The Idea of Communism

‘A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism.’ When Karl Marx began his Manifesto of the Communist Party of 1848 with these famous words, he – and his co-author, Friedrich Engels – could have had no inkling of the way in which Communism would take off in the twentieth century. It became not merely a spectre but a living reality. And not just in Europe, but for hundreds of millions of people spread across the globe – in places very different from those where Marx expected proletarian revolutions to occur. Communist systems were established in two predominantly peasant societies – the largest country in the world, Imperial Russia, which became the Soviet Union, and in the state with the largest population, China. Why and how Communism spread, what kind of system it became, how it varied over time and across space, and why and how it came to an end in Europe, where it began, are the central themes of this book.

Marx’s claim was an exaggeration when he made it in the middle of the nineteenth century. By the middle of the twentieth century it had become almost an understatement. That is not to say that the ‘Communism’ which held sway in so many countries bore much resemblance to anything Marx had envisaged. There was a wide gulf between the original theory and the subsequent practice of Communist rule. Karl Marx sincerely believed that under communism – the future society of his imagination which he saw as an inevitable, and ultimate, stage of human development – people would live more freely than ever before. Yet ‘his vision of the universal liberation of humankind’ did not include any safeguards for individual liberty. Marx would have hated to be described as a moralist, since he saw himself as a Communist who was elaborating a theory of scientific socialism. Yet many of his formulations were nothing like as ‘scientific’ as he made out. One of his most rigorous critics on that account, Karl Popper, pays tribute to the moral basis of much of Marx’s indictment of nineteenth-century capitalism. As Popper observes, under the slogan of ‘equal and free competition for all’, child labour in conditions of immense suffering had been ‘tolerated, and sometimes even defended, not only by professional economists but also by
churchmen’. Accordingly, ‘Marx’s burning protest against these crimes’, says Popper, ‘will secure him forever a place among the liberators of mankind.’ Those who took power in the twentieth century, both using and misusing Marx’s ideas, turned out, however, to be anything but liberators. Marxist theory, as interpreted by Vladimir Lenin and subsequently refashioned by Josif Stalin in Russia and by Mao Zedong in China, became a rationalization for ruthless single-party dictatorship.

During most of the twentieth century Communism was the world’s dominant international political movement. People reacted to it in different ways – as a source of hope for a radiant future or as the greatest threat on the face of the earth. By the middle decades of the last century there were Communist governments not only in a string of Soviet satellite states in Europe but also in Latin America and Asia. Communism held sway in what became the ‘Second World’. The ‘First World’ – headed by the United States and its main European allies – was to engage in prolonged struggle with the international Communist movement for influence in the ‘Third World’.

Even in countries with strong democratic traditions, among them the United States and Great Britain, many intellectuals were drawn for a time to Communism. In France and Italy, in particular, Communist parties became significant political forces – far stronger than they were in Britain and America. The French and Italian parties had substantial popular as well as intellectual support, together with significant parliamentary representation. After Communist systems had been put in place not just in Eastern Europe and Asia but in Cuba, too, it seemed to some at one point as if the system would triumph also in Africa. The global rivalry between the West and the Communist bloc led to prolonged tension and the Cold War. At times that came close to ‘hot war’ – most notably during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

The rise of Communism, even more than the rise of fascism, was the most important political phenomenon of the first half of the twentieth century. For Communism turned out to be a much stronger, and longer-lasting, movement – and political religion – than fascism. That is why by far the most significant political event of the later part of the century was the end of Communism in Europe – and its effective demise as an international movement. The decline, which preceded the fall, occurred over several decades, even though these were highly contradictory years which saw also Communist advances. It was after the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had exposed some of the crimes of Stalin in 1956 that Communism had its singular success on the American continent – in Cuba – and that its Asian reach expanded to embrace the whole of Vietnam.

It is worth noting at the outset that Communist parties did not call their
own systems ‘Communist’ but, rather, ‘socialist’. For them, ‘communism’ was to be a later stage in the development of society – the ultimate stage – in which the institutions of the state would have ‘withered away’ and would have been replaced by a harmonious, self-administering society. Throughout the book – to reiterate an important distinction – I use ‘communism’ when referring to that fanciful future utopia (and ‘communism’ also for other non-Marxist utopias), but ‘Communism’, with a capital ‘C’, when discussing actual Communist systems.

Early Communists

While Marx and, later, Lenin were overwhelmingly the most important theorists of Communism – in Lenin’s case, a key practitioner as well – the idea of communism did not originate with Karl Marx. Many different, and idealistic, notions of communism had come into existence centuries earlier. Most of these forerunners of both Communism and socialism had little or nothing in common with the practice of twentieth-century Communist regimes (or with those few such systems which survive into the twenty-first century) other than a belief in a future utopia, one more sincerely held by ‘communists’ from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries than by most Communist Party leaders in the second half of the twentieth century. Yet there were also millennial sects, attracted to a primitive communism, which foreshadowed Communist, even Stalinist, regimes in the the degree of their intolerance and their commitment to violent repression of their perceived enemies.

In medieval times social reformers looked back to the early Christians as examples of people who held everything in common. The prominent German historian Max Beer argued that even if it ‘may fairly be doubted whether positive communistic institutions really existed amongst the primitive Christian communities . . . there cannot be any doubt that common possessions were looked upon by many of the first Christians as an ideal to be aimed at’. Indeed, according to the Acts of the Apostles, the disciples of Jesus ‘were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common’. In the second half of the fourth century, St Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan (the mentor of St Augustine), declared: ‘Nature has poured forth all things for all men, to be held in common. For God commanded all things to be produced so that food should be common to all, and that the earth should be a common possession of all. Nature, therefore, created a common right, but use and habit created private right . . .’
Many fourteenth-century Christian theologians, among them the English church reformer John Wycliffe, assumed that the earliest form of human society was one of ‘innocence and communism’.\(^6\) Indeed, on occasion Wycliffe contended that ‘all good things of God ought to be in common’ (emphasis added).\(^7\) He cautiously qualified this, however, by saying that in practical life there was no alternative to acquiescing with inequalities and injustices and leaving wealth and power in the hands of those who had done nothing to deserve it.\(^8\) It was around the year 1380, Norman Cohn has argued, that people moved beyond thinking of a society ‘without distinction of status or wealth simply as a Golden Age irrecoverably lost in the distant past’ and began to think of it as something to be realized in the near future.\(^9\) Only a minority, however, challenged the monarchs and feudal lords and tried to create – or, as they saw it, ‘recreate’ – a communist society which would combine freedom for all with broad equality. One such person was the revolutionary priest John Ball, who years before the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 in England had occupied himself ‘inflaming the peasantry against the lords temporal and spiritual’.\(^10\) Ball was regarded as an instigator of that major revolt, for which he was executed in the same year. An extract from one of the speeches, said to have been delivered by him, exemplifies his radical, but religiously based, egalitarianism:

> Things cannot go well in England, nor ever will, until all goods are held in common, and until there will be neither serfs nor gentlemen, and we shall all be equal. For what reason have they, whom we call lords, got the best of us? How did they deserve it? Why do they keep us in bondage? If we all descended from one father and one mother, Adam and Eve, how can they assert or prove that they are more masters than ourselves? Except perhaps that they make us work and produce for them to spend!\(^11\)

Ball put the same point still more pithily in the verse attributed to him:

> When Adam delved and Eve span,  
> Who was then the gentleman?\(^12\)

Ball had his revolutionary counterparts in continental Europe. Especially in Bohemia and Germany, these movements were more intense and, in some of their manifestations, more extreme than in England. In early fifteenth-century Bohemia, Jan Hus was a reformer rather than a revolutionary. Like Wycliffe, he attacked corruption within the Church and insisted that when papal decrees contradicted ‘the law of Christ as expressed in the Scriptures’, Christians should not obey them. Arguing that the papacy was a human,
not divine, institution, and that Christ was the head of the Church, he
was excommunicated in 1412 and burnt as a heretic in 1415. Outrage in
Bohemia at Hus’s execution turned unrest into ‘a national reformation’ – a
century before Luther – and led to the creation of a Hussite movement,
one manifestation of which was a popular rising in Prague in 1419. An
extreme offshoot of the Hussites, known as the Taborites, practised a form
of communism in anticipation of the imminent Second Coming of Christ.
Thousands of peasants in Bohemia and Moravia sold their belongings and
paid the proceeds into communal chests. The principle that ‘all people
must hold everything in common, and nobody must possess anything of
his own’ was somewhat undermined by the practice whereby ‘the Taborite
revolutionaries were so preoccupied with common ownership that they
altogether ignored the need to produce’.

In the early sixteenth century, revolutionaries writing and preaching in
German were among the most severe in the treatment they advocated for
enemies of their imagined egalitarian social order. One such person, whose
real name is unknown, but whom historians have called ‘the Revolutionary
of the Upper Rhine’, argued that the road to the millennium led through
massacre and terror. He forecast that 2,300 clerics would be killed each day
in a bloodbath that would continue for four and a half years. There were
limits to his revolutionary zeal, for he did not advocate doing away with
the emperor. He did, however, favour the abolition of private property,
writing: ‘What a lot of harm springs from self-seeking! . . . It is necessary
therefore that all property shall become one single property, then there
will indeed be one shepherd and one sheepfold.’ A more erudite advoca-
te of a new social order, to be achieved by violent means, was Thomas
Müntzer, whose active proselytizing began a decade or so later than that
of the Revolutionary of the Upper Rhine. He was to earn the approval in
the nineteenth century of Friedrich Engels, who wrote: “The mystics of the
Middle Ages who dreamed of the coming millennium were already conscious
of the injustice of class antagonisms. On the threshold of modern history,
three hundred and fifty years ago, Thomas Müntzer proclaimed it to the
world.” Müntzer did his utmost to stir up the peasantry against the nobility
and the ecclesiastical establishment. It was not, obviously, his belief in an
imminent Second Coming that appealed to some nineteenth-century revolu-
tionaries, including Engels, but his commitment to class war. Müntzer played
a part in encouraging peasant insurrection in sixteenth-century Germany in
rhetoric which was violent and uncompromising. Thus, in a letter, urging
his followers to attack ‘the godless scoundrels’ who represented Church
and state, he wrote:
Now go at them, and at them, and at them! It is time. The scoundrels are as dispirited as dogs... It is very, very necessary, beyond measure necessary... Take no notice of the lamentations of the godless! They will beg you in such a friendly way, and whine and cry like children. Don’t be moved to pity... Stir people up in villages and towns, and most of all the miners and other good fellows who will be good at the job. We must sleep no more!... Get this letter to the miners.18

After leading an ill-equipped peasant army – which was instantly routed – against forces marshalled by German princes, Müntzer was captured, tortured, and beheaded in 1525.

On an altogether higher level, intellectually and in its humanity, was the work of Sir Thomas More. One of the most intriguing early portrayals of an imagined communist society is to be found in More’s Utopia, published in 1516.19 With this book, he gave a name to the entire genre of utopian fiction, of which several thousand examples saw the light of day over the next five hundred years.20 More himself eventually suffered the same fate as John Ball (and Müntzer) – he was executed, although, unlike Ball, not primarily for anything he wrote or said. In contrast also to Ball, he had risen high in English society, holding the important rank of lord chancellor. He was beheaded because he did not endorse Henry VIII’s decision to appoint himself the supreme head of the Church in England, thereby supplanting the pope. More did not openly oppose the king. He was put to death principally for opinions he did not make public, his very silence becoming a ‘political crime’.21

Yet More’s Utopia would, on the face of it, appear to be more subversive of the hierarchy largely taken for granted in medieval Europe than his silence over the king’s extension of his powers. The narrator in his story says: ‘... I’m quite convinced that you’ll never get a fair distribution of goods, or a satisfactory organization of human life, until you abolish private property altogether. So long as it exists, the vast majority of the human race, and the vastly superior part of it, will inevitably go on labouring under a burden of poverty, hardship, and worry.’ The book is written in the form of a dialogue, and More provides his own objection to that statement, saying: ‘I don’t believe you’d ever have a reasonable standard of living under a communist system. There’d always tend to be shortages, because nobody would work hard enough.’22 He evidently harboured some doubts about his utopia, but he weights the argument in favour of the society of his imagination and against that in which he lived, putting into the mouth of the principal character in his story the following words:
In fact, when I consider any social system that prevails in the modern world, I can’t, so help me God, see it as anything but a conspiracy of the rich to advance their own interests under the pretext of organizing society. They think up all sorts of tricks and dodges, first for keeping safe their ill-gotten gains, and then for exploiting the poor by buying their labour as cheaply as possible.23

Concluding his book, More reflects on what the ‘traveller’ has told him about how things are organized in the country called Utopia, and says: ‘. . . I freely admit that there are many features of the Utopian Republic which I should like – though I hardly expect – to see adopted in Europe.’24

Another notable utopia, a little less than a century after More’s work, was produced by the Italian Dominican monk Tommasso Campanella, whose La Città del sole (The City of the Sun) was published in 1602. Campanella was in frequent trouble with the authorities and this work was written while he was enduring a twenty-seven-year sentence as a prisoner of the Spanish Inquisition. Campanella sees the family as the main obstacle to the creation of a communistic state, and holds that parents for the most part educate their children wrongly and that the state must, therefore, be responsible for their education. He stresses the dignity of work, although in his city of the sun, working hours have been reduced to four a day, with much of the rest of the time devoted to ‘learning joyously’.25

The eighteenth-century Enlightenment – with its secularization, embrace of science, and belief in progress – paved the way for a different manner of thinking about the society of the future.26 This had both evolutionary and revolutionary manifestations. Prefiguring in important respects the thought of Marx, though much less dogmatically, Montesquieu and Turgot in France and such major figures of the Scottish Enlightenment as Adam Smith, John Millar and Adam Ferguson elaborated a theory of stages of development of society which, they argued, provided the key to understanding the evolution of society. It was the economic base, society’s mode of subsistence – specifically, the four stages of development from hunting to pasturage to agriculture (with the acquisition of property in the form of land) and, finally, commerce – which went a long way towards explaining the form of government and the ideas prevailing in each epoch.27 Marx read these authors and others who developed a sociological understanding of the development of law and property, but his theory of stages – outlined later in the chapter – differed significantly from them.

The French Revolution of 1789 gave rise to a more radical mode of thought than that of Smith or Turgot, concerned less with detached analysis of society than with changing it through direct action. All subse-
quent revolutionaries, including Marx and Lenin, paid close attention to
the French Revolution which from its beginning was seen as ‘an epochal
event which completely transformed the social and political identity of the
civilized world’. 28 In its variant that bore the greatest family relationship
to Communism, it was known as Babouvism, after its leader, Gracchus
Babeuf. For the Babouvists equality was the supreme value, and they were
ready to embrace ‘a period of dictatorship in the general interest for as
long as might be necessary to destroy or disarm the enemies of equality’. 29
In contrast with Babeuf, the French theorist the Comte de Saint-Simon
was no believer in equality, but he has some claim to be regarded as the
‘founder of modern theoretical socialism, conceived not merely as an ideal
but as the outcome of a historical process’. 30 Saint-Simon believed that free
economic competition produced poverty and crises and that society was
moving inexorably to a stage when its affairs would be planned in accord-
ance with social needs. He was resolutely opposed to violence and held
that the most educated section of society would become convinced of the
necessity of the development of more rational administration, based upon
the application of science, and that other social groups would be won over
to an appreciation of such a development. 31 Although Saint-Simon’s was
the first form of socialism to which the young Karl Marx was introduced
– by his future father-in-law, Ludwig von Westphalen – Marx was later
to pour scorn on Saint-Simon’s followers on account of their utopianism,
commitment to peaceful change and trust in the possibility of class co-
operation rather than the inevitability of class struggle. 32

Charles Fourier and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon were also significant figures
in the development of nineteenth-century socialist thought. Fourier wished
to retain private property, but he envisaged work in the future being carried
out by co-operatives, government being reduced to economic administration,
a single language being used by all humankind, and people’s personalities
liberated from the form of ‘slavery’ which he attributed to hired labour. 33
Both Fourier and Proudhon were read by Marx and also strongly attacked
by him. Indeed, Marx devoted an entire book which he entitled The
Poverty of Philosophy to a critique of Proudhon’s work, The Philosophy
of Poverty. Proudhon is famously associated with the slogan, ‘Property is
theft’, though the wording was not original to him, having already been
used on the eve of the French Revolution. Although an inconsistent and
utopian thinker, Proudhon thought of himself as a systematic analyst and
he was the first person to use the expression ‘scientific socialism’. He
believed that social harmony was the natural state of affairs and that it was
the existing economic system that prevented its flourishing. He was not,
for the most part, an advocate of revolutionary struggle, since he supposed
that the realization of his ideals should appeal to all, given that they would be ‘no more than the fulfilment of human destiny’.34

The nineteenth century saw many attempts to think about how society might be organized on a co-operative or, in some instances, communist basis. A French ‘utopian socialist’, Étienne Cabet, who was born in 1788, is credited by the Oxford English Dictionary with being the first person to use the actual term ‘communism’ (communisme), in 1840. In that year he published under a pseudonym his Voyage en Icarie. The Icaria of his imagination is an egalitarian community in which there is neither private property nor money and in which all goods are held in common. Cabet was opposed to violent revolution and his communism was inspired by Christianity. As such, it is hardly surprising that it had made no impact on Karl Marx, but Cabet’s writings did enjoy a degree of popularity in France. He spent some time in Britain and in 1849 emigrated to the United States where he died (in St Louis) in 1856.35 In his seven years in America he established several communist settlements – in Missouri, Iowa and California. The one at Cloverdale, California, survived until 1895.

One of the utopian socialists who was treated most seriously in his own lifetime was Robert Owen, a man who significantly influenced Cabet. Owen, who was born in 1771 and died in 1858, was an entrepreneur as well as a political thinker and educationist. A Welshman by origin, he took over a mill at New Lanark in Scotland which became in the second decade of the nineteenth century a model factory. A believer in the perfectibility of human beings if they were given the right environment and education, Owen provided schools at New Lanark which were advanced and enlightened for their time. The factory workers were also paid better, and worked shorter hours in far better conditions, than almost all their competitors. What helped to give Owen credibility in the wider world was that the factory was also for a time an outstanding commercial success, although – or because – large sums were constantly being spent on new amenities for the workforce.36

At that time Owen was still a paternalist employer, albeit a highly unusual one, but his ideas became more utopian, as well as impulsive, over time. He made more than one attempt to set up a co-operative commune, of which the most famous was at New Harmony in the United States. The Rappite Community at Harmony in Indiana, close to the Illinois border, had been set up by a group of around a thousand German settlers, mainly peasant farmers, led by a preacher, George Rapp, who had emigrated to the United States for the sake of religious freedom. In 1825 Robert Owen established a community there which he promptly named New Harmony. Owen’s status at that time was such that, on his way to Indiana, he had meetings with the
current American president, James Monroe, the president-elect, John Quincy Adams, and three former presidents no less illustrious than John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

While the founding of New Harmony was the point at which Owen embraced a form of communism or communitarianism, 1825 was also, as even a very sympathetic biographer observes, the year when his business sense and, indeed, his common sense ‘appear to have entirely deserted him’. 1825 was also, as even a very sympathetic biographer observes, the year when his business sense and, indeed, his common sense ‘appear to have entirely deserted him’. 37

Owen – who was described by the liberal Victorian writer Harriet Martineau as ‘always palpably right in his descriptions of human misery’ but ‘always thinking he had proved a thing when he had only asserted it in the force of his own conviction’ 38 – aspired to have complete equality of income in New Harmony, with all residents enjoying similar food, clothing and education. The self-governing community, however, found it very difficult to manage themselves and after a few weeks of trying, they called on Owen, who had soon departed from his creation, to come back for a year to sort things out. He duly returned, but unfortunately, ‘Owen’s autocracy . . . proved no more effective than communist democracy.’ 39 After several unsuccessful reorganizations of New Harmony, which had become more discordant than harmonious, Owen abandoned the project in 1827. 40

Marx and Engels

For inspiring the development of the Communist movement, Karl Marx, needless to say, stands far apart from all other nineteenth-century radicals other than his close friend and collaborator, Friedrich Engels. 41 Both men were born and brought up in Germany and both spent much of their adult life in Britain, Marx in London, Engels in Manchester. Marx came from a long line of rabbis, but his Jewish businessman father, who converted to Lutheran Christianity, was a lawyer and also the owner of several vineyards. Marx had a comfortable bourgeois upbringing in the town of Trier in the Rhineland where he was born on 5 May 1818. He later studied at the universities of Bonn and Berlin. During his London years, he never had a salaried job, but spent a vast amount of time in the Reading Room of the British Museum. He was a prolific writer, both as a journalist and as the author of polemical and theoretical books. The most influential advocate of proletarian revolution in world history married in 1843 a woman of aristocratic background, Jenny von Westphalen, whose father, Baron Ludwig von Westphalen, was from the Prussian aristocracy on his father’s side and the Scottish nobility on his mother’s. 42 Marx and his wife were frequently impoverished, and the material conditions in which they lived in London contributed to the early
deaths of three of their six children. On many occasions the survivors kept going thanks only to the beneficence of Engels or to pawning Jenny’s family silver. Although Marx’s most important political activism took the form of his writings, he played at times a notable part in an organization founded in 1864 as the International Working Men’s Association, later known as the First International. Most of the leading members were, indeed, manual workers, but they embraced a wide variety of viewpoints in addition to what would become known as ‘Marxism’, including Proudhonism and anarchism. Marx died in London on 17 March 1883 and was buried, in the presence of only eleven mourners, in Highgate Cemetery (which was to become a place of pilgrimage for visiting Communist dignitaries in the twentieth century).

Engels, who was born in Barmen, near Düsseldorf, on 28 November 1820, came from a Prussian Protestant family and a wealthier background than that of Marx. His father owned a textile factory in Barmen and was the co-owner of a cotton mill in Manchester. The young Engels did not have the opportunity to go to university, for his father insisted that he enter the family business straight from school at the age of sixteen. Although Engels thus had his formal education cut short, he more than made up for it with voracious reading. He rebelled against both the religious and the political orthodoxy of his parents, and following a year of military service, he had an important meeting in Cologne with Moses Hess, the person ‘who had perhaps the best claim to have introduced communist ideas into Germany’. According to Hess, ‘Engels, who was revolutionary to the core when he met me, left as a passionate Communist.’ Before going to Manchester in 1842 to help run the family business as his day job, and to collect material that would be useful in the revolutionary struggle as his vocation, Engels had his first meeting with Marx, who was initially unimpressed. When, however, Engels began to supply articles about working-class life in Manchester for the radical newspaper which Marx was editing at the time in Cologne, the relationship blossomed.

The successful collaboration between Marx and Engels began when they met again, this time in Paris in 1844, and the following year Engels published his important book, The Condition of the Working Class in England. In some respects Engels was much less bourgeois in his personal life than was Marx; in other ways, he led a more upper-middle-class life. On his first visit to Manchester in 1842 he became the lover of a largely uneducated young Irishwoman of proletarian origin, Mary Burns, and they were later to live together for years until Mary’s sudden death in 1864, after which her place was taken by her sister Lizzie. Engels also, however, maintained a separate residence in Manchester, at which he entertained a wide variety of professional people. His recreations included fox-hunting, and he frequently
rode with the Cheshire hunt. Engels outlived Marx by twelve years and he spent that time elaborating Marx’s ideas, including the mammoth task of compiling the second and third volumes of Capital, which Marx had left in note form, having published only the first volume of this landmark work (more famous than read) during his lifetime.

Between 1840 and the Russian Revolution of 1917 – especially in the nineteenth century – the terms ‘socialism’ and ‘communism’ were often used more or less interchangeably. Marx, however, made it clear that the Communists espoused a revolutionary brand of socialism, and he was dismissive of the utopian socialists and earlier ‘communists’ who did not see what he and Engels believed was not only the necessity, but also the inevitability, of proletarian revolution. In one of the most resonant sentences in their most widely read work, the Communist Manifesto,* Marx and Engels wrote: ‘The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.’ Four years after the publication of the Manifesto, Marx put in a letter what he thought was original in that work: ‘What I did that was new was to prove (1) that the existence of classes is only bound up with particular, historic phases in the development of production; (2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat; and (3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society.’ He had, of course, ‘proved’ nothing of the kind. Along with careful historical study and an impressive grasp of the social science of the day, to which he added original insights of his own, Marx had a strong capacity for wishful thinking and even the utopianism which he scorned in others. Neither in the Communist Manifesto nor elsewhere did he address the question of the political and legal institutions which should be formed following the revolution. These things, apparently, would take care of themselves.

In his Critique of the Gotha Programme, written in 1875, Marx attacked the document which had emerged from a conference at Gotha in that year which had seen the coming-together of two German proletarian parties to form the Social Democratic Workers’ Party. The programme adopted at

* The impact of the Communist Manifesto was modest in 1848. The revolutionary turmoil of that year occurred quite independently of it. Yet this short book, with its resounding phraseology, was increasingly influential in the last three decades of the nineteenth century and in the years leading up to the First World War. During that time translations of it came thick and fast. By choosing the term ‘Communist’ for this, their most famous joint production, Marx and Engels helped to ensure that would become the name of the movement they founded. The book’s claim to be enunciating a scientific form of socialism, combined with its brevity and readability, guaranteed its impact would long outlive its principal author.
the congress attempted to address the question of how socialism could be introduced into a state democratically, but for Marx’s taste this ‘old familiar democratic litany’ was nothing like revolutionary enough. The authors of the Gotha Programme had failed to realize that ‘between capitalist and communist society’ what was required was ‘the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat’, although, as usual, Marx left totally unclear what that might mean in institutional terms. In the Critique, he distinguished between a lower and higher phase of ‘communist society’. In the first phase there would be inequalities, but given that such a society had only just emerged ‘after prolonged birth pangs from capitalist society’, these defects were inevitable. In the higher phase of communist society the division of labour would be overcome, the distinction between mental and physical work would vanish, the springs of co-operative wealth would flow more abundantly and the communist principle would be established: ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!’

Marx’s understanding of the stages of human development was different from that of his eighteenth-century precursors mentioned earlier in this chapter – precursors only in the sense that they linked the development of institutions and ideas to the property relations and means of subsistence prevailing in different historical epochs. Marx shared their view that the first stage in human development consisted of a kind of primitive communism. The main stages which followed, as he saw it, were those of ancient society, which depended on slave labour; feudal society, in which production relied on serf labour; and bourgeois (or capitalist) society, in which wage labourers were exploited by the capitalist class. (He also identified what he called an Asiatic mode of production, in which there was an absence of private property and where the need to organize irrigation led to a centralized state and ‘oriental despotism’.) It was Marx’s firm, but fanciful, belief that ‘the bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production . . . The productive forces developing in the womb of bourgeois society create the material conditions for the solution of that antagonism. This social formation brings, therefore, the prehistory of human society to a close.’

In his Preface to the English edition of the Communist Manifesto of 1888, Engels (writing alone, since Marx had died five years earlier) explained why he and Marx had called it ‘Communist’ rather than ‘Socialist’. The latter term, he said, was associated in 1847 with ‘adherents of the various Utopian systems: Owenites in England, Fourierists in France’ or with ‘multifarious social quacks’ who professed to address all manner of social grievances ‘without any danger to capital and profit’. Socialism, Engels says, was in 1847 a middle-class movement, but Communism was a working-class
movement. Socialism, in continental Europe, had become respectable; Communism was not respectable. Essentially, the commitment of Marx and Lenin to the cause of proletarian revolution was what made them describe their manifesto as Communist.

Engels gives Marx the lion’s share of the credit for their joint production, saying that the fundamental proposition – the nucleus of the work – belongs to him. That central proposition sets out much of the essence of Marxism both as a way of understanding history and as an exhortation to the working class to act out its preordained revolutionary role, so it is worth citing how Engels puts the central idea in one sentence (even though it is a monumentally long sentence):

... in every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organization necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which is built up, and from which alone can be explained, the political and intellectual history of that epoch; that consequently the whole history of mankind (since the dissolution of primitive tribal society, holding land in common ownership) has been a history of class struggles, contests between exploiting and exploited, ruling and oppressed classes; that the history of these class struggles forms a series of evolutions in which, nowadays, a stage has been reached where the exploited and oppressed class – the proletariat – cannot attain its emancipation from the sway of the exploiting and ruling class – the bourgeoisie – without, at the same time, and once and for all, emancipating society at large from all exploitation, oppression, class distinctions and class struggles.59

Marx and Engels wrote many more abstruse books than the Communist Manifesto, and while there was almost invariably a polemical element, they were generally bolstered by substantial research. Marx was a prodigious reader across several disciplines, and since he was living in Britain during the greater part of his writing career, he also drew upon the primary sources that were to hand, such as the ‘Blue Books’ containing the results of official inquiries authorized by Parliament or the Privy Council and the Hansard reports of parliamentary debates. The bibliography of Volume 1 of Capital includes a remarkable range of parliamentary and statistical reports.60 As part of his explanation in his ‘Preface to the First German Edition’ of Capital of why so many of his examples are drawn from the country in which he was living, Marx wrote: ‘The social statistics of Germany and the rest of Continental Europe are, in comparison with those of England, wretchedly compiled.’61

While Marx and Engels devoted most of their attention to social conditions and their economic determinants, a century later some intellectuals in
Communist countries who wished to get away from ideological dogma and analyze real political life would cite as important precedents The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (Marx’s short book on the coming to power of Napoleon III in France, in which he examines the relationship between class and state power) and The Civil War in France (on the Paris Commune of 1870). In these works Marx paid special attention to the political ‘superstructure’ as distinct from the economic ‘base’ which was his more general concern.

Marx’s thought was crucially influenced by time and place. Doubtless, given the same disposition and character, he would have been a radical had he lived in the eighteenth century, but his thought would have been different from what it became, living when and where he did. Marx’s analysis, its various intellectual antecedents notwithstanding, was a product of the later stages of the Industrial Revolution and the intensive development of European capitalism. The existence of a large industrial workforce was a precondition for what was to become known as ‘Marxism’. That social group, or class as Marx saw it, both constituted a principal subject of his investigations and embodied his hopes for the future. And it was in Britain, where Marx lived much of his adult life, that industrialization in the middle of the nineteenth century was most advanced.

Marx was a great original thinker who drew inspiration from many sources. He was less influenced by previous socialist writers than by German Hegelian philosophy and British political economy, of which school Adam Smith was the founder and pre-eminent thinker. Marx, though, drew very different conclusions from those of either Hegel or Smith. From Hegel, he took a terminology which often obscured, rather than illuminated, his meaning. One central idea was that of the dialectic. For Hegel this meant ‘the development of the spirit’ which came through ‘the conflict and reconciliation of opposites’. Hegel described the process which gave birth to its opposite as the thesis; the opposite he labelled the antithesis; and the phase when the opposites were reconciled he called the synthesis. Marx transposed Hegel’s ‘development of the spirit’ into a materialist interpretation of history. He took over also Hegel’s ambiguous term ‘contradictions’ to describe growing incompatibilities in each of the historical epochs he identified between the institutional relationships and the changing forces of production. Marx believed that from Hegel he had taken the ‘rational kernel’ to be found in the ‘mystical shell’. His conviction that the proletariat will become not only stronger but also more revolutionary as the capitalist system develops turned out, however, to be an article of misplaced faith. Moreover, as David McLellan observes, in ‘looking to the development of the productive forces to bring about the changes he envisaged’, Marx showed
little awareness of 'the intrinsic value of the natural world' or of the fact that natural resources are not inexhaustible. He was, of course, far from alone in that respect. For most of the following century, Western industrial corporations were only slightly less culpable than their Communist bureaucratic equivalents in their reckless disregard for the natural environment.

Marx was not only a theorist of revolutionary change but a revolutionary by temperament. Even though his theory suggested that highly developed industry and a lengthy period of capitalism were twin necessities before any given society would be ripe for a workers’ revolution, he was eager to see revolution wherever it might occur. Many revolutionaries in Russia thought that the traditional peasant commune in that country might provide a short cut to socialism and communism, and the last thing they wanted was a lengthy period of capitalist dominion. Some of them, attracted to Marx’s teaching but worried by its implications, appealed to him for advice and elucidation. One such person was Vera Zasulich, to whom Marx sent a brief and ambivalent reply in 1881 after composing three lengthy drafts (which he did not send, but which survived in his personal archive). The most encouraging part of his reply for Zasulich was that when he wrote about the ‘historical inevitability’ of capitalist development, he was expressly limiting the generalization ‘to the countries of Western Europe’.

In their Preface to the Russian edition of the Communist Manifesto of 1882, Marx and Engels went further. They left as an open question whether it would be possible to ‘pass directly to the higher form of communist common ownership’ from the traditional Russian peasant commune or whether it must ‘first pass through the same process of dissolution as constitutes the historical evolution of the West’. They concluded that, provided the Russian Revolution became ‘the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West’, then the ‘present Russian common ownership of the land’ might, indeed, ‘serve as the starting point for a communist development’. Marx was encouraged by the fact that Russian radicals seemed to be more serious in their revolutionary commitment than their counterparts in the countries he knew best, Britain and Germany, but he, and especially Engels, linked the ultimate success of their endeavour to a Russian revolution triggering proletarian revolution in the West.

Marx, in spite of his belief in ‘inevitabilities’, was far from being as mechanistic in his interpretation of history as many of his disciples became. He was also well aware that revolutionaries, attempting to build a new social order, were never starting with a blank sheet. In a passage that referred to the revolutionary unrest in Europe in 1848 and, more specifically, to the coming to power of Louis Napoleon (who declared himself emperor as
Napoleon III) in France in 1851, but which has resonance also for the coming to power of Communists in Russia almost seven decades later, Marx wrote: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.'