CHAPTER 2

The Different Forms of Class Struggle

1 ‘Emancipation of the Working Class’ and ‘National Liberation’

Marx and Engels did not systematically expound and clarify a thesis central to their thought. However, to appreciate how reductive and misleading the habitual interpretation of the theory of class struggle is, it suffices to glance at the theoretical and political platform to be found in Marx (and Engels) from their early writings onwards. The starting point is well-known: although it had secured important results, the overthrow of the ancien régime, and abolition of monarchical despotism and feudal relations of production, was not the terminus of the requisite process of radical political and social transformation. It was necessary to go well beyond the ‘political emancipation’ that was the outcome of the bourgeois revolution, achieving ‘human emancipation’, ‘universal emancipation’. A new revolution was on the horizon, but what were its objectives?

The power of the bourgeoisie had to be overthrown to break the ‘chains’ imposed by it—the chains of ‘the present enslavement of the worker’ or ‘wage-slavery’. The ‘emancipation of the working class’, its ‘economical emancipation’, was to be achieved in and through ‘the abolition of all class rule’. Marx and Engels’ attention to struggle that the proletariat was enjoined to wage against the bourgeoisie was constant. But is the struggle for ‘human emancipation’, ‘universal emancipation’, exhausted by it?
Shortly before launching its final appeal for the ‘communist revolution’ and ‘the forcible overthrow of all existing conditions’, the *Communist Manifesto* invokes the ‘national emancipation’ of Poland. Here we find a new watchword emerging. From his earliest writings and interventions, Engels supported the ‘liberation of Ireland’, or ‘the conquest of national independence’ by a people that had suffered ‘five centuries of oppression’. In his turn, having demanded the ‘liberation’ of ‘oppressed nations’ in late 1847, Marx never tired of calling for a struggle for ‘the national emancipation of Ireland’.

Let us take stock: the radical revolution invoked by Marx and Engels was geared not only to the emancipation of the oppressed class (the proletariat) but also to the liberation of oppressed nations. Having mentioned the problem of Poland’s ‘national liberation’, the *Manifesto* closed with the exhortation: ‘Working Men of All Countries, Unite!’ This celebrated appeal also concludes the *Inaugural Address* of the International Working Men’s Association, founded in 1864. But in that text ample space is devoted to a ‘foreign policy’ that would prevent ‘heroic Poland’, as well as Ireland and other oppressed nations, ‘being assassinated’, which was committed to the abolition of Black slavery in the USA, and which would put an end to Western Europe’s ‘piratical wars’ in the colonies.

The struggle for the liberation of oppressed nations is no less important than the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat. The two struggles were followed and promoted with the self-same passion. In August 1844, Marx wrote to Feuerbach: ‘You would have to attend one of the meetings of the French workers to appreciate the pure freshness, the nobility which burst forth from these toil-worn men. …But in any case it is among these “barbarians” of our civilized society that history is preparing the practical element for the emancipation of mankind’. Four years later, in an article of 3 September 1848, Engels drew attention to the dismemberment and partition of Poland, carried out by Russia, Austria, and Prussia. In the nation that experienced it, this tragedy elicited a well-nigh unanimous response. A liberation movement emerged in which the nobility itself participated. To put an end to national oppression and humiliation, that class was ready to renounce its feudal privileges and ‘supported the democratic-agrarian revolution with quite unprecedented selflessness’.

The enthusiasm evident from this text should not be attributed to the ingenuousness and over-simplification for which Engels is often criticised. Marx expressed himself in even more emphatic terms in this connection: ‘world history does not know another example of such nobility of soul’. The ‘nobility’
celebrated in French workers was now attributed to the Polish nobility and, indirectly, to a great national liberation struggle as such.

Yet we must not lose sight of the differences. While the proletariat is the agency of the emancipatory process that breaks the chains of capitalist rule, the alliance required to break the shackles of national oppression is broader. We have seen this in the case of Poland, but it also applies to Ireland. In a long letter of April 1870, Marx supported a union whose heterogeneous features stand out: it would have as its protagonists, British workers, on the one hand, and the Irish nation as such, on the other. The former were called on to support the ‘Irish national struggle’ and reject the policy pursued ‘against Ireland’ as a whole by ‘aristocrats and capitalists’. The oppression by the British ruling classes was harsh and ruthless. Fortunately, however, the ‘revolutionary character of the Irish’, taken as a whole, could be depended on. And such revolutionary enthusiasm was summoned to find an initial outlet in the national liberation struggle. While the oppressed nation was enjoined to wage its struggle on the widest possible national basis, the task of the proletariat in the oppressor nation was to nurture its antagonism towards the ruling class, thereby furthering its own ‘human’ emancipation and, at the same time, contributing to the emancipation of the oppressed nation.

Marx and Engels did not arrive at this theoretical platform without fluctuations: ‘Ireland may be regarded as the earliest English colony’, wrote the latter to the former in a letter of May 1856. We are thus led to the non-European colonial world and, in particular, India, which three years earlier had been defined by Marx as ‘the Ireland of the East’. India’s tragic situation had already been invoked in The Poverty of Philosophy, which drew attention to a reality generally ignored by bourgeois economists intent on demonstrating capitalism’s capacity for improving the condition of the working class. They lost sight of ‘the millions of workers who had to perish in the East Indies so as to procure for the million and a half workers employed in the same industry in England three years’ prosperity out of ten’. Here the clash is between workers and workers; and it hinges on the difference in conditions between capitalist metropolis and colony. And now let us see the picture that emerges from an article by Marx dating from July 1853. Having described the tragic condition of India and the unrest in it following the encounter-clash with European culture (represented by British colonialists), the text continues: ‘the Indians will not reap the fruits of the new elements of society scattered among them by the British bourgeoisie, till in Great Britain itself the new ruling classes
shall have been supplanted by the industrial proletariat, or till the Hindoos themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether’.¹⁵

Two different revolutionary scenarios are envisaged here: the first (in Britain) casts the ‘industrial proletariat’ as the protagonist of anti-capitalist revolution; the second (in the subject colony) has as its protagonist the ‘Hindoos’. Every time ‘national emancipation’ or ‘national liberation’ is at stake, the subject is the oppressed nation as such: the Poles, Irish, and Indians. Has the concern with class struggle vanished?

2 A DISTRACTION FROM CLASS STRUGGLE?

There has been no lack of interpreters who answer in the affirmative. The author of a very well-documented book on Marx, Engels et la politique internationale argues that, in the years immediately following the Communist Manifesto, ‘foreign policy and the battle between nations took precedence over class struggle’. Indeed, ‘Marx not only analysed political intrigues [of an international kind] in detail, but did so without any reference to economic and social forces and factors’. To take but one example, the articles published in the Neue Rheinische Zeitung ‘seem completely disconnected from the body of his doctrine’.¹⁶ The impression is that, where ‘foreign policy’ and the diplomatic and military ‘intrigues’ bound up with it begin, class struggle ends, and the ‘doctrine’ of historical materialism falls silent.

At this point a disconcerting conclusion might dictate itself: while they stress that ‘every society’ is shot through with class struggle throughout the course of its development, and that all historical struggles are class struggles, Marx and Engels resort to their theory only intermittently. But is this how things really stand? It is worth noting the testimony (dated summer 1872) of the French socialist Charles Longuet, who, having paid tribute to the ‘martyrs’ of the Paris Commune, proceeded thus when reporting from the ‘temple of historical materialism’, or the Marx household (which he knew well, being Marx’s son-in-law): ‘the Polish insurrection of 1863, the Irish rebellions of the Fenians in 1869, the Land League and Home Rulers in 1874: these movements of oppressed nationalities were followed from the battlements of this fortress of the International with no less interest than the rising tide of the socialist movement in both hemispheres’.¹⁷ So interest in the ‘movements of oppressed nationalities’ was no less lively and constant than that reserved for the agitation of the
proletariat and subaltern classes. It would be difficult to challenge the reliability of this evidence: it is enough to leaf through editions of the collected works of Marx and Engels to realize just how many texts are devoted to the struggle of the Irish and Polish peoples and to denunciation of the policy of national oppression pursued by Britain and Russia, respectively.

The interest was intellectual and political, but with an emotional charge. On 23 November 1867, three Irish revolutionaries were hanged in Manchester, convicted of having orchestrated the armed liberation of two leaders of the independent movement, in an action that involved the death of a police officer. Some days later, Marx wrote to Engels referring to the reaction of his eldest daughter: ‘Jenny goes in black since the Manchester execution, and wears her Polish cross on a green ribbon’.

The symbol of the national liberation struggle of the Polish people (the cross) was thus married with the green of the Irish cause. On receipt of his friend’s letter, Engels answered immediately on 29 November: ‘I need hardly tell you that black and green are the prevailing colours in my house, too’—the colours of the mourning into which the Irish people’s national liberation movement was thrown by the British executioner.

Marx and Engels compared the Mancunian victims to John Brown, the abolitionist who sought to spark a slave revolt in the Deep South of the USA and faced the gallows courageously. And this comparison between the Irish independence fighters and the champion of abolitionism confirms the passion with which Marx and Engels followed the ‘movements of oppressed nationalities’ and the key role played by these uprisings in the process of human emancipation in their view.

Not only hostility but also indifference towards oppressed nations was harshly condemned politically and morally. The Inaugural Address reproved the ‘upper classes of Europe’ and, in particular, Britain for their anti-labour policy, but also for their support for the secessionist American South, as well as ‘the shameful approval, mock sympathy, or idiotic indifference’ with which they viewed the tragedy of the Polish nation.

Affecting an air of superiority towards this tragedy, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon merely exhibited ‘cynicism’ in Marx’s view—and cynicism that was quite the reverse of intelligence (see Chap. 5, Sect. 1).

Does an interest in ‘foreign policy’ have nothing to do with class struggle? Is it in fact a distraction from the latter? In reality, according to Longuet’s testimony, passionate sympathy for the ‘movements of oppressed nationalities’ burned in the ‘temple of historical materialism’—the doctrine that
construed history as the history of class struggles. In any event, as early as July 1848, the same year as the publication of the *Communist Manifesto*, Engels evoked and invoked ‘a democratic foreign policy’.22 Sixteen years later, via Marx’s pen, the newly founded International Working Men’s Association stressed that a ‘political economy of labour’ was imperative, but insufficient. The ‘working classes’ had to be taught ‘the duty to master … the mysteries of international politics; to watch the diplomatic acts of their respective Governments; to counteract them, if necessary, by all the means in their power’. They must realize that the struggle for a ‘foreign policy’ supportive of oppressed nations was an integral part of ‘the general struggle for the emancipation of the working classes’.23 How is so exacting an assertion to be explained?

3 ‘CLASS STRUGGLES AND NATIONAL STRUGGLES’: ‘GENUS’ AND ‘SPECIES’

In addition to the ‘direct exploitation (Ausbeutung) of labour’, condemning workers to ‘present enslavement’ in any particular country, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, the *Communist Manifesto* and contemporaneous texts denounce ‘the exploitation (Exploitation) of one nation by another’ or ‘the exploitation of some nations by others’.24 In the case of Ireland, it must be remembered that ‘the exploitation (Ausbeutung) of this country’ was ‘one of the main sources of [Britain’s] material wealth’.25 Was the exploitation that occurs in a single country the sole cause of class struggle? In the same year as the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx issued an authoritative warning: those who ‘cannot understand how one nation can grow rich at the expense of another’ were even less well-equipped ‘to understand how in the same country one class can enrich itself at the expense of another’.26 Far from being of minor relevance from the standpoint of class struggle, the exploitation and oppression that obtain internationally are a precondition, at least methodologically, for understanding social conflict and class struggle at a national level.

As we know, along with the ‘liberation’ or ‘economic emancipation of the proletariat’, Marx and Engels demanded the ‘liberation’ or ‘emancipation’ of oppressed nations. Is the struggle for the liberation/emancipation of exploited classes a class struggle—but not the struggle for the liberation/emancipation of exploited (and oppressed) nations? Is the struggle whose protagonist is a class that has achieved its political emancipation,
but not its economic and social emancipation, a class struggle, whereas
the struggle waged by a nation, yet to achieve its political emancipation,
is not a class struggle?

Not having secured economic and social emancipation, the proletariat
is currently subjected to ‘enslavement’. This is a phrase that immediately
puts us in mind of slavery in the strict sense. And once again a question is
tabled: is the struggle whose protagonists are subject to ‘present enslav-
ment’, ‘emancipated slavery’, or ‘wage slavery’, to ‘the indirect slavery of
the white man in England’, a class struggle, whereas the struggle whose
protagonists are subject to ‘real slavery’—‘the direct slavery of the Black
men on the other side of the Atlantic’—is not a class struggle?27 Is the
struggle whose subject is defined by the Grundrisse, in an unusual phrase,
as ‘free labour’ a class struggle, whereas the struggle whose subjects (in
the words of The German Ideology) are ‘the insurgent Negroes of Haiti
and the fugitive Negroes [slaves] of all the colonies’, is not?28

Take the terms in which Marx condemns bourgeois society. First of all,
let us attend to The Poverty of Philosophy: ‘[m]odern nations have been
able only to disguise slavery in their own countries, but they have imposed
it without disguise upon the New World’.29 Some years later, with the
colonial rule imposed on India by Britain in mind, Marx reiterated: ‘the
profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies
unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respect-
able forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked’.30 Is it only the struggle
challenging masked slavery and camouflaged barbarism that is tantamount
to class struggle? I think it would be absurd to answer in the affirmativ-
and decline to apply the category of class struggle precisely where exploi-
tation and oppression are most overt and brutal.

But let us return to Longuet’s testimony. Having referred to Marx’s
interest in and passion for the ‘movements of oppressed nationalities’,
he continued: ‘[h]is philosophy was not casuistry: he would never have
taken refuge in ambiguous quibbling when the clear, frank theory of class
struggle was at stake’.31 The nexus between national struggles and class
struggles is clear. Is this interpretation correct?

In 1849, in Wage Labour and Capital, Marx investigated ‘the economic
relations which constitute the material foundation of the present class
struggles and national struggles’ (Klassenkämpfe und Nationalkämpfe);
and stated his intention ‘to trace the class struggle [den Klassenkampf] in
current history’.32 Judging from this passage, it would seem that ‘national
struggles’ are to be subsumed under the category of ‘class struggle’ broadly
construed. Comparison with another passage, from the aforementioned letter of April 1870, where Marx proceeds to a more in-depth analysis of the Irish question, is in order. Let us read the conclusion: ‘[i]n Ireland, the land question has, so far, been the exclusive form of the social question; it is a question of existence, a question of life or death for the immense majority of the Irish people; at the same time, it is inseparable from the national question’. 33

In Ireland, there was no ‘social question’ apart from the ‘national question’. A de facto identity existed between the two, at least for a whole historical period, as long as independence had not been gained. The ‘social question’ is the more general category here—the genus—which, in the concrete situation of the unhappy island exploited and oppressed by Britain for centuries, takes the specific form of the ‘national question’. For anyone who has not grasped the point, Marx reiterates it: the ‘social significance of the Irish question’ should never be lost from view. 34 The species cannot be understood if it is detached from the genus. We can argue similarly in connection with the passage from Wage Labour and Capital referring to ‘class struggles and national struggles’: class struggle is the genus which, in determinate circumstances, takes the specific form of ‘national struggle’.

If classes and class struggle are formed and develop on the ‘material base’ of the production and distribution of the resources and means that ensure life, on the basis of ‘social relations’ and ‘actual relations of life’, 35 it is clear that we must bear in mind the ‘division of labour’ not only nationally but also internationally, never losing sight of the ‘world market’. 36

For peoples stripped of their independence, and especially for peoples subject to colonial rule and despoliation, the existing order reserves a particularly revolting division of labour. In the colonies (observed Marx in summer 1853 with reference to India), capitalism drags ‘individuals and people through blood and dirt, through misery and degradation’. 37 We know that Ireland too was a ‘colony’ and in it (observed Engels) there was not a trace of ‘the English citizen’s so-called freedom’; ‘[i]n no other country have I seen so many gendarmes’. 38 To be precise, Marx went further in an article of January 1859, what was involved was oppression evincing genocidal tendencies: ‘the [British] landlords of Ireland are federated for a fiendish war of extermination against the cotters; or, as they call it, they combine for the economical experiment of clearing the land of useless mouths’. 39 The specific difference that characterized the social question and class struggle in the colonies by comparison with the capitalist
metropolis has to be registered. There the international division of labour converted the subject peoples into a mass of serfs or slaves over whom a *de facto* power of life and death could be wielded. Secondly, the victim of this condition was a whole people, the nation as such. Hence Britain, the country that had ‘hitherto ruled the world market’, imposed ‘slavery’ on Ireland and represented the ‘dominant nation’, was one thing; Ireland, reduced to ‘simple pasturceland to provide meat and wool at the cheapest possible price for the English market’, and whose population had been drastically reduced ‘through eviction and forced emigration’, was quite another.  

Perhaps the meaning of the expression ‘class struggles’ (*Klassenkämpfe*) used in the *Communist Manifesto* is now becoming clearer. The plural is not employed to denote repetition of the identical, the continual recurrence of the same class struggle in the same form. It refers to the multiplicity of shapes and forms that class struggle can assume.  

We may conclude on this point. Marx did not define the relationship between class struggle and national struggle, social question and national question, clearly and unequivocally; and only in fits and starts did he arrive at the more mature formulation which distinguishes between genus and species. But the interest and passion with which he followed the ‘movements of oppressed nationalities’ were an expression not of distraction from the class struggle and social question, but of an attempt to grasp their concrete manifestations. Oppressed nations are summoned to be the protagonists of the second great class struggle for emancipation.

### 4 The Condition of Women and the ‘First Class Oppression’

The genus of emancipatory class struggles includes a third species. There is another social group that is so numerous as to form (or exceed) half the population; a social group that suffers ‘autocracy’ and awaits its ‘emancipation’ (*Befreiung*): women. Weighing on them is the domestic oppression exercised by the male.  

I am citing a text (*The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*) published by Engels in 1884. It is true that Marx had died the previous year, but as early as 1845–6 *The German Ideology*—a text to which Engels explicitly refers—observed that in the patriarchal family ‘wife and children are slaves of the husband’.  

In its turn the *Communist Manifesto*, which criticizes the bourgeoisie for
reducing the proletarian to the condition of a machine and instrument of labour, observes that ‘the bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production’, so ‘the real point aimed at is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production’. The category used to define the condition of the worker in the capitalist factory is now applied to the social condition of woman in the patriarchal family.

Taken as a whole, the capitalist system presents itself as a set of more or less servile relations imposed by one people on another internationally, by one class on another in an individual country, and by men on women within one and the same class. We can now understand the thesis formulated by Engels drawing on Fourier, which was also maintained by Marx—namely, that women’s emancipation was ‘the natural measure of the general emancipation’. For better or worse, the relationship between men and women is a kind of microcosm reflecting the total social order. In largely pre-modern Russia, subject to ruthless repression by their masters, the peasants (Marx observed) proceeded in their turn to ‘awful beating-to-death of their wives’. Or take the capitalist factory. While it affected all workers, the owner’s despotic power was experienced by women (stressed Engels) in especially degrading fashion: ‘his mill is also his harem’.

It is not difficult to find voices denouncing the oppressive character of the female condition in the culture of the time. In 1790, Condorcet defined the exclusion of women from political rights as an ‘act of tyranny’. The following year, the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen, whose author was Olympe de Gouges, drew attention in article 4 to the ‘perpetual tyranny’ imposed by man on woman. More than half a century later, John Stuart Mill in Britain referred to the ‘slavery of the woman’, ‘domestic tyranny’ and legally sanctioned ‘actual bondage’.

But what were the causes of this oppression and of the widespread indifference to it? Condorcet condemned the ‘power of habit’, which dulled the sense of justice even in ‘enlightened men’. Mill argued in a similar vein, referring to the set of ‘customs’, ‘prejudices’, and ‘superstitions’ that needed to be overcome or neutralized through a ‘sound psychology’. Although alluding to social relations, these were confined to ‘social relations between the two sexes’, which sanctioned the slavery or subaltern status of woman on account of ‘inferiority in muscular strength’ and the survival in this context of the ‘law of the strongest’.

The connection between the condition of women and other forms of oppression was not investigated. In fact, in Mill’s view, the man/woman
relationship was portrayed as a kind of island where the logic of subjugation, which had largely disappeared in other contexts, persisted: ‘[w]e now live—that is to say, one or two of the most advanced nations of the world now live—in a state in which the law of the strongest seems to be entirely abandoned as the regulating principle of the world’s affairs’. From Marx and Engels’ standpoint, by contrast, the relationship between capitalist metropolis (‘the most advanced nations of the world’) and colonies was more than ever one of domination and subjugation; and in the capitalist metropolis itself, economic (but not now legal) coercion continued to govern relations between capital and labour.

It was Mary Wollstonecraft who combined denunciation of the ‘slavish dependence’ reserved for woman with indictment of the existing social order. Male domination seemed to go hand in hand with the ancien régime. While champions of the struggle for the abolition of slavery singled out the ‘aristocracy of the epidermis’ or the ‘nobility of the skin’, the feminist militant targeted what, in her view, took the form of the aristocratic power of males. Denunciation of it was combined with condemnation of hereditary ‘riches and inherited honours’, with condemnation of ‘preposterous distinctions of rank’. In any event, women would not be ‘freed’ ‘till ranks are confounded’ and ‘till more equality be established in society’.

At times, the British feminist and Jacobin seemed to challenge capitalist society itself. Women ‘ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of the government’. But it should not be forgotten that in Britain workers too were excluded from political rights: ‘as the whole system of representation is now, in this country, only a convenient handle for despotism, [women] need not complain, for they are as well represented as a numerous class of hard-working mechanics, who pay for the support of royalty when they can scarcely stop their children’s mouths with bread’. The condition of workers and the condition of women had things in common. As was the case for members of the working class, ‘the few employments open to women, so far from being liberal, are menial’.

Ultimately, in this wide-ranging critique of the relations of domination characteristic of the existing social order, women themselves (in particular, the better-off) must learn to question things. Instead, they displayed ‘folly’ in ‘the manner in which they treat servants in the presence of children, permitting them to suppose that they ought to wait on them, and bear their humours’.
The ‘English Jacobin’, who constitutes a brilliant exception, seems in a way to anticipate Marx and Engels, who established a link between the division of labour in the family and the division of labour in society. Engels, in particular, formulated the thesis that ‘the modern individual family is based on the overt or covert domestic slavery of the woman’. In any event, the man ‘is the bourgeois; the wife represents the proletariat’.  

Of Marx and Engels’ contemporaries, the one who developed an analysis that might be compared with theirs, albeit with a converse value judgement, was not Mill but Nietzsche. The implacable critic of revolution as such, including the feminist revolution, compared the condition of woman to that of ‘sufferers of the lower classes’, ‘slave laborers [Arbeitssklaven] or prisoners’; and indirectly equated the feminist movement, the workers’ movement and the abolitionist movement. All three were on the look-out for ‘everything slave-like and serf-like’, in order to indignantly denounce it, as if registering its existence did not serve to confirm that slavery was ‘a condition of every higher culture’.  

Obviously, the theme of the link between the subjection of women and social oppression as a whole was developed much more amply and organically by Engels, with reference to The German Ideology, co-written by him with Marx and long unpublished: ‘the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male’. This was a state of affairs with a long history behind it that had not yet arrived at its terminus:  

The overthrow of mother right was the world-historic defeat of the female sex. The man seized the reins in the house too; the woman was degraded, enthralled, became the slave of the man’s lust, a mere instrument for breeding children [Werkzeug der Kinderzeugung]. This humiliated position of women … has become gradually embellished and dissembled and, in part, clothed in milder form, but by no means abolished.  

5 The Class Struggles of the Exploiting Classes

I have hitherto been concerned with the three major emancipatory class struggles, which are set to radically alter the division of labour and the relations of exploitation and oppression that obtain internationally, in a single country, and within the family. But we must not lose sight of the struggles whose protagonists are the exploiting classes.  

Let us see how, in November 1848, Marx summarized the key events of that year: ‘[i]n Naples the lazzaroni are leagued with the monarchy
against the bourgeoisie. In Paris, the greatest struggle ever known in history is taking place. The bourgeoisie is leagued with the *lazzaroni* against the working class*. The struggle whereby feudal reaction, availing itself of the support of lumpen elements, suppressed the democratic-bourgeois revolution in Naples is likewise class struggle; and so is the ruthless repression with which the French bourgeoisie, thanks again to the support of the urban lumpen-proletariat, quelled the desperation and rebellion of Parisian workers in the June days.

Finally, let us return one last time to Longuet’s testimony. In confirmation of the ‘clear, frank theory of class struggle’ professed by Marx and his family circle, he added a further detail: ‘*[i]n this house people never hesitate to take sides in conflicts where “different fractions of the bourgeoisie” can be recognized*. As we can see, ‘class struggle’ is mentioned even in connection with conflicts between ‘different fractions of the bourgeoisie’—that is, conflicts pitting exploiting classes, or fractions of them, against one another. As the *Manifesto* stresses, ‘the bourgeoisie finds itself involved in a constant battle. At first with the aristocracy; later on, with those portions of the bourgeoisie itself, whose interests have become antagonistic to the progress of industry; at all times, with the bourgeoisie of foreign countries’. Where the struggle against the aristocracy prompted the revolutions heralding the collapse of the *ancien régime*, economic competition between the bourgeoisies of different capitalist countries can issue in an ‘industrial war of extermination between nations’. Reference is probably being made here to the wars of the Napoleonic era, whose main protagonists were two countries—Britain and France—that had left behind the *ancien régime* and fought on several continents for control of the world market. However, while it outlines a historical balance-sheet of the past, the ‘extermination’ in which the class struggle between opposing capitalist bourgeoisies results calls to mind the carnage of the First World War, which occurred more than 60 years after the publication of the *Manifesto*.

### 6 1848–9: A ‘Class Struggle in Colossal Political Forms’

The intricate picture of class struggles, which is beginning to emerge, is not yet complete. We have seen them in operation in abstraction from one another. However, a concrete historical situation, especially a major historical crisis, is characterized by the conjunction of multiple, contradictory class struggles.
We may take a look at the major historical crises witnessed by the authors of the *Communist Manifesto*. We possess two balance-sheets of the revolutionary years 1848–9, both written on the spur of the moment by Marx. The first, from April 1849, is contained in *Wage Labour and Capital*, which, to judge from its title, should deal with a more strictly economic and trade union subject. In reality, Marx situates everyday ‘class struggle’ in the context of the upheavals underway: the ‘defeat of the revolutionary workers’ (who had risen in Paris in June 1848); the ‘heroic wars of independence’ and ‘the desperate exertions of Poland, Italy, and Hungary’; the emergence on the horizon of a possible ‘world war’, which would see ‘the proletarian revolution and the feudalistic counter-revolution’ ranged against one another; the ‘starving of Ireland’ (the terrible famine that decimated the island’s inhabitants, and which was greeted by distinguished representatives of the British ruling class as an act of Providence); the contribution made in their different ways by Britain and Russia to the crushing of the revolutionary movement, and hence, the relapse of Europe ‘into its old double slavery, the Anglo-Russian slavery’, with ‘the commercial subjugation and exploitation of the bourgeois classes of the various European nations by the despot of the world market—England’. Thus, the world had seen ‘the class struggle develop in colossal political forms in 1848’; nothing was alien to ‘the class struggle [and] the European revolution’.64 Rather than presenting itself in directly economic guise, the class struggle had assumed the most varied political forms (working-class and popular revolts, national insurrections, repression unleashed by domestic and international reaction with recourse to military or economic tools). Far from disappearing, it had become more acuter.

The second historical balance-sheet is drawn up in *Class Struggles in France*. The date was 1850 and in Marx’s view the crisis had not yet reached a conclusion and might, in fact, open up new, grandiose revolutionary prospects:

The defeat of June [of the Parisian workers] divulged to the despotic powers of Europe the secret that France must maintain peace abroad at any price in order to be able to wage civil war at home. Thus the peoples who had begun to fight for their national independence were abandoned to the superior power of Russia, Austria and Prussia, but, at the same time, the fate of these national revolutions was made subject to the fate of the proletarian revolution, and they were robbed of their apparent autonomy, their independence
of the great social revolution. The Hungarian shall not be free, nor the Pole, nor the Italian, as long as the worker remains a slave.

Finally, with the victories of the Holy Alliance, Europe has taken on a form in which every fresh proletarian upheaval in France directly involves a world war. The new French revolution is forced to leave its national soil forthwith and conquer the European terrain, on which alone the social revolution of the nineteenth century can be accomplished.⁶⁵

An intervention by the counter-revolutionary powers similar to that of 1792 was to be anticipated. Consequently, ‘the class war within French society turns into a world war, in which the nations confront one another’.⁶⁶

Here revolutionary impatience tends imaginatively to run ahead of a long (and highly complex) historical process. But I would mainly like to examine the theoretical and categorial aspect: what is configured as a ‘class war’ is ‘world war’, a nexus of revolutions and international conflicts.

Clearly, 1848–9 reminded Marx of the historical crisis that began in 1789. Starting from the invasion of France by powers committed to defending the ancien régime, it too saw revolutions and international conflicts intersect and converge in a global or European war. The most relevant novel factor in the new crisis was that its protagonists were no longer two social subjects, but three: in addition to the aristocracy and bourgeoisie, there was now the proletariat which (Marx hoped) might play a decisive role in reversing, over and above the ancien régime, capitalism itself. At all events, in both historical crises, assuming a different form each time, class struggle exploded in ‘colossal political forms’ (to borrow the terminology of Wage Labour and Capital), and ‘class war’ ended up taking the form of a ‘world war’ (to quote Class Struggles in France).

Class struggle almost never presents itself in the pure state, almost never confines itself to involving directly antagonistic subjects. Above all, it is precisely thanks to this lack of ‘purity’ that it can issue in a victorious social revolution. Marx envisaged a ‘proletarian insurrection’ occurring in the most developed capitalist country. Counter-revolutionary intervention would then target Britain, where, however, the weight of the working class was menacing from the perspective of powers determined to preserve the existing order at any cost. In the course of ‘world war’, or the novel conjunction of revolutions and wars that would detonate it, conditions would thus be created conducive to an event that was destined to signal a turning-point in world history: ‘the proletariat is pushed to the fore in the nation which dominates the world market, to the forefront in England. The revolution, which
finds here not its end, but its organisational beginning, is no short-lived revolution’. In its time, the feudal powers’ intervention against revolutionary France had prompted the Jacobin radicalization, had presaged the arrival in power of a political and ideological stratum not organically connected to the bourgeoisie, and which in fact (as stressed by The German Ideology) the bourgeoisie only managed to reabsorb later and with difficulty (see Chap. 9, Sect. 2). A potential counter-revolutionary intervention against Britain while it was immersed in a revolutionary crisis could end up setting in motion a similar process, requiring socialists in that eventuality to direct their energies to the defence of both social conquests and national independence.

While the occasionally fantastic character of the scenario sketched by Marx in 1850 is evident, what is undeniable is the almost prophetic foresight it displays. During major historical crises, which are characterized by a conjunction of domestic and international conflicts, the class struggle intensifies and becomes a revolutionary struggle in a country invested by an unprecedented national crisis. This was a scenario also evoked by the late Engels. In a letter of 13 October 1895 to August Bebel, he underscored the growing dangers of war. What would happen if Germany, where the strongest socialist party was active, were to be attacked by tsarist Russia (supported in the West by its allies) and the ‘nation’s existence’ threatened? ‘It might happen that, in contrast to the cowardice of the bourgeoisie and Junkers, who want to save their property, we should turn out to be the only vigorous war party. Of course, it might also happen that we should have to take the helm and do a 1794 in order to chuck out the Russians and their allies’.

This is a passage which was invoked by German social-democracy in 1914 to justify its support for imperialist war: a decidedly bizarre reference, which indirectly compared the Germany of Wilhelm II with the France of Robespierre! But it is the case that a key aspect of the twentieth century was the blossoming of national liberation movements that ended up being hegemonized by communist or communist-inspired parties. And the development of these movements was precisely punctuated by two world wars wherein the aspect of counter-revolutionary intervention was more or less massively present. The intervention of the Entente against Soviet Russia was followed, more than twenty years later, by the aggression of Hitlerite Germany, which simultaneously aimed to liquidate the socialist movement and build a colonial empire in the East, as a result of which defeat of this project provoked an immense wave of anti-colonial revolutions on a global scale. Once again, to adopt Marx’s terminology, we witness ‘the class war develop in colossal political forms’ and ‘class war’ configured as ‘world war’.
More than two decades after the revolutionary crisis of 1848–9, Marx and Engels were witnesses of the tragedy of the Paris Commune. In this instance, however, the clash between bourgeoisie and proletariat was obvious to everyone, if only on account of the execution squads mobilized by the former against the latter. We must concern ourselves with a more complex historical sequence, which they followed from an observation post located thousands of miles away. I am referring to the American Civil War, which Volume One of *Capital*, published in 1867, characterized as ‘the one great event of contemporary history’. This phrase recalls that used in connection with the Parisian workers’ ‘June insurrection’ of 1848, characterized as ‘the most colossal event [kolossalstesEreignis] in the history of European civil wars’.

*Capital* establishes a parallel between the Civil War and the struggle (in Britain and France) against working conditions that effectively force workers to ‘work to death’. If the abolition of slavery was the result of the American Civil War, analogously, ‘the legal limitation and regulation [of the working day] had been wrung step by step after a civil war of half a century’. While the Emancipation Proclamation banned the purchase and sale of Black slaves in the USA, in Europe legal regulation of the working day prevented workers from ‘selling, by voluntary contract with capital, themselves and their families into slavery and death’. If, across the Atlantic, the election of Lincoln, suspected of being an abolitionist, was followed by the secession of the slaveholding states, British capitalists reacted to the reduction and regulation of working hours with a ‘proslavery rebellion in miniature’, agitating in defence of the maintenance of wage slavery in its pure form.

In both instances, we are dealing with a class struggle waged at once from below and from above. In the USA, especially in the final phase of the war, the ranks of the Union were swollen by an influx of slaves or ex-slaves, who abandoned their masters or ex-masters to help defeat the pro-slavery secession, while in Britain working-class agitation went back a long way. In both countries, the reformist bourgeoisie played an important role. We are dealing with an emancipatory class struggle that does not present itself in the pure state as a clash between exploited and exploiter, oppressed and oppressor.

The ‘impure’ character of the American Civil War was even more marked and manifest—and not only because the contestants were not (at least at
first sight) a ruling class and an oppressed class. Furthermore, the North was far from being motivated by pure abolitionist zeal. Lincoln himself guaranteed slaveholding states peaceful enjoyment of self-government (and private property in human livestock) if they were prepared to display loyalty to the union. To justify their sympathy for the South, sizeable sections of the British bourgeoisie invoked this, arguing as follows: the Union was fighting primarily for protectionist customs tariffs (necessary to promote autonomous industrial development), and to defend its territorial integrity (and the vast national market required by the US bourgeoisie). Prominent figures in the socialist movement adopted a not dissimilar position (see Chap. 5, Sect. 2). Was a bloodbath justified merely to indulge the industrial bourgeoisie of the North against the landowning aristocracy of the South, or to replace one exploiting class with another and spread wage slavery by removing classical slavery? What was at stake seemed all the more vile given that the material conditions of wage slaves were no better than those of slaves proper at the time. Capping it all was the hypocrisy for which substantial sections of the British working class criticized abolitionists in their country. The latter were moved by the lot of Black slaves across the Atlantic, but remained impervious in the face of the tragedy of White slaves in their own backyard.

Marx was well aware of the limitations of British abolitionism. In Capital, he expressed utter contempt for the ideal-typical figure of the Duchess of Southerland. The noble lady ‘entertained Mrs. Beecher Stowe, authoress of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, with great magnificence in London, to show her sympathy for the Negro slaves of the American republic’. At the same time, however, she was ruthless towards her own ‘slaves’, who were ‘systematically hunted and rooted out’ of their land, condemned to die of hunger, and sometimes swept away along with the villages inhabited by them.74

Nevertheless, from his first article in the New York Daily Tribune, which appeared on 11 October 1861, Marx sharply rejected such arguments. It was true that Lincoln had confirmed that he sought only to preserve the territorial integrity of the USA, but ‘the South, on its part, inaugurated the war by loudly proclaiming “the peculiar institution” as the only and main end of the rebellion’. Besides, the Constitution of the Confederacy ‘had recognized for the first time Slavery as a thing good in itself, a bulwark of civilization, and a divine institution. If the North professed to fight for the Union, the South gloried in rebellion for the supremacy of Slavery’. Hence, what was at stake was clear: the defence or abolition of the ‘Southern slaveocracy’.75
As we can see, we are witness to a surprising inversion of positions. Resorting to ideology-critique (of an economistic and reductionist kind) were the pro-South sectors of the British ruling class (habitually inclined to celebrate the purity of spiritual values), while highlighting the abolitionist significance and virtues of the North’s war was Marx, the great and caustic critic of ideology. For what reasons? I shall try to summarize why for Marx the Union’s war to suppress the slaveholding secession took the form of a gigantic, emancipatory class struggle.

1. A society dominated by ‘an oligarchy’, ‘where all productive labour devolves on the niggers’, had to be defeated. As has been justly observed, ‘[f]or most of human history the expression “free labor” was an oxymoron’. This contradiction in terms was especially crying in the years before the Civil War in the American Deep South where, in Tocqueville’s words, ‘labor is confounded with the idea of slavery’. Breaking with this tradition entailed conferring dignity on the very idea of labour and achieving an important ideological victory. Above all, emancipating the labour ‘branded … in the black [skin]’ of slavery proper, the Union’s ‘Abolitionist war’ on the slaveholding, secessionist South had created more conditions more propitious for the emancipation of labour ‘in the white skin’. All the more so because ‘the slaveholders’ rebellion was to sound the tocsin for a general holy crusade of property against labour’. With this observation, Marx hit the nail on the head. In the very midst of the Civil War, one of the South’s most distinguished theorists, George Fitzhugh, although legitimating the subjection of Blacks and regarding it as necessary and beneficial, criticized the idea of ‘confin[ing] the justification of slavery to that race’. In Europe, meanwhile, echoing these themes and situating them in the framework of a developed philosophy of history, Nietzsche celebrated slavery as such, not necessarily racial slavery, as the ineliminable foundation of civilization.

2. When he maintained that the institution of slavery was required to regulate the relationship between capital and labour as such, Fitzhugh probably had in mind the expeditions of the ‘filibusters’ who set out from the South to export slavery to the countries of Central America—expeditions aimed at the ‘conquest of new territory for the spread of slavery and of the slaveholders’ rule’. In fact, in the years leading up to the Civil War William Walker had set out at the head of a small army of adventurers to conquer Nicaragua, reintroduce Black slavery there, restart the slave
trade and impose forced labour, on the Nicaraguans themselves.\textsuperscript{83} We can now understand the message of congratulations drafted by Marx in January 1865 and sent by the International to Lincoln on the occasion of his re-election: “[f]rom the commencement of the Titanic-American strife the working men of Europe felt instinctively that the star-spangled banner carried the destiny of their class”; they realized that ‘their hopes for the future, even their past conquests were at stake in the tremendous conflict on the other side of the Atlantic’.\textsuperscript{84}

3. With the abolition of Black slavery, the Civil War ended in the emancipation, albeit partial, of an oppressed ‘race’ or nationality. And from this standpoint too it took the form of a major class struggle. In the final phase of its existence, the Confederacy was obliged to retreat from its original position and ‘treat Negro soldiers as “prisoners of war”’,\textsuperscript{85} rather than shooting them as rebel slaves and barbarians excluded from the \textit{jus publicum europaeum}. In addition, Marx stressed that bound up with the abolition of slavery in the USA was recognition by Washington of the ‘independence of the Negro republics of Liberia and Haiti’.\textsuperscript{86} Of particular significance was the recognition of Haiti, which was born in the wake of the great Black slave revolution led by Toussaint L’Ouverture and long subject to diplomatic isolation and economic strangulation by the USA and the West.

For all these reasons, Marx regarded the Civil War as among the most important chapters in the class struggle of his time. The slave-owners’ bid to assert or reassert the identity between labour and slavery, the ‘crusade of property against labour’, suffered a defeat whose significance transcended the borders of the USA and the Black ‘race’.

Unfortunately, the defeat of the pro-slavery counter-revolution was only partial and attempts to stage a come-back under sign of ‘white supremacy’ were soon forthcoming. But for Marx this was further confirmation that the gigantic class struggle which exploded between 1861 and 1865 was far from over.

\section*{8 \hspace{1cm} Class Struggle and Other Paradigms}

As we can see, the theory of class struggle seeks to shed light on the historical process as such. It is a type of explanation that is opposed to other kinds of explanation. We can understand the latter and, as a result, arrive at a better understanding of the former, if we take a look at the theoretical
challenges which nineteenth-century culture had to face. What particularly stood in need of investigation was the reasons for the irresistible rise of the West. To put it in the enthusiastic terms employed at the start of the first Opium War by de Tocqueville, it was a question of clarifying the ‘multitude of events of the same kind that are gradually impelling the European race beyond its borders and subjecting all the other races in succession to its dominion and influence’, the ‘reasons for the subjugation of four-fifths of the world by the remaining fifth’. What was this triumphal march to be attributed to? Secondly, it was necessary to explain France’s differential political development compared with Britain and the USA. In France, revolution had been followed by counter-revolution, which in its turn paved the way for a subsequent revolution. A succession of political regimes followed one another: absolute monarchy, constitutional monarchy, Jacobin Terror, military dictatorship, empire, democratic republic, Bonapartism, and so forth. And no end to these convulsions, with the advent of an orderly regime of liberty and the rule of law, was in sight. In fact, on closer inspection, with the exception of brief intervals, absolute power presented itself as a destiny or a curse: divine right monarchy was followed by the Jacobin Terror, which in its turn paved the way for Bonapartist dictatorship. What a striking contrast with the gradual, constructive evolution of the other two countries, characterized by liberty and the rule of law! So what were the reasons for the interminable historical crisis engulfing France? Thirdly, even as it engaged in its colonial expansion, the West anxiously observed the irruption at home of shocking mass movements which, in the shape first of Jacobinism and then of socialism, seemed to be attacking the very foundations of civilization. What was happening?

Let us now glance in broad terms at the paradigms employed by the culture of the time to confront these three major theoretical and political cruces. In 1883, the year Marx died, a book appeared in Austria by Ludwig Gumplowicz which, in its very title (Der Rassenkampf, ‘The Race Struggle’), was counter-posed to the thesis of the class struggle as the key to interpreting history. Three decades before Gumplowicz, Arthur de Gobineau in France began to send to the printers his Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races—a work whose title once again speaks for itself. At the same time, a similar line of argument was advanced in Britain by Benjamin Disraeli, who formulated the thesis that race was ‘the key of history’—‘[a]ll is race; there is no other truth’. Furthermore, ‘there is only one thing which makes a race, and that is blood’. The whole
historical cycle from the discovery-conquest of America to the Opium Wars, and the rise and triumph of the British Empire, perfectly illustrated the decisive character of the racial factor. Only thus could it be understood how, though few in number, the Spanish *conquistadores* had triumphed in America and the British in China.

The racial or ethnologico-racial paradigm can be presented in diluted form and refer primarily to what, in contemporary terminology, would be called the ‘clash of civilizations’. Obviously, civilizations genuinely exist and are not to be confused with ‘races’. But if, rather than being construed on the basis of historically determinate contexts and conflicts, they are regarded as expressions of a tendentially eternal spirit or soul, there is a danger of a naturalistic slippage. The civilizations contrasted by Tocqueville with Western civilization, or the ‘Christian world’, all seem incomparably inferior in value and immobile in time, and are therefore destined by Providence to disappear. At this point, there is a strong tendency to abandon the terrain of history. The slippage into naturalism proves unstoppable when the discourse focuses on ‘semi-civilized tribes’ and ‘savages’: ‘the European race has received from heaven, or acquired by its own efforts, such incontestable superiority over the other races that make up the great human family that the man placed by us, on account of his vices and ignorance, on the bottom rung of the social scale is still first among savages’. We can readily understand the French liberal’s horror at something that had occurred in Australia: transported White European prisoners had escaped into the forests, married the daughters of Aborigine ‘savages’, proceeding to a miscegenation that generated a ‘race of half-castes’ dangerous to the existing social and racial order.88

Twelve years after Marx, Engels died. The date was 1895, the year in which Gustave Le Bon published *Crowd Psychology*. The book’s main thesis is well-known: the prolonged crisis from 1789 to 1871, from the outbreak of the Great Revolution to the Paris Commune, was ultimately the product of mental illness. Here, then, nineteenth-century bourgeois culture tackled the second theoretical and political challenge (France’s differential development) by recourse to the psychopathological paradigm. In the country stamped by an interminable revolutionary cycle, ‘a virus of a new and unknown kind’ raged, which had attacked the mental faculties of generations of intellectuals and political agitators: such was the view of Tocqueville, as of Hippolyte Taine and Le Bon himself.

But why did this virus rage in one country rather than another? The fact was, lamented Tocqueville, that the French were lacking in the stable
morality, strong common sense, and love of liberty and individual dignity exhibited by Anglo-Saxons—in particular, Americans. The French frequently succumbed to the delirium of ideological abstractions and exhibited a morbid attachment to equality and even homogenization. They were ‘afraid of isolation’ and harboured a ‘desire to be in the crowd’, feeling themselves members of ‘a nation that marches to the same step in perfect alignment’. They regarded liberty as ‘the least important of their possessions, and thus are always ready to offer it up with reason at moments of danger’. These were characteristics whose disappearance was difficult to imagine, given a people whose ‘basic characteristics are so constant that we can recognise the France we know in portraits made of it two or three thousand years ago’.

As we can see, the psychopathological paradigm tends to intersect with the ethnological or ethnologico-racial paradigm. This applies to Taine as well as Le Bon, who, to explain the insanity, delirium and convulsions of revolutionary France, adverted to morbid ‘crowd psychology’, but more exactly the morbid crowd psychology of ‘Latins’, who were wanting in ‘that sentiment of the independence of the individual so powerful in the Anglo Saxons’.89

Such stereotypes became even more widely diffused across the Channel and can even be found in John Stuart Mill. He contrasted the orderly liberty and economic development of the Anglo-Saxon world with the ‘submission’, ‘endurance’ and statism peculiar to the ‘continental nations’ of Europe, which, moreover, were rotten with ‘bureaucracy’ and envious egalitarian impulses. Thus, even in liberal Britain, albeit in less crudely naturalistic form, we find a conjunction of the psychopathological paradigm (which attributed a protracted historical crisis to a sick psyche) and the ethnological paradigm (which detected this sick psyche in specific peoples).

In Tocqueville, the naturalistic slippage of the psychopathological paradigm is more pronounced. Having died in 1859, he did not live to see the American Civil War, but had sensed its advent. What were the causes of the impending cataclysm? Ideological fanaticism, which had had such devastating effects in the country of radical Enlightenment and Jacobinism, was absent across the Atlantic. So what was the cause of the looming civil war? The French liberal was in no doubt: it was the ‘rapid introduction into the United States of men who were foreign to the English race’; it was the sudden arrival of ‘so many alien elements’, who disastrously altered the ‘nature’ (naturel) and ‘economy and health’ of the original ‘social body’.

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Finally, to explain the irruption of the subaltern classes onto the historical stage, and the emergence of the Jacobin-socialist movement, nineteenth-century culture employed the same admixture of psychopathological paradigm and ethnological paradigm. In Tocqueville’s view, socialism was the ‘natural disease’ of the French; and this was Le Bon’s position too. At the same time, it availed itself of the racial paradigm to brand the subaltern classes who rebelled against the existing order as barbaric and savage. What was occurring was a ‘new barbarian invasion’, this time originating from within the civilized world. Indeed, wrote Nietzsche, commenting on the Paris Commune and condemning it, a ‘barbaric slave class’ was at work that threatened to visit horrendous destruction on civilization. Or, to put the point in the words of Jeremy Bentham this time, nothing good was to be expected of the ‘savage’ that was the poor man.

As we can see, the main paradigms employed by bourgeois culture especially in the second half of the nineteenth century (following the failure of the 1848 revolution, Hegel became a dead dog) allotted very little space to history. This explains some extraordinary slips. Tocqueville counterposed the USA to a France incapable of ridding itself of absolute power. We are in a period that predates the American Civil War: the country where Black slavery remained alive and well was celebrated as a champion of the cause of liberty, while deafness to that cause was embodied by a country that had abolished slavery in its colonies decades earlier.

It was in disputing these paradigms that Marx and Engels developed the theory of class struggle.

9 The Formation of the Theory of Class Struggle

Tackling the issue of the working class on the terrain of historical and social analysis, the 27-year-old Marx not only ridiculed cries of alarm at the ‘new barbarian invasion’, but turned them back against those who uttered them. It was precisely from these ‘barbarians’ that emancipation was to be anticipated. The ‘barbaric slave class’ warned against by Nietzsche (and the culture of the time) was the working class which, breaking the chains of ‘present enslavement’ to which it was subject, made a decisive contribution to constructing a society and civilization no longer based on exploitation and oppression. The racial and civilizational clash paradigms were refuted in advance, on the grounds that
concrete socio-historical analysis disclosed the fluidity of the boundaries between civilization and barbarism. This did not only apply to class relations within the capitalist metropolis. The latter claimed to export civilization to the colonial world. In reality, it was precisely there that the ‘inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization’ clearly manifested itself (see Sect. 3). During the ‘civilizing war’ represented by the Opium War (according to the dominant ideology in the West and Tocqueville and Mill as well), it was the ‘semi-barbarian’ China which showed respect for ‘the principle of morality’. In any event, colonial expansion was not the triumph, ordained and consecrated by Providence, of the superior civilization and ‘European race’ about which Tocqueville, among others, fantasized. Rather, it was a key moment in the formation of the world market by the bourgeoisie, which had emerged ‘dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt’. With its class struggle, the Western bourgeoisie had imposed an international division of labour based on the enslavement of Blacks and the expropriation, deportation and even annihilation of Native Americans. The class struggle of oppressed peoples did not fail to respond to all this.

As regards interpretation of the major historical crisis that began in 1789, from the outset Marx developed an analysis in which race, the stereotypical characteristics attributed to this or that people, and madness played no role. In 1850, he published *Class Struggles in France from 1848 to 1850*. The methodology clearly formulated in the title also forms the guiding thread of a book published two years later, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. It was devoted to explaining why the revolutionary crisis, after having variously invested ‘all classes and parties’, resulted in the dictatorship of Bonaparte, that ‘chief of the lumpen-proletariat’, ‘a princely lumpen-proletarian’. It made no sense to counter-pose Britain and the USA to a France supposedly incurably deaf to the value of liberty. Britain distinguished itself by the ‘indecent haste’ with which, prior to anyone else, it recognized the France issuing from Louis Bonaparte’s coup d’état, whose author was ‘deified’ by the Conservative press. As for the North American republic, even were Black slavery to be ignored, it must be remembered that across the Atlantic ‘the class contradictions are but incompletely developed; every clash between the classes is concealed by the outflow of the surplus proletarian population to the west’—an emigration presupposing the expropriation and deportation of the natives and hence a ferocious dictatorship over them.
Departure from naturalistic paradigms was an essential moment in the process of developing the theory of class struggle. Already in his early writings, Engels criticized Thomas Carlyle, ‘with his prejudice in favour of the Teutonic character’, for his ‘exaggerated and one-sided condemnation of the Irish national character’. Rather than drawing attention to ‘the shameless oppression inflicted by the English’, the great writer had wrongly stigmatized the inhabitants of the subjugated island ‘Latins’ and ‘Celts’, members of a ‘race robbed of all humanity’, starkly inferior to the ‘Germanic’ or ‘Saxon’ race of which the English formed an integral part. It is also the context wherein to locate Marx’s critique of the dominant ideology, which claimed to attribute the tragedy of a people to the “aboriginal faults of the Celtic race”. What should be put on trial was not some putative ‘Irish nature’ but ‘British misrule’ and hence the responsibility of the dominant classes.

These were the years when the Irish, who occupied the bottom rungs of the labour market in England, seemed to Carlyle to be not only ‘Latins’ and ‘Celts’, but also—worse—‘negroes’, members of the race whose slavery the British writer, with his focus in particular on the USA, justified. Unfortunately, this view was also widespread among British workers, who (Marx observed in 1870) tended to adopt towards the Irish a similar attitude to that displayed in the American South by poor Whites towards the ‘niggers’ they despised and hated. But all this had little or nothing to do with ‘race’. In a society of the kind to be found in the Deep South, where, even after the formal abolition of the institution of slavery, the ruling oligarchy proudly displayed its otium and saddled Blacks with ‘all the productive labour’, social arrogance manifested itself as racial arrogance and contempt for ‘productive labour’ was, at the same time, contempt for the servile or semi-servile race forced to supply it.

Along with Carlyle, Marx and Engels’ polemic targeted François Guizot, who, after the workers’ revolt of June 1848, like Tocqueville, and probably in his wake, contrasted England and France. The first knew how to combine love of liberty with a robust pragmatism; the second was prey to fanatical subversiveness and lacked any sense of limits. Hence (ironized Marx) everything was to be explained by ‘the superior intelligence of the English’. Class struggle—conflict that was always historically determinate—ceded to a mythical, more or less eternal nature of peoples possessing a different degree of pragmatism and sense of reality. Those who argued thus took no account of the radicalism and civil war that
marked the first English revolution, the Puritan revolution. The latter, however, was attributed by Guizot to ‘a few ambitious, fanatic and evil-minded people’, not content with ‘moderate freedom’.103 Directed at the French, the ethnological paradigm gives way to the psychopathological paradigm, which sets off in search of fanatics and lunatics. The terrain of an ‘understanding of history’104 is abandoned here too. This way of arguing seemed so ridiculous to Marx and Engels that they pointed to adhesion to the ethnological and psychopathological paradigm as evidence of a decline in ‘les capacités de la bourgeoisie’. Terrified by the spectre of proletarian revolution, it was no longer capable of interpreting social conflict in historical terms.105

Whether directly or indirectly, the polemic of the theoreticians of the class struggle ended up encompassing a fair number of the major authors of the nineteenth century. According to Tocqueville, the vehicle of the ‘virus of a new and unknown kind’ was a ‘new race of revolutionaries’: ‘we are still dealing with the same men, but the circumstances are different’.106 One has the impression that Engels was replying to the French liberal when, in 1851, he waxed ironic about ‘that superstition which attribute[s] revolutions to the ill-will of a few agitators’.107

In denouncing an eruption of revolutionary insanity, nineteenth-century liberals had France in particular in their sights. In the conviction that the revolutionary cycle afflicting the West went back a long way, Nietzsche called for a settlement of accounts with ‘the madhouse-world of entire millennia’ and the mental illness originating with Christianity.108 Although taking the psychopathological paradigm to extremes, Nietzsche acknowledged his debt to the tradition behind him and declared that he had ‘passed through the school of Tocqueville and Taine’.109 On the other side, Engels mocked ‘Taine and Tocqueville, those idols of the philistines’.110

The various representatives of the dominant nineteenth-century culture were therefore in agreement in identifying France, with its protracted revolutionary cycle, as the clearest example of the horrors in which revolutionary madness could result. In 1885, Engels, by contrast, asserted that France was ‘the land where, more than anywhere else, historical class struggles were each time fought out to a decision’.111 For his part, Marx expressed utter contempt for the psychopathological paradigm, noting in 1867 that autocratic, feudal Russia employed it: Nicholas I explained the spread of the 1848 revolutionary crisis in Europe by the diffusion of the ‘French plague’ and French revolutionary ‘madness’, with the metastasis
of the ‘cancer of a sacrilegious philosophy’ attacking the healthy organs of the European social body.\textsuperscript{112}

10 \hspace{1em} \textbf{CLASS STRUGGLE AND IDEOLOGICAL STRUGGLE}

Class struggle not only encompasses different social relations, but is also played out at an ideological level, not sparing religion. The latter claims to be a sacred space that transcends conflict. In reality, it often acts as an ‘opium of the people’, facilitating the task of the ruling class.\textsuperscript{113} It is worth dwelling on this point because Marx’s discourse on religion has been confused with Enlightenment discourse, which risks compromising an understanding of the Marxian critique of ideology. For Marx religion is one of the ideologies, not ideology as such. The concrete role played by religion in the context of the class struggle in its various configurations has to be examined. Let us take a glance at history.

In the late eighteenth century, Poland was still formally a sovereign state. Frederick II of Prussia exploited the anti-Catholic sentiments of Enlightenment philosophes to justify the annexation of Polish territory, presenting it as a contribution to the diffusion of Enlightenment and defence of the cause of religious tolerance. In a letter sent to him, D’Alembert celebrated the ‘delicious verses’ of the enlightened sovereign which, in a felicitous blend of ‘imagination’ and ‘reason’, mocked the Poles and the ‘Holy Virgin Mary’, in whom they reposed their hopes of ‘liberation’.\textsuperscript{114} Something similar occurred in connection with Ireland, a colony of Protestant and Anglican Great Britain. Here too the struggle against national oppression was fuelled by religious themes and mobilized watchwords of a religious (Roman Catholic) kind. In this instance, it was John Locke who seized on the spirit of Enlightenment to combat the rebels, a manifestation of the ‘ignorant and zealous world’ of Popery, led astray by ‘the art and industry of their clergy’. They were incited by ‘priests’ who ‘everywhere’, to secure their empire, ‘hav[e] excluded reason from having anything to do in religion’.\textsuperscript{115} There could be no toleration of papists. In addition to looking to a foreign, hostile power, they harboured ‘dangerous opinions, which are absolutely destructive to all governments but the pope’s’; ‘[t]hose opinions and whoever shall spread or publish any of them the magistrate is bound to suppress’.\textsuperscript{116} In both cases, the alleged struggle against clerical obscurantism was, at the same time, repression of the national aspirations of the Polish and Irish peoples. Proudhon may be regarded as the inheritor of such Enlightenment ideology. In him we find...
a combination of the posture of a free thinker and derision of independence movements, for which defence of national identity (and liberation) also took the form of defence of religious identity.

Marx and Engels’ attitude was very different. From the outset, commitment to the struggle for the emancipation of subaltern classes, often stupefied and paralyzed by religious ‘opium’, was conjoined with support for independence movements which, precisely thanks to religion, achieved initial awareness of the national question. In the eyes of the Irish (noted the young Engels), the ‘Protestant intruders’ were one and the same as the ‘landlords’ and, in a way, an integral part of the machine subjugating the people, who had been invaded and subjected to the ‘most brutal plundering’. Digging beneath the surface of the religious clash between Catholics and Protestants, we uncover the clash between Irish farm hands, whose land was often expropriated, and the expropriating British colonists; we witness the emergence of the reality of class struggle in its concrete configuration. Religious affiliation can be experienced very intensely and mobilized effectively in political and historical upheaval. But it is not the primary cause of such conflict.

In the case of Poland, immediately after the (rapidly repressed) rebellion of January 1863, Marx, reconstructing the history of the partitioned, oppressed country, observed that tsarist Russia had not hesitated to use the pretext of the ‘exclusion of (non-Catholic) dissidents from political rights’ to justify its policy of intervention and expansion at Poland’s expense.118 This is a theme subsequently developed by Engels. At the time of the country’s first partition (he observed), there was ‘an enlightened “public opinion” in Europe’, under ‘the immense influence of Diderot, Voltaire, Rousseau and the other French writers of the eighteenth century’. In its expansionist march, tsarist Russia exploited it. Although engaged in ferocious persecution of Jewry, it ‘came soon upon Poland in the name of religious toleration’ and the rights of Orthodox Christians infringed by a Catholic, obscurantist country and government. In so doing, Russia could count on the support and benevolence of the _philosophes_: 

The Court of Catherine II was made the head-quarters of the enlightened men of the day, especially Frenchmen; the most enlightened principle was professed by the Empress and her Court, and so well did she succeed in deceiving them that Voltaire and many others sang the praise of the ‘Semiramis of the North’, and proclaimed Russia the most progressive country in the world, the home of liberal principles, the champion of religious toleration.119
The date was 1866. The following year, we have seen Marx telling Engels about his daughter Jenny paying tribute to the Irish patriots, who had just been hanged, and associating them with the Polish patriots who were also fighting for their independence. This was not prompted by some fleeting emotion. In 1869, Marx returned to the issue. He sent a photo of Jenny first to Engels, and then to Ludwig Kugelmann, and explained in the accompanying letter that the cross she was wearing round her neck was ‘the Polish 1864 Insurrection Cross’. In the house of the philosopher, revolutionary and scourge of the ‘opium of the people’, there was no hesitation in expressing solidarity with the liberation struggle of an oppressed people to the extent of displaying its religious symbols.

Attention to the concrete significance of religion in a concrete historical situation, and in the context of a specific conflict, was a constant in Marx and Engels’ thinking. During the American Civil War, Marx warmly stressed the vanguard role played by Christian abolitionists like William L. Garrison and Wendell Phillips. The latter, in particular, ‘[f]or 30 years … has without intermission and at the risk of his life proclaimed the emancipation of the slaves as his battle-cry, regardless alike of the persiflage of the press, the enraged howls of paid rowdies and the conciliatory representations of solicitous friends’. Indeed, he did not hesitate to criticize Lincoln, reproving him for relying mainly on negotiations from above with the leaders of states situated on the border between North and South, and uncertain about what position to adopt, rather than on mobilization from below of Blacks determined to break the chains of slavery. ‘Lincoln is waging a political war’: such was the condemnation by Phillips, who wanted to transform the military showdown between the two sections of the Union into a kind of abolitionist revolution, for which Marx likewise hoped.

The great opponent of Christian abolitionism was John C. Calhoun, who thundered against ‘the rabid fanatics, who regard slavery as a sin, and thus regarding it, deem it their highest duty to destroy it, even should it involve the destruction of the constitution and the Union’. For them, abolition was a conscientious duty. Only thus, they thought, could they free themselves from the agonizing sense of being complicit with the unforgivable ‘sin’ allegedly represented by slavery, against which they proclaimed a ‘general crusade’. Despite his hatred, or perhaps precisely because of it, Calhoun hit home. In Christian abolitionism, quasi-fundamentalist accents were not lacking, with which the major theorist of the slave-holding South liked to contrast a secular attitude that was ‘enlightened’ in its way. Yet Marx came down in favour of Garrison and Phillips, celebrating them
as champions of the cause of liberty. In the gigantic class struggle that unfolded before and during the Civil War, it was Christian abolitionism, often echoing with fundamentalist accents, which embodied resistance to the ‘general crusade of property against labour’ and the revolutionary cause of the emancipation of labour.

Not only as militants required to take a position on the conflicts of their time, but also as historians analysing conflicts that now lay in the past, the remote past even, Marx and Engels carefully avoided indiscriminate liquidation of movements inspired by religion in one way or another. In its time, the Spanish uprising against Napoleon’s army had been directed against the invading country’s cultural tradition as well as its military occupation. Hence, it had denounced the French Enlightenment and Revolution and, against these more or less ‘satanic’ ideas, appealed to the religion of its ancestors and the Holy Faith. But all this did not prevent Marx from formulating a balanced judgement in 1854 that, in the Napoleonic era, ‘[a]ll the wars of independence waged against France bear in common the stamp of regeneration, mixed up with reaction’.\(^{123}\) ‘Regeneration’ was represented by the mass struggle for national independence, while ‘reaction’ consisted in the obscurantist ideology informing the struggle.

Immediately after the failure of the 1848 revolution, rejecting tendencies to discouragement and escapism, Engels engaged in reconstructing the German ‘revolutionary tradition’,\(^{124}\) and thus wrote a book on the ‘peasants’ war’, the great anti-feudal revolt that had erupted more than three centuries earlier, in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, with slogans drawn from the Old and New Testaments.

Later, at the end of his life in 1895, Engels had no hesitation comparing the irresistible rise of socialism with the triumph of Christianity, notwithstanding Diocletian’s persecution and thanks to Constantine’s conversion.\(^{125}\) This stance was all the more significant because it occurred at the same time as Nietzsche’s equation and condemnation of Christianity and socialism in the name, first, of ‘Enlightenment’ proper and then, in the final phase of his development, of a ‘new Enlightenment’.\(^ {126}\)

Finally, it is worth remembering that very early on, Marx polemicized against Gustav Hugo, who, posturing as a ‘complete sceptic’ even more consistent than ‘the other Enlighteners’, ridiculed the ideal of the emancipation of slaves, not infrequently fostered (as we have seen) by Christian abolitionists.\(^{127}\)

In Marx and Engels, then, religion was represented as an ‘opium of the people’ in as much as it claims to transcend conflict, thereby impeding
attainment of revolutionary consciousness and strengthening the chains of oppression. But it may be that religion is the terrain where rudimentary consciousness of the conflict, of class struggle in its various configurations, emerges. This is the case, in particular, with the national question. In such instances, religious representations, which explain the conflict on the basis of a clash between Irish Catholics and British Protestants, or between Polish Catholics and Russian Orthodox Christians, is much less idealistic and much less mystificatory than the view that sees Enlightenment and obscurantism at grips in Ireland and Poland. Transfiguring domination into an expression of the light of reason, such ‘illuminism’, dear to Frederick II (and, in part, D’Alembert), as to Hugo, Calhoun, and Nietzsche, might well be defined as court Enlightenment. And we must then never lose sight of the fact that the critique of religion cannot be separated in Marx and Engels from the critique of court Enlightenment.

11 FROM RELIGION TO ‘RUSTIC IDYLL’

Recourse can also be had to art as an illusory escape from conflict. In reality, ‘social conflicts’ clearly emerge from the masterpieces of Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Dante, and Cervantes. In fact, this sometimes happens against the wishes of the author. Balzac ended up mercilessly describing the inevitable eclipse of a class (the aristocracy) for which he felt sympathy and pining nostalgia. Attempts to escape social reality and its contradictions can assume different forms, but all alike are inane.

After the failure of the 1848 revolution, criticizing a now forgotten author (Georg Friedrich Daumer) who expressed disdain for ‘abstract, exclusive politics’, and who counter-opposed to its miseries the beauty and warmth of nature, Marx and Engels mocked the widespread tendency to ‘flee before the historical tragedy that is threatening … to alleged nature, i.e. to a stupid rustic idyll’. In Feuerbach too, disillusion and disgust were so strong in these years that he was led to repeat Cicero’s exclamation about the ‘politics of his time’: ‘sunt omnia omnium miseriarum plenissima’ (‘everything is full of every misery’). It remained only to practice ‘indifference towards political parties and chatter’, seeking refuge and consolation in the arms of nature: ‘nature alone is not concerned with politics, but is the direct opposite of politics’. Rather than religion, evasion or escape from the conflict now seeks safety in nature. Marx had already cautioned against this attitude
five years before the 1848 revolution, when he observed that Feuerbach referred ‘too much to nature and too little to politics’.132

What has been said of escape into religion also broadly applies to escape into nature. Far from expressing a genuine transcendence of social conflict, it is an immature, often mystifying, expression of that conflict. We are dealing with a spiritual attitude that tends to manifest itself every time the hopes reposed in politics and political change fade or vanish. This is what happened after 1789, when the extreme complexity of the revolutionary process seemed to have definitively mocked the enthusiasm initially elicited in German culture by the fall of the ancien régime in France. In 1803, Friedrich Schiller had sung: ‘only on mountains is liberty to be found!’ Only where nature was as yet uncontaminated by man ‘is the world perfect’. As a result, only he who lived ‘in the silence of the countryside’, suckling with childish abandon on the ‘breast of nature’, could be regarded as happy; or she who lived ‘in the peaceful convent cell’, where likewise the ‘sad figure of humanity’ did not intrude—that is, where one was similarly far removed from the ephemeral din of historico-political upheavals. Hegel argued against Schiller and his ‘invocation of nature’. Rejecting any consolatory escape from the contradictions and conflicts of the political world (whether into nature or religion), he stressed that ‘[w]hat is created by human reason must possess at least the same dignity as what is created by nature’; in this sense, ‘the most banal Berlin wisecrack’ was no less worthy of admiration than a magnificent natural spectacle.133

This was a lesson which must have profoundly influenced Marx. According to the authoritative testimony of Paul Lafargue (the philosopher’s son-in-law, having married his daughter Laura), he loved to repeat ‘the saying by Hegel, the philosophy master of his youth: “Even the criminal thought of a malefactor is more grandiose and sublime than the marvels of the heavens”’.134 In his turn, in a letter of 1893 Engels wrote: ‘Nature is wonderful. I have always liked going back to her as a change from the movement of History, but History, after all, seems even more wonderful than Nature to me’. Contact with nature should serve to revive energies, enabling a return with renewed vigour to observing the historical and political world and participating in building a society based on solidarity and an awareness of common humanity, rather than exploitation and oppression—‘this approaching accomplishment of a thing never before attained in the history of our earth’.135
We have seen Marx wax ironic about the ‘alleged nature’ where the philistine disgusted with historical and political developments thinks to find refuge. Such ‘nature’ is ‘alleged’ in two senses. Firstly, it is not, in fact, uncontaminated by political and social conflict: conservative circles appeal to it to reprove the irrational agitation of the city. Secondly, observes *The German Ideology*, in the planet inhabited by humanity, ‘the nature that preceded human history’, which is precisely conceived in contrast to human history, ‘today no longer exists anywhere (except perhaps on a few Australian coral islands of recent origin)’. The countryside where Schiller, Daumer, and Feuerbach sought refuge had behind it a long, tormented history as well as a gigantic revolution—the Neolithic Revolution—which involved the introduction of agriculture and animal husbandry and the domestication of animals. In practice, everything celebrated as eternal nature, under the sign of order and regularity, and hence in contrast to the class struggles, agitation, and convulsions of the historical and political world is the product of a major historical upheaval.

Contrary to Schiller’s claim, even mountains are not uncontaminated by the ‘sad figure of humanity’. It is enough to think of shepherds and livestock, which pertain to the history just invoked. In any event, to scale heights that are not easily accessible, it is necessary to employ what has been produced by human labour, starting with clothes to protect against cold and storms. The ‘nature’ evoked and dreamed of by Schiller, Daumer, and Feuerbach is nothing but ‘the mental expression of a pious wish about human affairs’, a fantasy projection of ‘ideas’ that people ‘would like to see realized in human society’. Thus, it is a ‘nature’ from which the ‘dichotomy of life and happiness’ bemoaned in human society has vanished. In reality (to continue to cite *The German Ideology*), ‘Hobbes had much better reasons for invoking nature as proof of his *bellum omnium contra omnes*, and Hegel … for perceiving in nature cleavage’. The only thing that can overcome ‘the dichotomy of life and happiness’ is political action: class struggle.

12 *Nature* between Escape and Class Struggle

Marx and Engels ironized about attempts to seek shelter from the conflict in a nature uncontaminated by human history and celebrated in opposition to it. They criticized the evasion implicit in the ‘cult of nature’, as in religion in the strict sense. But all this did not prevent them being among the first to draw attention to what would today be called the ecological question.
From the outset, Marx stressed that ‘man lives on nature’, ‘the first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals’, whose ‘physical organization’ and ‘consequent relation to the rest of nature’ cannot be ignored. Almost 30 years later, the Critique of the Gotha Programme opens with a caution that sounds prophetic today: however great and growing labour productivity might be, ‘[l]abour is not the source of all wealth’. A key point must never be neglected: ‘Nature is just as much the source of use values (and it is surely of such that material wealth consists!) as labour, which itself is only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labour power’.

We are immediately directed back to class struggle. While capitalism has the merit of promoting an unprecedented growth of the productive forces, it risks doubly jeopardizing ‘real wealth’. Firstly, with its ruthless pursuit of maximum profit and periodic crises, capitalism involves an enormous dissipation of the ‘natural power’ that is ‘human labour-power’, already sacrificed without scruple in children condemned to death from toil and hardship. It could be said that Volume One of Capital is, in large part, a critical analysis of ‘the incessant human sacrifices from among the working class’ and ‘the most reckless squandering of [natural] labour power’.

But that is not all. Capital elsewhere underscores that ‘all progress in capitalistic agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the labourer, but of robbing the soil’, thereby ‘ruining the sources of [its] fertility’. In any event, applied to the relationship between humanity and nature as a whole, the idea of private property on which bourgeois society is based proves even more devastating. The more absolute such an idea, the more serious the consequences for nature. In the American Deep South, slave-holding society was also characterized by ‘brutal spoiliation of the soil’. As regards Ireland, ‘the potato blight resulted from the exhaustion of the soil, it was a product of English colonial rule’ and the policy of colonial despoliation pursued by the London government.

We may draw a general conclusion: ‘[e]ven a whole society, a nation, or even all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the globe. They are only its possessors, its usufructuaries, and, like boni patres familias, they must hand it down to succeeding generations in an improved condition’. In future, ‘[f]rom the standpoint of higher economic form of society, private ownership of the globe by single individuals will appear quite as absurd as private ownership of one man by another’—that is, the relationship of slavery.
We can now understand Engels’ warning in *Dialectics of Nature*: ‘we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature—but … we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst’.\(^{148}\) To safeguard nature, which makes the continuation and development of human history possible, politico-social conflict, from which the religious ‘cult of nature’ recommends escape, must be confronted and resolved. Appeals to look to nature for a place that transcends societal disagreements and contradictions are a distorting, mystificatory expression of the very conflict they vainly seek to repress.

But let us nevertheless try to take such appeals seriously. We should first of all remember that the worker ‘never gets the slightest glimpse of Nature in his large town with his long working-hours’.\(^{149}\) Besides, the ‘nature’ present in the ‘working-people’s quarters’ of urban centres affords a desolate spectacle: they have been constructed ‘without the slightest reference to ventilation, with reference solely to the profit [\textit{Gewinn}] secured by the contractor’, and abandoned to ‘the most miserable and filthy condition’ and ‘a shocking stench, with filthy and swarms of vermin’.

Furnishing one of the very first analyses of the ecological and environmental question, Engels noted how the logic of profit explained the pollution of the atmosphere (witness a city ‘enveloped in a grey cloud of coal smoke’), of waterways (here we have a ‘coal-black, foul-smelling stream’ and there a ‘dark-coloured body of water, which leaves the beholder in doubt whether it is a brook or a long string of stagnant puddles’).

The text just quoted dates from 1845. Two years earlier, Herbert Spencer had ironized as follows: if the state is to be assigned the task of intervening against industry’s polluting discharges, why deny it competence as regards ‘the spiritual sanity of the nation’?\(^ {152}\) Some decades later, the English liberal had a rethink and felt obliged to come to terms with the problem of air pollution: he made some very modern-sounding observations about the foul air people were sometimes forced to breathe on trains. But it is always and only individuals who appear on stage; and the problem is treated without any reference to factories and industrial locations or rivers, lakes and the natural environment. The conflict emerges when gentlemen or, rather, ‘men who think themselves gentlemen smoke in other places than those provided for smokers’.\(^ {153}\) Classes and class struggle are as absent as ever.
13 A GENERAL THEORY OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

We can draw some conclusions. Firstly, by virtue of its ambition to encompass the whole historical process, the theory of class struggle is configured as a general theory of social conflict. According to the Communist Manifesto, it is ‘the history of all [aller]hitherto existing society’, ‘the history of all [ganzen] past society’, which is characterized by ‘class struggles’ and ‘class antagonisms’. Decades later, in 1885, Engels reverted to the theme: ‘[i]t was … Marx who had first discovered the great law of motion of history, the law according to which all [alle]historical struggles … are in fact only the more or less clear expression of struggles between social classes’. I have emphasized the keyword which identifies social conflict as such with class struggle, whoever its protagonists are and whatever form it takes.

Secondly, effecting a radical epistemological break with naturalistic ideologies, the Marxian theory of class struggle situates social conflict on the terrain of history.

Thirdly, precisely because it seeks to supply an interpretative key to the historical process, it strives to take into account the multiplicity of forms in which social conflict manifests itself. With this italic I intend to signal a preliminary problem. Obviously, existence is marked by an infinity of conflicts that develop between individuals for a whole variety of reasons. But what is involved here is analysing conflicts whose protagonists are not single individuals, but social subjects who, directly or indirectly, pertain to the social order, to some essential articulation of the division of labour and the social order.

This is how the object of Marx’s theory of ‘class struggles’ is defined. We are dealing with a general category—a genus—which can subsume different species. We may venture a typology starting, obviously, not from world history, but from the historical time in which the authors of the Communist Manifesto lived. An initial distinction is indicated. On the one hand, there are conflicts that oppose exploiting classes—class struggles that see the bourgeoisies of different countries rise up against the landed aristocracy and the ancien régime, and then confront one another in more or less fierce competition liable to result in war. On the other hand, we have struggles for emancipation, which are class struggles from the standpoints of the social subjects engaged in achieving it and of those intent on preventing or impeding it. At this point we must make a second
distinction—to be exact, a tripartite distinction—between the struggle whose protagonists are peoples in colonial or semi-colonial conditions; the struggle waged by the working class in the capitalist metropolis (the one on which Marx and Engels were particularly focused); and the struggle of women against ‘domestic slavery’. Each of these three struggles challenges the prevailing division of labour internationally, nationally, and within the family. A ‘relation of compulsion’ (Zwangsverhältniß) obtains between capital and labour in bourgeois society. But the same is true of the other two relations. The three struggles for emancipation challenge the three fundamental ‘relations of compulsion’ constitutive of the capitalist system as a whole.

Benedetto Croce took no account of all this when, in September 1917, with reference to the war that was raging, he declared: ‘the concept of power and struggle, which Marx transported from states to social classes, now seems to have reverted from classes to states’.

It is true that, at least in the early stages of the patriotic union sacrée, the gigantic conflict was regarded and theorized by not a few European intellectuals as further confirmation of the crisis of historical materialism or as ‘an instrument to abolish class structure’. However, only a few weeks after the class struggle had been declared dead by Croce, the October Revolution and the insurrection of the popular masses against the war, and the privileged classes who ruled the country and army, occurred in Russia. But that is not the only reason why the terrible trial of strength between the great powers which erupted in 1914 was far from being the termination or suspension of class struggle.

We should take special note of the observation made by an eminent contemporary historian, Arno J. Mayer: no war has ever been so ardently invoked as ‘prophylaxis’, as ‘an instrument of domestic politics’, as a life-line for a political and social order that felt ever more imperilled by the rise of the labour and socialist movement. To cite the example of a figure not far removed from Croce’s circle, ten years before its outbreak, the war was invoked and summoned by Vilfredo Pareto to set socialism back ‘for at least half a century’. In a similar vein, in Germany, Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz also justified his policy of naval rearmament by the need to discover an antidote to ‘Marxism and the political radicalization of the masses’. And this is not to mention the conviction, widespread among the dominant classes and their ideologues, that colonial expansion alone could defuse the social question in the metropolis and weaken or contain the socialist movement.
On closer inspection, the First World War was not merely an expression of the class struggle, but was so in a triple sense. It pertained (a) to the struggle for hegemony between the capitalist bourgeoisies of the great powers; (b) to the social conflict in the metropolis which the dominant class hoped to neutralize and deflect via international confrontation and colonial conquest; and (c) to the oppression and exploitation of peoples in colonial or semi-colonial conditions for whom (to adopt Marx’s terminology on the subject of Ireland) the ‘social question’ was posed as the ‘national question’.

In each individual country, the ruling class certainly seized the opportunity to commend or impose social peace and national unity, to suppress strikes and, if need be, extend working hours. However, far from betokening its end, such behaviour was a manifestation of the class struggle waged by the bourgeoisie, which subsequently, with the intensification of the sacrifices required by the war and the progressive loss in credibility of patriotic rhetoric, the proletariat countered with a class struggle that could even take revolutionary forms.

In the light of such considerations, Karl Popper’s summary cannot but raise a smile. He expounds as follows the thesis that fascism and communism share an evil, obviously German father: ‘the left wing [represented by Marx] replaces the war of nations which appears in Hegel’s historicist scheme by the war of classes, the extreme right replaces it by the war of races’. In fact, social and class conflict is very much present in Hegel, who constantly referred to it to explain the fall of the monarchy in ancient Rome, overthrown by an aristocracy determined to strengthen its hold over the plebs; or to shed light on the modern process that saw the absolutist monarchy progressively limit the power and privileges of a feudal aristocracy stubbornly attached to its privileges and the serfdom and exploitation imposed on the peasant mass. With the advent of the modern representative state derived from the French Revolution, social conflict had far from disappeared for Hegel: the proletarian who was unemployed or incapable of working, or the poor man who risked dying of starvation, was in a similar condition to the slave and hence fully entitled to rebel. On the other hand, the ‘war of nations’ (a reality obvious to everyone) features prominently in Marx and Engels: capitalism was also condemned by them because it secreted an ‘industrial war of extermination between nations’ and waged piratical wars against colonial peoples, who responded with legitimate wars of resistance and national liberation.
As for the ‘war of races’, Marx and Engels certainly rejected interpreting history in racial terms. In so doing, they were compelled to argue not only against the phantom Hegelian ‘extreme right’ fantasized by Popper, himself a prisoner of the ethnological paradigm in a way (he pointed to Germany as the source of all evil), but also against figures and newspapers in liberal America and Britain. However, what at first sight presents itself as a ‘racial war’ is, in reality, a class struggle. For example, it is clear that in the USA of Black slavery and white supremacy the fate of African Americans was sealed primarily by ‘racial’ affiliation. In such circumstances, to raise the ‘racial’ (or national) question did not in fact mean repressing social conflict, but confronting it in the concrete, particular terms in which it manifested itself.

Only if we appreciate this can we understand the twentieth century, which (as we shall see) was marked by epic class struggles and national resistance struggles against attempts by the Third Reich and the Empire of the Rising Sun to revive the colonial and even slave-holding tradition in Eastern Europe and Asia, respectively.

In short, what escapes Croce, Popper, and Ferguson is the role played by class struggle in contradictions, clashes, and confrontations that seem purely national and racial in character. None of them appreciates that Marx and Engels’ theory of class struggle is a general theory of social conflict, even if it is not organically and systematically expounded. We may proceed to a comparison. Likewise benefiting from the extraordinary cultural season that witnessed the blossoming of German classical philosophy, Carl von Clausewitz wrote his celebrated book On War, which encompassed the most varied armed conflicts, interpreting them as the continuation of politics by other means. Marx and Engels in principle composed a treatise On Social and Political Conflict which, rising to a higher level of generalization and abstraction, on the basis of the division of labour into antagonistic classes and class struggle, interprets the various forms of social conflict, including wars and different types of war, in a unitary key. It should at once be added that, while Clausewitz adopted an at least partially objectivist attitude, the two philosophers and revolutionary militants explicitly declared that they did not seek to rise au-dessus de la mêlée, confining themselves to observing it with detachment, but were actively engaged in changing the world in a very precise direction.
NOTES

1. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975–2004, Vol. 3, pp. 149, 168, 186.
2. Ibid., Vol. 6, pp. 519, 125; Vol. 22, p. 335.
3. Ibid., Vol. 20, pp. 110, 14.
4. Ibid., Vol. 6, pp. 518–19.
5. Ibid., Vol. 6, p. 449; Vol. 4, p. 561; Vol. 3, p. 390.
6. Ibid., Vol. 6, p. 388; Vol. 43, p. 475.
7. Ibid., Vol. 20, p. 13.
8. Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 355. It should in fact be noted that while the terms *Arbeiter* (worker) and *Arbeiterklasse* (working class) refer to the industrial proletariat in the strict sense in the early writings of Marx and Engels, they subsequently tend to assume a broader meaning, to the point of ultimately becoming synonymous with dependent labour.
9. Ibid., Vol. 7, p. 373.
10. Karl Marx, *Manuskripte über die polnische Frage (1863–4)*, ed. W. Conze and D. Hertz-Eichenrode, ‘S-Gravenhage, 1961, p. 124.
11. Ibid., Vol. 43, pp. 473–4.
12. Ibid., Vol. 40, p. 49.
13. Ibid., Vol. 12, p. 125.
14. Ibid., Vol. 4, p. 160.
15. Ibid., Vol. 12, p. 221.
16. Miklos Molnár, *Marx, Engels et la politique internationale*, Paris: Gallimard, 1975, pp. 122, 114, 20.
17. Quoted in Hans Magnus Enzensberger (ed.), *Colloqui con Marx e Engels*, Turin: Einaudi, 1977, pp. 327–8.
18. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 42, p. 479.
19. Ibid., Vol. 42, p. 483.
20. Ibid., Vol. 42, p. 474; Vol. 21, p. 189.
21. Ibid., Vol. 20, p. 13.
22. Ibid., Vol. 7, p. 167.
23. Ibid., Vol. 20, pp. 11, 13.
24. Ibid., Vol. 6, pp. 196, 125, 503, 388.
25. Ibid., Vol. 43, p. 473.
26. Ibid., Vol. 6, pp. 464–5.
27. Ibid., Vol. 4, p. 122; Vol. 22, p. 335; Vol. 19, p. 20.
28. Ibid., Vol. 29, p. 121; Vol. 5, p. 309.
29. Ibid., Vol. 6, p. 168.
30. Ibid., Vol. 12, p. 221.
31. Enzensberger, *Colloqui con Marx*, pp. 328–9.
32. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 9, p. 197.
33. Ibid., Vol. 43, p. 474.
34. Ibid., Vol. 43, p. 476.
35. Ibid., Vol. 35, p. 375 n.
36. Ibid., Vol. 38, p. 98.
37. Ibid., Vol. 12, p. 221.
38. Ibid., Vol. 40, p. 49.
39. Ibid., Vol. 16, p. 137.
40. Ibid., Vol. 43, pp. 474–5.
41. See ibid., Vol. 26, p. 262.
42. Ibid., Vol. 5, p. 46.
43. Ibid., Vol. 6, p. 502.
44. Ibid., Vol. 25, p. 248; Vol. 43, p. 185.
45. Ibid., Vol. 43, p. 424.
46. Ibid., Vol. 4, p. 442.
47. Marie-Jean-Antoine Condorcet, Oeuvres, ed. A. Condorcet O’Connor and M.F. Arago, Stuttgart and Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1968, Vol. 10, p. 121.
48. John Stuart Mill, ‘The Subjection of Women’, in Collected Works, ed. J.M. Robson, Toronto and London: Toronto University Press and Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963–91, Vol. 21, pp. 264, 288, 323.
49. Condorcet, Oeuvres, Vol. 10, p. 121.
50. Mill, ‘The Subjection of Women’ pp. 263–4.
51. Ibid., pp. 264–5.
52. Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, London: Everyman’s Library, 1992, p. 3.
53. See Domenico Losurdo, Liberalism: A Counter-History, trans. Gregory Elliott, London and New York: Verso, 2011, Chapter 5, §6.
54. Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, pp. 155–6, 209.
55. Ibid., p. 158–9.
56. Ibid., pp. 160, 208.
57. Marx and Engels, Collected Works, Vol. 26, p. 181.
58. Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘On the Genealogy of Morality’, III, 18, in Beyond Good and Evil/On the Genealogy of Morality, trans. Adrian Del Caro, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014, p. 323.
59. Nietzsche, ‘Beyond Good and Evil’, 239, p. 142.
60. Marx and Engels, Collected Works, Vol. 26, pp. 173, 165.
61. Ibid., Vol. 8, p. 17.
62. Enzensberger (ed.), Colloqui con Marx, pp. 328–9.
63. Marx and Engels, Collected Works, Vol. 6, pp. 493, 509.
64. Ibid., Vol. 9, pp. 197–8.
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66. Ibid., Vol. 10, p. 117.
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