutor. But the Marxist current continues to do what Marx did: refuse the debate and distort reality. I remember the condescending smile of this activist of the Trotskyist current when I recently tried to explain to him the similarities in the method of exposure between the *System of Economic Contradictions* and *Capital*. He didn't even want to hear about it. That day I understood the feeling James Guillaume must have felt when he was confronted with the morgue of the Swiss Social Democrats at the Olten congress: you anarchists are nice guys but a bit stupid, we socialists are the depositaries of scientific socialism⁵⁵.

54 Maximilien Rubel, "Marx, théoricien de l'anarchisme", *L'Europe en formation*, n° 163-164, octobre-novembre 1973. Reproduit dans *Marx, critique du Marxisme*. Petite Bibliothèque Payot/Critique de la politique, 1974.

55 On James Guillaume and the Olten congress, see:

<http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article263>

James Guillaume and Pindy had been mandated to represent the Jura Federation at the Olten congress, which was to discuss the creation of a "central organisation of the working class in Switzerland". The two men went

Before concluding, can you develop the idea of a possible conjunction between Marxism and anarchism?

In my opinion it's a false problem. We can possibly speak of a debate between Marx and Bakunin, between Marx and Proudhon. Whereas Marxism is a doctrine elaborated by a man, anarchism is too diverse, it covers too varied a field of reflection and action. And frankly I don't see what debate there could be between Marx and Malatesta, for example although there has been one between Fabbri and Bukharin⁵⁶.

Bakunin paid tribute to Marx's theoretical contribution, and that was a sincere opinion. If we stick to the "fundamentals", Proudhon and Bakunin, anarchism and Marxism are close on the theoretical level, even if they differ fundamentally on questions of strategy and organisation⁵⁷.

So, if anarchism and Marxism have developed separately in terms of doctrine and theory, this development has emanated from identical concerns but with different conclusions. If a number of anarchists refuse to consider that anarchism and Marxism arose from identical conditions, this refusal both hinders the understanding of the points they approach, and also prevents a true perspective and understanding of the differences. That could be the subject of another interview...

Yes, well, we'll see...

Before I finish I would like to say one last thing. There are those who rejoice in the general disaffection with Marxism, seeing this as proof of the relevance of liberal thinking. The anarchist critique of Marxism should

there without too many illusions, but intended to defend their point of view and listen to that of the other delegates. James Guillaume writes: "They believe that they are in possession of the true scientific doctrine, and they look with pity on the dissidents; they are not even satisfied with this pity, they believe that they have been given the mission to eradicate heresy and to implant everywhere the sound doctrine of eternity and the necessity of the stick. Nothing is more amusing than to discuss with one of these citizens and to see the condescending smile with which he welcomes your arguments; nothing has ever disturbed and will never disturb the serenity of his convictions".

56 *Poverty of Statism: Anarchism vs Marxism: A Debate*: Bukharin, Fabbri, et al. Cienfuegos Press, 1981.

57 "Marxisme et anarchisme : Rapprochement, synthèse ou séparation ?", <http://monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article791>

not be situated on this terrain. Libertarians must not in any way howl with the wolves and support the criticisms of Marxism made by the enemies of the working class, the opponents of human emancipation. Our critique of Marxism is a critique from within. This is the position Bakunin had very clearly defended.