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# MARX AND THE UTOPIAN WILHELM WEITLING

HANS MÜHLESTEIN

## I

THE most important proletarian representative of "equalitarian communism" in the earlier nineteenth century was undoubtedly the tailor Wilhelm Weitling, who was born in 1808, the illegitimate son of a French officer of the Napoleonic army of occupation and a working girl of Magdeburg. Weitling's relative historical importance was that, along with Auguste Blanqui, he represented the most active element of the revolutionary tendency of the continental proletariat throughout the first period of his life; that is, until the first communist trial in Zurich, in 1843. At that time he was a leader in that phase of the proletarian movement which developed immediately before the first published works of Marx and Engels. If he has a place in history, it is because he was the first real proletarian (besides the weak Pierre Leroux) who proved to be a revolutionary writer, and the only proletarian who ever built a consistent and complete utopian system of communism. Etienne Cabet, his contemporary utopian, had been general procurator of Corsica and advocate at the royal court, and was certainly not a proletarian.

Thus it is no accident that the clash between Marx and Engels on the one hand, and Weitling on the other, represents the historic moment in which nascent socialist humanism finally rejected and left behind the utopian wanderings of the masses of an entire epoch.

It is the purpose of this article, in the first place, to outline Weitling's utopianism on the basis of sources in large part new; next, to describe the clash between Marx and Weitling; and finally, to cite a central passage of the first "Marxist" philosophy, in which the young Marx, with the vision of genius, refuted in his philosophical criticism the theory of a collective faith in equalitarian communism. This he did at a time when that belief still misled the masses, whom it was to lead to the catastrophe of 1848.

When Wilhelm Weitling settled in Paris in 1837, after an earlier stay there in 1835, Buonarroti had just died, and ten years were to pass before the *Communist Manifesto* was to be written, on the eve of the February Revolution. These ten years were the last interval during which

\* Translated from the French by Henry F. Mins.

utopianism could still erect its "systems." It was no accident that these systems were now purely proletarian, that they had little or no connection with science (as the great utopian systems of Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen had had), but that on the other hand they had a powerful effect on the masses. The two most important "systems" were those of Weitling and Cabet. Here we shall speak only of the former.

The great critical utopian systems, those of Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen, had been erected in the first half of the same era, but by 1837 had already been severely shaken. Their practical value for the workers' movement of the time, if they had ever had any, was in inverse proportion to their theoretical significance. In 1837, twelve years had passed since the death of Saint-Simon. During the same year, Fourier had died in great poverty. Owen survived his own historical importance from 1837 on, the year in which he refused to help in the incipient Chartist struggles. Saint-Simonism had already completely degenerated into vague moral teaching disguised in Christian trappings for the advantage of the rich industrialists who were educating themselves, and of their children. Saint-Simonism was on the way to playing the lamentable role it was to have under Louis Napoleon, a role which Franz Mehring has stigmatized in his excellent account of utopianism:<sup>1</sup> "Under the Second Empire," Mehring wrote, "the crudest forms of fraud on the stock exchange took place under the banner of Saint-Simonism."

Fourier was still, in the 1830's and 1840's, the source of inspiration of a great number of theorists and petty bourgeois dreamers, who vegetated as humble parasites, with no effect whatever on the masses. Except for certain confused ideas in Weitling's system, Cabet alone undertook to draw the conclusions of the Fourierist doctrine for the proletariat. Cabet returned in 1838 from exile in England, where the Chartist movement had made him a revolutionary, and where reading the works of Thomas More had made him a fantastic utopian. There were no more Owenites in Paris at that time, and very few in England.

By far the most popular leaders of the masses of the Parisian proletarian were the worst, most hardened phrase-mongers of the bourgeois republican opposition to Louis-Philippe's bankocracy. The proletariat was not admitted to the secret clubs of industrial capitalists, liberals and republicans appearing immediately after the accession of the bourgeois king, which kept on plotting just like the similar clubs of the Restoration. They were meeting places for the bourgeois revivals of the bourgeois

<sup>1</sup> Franz Mehring, *Geschichte der deutschen Sozial-Demokratie* (Stuttgart, 1922), I, p. 12.

parliamentary fraction in power. They were clubs of aspirants to ministerial portfolios, and men like Thiers and Guizot were to be seen there. Most of the other opposition organizations, like the secret societies of the Rights of Man or of the Friends of the People, were strongly bourgeois, democratic, reformist, republican, never thoroughly revolutionary and proletarian. Among the members of these associations was to be found the rich bourgeois, Ledru-Rollin, for example. It was only in the two popular secret societies, the Society of Families and the Society of the Seasons that a true revolutionary like Blanqui had authority, which in his case was almost legendary.

Weitling too joined the Society of the Seasons. In any case, from 1835 on he belonged to the Federation of the Exiles, an organization of German emigrés founded in 1834, directed in authoritarian fashion by two bourgeois of the German Left, a pair of victimized *privat-dozenten* named Venedey and Schuster. In 1836 the dissident left wing of the Federation formed the Federation of the Just, which admitted some French too and some of other nationalities, but principally proletarians. Probably this dissidence is linked to Weitling's presence in Paris in 1835. Certainly Weitling's return and definite establishment in Paris in 1837 was directly connected with the foundation of the Federation of the Just, whose ideological leader and political chief he was. Later he kept this position when conducting from abroad an intense propaganda for the Federation of the Just, for instance in Switzerland from the spring of 1841 to June, 1843. This was the date of the Zurich communist trial which made a great scandal and in which Weitling was condemned by a savagely anti-communist court in the name of "Swiss liberty" to a year of prison, then to be turned over in chains, like an assassin, to the Prussian authorities.

This Federation of the Just, its ideology and its propaganda, are in every respect deserving of the attention of modern socialists for the obvious reason that after the headquarters of the federation were moved to London in 1839-40 it became, in 1845, the Communist League. Marx was in contact with the Paris section, while Engels was connected with the center in London. Finally the two founders of modern socialism were commissioned by the Communist League, toward the end of the summer of 1847, to draw up its communist program. The result of this work was of course the *Communist Manifesto*.

These ten years encompassed a complete change in the ideology of the proletariat, from utopianism to science. From its inception, and even under the name of the Federation of the Exiles, the Communist League had been strongly influenced by Lamennais in a religious way. In par-

ticular, his *Paroles d'un croyant* (1834), which had immense success, affected the members of the first proletarian federation. The group's organ, *The Outcast* (*Der Geächtete*), printed as the editorial of its first number, a panegyric to Lamennais by the poet Ludwig Börne, a persecuted German Jew. During the first year of its existence as a proletarian organization, in the absence of a program of its own, the Federation treated this work and applied it as a veritable plan of action. This condition persisted until Weitling, as leader of the dissident group, was entrusted with writing the program for the new Federation of the Just.

This was an earlier close parallel to the origin of the *Communist Manifesto*. But what a difference in the results! In 1838 the first book of the poor worker Weitling appeared in Paris, printed with difficulty on a clandestine press and financed by workers' pennies. It bore the clumsy but vigorous title, *Humanity as it is and as it Ought to Be*. The second phrase of the title betrays, with touching naiveté, the pedagogic and moral utopianism of the then regnant Babouvist pattern. Weitling too takes up the ideal of equalitarian "communism," but puts into it all the drive of an irreconcilable proletarian revolutionary, who does not yet see too clearly how to apply his profound and elemental class feeling. The membership pledge of the Just, no doubt composed by Weitling, contains a statement which clearly shows the progress made toward a mature class feeling: "We workers have had enough of working for idlers. . . . We no longer wish to respect a law which keeps the most numerous and most useful human classes in degradation, need, humiliation and ignorance, to assure a small number of the chosen the means of ruling as master over the working classes. . . ." This credo constitutes an enormous advance over previous French criticisms of society. It is a primitive but powerful symptom of the growth of proletarian class consciousness.

But the historic moment had not come, and it was not Weitling who brought it on, as we will see. "Weitling was already a proletarian," says Franz Mehring, "but still an artisan proletarian." Weitling the artisan, coming from backward Germany, was completely taken in by all the idealism of the French petty bourgeois socialists, who were highly religious preachers of class reconciliation. Yet the proletarian in Weitling was intuitively able to obtain penetrating insights from his contact with the French proletariat, which was objectively much more developed than the German, even though the French working class had not developed its class consciousness either. These two tendencies in Weitling, along with his religious Messianism, only developed to their full extent during his stay in Switzerland. At that time there became evident in him both

the genuine proletarian revolutionary and the anarchist of the *Lumpenproletariat*, who was but a reconciler of classes.

One unconscious tendency of Weitling's system was its antipathy to culture. Weitling had an implacable hatred for Fourier because the latter gave a favored treatment to capitalists and talents in his projected phalanges. Opposition to privileges for capitalists is a natural expression of proletarian class sentiment. However, his protests against privileges for talent were the product of an unbroken series of unhappy experiences with German intellectuals, who all too often played the role of secret agents of Metternich's police among the German emigrant colony. Despite these valid and specifically proletarian reasons, Weitling's growing suspicion of the "learned" and "cultivated" is dominated by a "narrow equalitarian communism" and by his "hostility to culture." In practice he was by no means an enemy of culture; he made titanic efforts to acquire it, with insufficient means. But the ultimate consequences of the "equalitarian communism" which he had made his own were fatal to him.

These consequences did not become urgent for him until his Swiss period. His comrade in arms for years was August Becker (called Red Becker), a man of distinction who had been the intimate friend of Georg Büchner, the poetic genius cut off in his youth. Becker, then a sincere "socialist" (that is, a radical bourgeois of the left), always had a friendly but critical attitude toward Weitling. In 1848 Becker was a democrat and a very popular Hessian deputy. He then went to America, where he practiced as a journalist till his death in 1875. This man calls Weitling a "professor-eater" and sharply criticizes this "ungenerous hate on Weitling's part toward so-called men of learning." Still, Becker always defended his friend loyally and courageously against all the persecutions of Swiss reaction, of which he too became a victim in the end, and which he adduces to explain the fact that Weitling carried on his propaganda in Switzerland for the Federation of the Just underground, although there was no formal legal obstacle to open agitation. "If he operated clandestinely," Becker says, "the reason is that he had repeatedly learned to his cost that he could not always state his case by way of discussion and democratic voting." Becker adds: "Hence his hatred against the democratic and republican form of the state, and the meager opinion he had of the 'alleged intelligence of the people.'"

August Becker's notes were stolen from him by a spy of Metternich's police, and were only found eighty years later by Barnikol, professor of theology at Halle, among Metternich's papers in the State Archives in

Vienna. Published in our own times, they constitute a valuable source of information about Weitling.<sup>2</sup>

In them we see the birth of a purely revolutionary ideology in Weitling, naturally marked by all the crudity typical of the stage of proletarian development of that time. Becker's notes picture Weitling as a giant, full of the confused world of proletarian thoughts and sentiments. He tries to make this chaos clear; but he never pierces through to the light. This titan of thought is susceptible, and rebuffs violently, even furiously, anything that irritates him. Finally, seeing the forces against him, he is possessed by a fury of destruction, and seeks to do away with all before him. In this state he takes himself to be the Messiah saying once more, "I am not come to bring peace, but the sword," and "I am come to cast a fire on this land, and what more can I seek than that it burn?"

The religious Messianism is seen in his third book, *The Gospel of a Poor Sinner*. It was in order to put this work through the press that he undertook his voyage to Zurich in the spring of 1843 and there fell into the trap of the Swiss communist-hunters. His Messianism increased during his stay in Switzerland. It reached the point of pure mystical madness—or megalomania—where he believed himself to be the Messiah and wrote a new religious doctrine of salvation. But if we analyze more deeply the Weitling of this period, we perceive that the religiosity of his doctrine is not new, and that we are witnessing a total relapse into the primitive Christianity of a Thomas Münzer. What is new in him could not be religious. It is not unreasonable that Weitling should have been convicted at the Zurich trial for "blasphemy against God" as first count in the indictment, while his crime of "political conspiracy" was mentioned only second in the verdict. This is a frequent procedure; public opinion is flattered in its favorite prejudices to distract it from the point at issue.

In the case of Weitling's doctrine, the point at issue was the revolutionary and proletarian content, an element which had developed during his Swiss stay at least as rapidly as his Messianic folly. It can even be said that the latter was but the expression of the extreme intensity of his revolutionary will. We shall cite some passages from Becker, since this source appears never to have been used in connection with Marxist writing.

Weitling's "Chiliasm" was now definitely political and, we add, anarchistic. We have seen his "hate for the democratic and republican

<sup>2</sup> August Becker, *Geschichte des religiösen und atheistischen Frühsozialismus*, ed. Ernst Barnikol (Kiel, 1932).



form of state." But he hates, or at least despises, all the existing political parties, for his party was not yet in existence. Above all the parties and their "merely political revolutions," he seeks to bring on the great act of salvation: the total destruction of all of existing society, without exception.<sup>3</sup>

Weitling had no preference for one political party over another [Becker says]. He did not hope for a social reform from any of them, least of all from the Republican Democratic Party. The *Jeune génération*, his propaganda organ in Switzerland, shows that he expected much more in this respect from some chance which might put a king of genius on the throne. "What we need is a total revolution," he used to repeat. "But we must prefer a peaceful one to a violent one!" He did not even dream that it would be the task of the communists to make that revolution.

The equalization, or rather anarchism, which he favored took the extreme form which is produced by revolutionary impatience. We could go even further: it is a veritable philosophy of the *Lumpenproletariat*, the most monstrous to be formulated before Bakunin. Equalize everything, equalize and level everything to the ground: that is the only hope of the ragged proletarian reduced to helplessness. Perhaps then, he hopes, a fresh start will be possible which will lead him, him too, him at last, to own something. It is equalitarian communism, pure and unadorned: the communism of the man who not only, as Marx remarked a year later (1844), "has not gone beyond the stage of private property, but who has not even reached it yet."

August Becker cites a text from Weitling's *La jeune génération* in which Weitling gives the simplest and most exact expression to the "communism" of universal leveling. "What is it to us," Weitling says, "that we have to work early and late and have but a meager fare? Aren't we used to it? If we knew that no one else was better off, that all shared the same troubles and the same enjoyments, then we should be happy and content. . . ."<sup>4</sup> Is this not reminiscent of the doctrine that came half a century earlier from Sylvain Maréchal, the member of Babeuf's conspiracy, in his project for the *Manifesto of the Equals*: "All the arts may well disappear, provided that true Equality remain"? Can there be a doctrine less productive for the development of socialism, not to speak of the development of socialist culture, than the notion that no one in the world should have anything more than the poorest proletarians? Is

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.



not such a doctrine the confession of mere envy? Before much more than a year had passed, Marx wrote of this kind of so-called communism: "General envy, constituting itself a veritable power, is nothing but the masked form under which greed makes its home and satisfies itself in another way."

But this tailor of genius, Weitling, took powerful hold once more shortly before being muzzled by the Swiss bourgeoisie in the communist trial of Zurich in the summer of 1843. He was then close to finding the proper framework for the development of his ardent proletarian will, and above all favorable to the cause of the proletariat itself: namely, a "powerful party" of the proletariat. For it is the germ of such a party that lies under the legendary "revolutionary army of forty thousand men," by means of which he planned, it was said, to turn all Switzerland upside down; this was the principal argument for his convictions, next after the camouflage charge of "blasphemy."

Becker raised this question in a letter seized by the Zurich authorities; he always speaks of himself in the third person:

Weitling had written to Becker that he was carrying on his propaganda at Zurich with success, and, "provided that communism continued to make progress at the same rate, that he would soon have 40,000 communists in Switzerland, with whom something earnest could be undertaken." Becker took this to mean that Weitling, with his 40,000 men, was planning to make a revolution; and, in his answers to Weitling, ridiculed this adventurer's plan of revolution and clandestine propaganda in general. Weitling was not pleased by Becker's humor, and complained bitterly that Becker should have thought him so foolish as to plan a revolution in Switzerland with 40,000 men. "With 40,000 poor devils," as he expressed it, "one certainly can not make a revolution, but one can well make a powerful party, publish newspapers and books in quantities. One can exercise an appreciable influence on public opinion, and thus do something earnest! . . ."

It is true that even with his "40,000 communists in Switzerland" Weitling remained the same incurable utopian. That very Switzerland where today, in the middle of the twentieth century and after two world wars, the working-class party which is (relatively) furthest to the left has barely succeeded in mustering 20,000 members! Yet merely by expressing his political idea of the organization of a powerful working-class party, Weitling reached a point in the development of his thought which he never approached again. After the torments he had to undergo in his Zurich dungeon, after the sufferings he endured from prison to prison all through Germany, handed over by the Zurich "democrats" to Prussian reaction, he never rose again as the "proletarian eagle" who had grown

great in Switzerland. He fell to the level of the German petty bourgeois prophet he had at bottom always been, even behind the monumental mask of the "proletarian Messiah." He became his first self, a little workman of the German artisan class, whom the revolutionary ideas of the French proletariat had aroused to the extreme of rebellion. His doctrine, as Marx could still say in his *Deutsche Ideologie* in 1845, was "the only existent German communist system." But it was definitely, as Marx defined it, "a reproduction of French ideas in the framework of a vision limited to the conditions of the petty artisans."

## II

Against this background we can envisage the break of Marx and Engels with Weitling. For humanist as well as socialist reasons this was sure to occur. The rupture took place in the spring of 1846. At this time Marx and Engels realized the importance of basing the new ideology of the working class on a scientific and humanistic rationale, and undertook not merely to sum up the consequences of the cruel and inhuman situation of this new class in a clear and politically revolutionary program, by defining the historical role of the working class in the spirit of the new humanism; they sought to create, within the proletariat, the organs requisite to such an international action.

The clash with Weitling occurred in the midst of the intellectual tension in which Marx and Engels lived continually from the time of their first meeting in August, 1844 in Paris. The meaning of this rift is important. Since the Zurich communist trial, the time when Marx and Engels became enthusiastic about the "founder of German communism" and his "genial writings," that is within two or three years, the two opposing factors had both basically changed.

In France and England, the social tension was rapidly moving toward a revolutionary situation because of the sharp industrial crises and consequent want. In Germany the bourgeois revolution seemed at last to be maturing. Marx and Engels registered, like seismographs, the slightest fluctuations in the course of the pre-revolutionary situation, and were feverishly active. On the one hand they strove to provide the imminent revolution with a realistic political program, logically derived from the proletariat's actual historical tendencies; on the other, they worked toward the crystallization of a central revolutionary organ, using already existing elements for the political organization of the proletariat.

Weitling, however, freed at the beginning of 1845, had completely relapsed, after his return to Germany, into the German petty bourgeois

romanticism of old, as is strikingly shown by his posthumous book *Justice*, written in prison at Zurich and prosecuted in Germany. From this time on Weitling rested on his glory, on his past role as proletarian prophet and Messiah. His attitude during his clash with Marx allows no doubt of this. Even if he had maintained the advanced revolutionary point of view which was his just before the Zurich trial, Weitling would have been incapable of taking an active part in the bourgeois revolution in Germany, or even of understanding its true historical sense. In his sectarian pride he felt that he was far above all the bourgeoisie's attempts at revolution. He consciously ignored them, and at best he would have had them serve for a general looting on the part of the ragged proletariat. But since Zurich Weitling had abandoned even this defiant attitude, falling back on the purely bourgeois and liberalistic position of class conciliation, a doctrine he had learned to preach in Paris, following the example of Lamennais and other bourgeois reformers of society. In a pre-revolutionary situation which was rapidly coming to a head, such a position took on a typically reactionary meaning, like the idealism of the German philosophers of "true" socialism against whom Marx and Engels protested in the *Heilige Familie* and the *Deutsche Ideologie*.

We shall show by citations from these books the point Marx and Engels had reached in their ideological evolution shortly before their clash with Weitling. The *Heilige Familie*, the first product of their collaboration, had appeared toward the end of February, 1845 at Frankfurt-am-Main, apparently without influencing Weitling. Yet it contains the essentially Marxist arguments whose essence later passed in toto into the *Communist Manifesto*. Thus:

In its economic movement, private property drives itself to its own dissolution. . . . The proletariat carries out the sentence which private property has passed on itself by producing the proletariat.

The question is not what this proletarian or that one, or the entire proletariat as a whole *conceives to be* its goal at any moment. The question is *what it is* and what, in accordance with this *nature*, it will historically be compelled to do. Its goal and historical action are irrevocably prefigured in its own actual situation. . . . It does not need saying here that a great part of the English and French proletariat is already *conscious* of its historical task, and is constantly working to bring this consciousness to complete clarity.<sup>5</sup>

Another citation will show what Marx and Engels thought of the ideology characteristic of Weitling and the "true socialists" of Germany just before the break. They say in the *Deutsche Ideologie*:

<sup>5</sup> *Gesamtausgabe*, Abt. I, Bd. III, p. 206 f.

If the opposition between communism and the world of private property is conceived in its crudest form, that is in the abstract form in which all the real conditions of this opposition are removed, we arrive at the opposition between property and lack of property. The removal of this opposition may be thought of as the removal of one side or the other, as suppression of property, which amounts to general lack of property or vagabondage [and is the end-point of the policy of looting preached by Weitling before the Zurich trial], or as suppression of the absence of property, which consists in the establishment of true property.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the actual private property-owners are on one side, and the propertyless communist proletarians on the other. This opposition becomes sharper every day and is driving toward a crisis. If therefore the theoretical representatives of the proletariat wish to accomplish anything by their literary activity, they must first of all drive to remove all the phrases that weaken the awareness of this opposition, all the phrases that mask this opposition and give the bourgeois the chance of getting closer to the communists, using their philanthropic reveries and enthusiasms to further their own security. We find all these bad qualities however, in the slogans of the true socialists, especially in that of "true property." We are well aware that the communist movement can not be ruined by a couple of German phrase-mongers. But still it is necessary in a country like Germany, where philosophical phrases have had a certain influence for centuries, and where the absence of the sharp class contradictions of other nations makes the communist consciousness less precise and determined anyway, to oppose all the phrases that could weaken and dilute even further the total opposition of communism to the established order.<sup>7</sup>

This may enable us to understand the incisiveness and even the violence with which Marx and Engels had to settle accounts with Weitling, as well as the historical need to break with him.

In the spring of 1846, Weitling made a long visit in Brussels. There he once more met Marx and Engels, who had been in that city for a year. After his expulsion from France by the Guizot government in January, 1845, Marx had settled in the Belgian capital the next month. In April, Engels came to join him, and the two compiled, during a year of intense collaboration, the two volumes of the *Deutsche Ideologie*, the most crushing critique ever directed against the idealist philosophy and the phraseology of the Germans. Yet all through that long and destructive critical offensive against whatever in Germany prided itself on bearing the name of socialist or communist, there is not a single attack on Weitling. This fact is perhaps the best proof that Marx and Engels

<sup>6</sup> "True property" is the dream of "harmonization," of class conciliation, which is peculiar to the "German socialism" of the time, including Weitling.—Ed.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, Abt. I, Bd. v, p. 452 f.

still hoped to win Weitling over to their cause. In the two or three passages which give Weitling brief mention, Marx and Engels protect him, placing him clearly outside the group of "true" socialists.

After February, 1848, Marx and Engels had undertaken to set up an international organ of communist propaganda. At the same time they prepared to create an international communist organization on the basis of scientific communism. The first step was to set up "communist correspondence committees," and the first committee was set up at Brussels under their direction.<sup>8</sup> The final rupture between Marx and Weitling took place at a meeting of this Brussels committee on March 30, 1846.

Let us hear how Weitling himself tells the story of this decisive session. What he relates shows better than any other account the dangers of the anti-culturalism which Marx and Engels had to combat in this representative of "narrow equalitarian communism." It illustrates too Weitling's stubborn incomprehension. Here is the letter written the next day (March 31, 1846) by Weitling to Moses Hess, one of the leaders of the German working class movement:<sup>9</sup>

31.III.46

Dear Hess,

Once again we had a session last night *in pleno*.

Marx brought someone along whom he introduced to us as a Russian, and who did not say a word all evening. The question at issue was the following: "What should be done by way of propaganda in Germany?" Seiler<sup>10</sup> had raised the question, but declared he could not go to the bottom of it last night, since many other delicate points could be involved, etc. Marx vainly pressed S. Both started to get excited. Marx became violent. Finally, it was he who dealt with the question. This is what he said:

- (1) A screening has to be made in the ranks of the Communist Party.
- (2) This can be done by criticizing the useless and cutting off their funds.
- (3) This screening is at present the most important thing that can be done to advance communism.
- (4) He who has the power of obtaining authority over the men of money also has the means of displacing the others, and is right in using that means.
- (5) "Artisan communism" and "philosophical communism" (Marx was the first to draw these distinctions, and if it was someone else it

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Karl Marx, Lebenschronik* (Moscow, 1934), p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> Letter published in E. Barnikol, *Weitling, der Gefangene und seine 'Gerechtigkeit'* (Kiel, 1929), p. 269; and in Landshut and Mayer, *Die Frühschriften von Karl Marx* (Leipzig, 1932), p. 531.

<sup>10</sup> German communist associated with Weitling in his struggles in Switzerland.—Ed.

certainly was not I) should be fought. Sentiment should be banished, it is only dizziness [*Duse!*]; finally, no more oral propaganda, no more organizations for underground propaganda, and even no further use of the word "propaganda."

(6) There can be no question for the time being of realizing communism. It is the bourgeoisie which to start with must attain power.

Here Marx and Engels attacked me fiercely. Wedemeyer said a few words calmly, Gigot and Edgar not a word. Heilberger<sup>11</sup> stood up to Marx from an impartial point of view, and at the very end Seiler did so too with an admirable calm and bitterness. I became violent, so did Marx, even more so; in a word, to finish up, everybody was boiling and running here and there in the room. It was primarily when he heard my summary that Marx jumped. I said in particular: what all our discussion amounts to is nothing but this: he who finds the financial means may write what he likes. . . .

Three important points emerge from this caricatured account of the historical session of March 30, written by a mind wounded in its vanity.

First, it is to be noted that Marx and Engels have definitely gone beyond the stage of pure ideological propaganda; the practical organization of the best forces of the proletariat should replace this propaganda.

Second, Marx and Engels declare merciless war against two historical forms of utopianism: the proletarian folly of leveling equalitarian communism ("artisan communism") and the bourgeois idealism of class conciliation ("philosophical communism"). They thus deny to the so-called "humanists," the bourgeois disguised as "communists," any right to the cultural heritage, and for the first time denounce them as false "humanists."

Third, Marx and Engels define the revolutionary tactics which will be decisive for the struggle of the proletariat in the revolutions of the nineteenth century: the proletariat must first gain full bourgeois democracy along with the bourgeoisie, before it can even organize to bring about communism. This lays open to communism the path of the mass democratic party, excluding "communist" sectarianism which is to be found just as well in the isolation of the organizer of coups d'etat (Blanquism) as in the quietist and apolitical communism under the doctrinaire teaching of chosen prophets and visionaries.

On all these fundamental points, Weitling's reaction remains totally negative. He does not even deem it necessary to discuss them in his letter to that other workers' leader, Moses Hess. Is not he, Weitling, recognized by innumerable German proletarians (it does not matter that they are

<sup>11</sup> Gigot was a Belgian communist; Edgar von Westphalen was Marx' brother-in-law; Heilberger a German "socialist."—Ed.



on the artisan level) as the "proletarian Messiah"? Is not that of infinitely greater moment? Is not the work that he, Weitling, has done of "much more importance for the proletarian cause" than the scientific hair-splittings and "bookish analyses" of all these rich young men? They had to be rich, or at least "have authority over men of money" to be able, "removed from the suffering world and the torments of the people," to afford such a luxury as learning.

That such petty bourgeois egocentric thoughts were not merely unspoken ideas, but really the last explicit arguments of Weitling in his dispute with Marx, is shown with terrible clearness in another document which we possess concerning this notable meeting. But before letting this document speak for itself, we must settle this question of money, which only Weitling raises, and on which our second source unfortunately sheds no light.

It was the petty-bourgeois complex of envy toward any possession, typical of Weitling as we have seen, which led him to sum up all the essential problems of the workers' movement (the subjects of his difference with Marx, by his own account) in this incredibly primitive, or cynical, conclusion: "What all our discussion amounts to is nothing but this: he who finds the financial means may write what he likes. . . ." No wonder Marx "jumped" when Weitling threw this grotesque statement at his head, reducing the work of the entire evening to nothing; no wonder that he even (as our second source says, leaving aside the money question) "angrily struck the table with his fist." It was certainly the same envy complex which led Weitling—either because he did not understand the plan Marx presented, or for revenge—to put in Marx' mouth the dishonest statement: "He who has the power of getting authority over the men of money, also has the means of displacing the others, and is right in using that means." This is equivalent to saying that Marx wanted to buy the new communist organization, the Communist League, by corruption, using no other principles than force and dictation.

Let us now take up our second source. Its interest is enormous, for it is the proof that for Marx and Engels the break with Weitling was dictated by a deep concern for the entire future of culture, that is, by eminently humanist motives. It is a strange piece of good fortune that it was the same Russian whom Weitling mentioned as Marx' guest who is our witness for the meeting of March 30, 1846 and gives us a detailed account free of any political or national bias. He was the bourgeois publicist, Paul Annenkov (1812-87), whom a mutual friend, the "land-owner of the steppes" G. M. Tolstói, had recommended to Marx. These



two Russians belonged to the bourgeois liberal revolutionaries of the forties, whose spiritual leaders were Chaadaev, Alexander Herzen, Bielinsky, and even Bakunin, in a word the group that in a way was the "Hegelian Left" of Moscow. Marx and Engels too had belonged to the Hegelian Left, but had long been using their own wings; and the object of all their philosophical criticism up to then had been precisely the Hegelian Left of Germany which, unlike the Russian Hegelians (who were progressives and revolutionaries), had retrogressed into pre-Hegelian and non-dialectical metaphysics, and thus become reactionary on the political plane as well. There were thus very close points of contact between Marx and Engels and the bourgeois Russian revolutionaries. It was certainly not an accident that the latter sought out Marx and Engels, and it was certainly not without reflecting that Marx introduced the bourgeois Russian revolutionary into the circle of the Brussels "correspondence committee," that cell of the future Communist League.

Annenkov's report is part of a series of articles which appeared in 1880 under the title "A Famous Decade" in the *European Bulletin*,<sup>12</sup> and later in German in the Social Democratic organ *Neue Zeit*.<sup>13</sup>

Let us first see Annenkov's portrait of Marx:

He, Marx, represented the type of man who embodies energy, will-power and inflexible conviction—a human type who even in his outward aspect was most remarkable. His head covered by a thick black crop of hair, his hands hairy, his coat wrongly buttoned—Marx still had all the appearance of a man who has the right and the power to demand respect, even though his appearance and actions were often strange. His gestures were angular but bold and sure; his manners were exactly the contrary of conventional *savoir vivre*. But they were proud with a tinge of scorn, and his piercing voice, with metallic resonances, was singularly in harmony with the radical judgments he made on men and things. He never uttered any but categorical statements and suffered no contradiction. His speech was made still sharper by an intonation which almost pained me and pervaded all he said. This intonation expressed his firm belief in his mission to govern minds and prescribe laws to them. There rose before me the incarnation of a democratic dictator, as one might imagine him if one let fantasy drift.

But here is Annenkov's description of the meeting, word for word:

As soon as we had met, Marx invited me to a discussion between him and the tailor Weitling, who had behind him in Germany a con-

<sup>12</sup> Russian title, *Vestnik Evropy*.

<sup>13</sup> I (1883), p. 236 ff. Also in Landshut and Mayer, *op. cit.*, p. 532-35.

siderable workers' party. This meeting had been called so that the workers' chiefs might agree if possible on a common tactic. Naturally I did not hesitate to accept the invitation.

The tailor Weitling was a handsome blond young man in a suit a little foppish in cut, with a well-trimmed little beard, and looked more like a traveling salesman than the sombre and bitter worker, bent under the weight of labor and thought, that I had imagined.

After having been introduced, which on Weitling's part was done with a rather artificial courtesy, we sat down around a little table at the end of which Marx had taken his place, pencil in hand, his lion's head bent over a sheet of paper, while his inseparable friend, his comrade in the work of propaganda, the tall, straight and grave Engels, with his Britannic distinction, opened the meeting with a speech. He showed how necessary it was that the men who were devoted to labor reform should clearly show each other their intentions and choose a common program which could serve all those who did not have the time or the possibility of taking up theoretical questions as a flag around which they could rally.—

As soon as he had finished his address, Marx raised his head and put this direct question to Weitling:

"Tell us, Weitling, you have made so much stir in Germany, with your communist propaganda, you have gathered so many workers and made them lose their jobs and their bread; what arguments do you have to justify your social-revolutionary agitation, and what do you intend to base it on in the future?"

I still remember the very form of this abrupt question, which opened a passionate discussion in the little group; a discussion which did not last long, as I shall show. Weitling apparently wanted to keep the discussion on the level of liberal high-sounding platitudes. With an expression of a certain gravity and seriousness, he began to explain that it was not his concern to create new economic theories. He had to adopt those which were best fitted, as it had turned out in France, to open the workers' eyes, teaching them not to trust promises and to put all their hopes in themselves. He spoke at length, but to my great surprise, his speech was in form too tangled and unclear, quite the contrary to Engels. He often repeated himself, he corrected his own language and made painful progress toward conclusions which usually came too late, or else came too soon, being earlier than his presuppositions. Now he had before him listeners of a different sort than he had been used to having around him at his shop, or who read his journal and his pamphlets on the economic conditions of our epoch. The result was that he lost both freedom of thought and of expression.

He would no doubt have spoken even longer if Marx, with eyebrows raised in anger, had not interrupted him to reply. The essence of this sarcastic response was that it was nothing but deceit to rouse the people without giving them a solid basis for their action. By awakening the fantastic hopes just spoken of, Marx continued, one will never save those who suffer, but one will certainly lead them to their ruin. In Germany especially, going to the workers without scientifically precise ideas and

without concrete teachings is the equivalent of making dishonest propaganda, without knowing what one is doing. That requires, to be sure, an enthusiastic apostle on one side, but also on the other nothing but donkeys who listen with their mouths open. Here, he added with a brusque movement of the hand, here we have a Russian among us. In his country, perhaps, the role you are playing would not be out of place. There and there only unions of absurd apostles with absurd disciples can form and subsist, with any real success. In a civilized country like Germany, Marx continued, nothing can be produced without a solid and concrete doctrine; and up to now nothing has been produced but noise, a harmful excitement, and the ruin of the very cause one had set his hand to.

Weitling's pale cheeks colored and his speech suddenly became free and lively. In a voice trembling with excitement, he undertook to prove that a man who had gathered hundreds of men around him in the name of the idea of justice, solidarity and fraternal love, could not be called a trivial and useless man. He said that he, Weitling, was consoled for the attacks of that evening by the hundreds of letters, declarations and testimonials of gratitude he received from the most distant provinces of his country; he said that his modest preparatory activity was perhaps of more importance for the common cause than the library criticism and analysis deployed apart from the suffering world and the people's torments.

As he pronounced these last words, Marx, furious, smashed his fist on the table so violently that the lamp swung. Then rising, he cried: "Ignorance never did any one any good."

We rose too, following his example. The meeting was at an end. And while Marx walked from one side of the room to another, in an unfamiliar agitation and rage, I rapidly took leave of him and the others and went home, astonished to the greatest degree at what I had just heard and seen.

"Ignorance never did any one any good!"

This is the true death sentence on all the primitive equalitarian communism, which good old Buonarroti thought should in Justice's name have put the humble shepherd and the scientist Newton on the same footing.

It was the death sentence on all the levelling utopianism of the masses, intrinsically anti-cultural, which had dominated the entire epoch.

*Graubünden, Switzerland*