

The 1848 Revolutions: An Anarchist Perspective

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This is a write-up of a talk I gave at the Sparrow's Nest Archive in Nottingham on 23 June 2018. The talk was advertised by the following text:

The Revolutions of 1848 remain the most widespread revolutionary wave in European history. While remembered as essentially liberal in nature, aiming at ending the old monarchical regimes they were also note-worthy for the advent of the industrial working class as a factor in social struggle. So as well as political change, the social question was raised while the events of 1848 shaped the ideas of Marx and Proudhon. So on their 170th anniversary, we look at the 1848 revolutions and their lessons for today.

This text is based on my notes and so does not quite cover what was said on the day – it is more like what I wanted to say. However, the basic points are the same and are of wider interest. Given how crucial 1848 was in the development of the thought of Marx and Proudhon – both active participants – and so Marxism and Anarchism, it is surprising how little there is on it from a libertarian perspective. Hopefully this will go some way to address this situation and give lessons to today's rebels.

Introduction

1848 was a year of revolutions.

On 12 January 1848, Palermo rebelled against Ferdinand of Naples. This proved to be a prelude to a whole series of revolutions across Europe. France saw the overthrow of the monarchy in February, which in turn set off a wave of revolt. Indeed, it may be easier to say where in Europe was not affected by revolution, with echoes even in Britain.

All experienced a similar fate, namely defeat by counter-revolution. So, for example, Ferdinand became known as “King Bomba” for the bombardment of the rebel city of Messina for eight hours after its defenders had already surrendered, killing many civilians.

Needless to say, I cannot cover everything or everywhere, so I will concentrate on events in France as these are the most famous and most socialist. For it was here that the social question was explicitly raised, as Proudhon later noted the “question was no longer between monarchy and democracy, but between labour and capital.”

Context

No revolution takes place in isolation, it is influenced by both objective circumstances and ideas. Both interact, both are important. After all, objective circumstances shape ideas and actions while ideas lead to specific decisions, impacting on objective circumstances – for good or bad.

So before discussing events in France, I have to sketch the social and ideological context.

Social and Economic Conditions

France in 1848, like all continental Europe, was predominantly agricultural and the bulk of the working population were peasants. Industry was predominantly artisan in nature, with little in terms of industry and so an industrial proletariat. So, for example, in Paris small industry predominated with around 7,000 *patrons* with more than 10 workers while 32,000 people worked alone or with a single worker.

Links between towns and cities were rudimentary, with some railways but no actual national network. Machinery was being introduced, causing unemployment amongst the artisans. 1846 saw a financial crisis and bad harvests, which developed into an economic depression the following year.

Alongside these economic changes, there were rising demands for political reform within the bourgeoisie. Since 1830, the big bourgeoisie ruled under a constitutional monarchy (the July Monarchy). Suffrage was limited to males who paid 200 francs or more in taxes, resulting in voters numbering 250,000 out of a population of 9 million. Unsurprisingly, the regime was viewed as corrupt and was generally despised.

Socialist ideals and workers movement

As in Britain, the rise of industry also saw the rise of socialist ideas and a labour movement. This saw the transformed working class increasingly called the “proletariat” by most socialists at the time, but it must be stressed that this was in a pre-Marxist way as industry was not widespread (even if its impact – particularly via competition with Britain – was).

As social conditions changed, so did ideas. *Associationism* started to grow within the working class alongside strikes and unions, both were illegal and so many “mutual aid” groupings were also “resistance societies.” Yet workers did more than just survive or resist, they hoped for a better future. Faced with the rise of wage-labour, the idea of Associationism – co-operation – was raised by the workers themselves in 1830 as alternative (first by printers, then by other groups of workers). This was reflected in many works, including early feminist Flora Tristan’s *The Workers’ Union* (1843) as well as in practice, such as the “mutualist” societies of the militant artisans of Lyons.

As in Britain, what was latter termed *Utopian Socialism* arose during the 1820s and 1830s. This was focused around a few critics of current society (notably Fourier and Saint-Simon) who urged the creation of ideal communities to present an example the rest of society would follow. These thinkers were influential but fundamentally authoritarian in both tactics and aims. The followers of Fourier and Saint-Simon participated in the revolution, along with Cabet and his Icarians – named after his famous utopian novel *Voyage to Icaria* (1840).

Then there were the *Insurrectionists* (Blanqui and Barbès) who aimed at the seizure of power by *coup de main*, followed by the “dictatorship of proletariat” as rule of insurrectionists.

The most influential at the time were the *Jacobin-Socialists*, which combined French Republicanism with a programme of state-aid to workers associations. As expounded by Louis Blanc in his *Organisation of Labour* (1839), competition from these workers association – social workshops (*ateliers sociaux*) – would drive private industry out of business, eventually replacing competition with state planning. However, as a reformist he saw this as benefiting all classes and so all classes – as citizens of the republic – would be involved in the organisation of labour.

Finally, there was *Mutualist-Anarchism* as advocated by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (he picked up the term *mutualist* while staying in Lyons in the early 1840s). Unlike the other socialist thinkers, he was working class (forced to leave school to become a printer by trade). Proudhon is essentially a critic of the current system, with alternatives sketched in passing in such works as *What is Property?* (Three memoirs – 1840, 1841 and 1842) and *System of Economic Contradictions* (1848). He opposed both capitalism and what he termed “Community,” namely the visions of the utopian socialists. Instead, he advocated “universal association” – a form of market socialism based on workers control of production. Likewise, he opposed Blanc’s ideas as well as what passed at the time for “communism” (rightly so, as Kropotkin later said). In spite of invoking the term “revolution” all the time, he was fundamentally a reformist and saw the organisation of credit as the means to the organisation of labour (i.e., a federated system of workers’ producer, credit and consumer co-operatives)

So by 1848 there were both a workers’ movement and socialist ideas: authoritarian and libertarian, revolutionary and reformist. This meant that any revolution would inevitably bring these aspirations into conflict with existing system. This was expressed during 1848 between the Republic and what radicals called the “Social and Democratic Republic” (*la République démocratique et sociale*), between a political (bourgeois) revolution and a social revolution.

The February Revolution in France

Obviously I cannot cover everything which happened in France in 1848 and after, so by necessity I will concentrate on key events.

In the months preceding the February Revolution, moderate liberals organised “banquets” to call for an extension of the suffrage in order to get around the 1835 Act prohibiting public assemblies. On *21 February*, a political banquet in Paris was outlawed by the French government and the following day saw protests, marches and barricades. Troops were mobilised and fighting breaks out. On *23 February*, troops open fire on a march and kill 52 people.

Then, on *24 February*, Paris sees more barricades built and crowds converge on the royal palace from all directions. The King reviews the National Guard (a bourgeois militia), who mock him and call for his abdication. Recognising the obvious and seeing he cannot rely on the armed forces, the King abdicates. A crowd invades the Parliament chamber and a Provisional Government is created by acclamation. Popular pressure ensures that a republic is proclaimed and that two well-known socialists (Louis Blanc and Albert) are included in the new government – although as “secretaries” and not ministers.

So began the Second Republic.

The next day, *25 February*, saw a march demanding, amongst other things, the replacing of the tricolour with Red Flag as the emblem of France (Proudhon at the time states “the red flag is the sign of a revolution that will be the last, “ it is “the federal standard of humanity”). Alphonse de Lamartine, Minister of Foreign Affairs but effectively chair of the government, successfully argues against this in front of the crowd.

A petition for the “organisation of labour” is presented later that day to the Provisional Government when, at half-twelve, a worker enters the council chamber, petition and gun in hand, and simply says the “organisation of labour... within the hour,” before gesturing to the crowd outside. Louis Blanc quickly writes the “Right to work” decree:

“The provisional government of the French Republic undertakes to guarantee the existence of the workers by labour. It undertakes to guarantee work for every citizen. It recognises that workers must associate with each other in order to enjoy the benefit of their labour.”

The worker replies that there is now “three months of misery at the disposal of the Republic.” The “Right to work” becomes the focus for the struggle between political and social revolution.

The National Workshops (*Ateliers Nationaux*) are decreed the next day. These, however, are organised by bourgeois republicans in the Ministry of Public Works and cleverly named to give a superficial air of being embedded within Republican institutions (like the “National Guard”, the “National Assembly”, etc.). The name also linked them to Blanc’s “social workshops” but, in reality, they were more like the traditional “charity workshops” (*ateliers de charité*) established by previous governments in times of economic distress. Soon 120,000 workers were in these state-run, military-like make-work schemes.

The *26 February* also sees laws restricting freedom of association repealed and as a result clubs start to form. These are political associations based on mass meetings, soon there are over 200 in the Paris area, with 100,000 members. Workers associations (called “corporations”) become increasingly active, conducting strikes and forming co-operatives. Significantly, the Provisional Government also decrees on the creation of the Mobile Guard to give itself some reliable armed forces.

On the *28 February* there is a mass demonstration for the creation of a “Ministry of Labour.” This is initially refused by the Provisional Government, but after Blanc and Albert threaten to resign the Luxembourg Commission is announced as compromise. This would be an advisory body – a “Government Commission for Labour” – and located where the “Chamber of Peers” sat in previous regime, the Luxembourg Palace. As with the naming of the National Workshops, this gave a false impression, namely that the new commission would play a similar role in the new Republic as the previous second chamber did under the July Monarchy.

The Luxembourg Commission begins its deliberations on *1 March*, with 200 deputies elected from various corporations (this later rises to 700). However, bosses (*Patrons*) are also elected – 231 representing 77 trades. This, though, is unsurprising, as Blanc was an advocate of class cooperation. As well as discussing the “social question” and the organisation of labour, it is also involved in resolving strikes, creating trade regulations, etc. It is worth noting that this is the only elected body of the republic at the time.

On *16 March*, the Provisional Government issues a decree raising direct taxes on property to 45%, aiming to secure the republic’s finances. This, called the “45 centimes,” alienates peasants and other small property owners from the republic.

The following day, *17 March*, there is a mass march of 200,000 in Paris demanding that the planned elections are postponed from the 9th of April to 31st of May in order to give more time for electioneering in rural areas, that the elections in the National Guard was likewise postponed and that all troops are removed from Paris. Blanc supports the postponement, arguing the need “to act upon the French nation, that nation [...] prompt to obey the impulses coming from authority [...] placed a luminous beacon on the summit of society which would have lit it up [...] should have been summoned to the ballot-box, they would completed their education.” However, he convinces the marchers to let the Provisional Government decide in its own time – so prompting a protester to say to his face that “So you’re a traitor, you too.”

The National Guard elections are postponed to 5th April and the general election to the 23rd, although the lasting impact of the huge demonstration was to scare the bourgeoisie.

Another march of 20,000 takes place on *16 April* to give the government a petition asking for social reforms and to hand over a “patriotic donation.” While peaceful, rumours had circulated beforehand that an insurrection is planned. This allows the government, in the form of Ledru-Rollin (formerly a radical, now a politician) to proclaim a state of siege. The marchers face some 50,000 armed National Guards, who take the opportunity to intimidate them and so the wider population, while the petition is received by the deputy mayor of Paris rather than the Provisional Government. The march is used as excuse to bring troops to Paris.

Elections based on universal male suffrage take place on *23 April*, with the peasantry making up 84% of the new electorate. The election results in a majority Conservative Assembly, with less than 10% of deputies radicals. A new conservative Government is formed on *4 May*: it and its supporters are called “the Party of Order.” With the elections over, club membership starts to fall as these were primarily political forums.

On *15 May* another march of around 10–20,000 people demand that Russia and Prussia recognise Polish independence – and for France to declare war on them if they do not – as well as a Ministry of Labour and Progress, a policy of Louis Blanc which had been rejected Assembly five days previously. When a delegation of twenty-five are allowed to enter chamber, the mass rush in when doors were opened. Then comes a call for seizing the Paris Town Hall, although this abortive and confused insurrection is quickly stopped by arrests.

The Assembly passes various repressive laws as a result of the invasion of the chamber, including against the clubs (which are no longer allowed to use public buildings) and the Luxembourg Commission is disbanded. The latter, however, continues in reduced form, independently of the State.

On *26 May*, Emile Thomas, the director of the National Workshops, is arrested and “reassigned” to another city due to his opposition to government plans for them. Then, on *23 June*, the government announces their closure and the following day sees over a thousand barricades start to be raised across Paris. The revolt itself is spontaneous, with little or no co-ordination between barricades. Troops are called out and fighting begins. General Cavaignac declared dictator of the state of siege and uses 40,000 troops – Army, Mobile Guard, National Guard – against the insurgents, resulting in 4–5,000 dead during the fighting and around 3,000 shot after surrender. Over 11,000 are arrested, with 4,000 deported to Algeria.

The revolt and its barbaric suppression become known as “the June Days.”

The state of siege under Cavaignac lasts until *29 October*. A new Constitution is passed on *4 November*, which saw the creation of a single permanent Assembly of 750 members which would elect members of a Council of State to serve for six years. The executive power is delegated to the President, who is to be elected for a single four year term by direct universal male suffrage. The President would choose ministers, with both being responsible to the Assembly.

On *10 December*, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte (nephew of Emperor Napoleon) was elected overwhelmingly – winning 5,572,834 votes (74.2%), compared with 1,469,156 for Cavaignac (the socialist Ledru-Rollin received 376,834, the extreme left candidate Raspail 37,106, and Lamartine received only 17,000 votes).

The forces of reaction increased during 1849. For example, *15 March* sees a law passed against workers’ combinations while on *21 March* another is passed against the clubs. A demonstration of the Montagne (the extreme left of the assembly, named after the radical Jacobins of the first French Revolution) opposing French intervention against the Rome revolution takes place on *13 June* and is treated as an insurrection, leading to many arrests. The democratic socialist press is muzzled. *27 November* sees a law against strikes enacted.

The unexpected success of the democratic socialists in elections is soon followed by the National Assembly voting on *31 May 1850* to restrict the vote, disenfranchising 3.5 million working class voters – the leader of the Party of Order, Adolphe Thiers, calls these “the vile multitude.”

Towards the end of 1851, Bonaparte – with his term nearing an end – desires a second term as well as more expenses. Lacking enough support in the National Assembly to amend the constitution, he organises a coup on *2 December 1851* (the same day as the coronation of his uncle as Emperor in 1804). Using as an excuse defence of the universal male suffrage that Assembly had restricted, over 70 leading politicians were arrested. The coup mostly meets with indifference, if not support, but some barricades were raised in the streets and crowds clashed with troops and police in Paris and in the provinces (there is widespread peasant revolts in south-eastern France), resulting in several hundred demonstrators killed and 27,000 arrested.

Bonaparte outlines a new constitution based on the restoration of manhood suffrage but with increased Presidential powers – as well as sharply reduced assembly powers – and an increased presidential term of 10 years. While ratified by a plebiscite on *20–1 December*, this was not enough for his ambitions and after another plebiscite on *20–1 November 1852* (which saw 97% in favour, with a quarter of a million against and two million abstentions) Louis-Napoléon declares himself Napoleon III, Emperor of the French, on *2 December 1852*.

So ended the Second Republic, replaced by the Second Empire in just over 4 years.

At the time...

Given the sorry tale recounted above, it is unsurprising that there was not much popular support for the Second Republic by the end. The hopes of February were soon crushed – by the Second Republic it created.

The Revolutions of 1848 were notable for the numbers of socialist thinkers active within it, some as significant participants. Here, I will concentrate on two whose movements still exist – Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Karl Marx.

I will cover their role in the revolutions of 1848, what they argued at the time and draw out lessons.

Proudhon

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon played a leading role in French events as a journalist and then as an elected politician. He did not take part in the banquet movement but in February he helped build barricades in Paris and used the skills of his trade to print one of the first posters of the revolution.

Wary of the revolt, he thought that they “have made a revolution without an idea.” This he sought to provide, by means of his journalism after being urged to start a paper by printers who had just left the barricades. He produced four papers during the Revolution, all having “People” in the title and all suppressed. As well as these papers – which were daily at times, with 40–50,000 issues sold – Proudhon also wrote numerous pamphlets and articles. The theme was consistent, namely the pressing need for economic transformation:

“In future there must only be amongst men, workers, associates. Masters, workmen must disappear [...] no more classes superior and inferior” (*Le Représentant du peuple*, 29 February 1848)

Rejecting his previous anti-political stance, Proudhon was elected to the National Assembly on 4 June 1848 along with, amongst others, Victor Hugo and Louis-Napoleon. There he raised socialist ideas, including after the June Days when he proclaimed that “only one of two things can happen: either property will overrule the Republic or the Republic will overrule property.” In the face of victorious reaction, he proclaimed:

“When I used those pronouns *you* and *we*, it was self-evident that at that point I was identifying *myself* with the proletariat and identifying *you* with the bourgeois class”

Only one other representative voted for his proposal, the other socialists abstained. As Bakunin later noted, after the June Days there was but “a single voice, the voice of the illustrious and heroic socialist Proudhon, who alone had the courage to throw down the challenge to this rabid bourgeois herd of conservatives, liberals, and radicals.”

Proudhon recognised danger of Louis-Napoleon early, denouncing quite accurately his pretensions of becoming Emperor. He used his publications to defend the Republic against both

Conservatives and Bonaparte, recognising the weakness and isolation of the left he argued for reconciliation and moderation alongside legal resistance (he continued his long-standing opposition to insurrection). He also sought to encourage socialist economic reform by the workers themselves.

He was stripped of parliamentary immunity because of his attacks on now-President Louis-Napoleon, resulting in him beginning a three-year prison sentence in June 1849. During his imprisonment he wrote two key libertarian texts: *Confessions of a Revolutionary* and *General Idea of the Revolution*. These books, along with his extensive journalism, raised numerous ideas which would become standard libertarian themes – ideals which came from his role as both participant in, and commentator on, events.

Democracy

Proudhon is often remembered as having proclaimed that “universal suffrage is counter-revolution.” Given the events of 1848, he certainly had a point. However, context is important and he was referring to universal suffrage used to elect a government in a centralised, indivisible republic. In other words, a Jacobin or bourgeois system which would “concentrate all public powers in the hands of a single authority” and so “created despotism.” This was nothing less than “the negation of the People’s sovereignty” and so “democracy says that *the People reign and does not govern*, which is to deny the Revolution.”

This analysis also suggested that the state was not just an instrument of class rule, it had its own oppressive and exploitative traits which existed independently of its role as enforcer of the rule of economically dominant minority classes.

For Proudhon, real democracy required a radically different system. So the “choice of talents, the imperative mandate, and permanent revocability are the most immediate and incontestable consequences of the electoral principle.” More, a “truly democratic regime” required “unity *at the bottom* and its separation *at the top*” and this in turn meant the need to democratise and federate *all* aspects of life: social, economic and military (“Organised in this way the army retains its civic feelings”). This applied universally, both functionally and internationally for in a free socialist society there “will no longer be nationality, no longer fatherland [...] Whatever a man’s race or colour, he is really a native of the universe; he has citizen’s rights everywhere.”

“Organisation of Credit”

Economic transformation was at the heart of his activity during 1848, arguing for the “organisation of credit” and creating *The Bank of the People*. He saw this as the means to achieve “the organisation of labour,” which still remained the end. This was because “the organisation of labour must not emanate from the powers-that-be; it ought to be SPONTANEOUS.” In other words, labour must organise *itself* rather than be organised by the State or by well-meaning intellectuals:

“Louis Blanc represents governmental socialism, revolution by power, as I represent democratic socialism, revolution by the people. An abyss exists between us.”

Economic change cannot be left to the State which was, as he had put it in 1846, “chained to capital” and cannot be seized and reformed. Moreover, it was not up to the task anyway:

“Since I first set foot on this parliamentary Sinai, I ceased to be in contact with the masses: by absorbing myself in my legislative work, I had completely lost view of current affairs [...] One has to experience this isolation called a national assembly to understand how the men who are the most completely ignorant of the state of a country are nearly always those who represent it.”

He also sought economic change *now*, opposing all the others on the left who advocated “political revolution first, then social revolution.” Instead, he argued that economic transformation was needed and so it was a case of “social revolution first, then political revolution.” This reflects his reformist politics and rejection of insurrection.

As well as solving the social question, economic change was needed to combat the economic crisis (which had got steadily worse after revolution). Moreover, he argued that workers could not rely on or wait for the government to act, not least because it was obviously bourgeois and opposed to social reforms. Nor could they await the seizing political power – whether by election or a coup d’état – for their distress would not disappear in the meantime.

Proudhon, then, sought practical solutions to the problems facing the revolution and the working class rather than postpone such things to after “political power” was won (if it ever were and assuming the politicians were up to the task). I must note that some – usually Marxists, following Marx himself – suggest that Proudhon’s “Bank of the People” project was an expression of his utopian politics. However, such smug comments seem to forget that there was a revolution taking place – when would be a better time to seek to apply your socialist ideas than during a revolution? And who better to build socialism than the workers themselves by their own associations for production and credit?

“Revolution from Below”

For Proudhon, what was required was “a revolution from below, from true democracy,” which he contrasted (as he had in 1846) with a top-down approach:

“From above [...] evidently signifies power; from below signifies the people. On the one hand we have the actions of government; on the other, the initiative of the masses. [...] Revolution on the initiative of the masses is a revolution by the concerted action of the citizens, by the experience of the workers, by the progress and diffusion of enlightenment, revolution by the means of liberty.”

Proudhon was the first to argue for what has become known as *Socialism from below*.

Looking to the future

Proudhon stressed the need to look to the future: “Could [society] not turn its gaze in the direction in which it is going?” He berated those so-called revolutionaries and radicals who aped the past:

“what is this queer preoccupation which, in time of revolution, bedazzles the most steadfast minds, and, when their burning aspirations carry them forward into the future, has them constantly harking back the past? [...] In order to organise the future,

a general rule confirmed by experience, the reformers always start out with their gaze fixed upon the past. [...] nothing has changed: all we have had is a change of personnel.”

In this he was repeating what he had argued in 1846’s *System of Economic Contradictions*, where he had attacked those utopians who created visions of a perfect society rather than analyse the society around them and identify those developments and tendencies which point beyond capitalism.

“That a new society be founded in the heart of the old society”

Like all anarchists, Proudhon was not naïve enough to believe that socialism could be achieved overnight. Rather than postulate ideal visions against the grim reality of capitalism, he advocated organs of dual-power as a means to challenge both state and capital. As he put it in 1848:

“I propose [...] a body representative of the proletariat be formed in Paris, *imperium in imperio* [a state within the state], in opposition to the bourgeoisie’s representation [...] a new society be founded in the heart of the old society [...] a labour charter be written into the agenda forthwith [...] groundwork for republican government be laid down and special powers delegated to the workers’ representatives.”

This reflected his 1846 call that “an agricultural and industrial combination must be found by means of which power, today the ruler of society, shall become its slave.”

Looking back from 1849, he reiterated that the “organisation of popular societies was the pivot of democracy, the cornerstone of republican order [...] It would have been necessary to rip the nails and teeth off state power and hand over the government’s public force to the citizens [...] to prevent the government from taking steps against liberty.” This required “assemblies, popular societies, public meeting-rooms, colleges, academies, congresses, electoral committees, etc.; in a word, associations and meetings of all kinds and varieties. [...] it is a matter of the organisation of universal suffrage in all its forms, of the very structure of Democracy itself.” This was because change had to come from below, from the masses:

“All revolutions have been carried through by the spontaneous action of the people; if occasionally governments have responded to the initiative of the people it was only because they were forced or to do so. Almost always they blocked, repressed, struck.”

He recognised that workers had to free themselves for “the government can do nothing for you. But you can do everything for yourselves.” Given the nature of the state and its role as guardian of property, there was no alternative.

Likewise, Proudhon argued that key industries should be handed to workers’ associations to run, rather than to capitalists or their state. These, combined with associations created by workers themselves, would be examples of what was possible.

Yet while sympathetic to the workers in the Luxembourg Commission and sharing a desire for association to replace wage-labour, he was opposed to its ideas for many reasons. First, the Commission was top-down, with the initiative resting with the State and its experts – its assembly

simply gave advice and ratification of decisions made elsewhere. Second, for Blanc it was an “Estates General of Labour” and reflected this by being patriarchal, top-down, centralised and statist. It also included bosses representatives. Ultimately, for Blanc, the state emancipates the workers and the Commission was ideologically committed to the “Organisation of Labour” *by the State* – something Proudhon rightly dismissed as being “still monarchical, still wage-labour.” However, Proudhon did work with its members in 1849 to found the short-lived *Bank of the People*

Anarchism confirmed

The events of 1848 saw Proudhon become a politician but they also saw him at his most anti-statist, in part due to that experience. In 1849 he wrote his commentary on events, *Confessions of a Revolutionary* (revised in 1851). In it he noted that events had confirmed analysis of the State in *System of Economic Contradictions*:

“Power, the instrument of collective might, created in society as a mediator between labour and capital, finds itself inevitably chained to capital and directed against the proletariat. No political reform can solve this contradiction [...] The problem before the working classes then is not to conquer but to overcome at the same time power and monopoly, which means creating, out of the people’s guts and labour’s profundity, a greater authority, a more powerful fact, that surrounds and subjugates capital and the state. Every proposed reform that does not satisfy this condition is simply one more scourge [...] which threatens the proletariat.”

This, he now noted, was a “prophecy of the events that we have seen take place in 1848 and 1849. It is by stubbornly wanting revolution through power and social reform through political reform that the February revolution was postponed.” His conclusions were the same, anti-statism was reaffirmed:

“The idea of a sovereign power [...] is none other than the very principle of despotism [...] it is the hierarchical concentration of all the political and social faculties in one and indivisible function, which is the government”

However, he also reiterated that anarchism is not just anti-state. So while the “idea of a sovereign power [...] is none other than the very principle of despotism [...] it is the hierarchical concentration of all the political and social faculties in one and indivisible function,” he also stressed that “I deny all kinds of proprietary domain. I deny it, precisely because I believe in an order wherein the instruments of labour will cease to be appropriated and instead become shared.” Anti-Capitalism was reaffirmed, and so “under universal association, ownership of the land and of the instruments of labour is *social* ownership [...] handed over to democratically organised workers’ associations [...] woven into the common cloth of the democratic and social Republic.” The common theme was an anti-hierarchical perspective, for “the Revolution in 1848 struck authority. Authority is Church, State, Capital.”

Thus, as he summarised in 1851, “socialism is [...] the extinction of poverty, the abolition of capitalism and wage labour, the transformation of property, governmental decentralisation, the organisation of universal suffrage, the effective and direct sovereignty of workers, the balance of economic forces, the substitution of the contractual regime for the legal regime.”

Marx

Karl Marx was a commentator on French events and a participant in Germany, although at the time Proudhon was far more important and well-known.

The German March Revolution raised much the same demands as the French February one, namely a Republic along with basic liberties. In addition, faced with a confederation of 39 independent states, German national unity was often raised.

Communist League

First, though, I need to present some ideological context. Marx and Engels had joined what was to become the *Communist League* in 1847 and tasked with writing its manifesto. The *Communist Manifesto* was published in German just before the uprising Paris, although it obviously had no impact on any of the revolts which subsequently erupted.

The Manifesto did predict an imminent bourgeois revolution in Germany, but then added this would be but a “*prelude to an immediately following proletarian revolution.*” Yet it is important to note that outside of Britain, the proletariat was *not* the majority of the working population and industry was *not* wide-scale. Rather, the working class in Germany (as in France) was predominantly peasants and artisans (and would be for many decades afterwards). These classes, according to the *Manifesto*, “fight against the bourgeoisie, to save from extinction their existence as fractions of the middle class. They are therefore not revolutionary, but conservative. Nay more, they are reactionary, for they try to roll back the wheel of history.” This lack of a proletariat would impact significantly on Marx’s activities during the revolution.

As noted, the *Manifesto* had no influence on the revolution yet it did have a negative impact on all subsequent revolutions thanks to its famous ten points – such as the nationalisation of means of production and the creation of “industrial armies” – which helped equate (the early stages of) socialism with state-capitalism and subsequent revolutionary movements, with its call for “winning the battle of democracy” which encouraged the socialist and labour movements into electioneering.

With the outbreak of revolution and the *Communist League* immediate issued a list of demands: “The whole of Germany shall be declared a united, indivisible republic”; “In future armies shall at the same time be workers’ armies [...] these shall be a means of organising work”; “All baronial and other feudal estates, all mines, pits etc. shall be converted into state property. [...] All private banks will be replaced by a state bank [...] All means of transport [...] shall be taken in hand by the state. They shall be converted into state property”; “In the remuneration of all civil servants there shall be no difference”; “Establishment of national workshops. The state shall guarantee the livelihood of all workers and provide for those unable to work.”

The links of Louis Blanc’s ideas are obvious, as noted by Bakunin later in *Statism and Anarchy*, and they reflected and clarified the *Communist Manifesto*, as shown when Engels in 1885 opined that “many a one can still learn something from it even today.” Yet these demands were statist, reformist and completely compatible with capitalism – at best, it laid the basis of State-capitalism. Still, while having no impact in 1848, the *Manifesto* and the *League*’s demands did present a guide which led the Russian Revolution into a dead-end and skewed socialism towards social-democracy. However, to return to 1848...

Neue Rheinische Zeitung

Marx and Engels returned to Germany after the March Revolution and started the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* (*New Rhenish Newspaper*) in June, with a circulation of 3–6,000 (a fraction of Proudhon's journals). Significantly, its editorial line rejected the position set out in the *Communist Manifesto* and hid their colours, subordinating the proletariat to the “democratic bourgeois” with a political program with two main points, “a single, indivisible, democratic German republic, and War with Russia, including the restoration of Poland” as Engels recalled in 1884. In short, Marx embraced a stages approach to the revolution and decided that proletarian revolution had to wait in favour of supporting the bourgeoisie and its demands.

Having decided upon a united cross-class front, Marx and Engels urged suppression of the *Communist Manifesto* and the *Communist League's* demands. All this, unsurprisingly, came into conflict with the radical artisans in the *Communist League*, so Marx simply disbanded it using his “discretionary powers.” As well as advocating bourgeois demands, there is some interesting material in *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* such as stock market reports, war with Denmark (“the first revolutionary war waged by Germany,” the “right of civilisation as against barbarism, of progress as against stability”) along with Engels' comments on “unhistoric” peoples (including the hope for a war which will “wipe out all these petty hidebound nations, down to their very names” and “will result in the disappearance from the face of the earth not only of reactionary classes and dynasties, but also of entire reactionary peoples. And that, too, is a step forward”), casual racism (against Slavs mostly, but also finding time to note “that magnificent California was snatched from the lazy Mexicans, who did not know what to do with it” by “the energetic Yankees”), and best not to mention the anti-Semitic articles published...

As even Marxist Roman Rosdolsky had to admit that Engels' position was based on a “strange division by nation, instead of social class.” Also, it is amazing how “historical” facts and the needs of the revolution happened to coincide with needs and aims of German nationalism...

Even these moderate bourgeois demands prove too radical for the Prussian government, who order Marx to leave the country. In exile, he re-joins the *Communist League* which had reformed in 1849, but he quickly came into conflict, again, with radicals artisans within it. His famous March 1850 address is a compromise which reflected this conflict for while it still had a “stages” perspective it also mentioned actual workers activity. Yet this was hardly new, given that it echoes Proudhon's 1848 call to form workers committees:

“Alongside the new official governments they must simultaneously establish their own revolutionary workers' governments, either in the form of local executive committees and councils or through workers' clubs or committees, so that the bourgeois-democratic governments not only immediately lost the support of the workers but find themselves from the very beginning supervised and threatened by authorities behind which stand the whole mass of the workers.”

However, unlike Proudhon Marx placed this within a Jacobin context:

“the workers must not only strive for one and indivisible German republic, but also [...] for the most decisive centralization of power in the hands of the state authority. They should not let themselves be led astray by empty democratic talk about the freedom of the municipalities, self-government, etc. [...] revolutionary activity [...]

can only be developed with full efficiency from a central point. [...] As in France in 1793, it is the task of the genuinely revolutionary party in Germany to carry through the strictest centralisation.”

Sadly, Marx did not explain how universal suffrage in a one and indivisible republic in a predominantly peasant country helps the proletariat (or radical artisans) achieve their goals. Nor did he wonder, given recent French experience, whether all this would achieve being the empowerment of the bourgeoisie and its forces of repression... against the working class. Significantly, Engels admitted in 1885 that “this passage is based on a misunderstanding” and was historically inaccurate – strangely, this admission has had no effect on Marxist prejudices in favour of centralisation!

Shortly afterwards, Marx again rejects this position and argues proletarian revolution is not possible any time soon and attacks the radical artisans in the *League*:

“Whilst we tell the workers that they must go through fifteen, twenty, perhaps even fifty years of war and civil war, not only in order to alter existing conditions, but even to make themselves fit to take over political power, you tell them, on the contrary, that they must seize political power at once or abandon all hope. Whilst we point out how undeveloped the German proletariat still is, you flatter the nationalism and the craft prejudices of the German artisan in the crudest fashion, and that is naturally more popular.”

Strangely, while often quoting this passage Leninists do not explain why only two years of civil war had the opposite effect in Russia...

Tiring of debating with the radical artisan opposition, Marx disbands the *Communist League*, again, and decides to concentrate on writing, primarily *Capital*, while waiting for the march of history to make a proletarian revolution more likely.

Looking back...

While in exile Marx wrote two works on the February Revolution. The first, *The Class Struggles in France, 1848 to 1850* consisted of articles written in 1850 for the new monthly *Neue Rheinische Zeitung: Politisch-ökonomische Revue* (this is also notable for Engels’ 1895 introduction on use of the ballot-box as socialism’s most effective weapon). The second is 1852’s *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis-Napoleon*. This is by far the most influential of the two, with (for example) Murray Bookchin quoting the following passage in *Listen, Marxist!*:

“The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language.”

It would be churlish, but sadly necessary, to note that this simply echoes Proudhon’s comments from 1849. And talking of Proudhon, Marx also dismisses French workers attempts to improve their situation directly:

“In part it [the proletariat] throws itself into doctrinaire experiments, exchange banks and workers’ associations, hence into a movement in which it renounces the revolutionising of the old world by means of the latter’s own great, combined resources, and seeks, rather, to achieve its salvation behind society’s back, in private fashion, within its limited conditions of existence, and hence necessarily suffers shipwreck.”

So the focus must be on political struggles for state power, rather than economic self-activity to mitigate the economic problems facing the working class. Needless to say, future social democrats used such words to argue that workers wait until a future election returns a socialist government. And best not mention how Lenin was so focused on seizing power in 1917 that he ignored its likely impact on the economy – the “conditions of existence” of the workers. Luckily, the factory committees – “behind society’s back” within the workplace – kept the economy going, until the Bolshevik leadership marginalised the committees in favour of nationalisation as argued for in the *Communist Manifesto*. Sadly, this creation of state-capitalism coincided with a deepening of the economic crisis.

However, returning to 1848 we see that in 1850 developments were in line with ideology. The State was run by the bourgeoisie and was used to crush the workers. Interestingly, as often the case, *The Class Struggles in France* can be selectively quoted for both Social Democracy and Leninism. For the former, we have:

“The comprehensive contradiction of this constitution, however, consists in the following: The classes whose social slavery the constitution is to perpetuate – proletariat, peasantry, petty bourgeoisie – it puts in possession of political power through universal suffrage. And from the class whose old social power it sanctions, the bourgeoisie, it withdraws the political guarantees of this power. It forces the political rule of the bourgeoisie into democratic conditions, which at every moment help the hostile classes to victory and jeopardise the very foundations of bourgeois society.”

For the latter, we have:

“But the clubs – these were the gathering points, the conspiratorial seats of the revolutionary proletariat. The National Assembly had itself forbidden the coalition of the workers against its bourgeois. And the clubs – what were they but a coalition of the whole working class against the whole bourgeois class, the formation of a workers’ state against the bourgeois state? Were they not just so many constituent assemblies of the proletariat and just so many military detachments of revolt in fighting trim – what the constitution was to constitute above all else was the rule of the bourgeoisie.”

That the latter does not contradict the former goes without saying, as does the awkward fact the praise for clubs simple echoes Proudhon’s comments from two years previously.

Still, 2 December 1851 causes Marx some issues for, according to his ideology, this should never have happened. So, for example, in *The German Ideology*, he and Engels had confidently asserted that the “independence of the State is only found nowadays in those countries where the estates have not yet completely developed into classes.” The *Communist Manifesto*, likewise, argued that political power “is merely the organised power of one class for oppressing another” and that the

“executive of the modern state is nothing but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.”

Yet in 1852 the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis-Napoleon* argues that “parliament... made the law of the ruling class its general will” and so Bonaparte’s coup saw the “passing of the parliamentary regime and of bourgeois rule.” Indeed, “the industrial bourgeoisie applauds with servile bravos the coup d’état of December 2, the annihilation of parliament, the downfall of its own rule, the dictatorship of Bonaparte.” It is “the final and complete collapse of the rule of the bourgeoisie [...] overthrow of the bourgeoisie,” for the “French bourgeoisie [...] had brought the *lumpenproletariat* to domination.” In short, “the executive authority has made itself an independent power.”

The confidence of previous years is undermined by the rise of an “independent power.” Yet Marx does not leave it at that, for “Bonaparte represents a class, and the most numerous class of French society at that, the *small-holding peasants*.” Acknowledging the peasant revolts which Bonaparte crushed, Marx adds that he “represents not the revolutionary, but the conservative peasant”!

With sufficient time, I am sure that a more coherent narrative could be built from these somewhat contradictory comments – and, indeed, Marxists have, with varying degrees of success – that the regime saw the end of bourgeois rule, represented (part of) the peasantry, ensured the domination of lumpenproletariat... and is independent.

Yet the bourgeoisie did manage well enough under Bonaparte, with both Proudhon and Bakunin noting the regime’s bourgeois support. Would it not be easier to argue that, as in Germany, the bourgeoisie sided with monarchical forces against the working class? That the bourgeoisie simply failed to play the role Marx assumed it would?

Still, Marx’s analysis of events are of interest simply because they undermine his own ideology and theory of the state. For they suggest that the state is can be an independent power and so not just an instrument of class rule:

“But under the absolute monarchy, during the first Revolution, and under Napoleon the bureaucracy was only the means of preparing the class rule of the bourgeoisie. Under the Restoration, under Louis Philippe, under the parliamentary republic, it was the instrument of the ruling class, however much it strove for power of its own.”

Hence Marx’s conclusion that “all revolutions perfected this machine instead of smashing it.” Sadly, he does not ponder what would happen when empowering a so-called proletarian state even more centralised and indivisible than previous regimes – compare France’s half-a-million bureaucrats in 1848 to Lenin’s five million!

Interestingly, Engels in 1884 reiterated that the state “is, as a rule, the state of the most powerful, economically dominant class which, through the medium of the state, becomes the politically dominant class [...] By way of exception, however, periods occur in which the warring classes balance each other, so nearly that the state power, as ostensible mediator, acquires, for the moment, a certain degree of independence of both.” He listed the “absolute monarchy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,” which held the balance between the nobility and the bourgeoisie, and “the Bonapartism of the First, and still more of the Second French Empire,” which held the balance between bourgeoisie and proletariat. In fact:

“In France, where the bourgeoisie as such, as a class in its entirety, held power for only two years, 1849 and 1850, under the republic, it was able to continue its social existence only by abdicating its political power to Louis Bonaparte and the army.”

So “by way of exception” accounted for over 250 years, bar a two year period! This is hardly an evidence based theory of the state. Equally, it would be churlish to note that Bonapartism *crushed* the workers organisations and so the notion of a “balance” makes as little sense as Trotsky’s description of Stalinism as a form of “Bonapartism,” as reflecting some kind of balance between workers and peasants when both had long been under the cosh of the Bolshevik state machine.

Still, in spite of all this, Marx could proclaim in 1852 that “universal suffrage is the equivalent for political power for the working class of England.”

Libertarian Lessons Learnt

This talk was subtitled “an Anarchist Perspective” and it would be remiss of me not to discuss what lessons were learnt by libertarians from it. As I cannot cover all anarchists, I will focus on Bakunin and Kropotkin.

First, it must be restated that Proudhon was a reformist, while modern anarchism is revolutionary. However, the latter was built upon the foundations laid by Proudhon’s analysis of capitalism and the State, as well as his experiences and conclusions from 1848. These can be grouped into two main ones, that economic transformation is the key to a successful revolution and Jacobin memories are unreliable and no guide to social transformation.

Second, as Marx’s under developed comments on Bonapartism suggest, anarchist opposition to the state is sensible for it represents a power in and of itself, regardless of its current role as defender of the bourgeois. Creating a new, even more, centralised structure would not be wise – a new form of social organisation is needed when capitalism ends.

Bakunin

Michael Bakunin actually took part in the 1848 revolution and was on numerous barricades in numerous states. However, he did so as a democratic-federalist Pan-Slavist rather as an anarchist. Yet he was aware of Proudhon’s work and recognised need for popular (social) demands for any Slav revolt to succeed: “With the landlords’ programme you will not rouse a single peasant.”

Captured after the defeat of the revolution, he was condemned to death by the government of Saxony. This was commuted to life imprisonment to allow extradition to Austria (June 1850) and then to Russia (May 1851). There he was entombed in the Peter and Paul Fortress for three years, then the castle of Shlisselburg for another four. His conditions were horrific, being in solitary confinement and chained to a wall for part of it. He also suffered from scurvy and his teeth fell out. He was finally exiled to Siberia, before escaping Tzarist Russia in 1861.

It was in exile during the 1860s that he became a Revolutionary Anarchist, joining the First International in the latter part of that decade. During this period he summarised what he considered necessary for a successful revolution. From his experiences of street-fighting in the Revolutions of 1848, he saw the need for “a federation of standing barricades and a Revolutionary Communal Council will operate on the basis of one or two delegates from each barricade [...] invested with binding mandates and accountable and revocable at all times.” Also, mere political change was not enough and so there had to be the expropriation of capital, and so “workers’ associations would then take possession of all the tools of production as well as all buildings and capital.” Seeing how fear of a radical Paris was used to rouse rural fears against the revolution, he rejected the predominant position of Paris which marked so much of French revolutionary politics. Instead, he argued the need for a “declaration by the capital city, rebellious and organised as a commune, to the effect that [...] it therefore renounces the right, or rather any claim, to govern the provinces.” This would be a first step towards the federation needed to defend the revolt:

“all the provinces, communes, and associations to [...] delegate their deputies, likewise invested with imperative, responsible, and revocable mandates, to a set meeting place, for the purpose of constituting the federation of associations, communes, and provinces which have rebelled [...] and in order to organise a revolutionary force capable of overcoming the reaction.”

Bakunin also recognised that need for pre-organisation, for spontaneity was not enough. Thus the pressing need for both the organisation of revolutionaries and the organisation of working classes. As regards the latter, he advocated what would later be termed syndicalism by noting that “unions create that conscious power without which no victory is possible” while strikes “create, organise, and form a workers’ army, an army which is bound to break down the power of the bourgeoisie and the State, and lay the ground for a new world.”

Kropotkin

Peter Kropotkin not write much on 1848, usually mentioning it in passing. An exception can be found in an article penned for *Freedom* in 1898, entitled “1848–1871” (included in *Direct Struggle against Capital*). Given the similarity in their politics – both being revolutionary anarchists – his analysis unsurprisingly echoes Bakunin. However, he shares much with Proudhon, such as lamenting the fixation with the past of so many radicals at the time:

“The worship of the Convention of 1793, and the Jacobin Club [...] in reality they were obstacles to whatever really had been achieved in the economic field by the French peasants and workers — the worship of what they described as the *dictature of the people* but what was really a dictature of the few against the people”

He echoed Proudhon’s own account of his time in Parliament and urged radicals to remain within the people and build socialism directly:

“Isolated as they were from the masses, which alone would have given the inspiration for a revolutionary change in the ways and means of production, they soon were driven to simply organise relief works.”

This was because the “social revolution is an economic revolution and not a political one; [Proudhon] proved *it must attack the system of property, not the system of elections*.” As Bakunin stressed, the need was to forge ahead by force of example rather than seek to impose radical change from the centre: “Why should Paris, Lyon, St. Étienne be kept back in their progress towards Communism by the backward stay of the populations of Brittany and Western France altogether.” This meant the “commune, supreme in its entire economical and political life. The commune becoming *all*, after having so long been *nothing*, nothing but a parcel of the State.”

Conclusions

While any new revolutionary situation will be radically different than that facing radicals in 1848, there are some conclusions to be drawn from events 170 years ago. There is little point in looking at history if there is no attempt to learn lessons from it, if only to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. For libertarians, the question boils down to what forms of popular organisation were developed in the revolt and their potential. As Kropotkin put it in his *The Great French Revolution*:

“To make a revolution it is not, however, enough that there should be such risings – more or less successful. It is necessary that after the risings there should be left something new in the institutions, would permit new forms of life to be elaborated and established.”

So what forms of self-management appeared in 1848?

First of note are the *Clubs* which, although neighbourhood based, were organised by political interest. There was also a “club of clubs.” These were, however, potentially a form of community self-organisation, with Proudhon suggesting as early as 28 April 1848 that these be a popular forum discussing the issues facing the revolution and practical measures on how to solve them along with the social question. Sadly, given their origins the clubs focused on political issues, usually election orientated, and so ignored wider social issues (for example, the pressing issue of high rents for working class people was not raised).

Second are the *Corporations* (the name is the French equivalent of guild, so trade associations) which participated in marches under their own banners. They were also the electoral bodies for Luxembourg Commission and involved in strikes and trade regulations. So they combined various functions as trade based organisations, including creating productive associations (co-operatives). These had greater potential as they saw themselves as active participations in both trade disputes and in building a co-operative alternative to capitalism

So popular organisations existed, both community and economic, which were embryos of a socialist alternative, as Proudhon recognised. Sadly, both were fatally undermined by their own politics. Both were infused with the Jacobin tradition, even if modified by the likes of Louis Blanc to address the social question. Few recognised that, to quote Kropotkin from *Modern Science and Anarchy*, that “the Jacobin club was *the bulwark of the bourgeoisie coming to power against the egalitarian tendencies of the people* [...] the *Jacobin State* [...] had been designed from the viewpoint of the bourgeois, in direct opposition to [...] the people.”

Thus the social revolution of 1848 drew its ideas, its imagery, its tactics from a bourgeois revolution, bourgeois politics, bourgeois vision, and a bourgeois structure. They aimed at the “one and indivisible republic” and so strengthening the *bourgeois* state and pushed the focus of activity to the centre, to politicians. They proclaimed the need for universal suffrage within this republic, so enchainning the militant minority to the many. This meant they could not defend – never mind

extend – the gains of the revolution for the conservatives could point to the radicals own politics and proclaim they, not the radicals, embodied the voice of the people (which Rousseau had so casually equated to the voice of god). Likewise, the radicals viewed the (bourgeois) State as the means of achieving the “Organisation of Labour,” so resulting in an expectation that change was top-down, that the initiative was from above, not below. Then there was the notion that political reform came first, then social reform. This not only did nothing to help the economic crisis, it did not undermine capitalist economic power and simply ensured that change was postponed until a majority across the nation elected the right government, in other words indefinitely.

Few then recognised that a working class revolution needed new visions, new politics, new structures based on our class organisations. Few do so now, with Leninism inheriting the Jacobin mantle and failing to understand the lessons of 1917, never mind those of 1848.

So what is the alternative? As Daniel Guérin summarised in his excellent book *Anarchism*:

“Proudhon, in the midst of the 1848 Revolution, wisely thought that it would have been asking too much of his artisans to go, immediately, all the way to ‘anarchy.’ In default of this maximum program, he sketched out a minimum libertarian program: progressive reduction in the power of the State, parallel development of the power of the people from below, through what he called clubs, and which the man of the twentieth century would call councils. It seems to be the more or less conscious purpose of many contemporary socialists to seek out such a program.”

In other words, the lesson is the need to build organs of working class self-management, to *decentre* society, within the community and within the economy. To rip as many functions as possible from the state and capital and place them into the hands of the people and their social and economic federations. To not wait until after a revolution to build such working class organisations, but to create or get involved in community and workplace organisations now. Indeed, Kropotkin urged for such an approach during the 1905 Russian Revolution. Proudhon put it in 1851:

“The proletariat, gradually dejacobinised, demands its share, not only of direct suffrage in the affairs of society, but of direct action.”

That, in a few words, is the lesson of 1848.

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I consulted numerous books when preparing this talk. However, the following are the ones I drew on most. They are in no particular order and I am fully aware that some contradict others (particularly in terms of their accounts of Proudhon's ideas) and so judgement must be used. I must also note Marx and Engels quotes are from the *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, except for *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* for which I used the new translation in Cowling and Martin's *Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire*.

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