The Tragic Farce of Marx, Hegel, and Engels: A Note

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Marx begins his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* with a famous paragraph: Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. Caussidière for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre, the Montagne of 1848 to 1851 for the Montagne of 1793 to 1795, the Nephew for the Uncle. And the same caricature occurs in the circumstances attending the second edition of the eighteenth Brumaire!

He then follows this paragraph with equally striking ones, in which he shows how “Men make their own history,” but hitherto by borrowing disguises and languages from the past, going through their new and revolutionary roles as if sleepwalkers, awakened from the dead, unconscious of what they are really doing. “Thus,” Marx concludes, “the awakening of the dead in those revolutions [1642 and 1789] served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not of parodying the old; of magnifying the given task in imagination, not of fleeing from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not of making its ghost walk about again.”

Oddly enough, few commentators on Marx have sought to look more closely at these passages and to analyze them. Where they have, as in Stanley Edgar Hyman’s *Tangled Bank*, the emphasis is on Marx’s well-known propensity to theatrical form and images. To my knowledge, for example, no one has tracked down “Hegel remarks somewhere” to its source, and taken it seriously. The passage Marx is thinking of is a brief comment by Hegel in the *Philosophy of History* on Caesar and the Roman State. According to Hegel, in ending the Republic, “Caesar, judged by the great scope of history, did the Right.” Brutus, Cassius, and the other conspirators at the time, Hegel tells us, thought otherwise, “supposing Caesar's role to be a merely adventitious thing.” Hegel then passes his judgment on the matter:

But it became immediately manifest that only a single will could guide the Roman State, and now the Romans were compelled to adopt that opinion; since in all periods of the world a political revolution is sanctioned in men’s opinions, when it repeats itself. Thus, Napoleon was twice defeated, and the Bourbons twice expelled. By repetition that which at first appeared merely a matter of chance and contingency, becomes a real and ratified existence.

If I am right about this passage as the source for Marx’s memory of Hegel’s remark, then we are in the presence of another of Marx’s famous inversions. Again, he has stood Hegel on his head. For clearly, Hegel sees repetition in world history as a mark of ratification, sanctifying what has happened. He has not “forgotten” to add, the first time as tragedy, the second as farce; for such an addition would utterly contradict what he is saying.

Actually, Marx seems to have borrowed the whole tragedy-farce notion about the Eighteenth Brumaire from Engels, and added the Hegel allusion merely as an opener. In a letter of December 3, 1851, Engels remarks to Marx: “The history of France has reached the stage of supreme comedy. Could anything funnier be imagined than this travesty of the Eighteenth Brumaire carried out in time of peace by the most insignificant man in the whole world with the aid of discontented soldiers and, so far as one can judge at present, without meeting with any resistance whatever?” A few paragraphs further on, Engels expands on his idea:

it really seems as if old Hegel in his grave were acting as World Spirit and directing history, ordaining most conscientiously that it should all be unrolled twice over, once as a great tragedy and once as a wretched farce, with Caussidière for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre, Barthélémy for St. Just, Flocon for Carnot, and that mooncalf with the first dozen debt-encumbered lieutenants picked at random for the Little Corporal and his Round Table of marshals. And so we have already arrived at the Eighteenth Brumaire.4

Obviously, then, Engels is the source of Marx’s basic imagery and of his confusion about Hegel’s “remark.” This view is strengthened by Marx’s own admission in his reply to Engels of December 9, 1851: “Quite bewildered by these tragicomic events in Paris, I have kept you waiting for an answer.”5 But Marx’s bewilderment did not last long. Sometime apparently between December 1851 and March 1852, he wrote the brilliant Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. In it, he incorporated Engels’ original idea.

Engels was not, of course, the first to entertain the general notion of political revolution as theater—tragedy or farce—though he probably came by it on his own. De Tocqueville, for example, in February of 1848 had written in his Recollections:

Men were fruitlessly endeavouring to warm themselves at the fire of our fathers’ passions, imitating their gestures and attitudes as they had seen them represented on the stage, but unable to imitate their enthusiasm or to be inflamed with their fury. . . . Although I clearly saw that the catastrophe of the piece would be a terrible one, I was never able to take the actors very seriously, and the whole seemed to me like a bad tragedy performed by provincial actors.6

We cannot accuse Engels, however, of unacknowledged borrowing, as De Tocqueville’s Recollections were not published until 1863. Presumably the idea was generally in the air, and both men drew on public inspiration.

In any case, in Marx’s use of the borrowed imagery, we have an interesting insight into his creativity. We see how he used other men’s ideas for his own pur-

4. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Selected Correspondence (Moscow, n.d.), 73, 75.
5. Ibid., 77.
6. I have used the translation quoted in A. J. P. Taylor, From Napoleon to Lenin (New York, 1966), 56.
poses, exploiting them, so to speak, and standing them on their heads. Moral condemnation in this matter would be beside the point, and a misunderstanding of the way in which the creative process works. For Marx was a genius, who transmuted what he borrowed into his own particular, finer metal. Thus, he used the theatrical image of tragedy and farce in order to dramatize a major piece of theoretical analysis: that earlier revolutions (e.g., 1642 or 1789) could bring about drastic change only by the bourgeois society hiding its true purposes from itself by means of historical disguises, whereas a future revolution could succeed only by being fully conscious of its purposes. This is what Marx has in mind when he says in *Eighteenth Brumaire*:

> The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past. Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to drug themselves concerning their own content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead.

(At this point, the impish Marx cannot help adding another of his famous chiasmatic formulations: "There the phrase went beyond the content; here the content goes beyond the phrase."{*})

At the end, then, we can see that, in his way, Marx has remained partly true to Hegel, in spite of misconstruing his specific remark. Marx, by emphasizing the need for consciousness, has held fast to the kernel of truth in Hegel's formulations about man being free only when he comprehends his history. Hegel had restricted his insight by claiming that man can only be conscious about what has happened "after the owl of Minerva" has taken flight. Marx, more presumptuous, would have man "make his own history" in the full light of reason. For Marx, only a conscious political revolution, with its eyes fixed on the future, could make men fully free. This, surely, is the utopian dream Marx wished to substitute for the "nightmare" of the past, which he saw weighing "on the brain of the living."

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