

Marx's EIGHTEENTH BRUMAIRE today

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Karl Marx published THE EIGHTEENTH BRUMAIRE OF LOUIS BONAPARTE in 1852 in the aftermath of the Dec. 2, 1851 Bonapartist coup in France that brought to an end the whole period of ferment that had begun with the 1848 revolutions.

In France it ushered in nearly two decades of authoritarian rule, as the Bonapartist state became a precursor of twentieth century fascism, setting up the first modern police state. All the while the regime also claimed to oppose slavery and to be acting in the name of the masses against the various monarchies of Europe. Among Bonaparte's most reactionary adventures was the attempt to install a puppet ruler, Maximilian, in Mexico.

REORGANIZATION AND RETROGRESSION

The 1851 coup came suddenly, like a "bolt from the blue," Marx wrote (MECW 11, p. 107--I am referencing the version in Marx and Engels, COLLECTED WORKS, but here and elsewhere, sometimes altered in consultation with Terrell Carver in the 1996 Cambridge edition of Marx, LATER POLITICAL WRITINGS).

One indication of the defensive posture that revolutionaries across Europe had been forced into was shown in how the Eighteenth Brumaire was published. No European publisher was able to print it and the pamphlet came out in the U.S. in a very small printing, under the auspices of the German immigrant Marxist and future Union Army officer Joseph Weydemeyer. In this work, Marx predicted correctly that a long wave of reaction would now blanket Europe. The EIGHTEENTH BRUMAIRE was one place where Marx developed his theory of the state, something he had planned to complete in a major work that was to follow CAPITAL.

In the EIGHTEENTH BRUMAIRE, Marx showed how the road to the Bonapartist coup of December 1851 had been paved by the deep contradictions that had emerged in 1848, on the one hand, between the bourgeois democrats and the proletariat, and on the other, among the bourgeois democrats themselves. The result was a deeply retrogressive situation, wherein, "it seems that the state only returned to its oldest form, to the shamelessly simple domination of the sword and the cross" (MECW 11, p. 106).

However, Marx insisted, this was not a return to the premodern era, but a form of dictatorship that was very new. Up through 1852, Marx noted, "all revolutions perfected

the state machine instead of breaking it," helping to create a "huge state edifice" (MECW 11, p. 186). He also dealt with the class basis of the new state--its roots in parts of the disunited French peasantry and its connection to the army.

At the same time, he wished to disabuse the proletariat and all those in the revolutionary camp of the notion that any immediate turnabout lay on the horizon. There were simply too many objective obstacles: "Human beings make their own history," he wrote. "But," he warned, "they do not make it just as they please, in circumstances chosen by themselves, but under present circumstances, given and inherited from the past" (MECW 11, p. 103).

At the same time, Marx sketched the positive motion that he saw in the trajectory of the movement, even in defeat. Despite setbacks, there had been a lot of learning and the growth of proletarian self-consciousness. In language that evoked Hegel's "labor, patience, and suffering of the negative," Marx wrote of how, as against bourgeois revolutions and their strengthening of the state, proletarian revolutions "engage in perpetual self-criticism" and "deride with savage brutality the inadequacies, weak points, and pitiful aspects of their first attempts" (MECW 11, p. 106).

This self-critical attitude was not due to weakness, Marx wrote, but to the "prodigious" scope of their aims, which, as he was to write later, include not just the overthrow of a particular ruler or system, but the "abolition" of "class-rule itself" (in 1871 in *THE CIVIL WAR IN FRANCE*). However, to get there, constant self-critique and self-reorganization on the part of the revolutionary movement was an absolute necessity.

ALLEGED DISMISSAL OF THE PEASANTRY

Some critics of Marx have seen the *EIGHTEENTH BRUMAIRE* as a flawed work because of a supposedly elitist dismissal of the peasantry. They hang their argument on the passages where Marx wrote that, in a way, the Bonapartist regime represented the French peasantry, a class that he considered to be an unformed mass, "much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes." He added that "they do not form a class" and since "they cannot represent themselves, they need to be represented," and in this case that vacuum had been unfortunately filled by Bonaparte (MECW 11, p. 187).

If in fact Marx dismissed the revolutionary potential of the peasantry, here or more generally, that would indeed constitute a serious flaw in his thinking, especially given the history of 20th century revolutionary movements, from China to the Zapatistas.

Instead, however, what Marx was saying was that at that particular juncture, 1851-52, the French peasantry lacked cohesion and therefore fell into the trap of Bonapartism, as had the liberal democrats as well. What Marx was talking about was the emergence of different tendencies among the French peasants, based on their specific class position and the uneven development of their revolutionary consciousness:

"But let there be no misunderstanding. The Bonaparte dynasty represents not the revolutionary, but the conservative peasant; not the peasant that strikes out beyond the condition of his social existence, the smallholding, but rather the peasant who wants to consolidate this holding; not the country folk who, linked up with the towns, want to overthrow the old order through their own energies in conjunction with the towns....It represents not the enlightenment, but the superstition of the peasant; not his judgment, but his prejudice; not his future, but his past..." (MECW 11, p. 188).

The above passage is in keeping with many others by Marx, where he vehemently opposed those who argued that the proletariat alone was revolutionary, such as in the *CRITIQUE OF THE GOTHA PROGRAM* (1875), where he polemicized against the Lassallean view of the backwardness of the peasantry.

Marx expressed this point more affirmatively in his letter to Engels of April 11, 1856, where he wrote of the dialectical relationship between peasant and proletarian struggles, going back to the 16th century peasant uprising in Germany on which Engels had written one of his best books, *THE PEASANT WAR IN GERMANY* (published only two years before the *EIGHTEENTH BRUMAIRE*). Marx wrote: "The whole thing in Germany will depend upon the possibility of backing the proletarian revolution by some second edition of the Peasant War. Then the affair will be splendid..."

The *EIGHTEENTH BRUMAIRE* has relevance today on its 150th anniversary for many reasons. One of them lies in how, as against Marx's anarchist critics, it shows his preoccupation with, and opposition not only to capital, but also to the modern state, and gives some flavor of the never-written book on the state that was to have followed *CAPITAL*. A second point to ponder for today is how the Bonapartist coup of 1851, while not an exact parallel to what happened after September 11, showed the drive for total domination by the modern bourgeois state, one that reached its fullest development in the twentieth century with state-capitalist totalitarianism. Today, that is a danger that lurks more than ever under the surface of bourgeois democracy.