

Bonapartism

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After the endless crisis of Marxism, the universal applicability of a materialist reading of history has lost much of its credibility, but it has opened up a new perspective on Marx as a uniquely perceptive commentator not only of his own time, but also of ours. One of the most remarkable essays in this respect is his commentary on the rise of the future French emperor Napoléon III in *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte* (1852). Marx's detailed account of French politics between 1848 and 1852 has generally been considered a "largely unintelligible compendium of anomalies", and at best as the "untidy version of the 1859 Preface". But in fact, this text "reveals that Marx was a pioneer analyst of the politics of representation and a first-rank theorist of contingency." (Carver 2004 104, 108-9). In times when political leaders are ridiculed as idiots and feared as ghosts of an uncanny past, Marx's analysis of Bonapartist rule offers what might be called a "spectral" analysis of the vicissitudes of political power.

Many considered Charles-Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte (1808-1873), nephew of Napoléon Bonaparte, and emperor of the French Second Empire (1852-1871), to be a fool. After a hare-brained coup d'état against the regime of king Louis Philippe in 1836, he went into exile in London, where he wrote *Des Idées Napoléoniennes* (1839), in which he claimed his uncle's legacy as a new Caesar, as "exécuteur

testamentaire" of the French Revolution, and as savior of the French nation (Bonaparte 1839, 15-30). Despite his adoption of the cloak of Napoléon, a second coup d'état the nephew staged in his uncle's name in 1840 was also a failure "beyond comedy", as the *Journal des Débats* commented: "One shouldn't kill fools, but they should be locked up" (quoted in Milza 2004, 128). And so it happened. Nevertheless, Louis Bonaparte was able to amass a following, which in 1846 helped him to escape from prison and to go back to London.

Louis returned to Paris two years later, after the revolutionaries of 22-24 February 1848 had ousted king Louis Philippe, and only a few days before Karl Marx entered the city. Although Marx quickly moved on to Germany, he became a witness and commentator of the remarkable turn in the career of Louis Bonaparte. On the basis of the new constitution, reintroducing general male suffrage, Louis won a seat in the National Assembly in the by-elections of June 1848, and on 10 December he won the first presidential elections by a landslide, notably because of the support of the French farmers, who probably supported anyone by the name of Napoléon. Within four years, he became president for life, and finally emperor Napoléon III. Even then, the famous author and member of the National Assembly, Victor Hugo, wrote a scathing critique entitled *Napoléon le Petit* in which he argued that Louis was "a personnage vulgaire, puerile, théâtral et vain". He was maybe after all "not an idiot", but definitely a crook and a fraud, who "doesn't speak but only lies" (Hugo 1852, 19, 21, 34 and 39).

In *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*, Marx initially seemed to follow the ridicule of Hugo. He famously opened his comments on Louis Bonaparte's path to power with the statement that "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" (Marx 1852, 103). Yet in opposition to this ironical reading of political history, Marx then seemed to present a materialist analysis of his times, arguing that "upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of different and distinctly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life.

The entire class creates and forms them out of its material foundations and out of the corresponding social relations” (Marx 1852, 128).

However, as Marx remarked in the 1869 preface to the second edition of *Der achtzehnte Brumaire*, he rejected not only Hugo, who unintentionally gave the “little Napoléon” world-historical proportions, but he also criticized the materialist reading of the events by the anarchist thinker Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who ultimately had celebrated the coup of Louis Bonaparte as a necessary moment in the march towards democracy (Marx 1869). Instead, the gist of Marx’s argument was that history is not fully determined by class dynamics. For one thing, “sentiments and illusions” are transmitted “through tradition and upbringing” as a result of which people “may imagine that they form the real motives and the starting-point of his activity” (Marx 1852, 128). It was as a result of such “traditional” self-conceptions that labor was divided between workers and farmers, the latter of whom were deceived about their position due to their relation to the land. But also the bourgeoisie was divided between the supporters of the house of Bourbon (which ruled during the Restoration between 1815 and 1830) and the Orleanist supporters of the dethroned king Louis Philippe, who were both unaware of the actual basis of their difference as a conflict within the bourgeoisie between landed property and financial capital. More importantly, the bourgeoisie became only belatedly aware of “the logical conclusion [of] its own parliamentary regime”, namely that it “lives in struggle and by struggle” (Marx 1852, 142).

The result of these accumulated contradictions was a general confusion about “alliances whose first proviso is separation; struggles whose first law is indecision; wild, inane agitation in the name of tranquility; most solemn preaching of tranquility in the name of revolution; passions without truth, truths without passion; heroes without heroic deeds, history without events” (Marx 1852, 125). In these opaque conditions, Louis Bonaparte was able to rise above the warring parties, and to present himself as the savior of the nation, who claimed to serve the interests of “the people”, yet in his claim to restore “order” actually saved the bourgeoisie from its own divisive weakness. At the same time, it brought him increasingly into

conflict with the parliamentary party of order, leading to a pattern not unfamiliar to the observer of contemporary Trumpist politics:

As often as the ministers dared to make a diffident attempt to introduce his personal fads as legislative proposals, they themselves seemed to carry out, against their will only and compelled by their position, comical commissions of whose fruitlessness they were convinced in advance. [...] He behaved like an unrecognised genius, whom all the world takes for a simpleton. (Marx 1852, 140)

The conflict with the parliamentary party of order became even more intense after it abolished universal male suffrage – according to Marx “the coup d’état of the bourgeoisie” (Marx 1852, 146). It enabled Louis Bonaparte to present himself as the only representative of the people’s interest – who thus should have no limit to his presidential term. To plead his case directly with the people, he toured around the country, accompanied by the members of the “Society of 10 December”, an untidy assembly of “pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, maquereaus, brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ-grinders, rag-pickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars – in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French term *la bohème*” (Marx 1852, 148). Like Trump’s community of twitterati after him, Louis Bonaparte thus successfully created an alternative theatre of political representation that became a fundamental challenge to parliamentary power. It helped Louis to stage the coup d’état of 2 December 1851, and a plebiscite that legitimized his installation as emperor exactly a year later.

The essence of Marx’s explanation of the success of Louis is expressed in the famous line “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx 1852, 103). Against the tendency to interpret this statement as a confirmation of historical determinism, it actually forms the starting point for a “spectral” analysis of political power, defined not by any iron laws of history, but by the imaginary

force of the past, in which the “tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (Marx 1852, 103).

In many different ways, Marx emphasized the spectral nature of the historical processes he was witnessing. It was not just the “specter of communism” which was haunting Europe, but more importantly the ghosts of the past defined the present by a process which Marx described as “world-historical necromancy” (Marx 1852, 104). It was evidently first of all the spirit of Napoléon which inspired the remarkable rise of the nephew, but before that already, the contemporary political stage had been dressed by the players of the past. Just like the French Revolution had re-enacted the Roman Republic, so had the revolutionaries of 1848 followed the script of 1789. But while in previous revolutions, “the resurrection of the dead [...] served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not of parodying the old”, in the revolution of 1848 “only the ghost of the old revolution walked about” (Marx 1852, 105). Louis Bonaparte was no more than a degenerate schemer who “conceives the historical life of the nations and their performances of state as comedy in the most vulgar sense, as a masquerade where the grand costumes, words and postures merely serve to mask the pettiest knavery” (Marx 1852, 149). He was so enthralled by staging his own image that he became “the serious buffoon who no longer takes world history for a comedy but his comedy for world history” (Marx 1852, 150).

Despite its imaginary character, this masquerade of history had a fundamental political impact. By resurrecting the ghost of Napoléon, Louis forged a constituency out of a formless mass of individuals. On the one hand, he constituted “himself chief of the Lumpenproletariat, who here alone rediscovers in mass form the interests which he personally pursues, who recognizes in this scum, offal, refuse of all classes the only class upon which he can base himself unconditionally” (Marx 1852, 148). On the other hand, he forged a unity from the “vast mass” of the small-holding peasants, who “live in similar conditions but without entering into manifold relations with one another”, “formed by simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes” and therefore “incapable of enforcing their class interests in their own name”. In this respect,

Napoléon performed an essential role: “They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, as an unlimited governmental power that protects them against the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. The political influence of the small-holding peasants, therefore, finds its final expression in the executive power subordinating society to itself” (Marx 1852, 187-8).

Marx’s aesthetic theory of representation – prefiguring Ankersmit’s (2002) notion that representation is not a mimetic copy, but a creative imagining of what is represented – implied that civil society was subjected to a “state machine” led by a “casual adventurer from abroad, raised up as leader by a drunken soldiery.” (Marx 1852, 186). Louis positioned himself at the same time as the impartial champion of the public order and as mouthpiece for large sections of French society that so far had failed to find a political expression of their interests. Yet the success of the new emperor’s imaginary power was also due to the fact that it had entertainment value for a society that according to many succumbed under petty self-interest: “Violent political passions have little hold on men who have in this way attached their entire soul to the pursuit of wellbeing,” argued Tocqueville (1840, 1139). Or as one of the main protagonists of the revolution of 1848, Alphonse de Lamartine, argued more pointedly in 1839, “La France est une nation qui s’ennuie!” – 1968, prefaced by a similar discourse of boredom, was in many ways a re-enactment of 1848 (Lamartine 1839; Viansson-Ponté 1968). Louis Bonaparte was leader of the *bohème*, and the political dandy par excellence, who turned politics into a costume party, dressing up in military attire as the emperor that had long been dead, and thereby demonstrating the imaginary nature of Bonapartism as a mode of political power.

In the end, Marx rejected the scenario Bonapartism enacted as that of the French Revolution “in reverse” (Marx 1852, 124). In this zombie-version of history “Men and events appear as inverted Schlemihls, as shadows that have lost their bodies. [...] When the ‘red spectre’, continually conjured up and exorcised by the counterrevolutionaries, finally appears, it appears not with the Phrygian cap of anarchy

on its head, but in the uniform of order, in red breeches” (Marx 1852, 125). This obsessive re-enactment of the past contrasted sharply with the nature of a truly social revolution, which “cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. [...] In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead” (Marx 1852, 106).

The utopian energy of this progressive revolutionary ideal defined the political logic of the century between 1848 and 1968. But this legacy of the social revolution survives today only “sous une forme *spectrale*”, in the guise of a melancholic longing for a past long gone (Traverso 2016, 21). Marx’s analysis suggests that the demise of progressive history at the same time revealed the spectral nature of political representation. Bonapartism, and related forms of political power such as populism, are “specters of democracy”, that might bring power to the imagination, but it may also awaken the specters of the past that haunt us in our political nightmares.

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