

GUSTAV BANG

Crises in European History

Translated by Arnold Petersen



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By Gustav Bang

(Translated by Arnold Petersen)

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Introductions.

Introduction to the First American Edition.

Gustav Bang's work, *Crises in European History* (*Brydningstider i Europas Historie*), was first published serially in the *Daily People* during 1909–10. As an economic interpretation of three important crises in European history it is perhaps one of the best, considering the brevity of the work. Dr. Bang here employs to the best advantage the Marxian key, and succeeds in unraveling what to the average reader usually appear to be mysteries or near mysteries. As the author explains in his introduction, the motive power of historical changes is to be found in the economic basis of a given society, in the methods of production and exchange peculiar to that society. To put it in this manner is, of course, to lay oneself open to the charge of teaching that that economic basis, and nothing else, influences the historical processes. Dr. Bang, however, in the concrete examples chosen furnishes ample evidence to show that while that undoubtedly is the chief, and in the long run the really important factor, the line cannot be drawn too sharply between cause and effect, seeing the effect frequently reacts upon the cause, stimulating it and aiding in accelerating (or retarding temporarily, as the case may be) the historical process.

The publishers have felt that the work deserved a wider circle of readers than was possible through the *Daily People*, and for this reason present it to the English-speaking working class in booklet form.

Since this work was first published Dr. Bang has passed away. His death was a loss to the international movement, especially at a time when all the clearest and ablest men in that movement were needed.

Gustav Bang was born September 26, 1871, in a small provincial town in Denmark. He died on January 31, 1915. His father was a minister, who also acquired a considerable reputation as a historian, and it was from the father that young Bang imbibed his love of history.

He became interested in the socialist movement at an early age and continued his activity in the movement for 20 years, i.e., until the time of his death, delivering lectures, compiling statistics, writing for the Danish party organ, etc. Like most men of his character and learning Bang was a tireless worker and a prolific writer. Other works by him, besides the present one, are: *The Rise of Capitalism*; *The Socialist Republic*; *Cultural History of Europe*; *Georgeism*, and a number of smaller

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and larger works. Aside from occasional articles translated for the *Daily and Weekly People* nothing outside of the present work seems to have been translated into English. More should, and undoubtedly will, be translated in the future.

Dr. Bang was a quiet and unobtrusive man, unassuming almost to the point of self-effacement. And like most scholars he was totally devoid of vanity. Though he has added nothing to the fundamental principles of sociology and economics, he has done much to make these principles, i.e., the principles of Marxian socialism, better known to and more easily understood by a large circle of working-class readers. For this he deserves a niche in the hall of fame of international socialism.

ARNOLD PETERSEN

New York
April 1916

Introduction to the Second American Edition.

A new, revised edition of Dr. Gustav Bang's celebrated *Crises in European History* having been found necessary, a few supplementary remarks to the original preface seem in order. Two score years and more have passed since the present writer translated this work. It has gone through many printings with thousands of copies distributed throughout the English-speaking world. Translations have been made from this translation into other languages—there comes to mind particularly a pirated edition in Greek, this present translator having been rewarded with anonymity! It is impossible to say how many Socialists it has made, but the figure in any case should prove impressive.

This translation was made within a few months after the original was published in Denmark. Dr. Bang was then at the height of his intellectual powers, though apparently his physical powers were waning. As noted before, he died in 1915, at the early age of 44. During the preceding months he had been working on a series of articles entitled "After the War," which unfortunately he did not finish. I translated the opening chapters, and they were published in the *Weekly People* at the time. It is, of course, impossible to say what course Dr. Bang would have followed after the First World War, but it seems safe to say that he would have found himself in rebellion against the Social Democratic Party, already then

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strongly infected with the capitalist reform virus, and now indistinguishable from out-and-out capitalist reform parties. It is inconceivable that Dr. Bang could have reconciled himself to the role of apologist for capitalist principles and policies, and still less as apologist for the renegades who have consented to manage the Danish capitalist political state—which is to say, to serve as agents for the class that subsists on the toil of the working class. It seems probable that he would have taken the same course as Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxembour, despite his early admiration for the renegade Kautsky, who, of course, had not then as yet turned traitor.

All this, however, is speculation, and must remain so. But, if a man's worth is proven by what he wrought, Dr. Bang will rank high in the esteems of posterity. Had he lived on, it is probable that he would have added a fourth chapter to his *European Crises*—the period after the First World War. This was indicated in the aforementioned unfinished work, *After the War*, in which he made the following observations:

“There are strong indications that we stand at the beginning of a new period in which the old capitalist-militarist society will disintegrate and collapse. Not that the victory of socialism will follow immediately after the ending of the war, since the proletariat in the various countries will not at once be able to conquer political power, and use that power to transform society in accordance with its class interests. Full and permanent conquest of power by the proletariat (even if social conditions were ripe) will hardly follow a single revolutionary episode. Rather, by all signs, it will be the result of a shorter or longer revolutionary period—a transition period in which the determining struggles between the possessing and dispossessed classes are fought to a finish; a period during which the utmost efforts will be exerted, wherein the last ‘reserves’ are called up, wherein everything is staked at one throw, and wherein progress and retrogression will alternate from time to time, but wherein the ultimate result, ‘The victory of the working class; the destruction of capitalism,’ becomes a matter of course.”

Continuing, Dr. Bang observed that, of course, the historic development does not constitute an automatic play of blind forces but, on the contrary, it constitutes classconscious efforts to reach predetermined goals. And he added: “The situation that will present itself at the close of the war will offer the proletariat extraordinary opportunities—opportunities for mighty progress for the working class, in political, economic and spiritual respects, opportunities, however, which may be lost if the proletariat at the decisive moment stands weak and vacillating, in inner self-

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conflict, and uncertain as to means and methods.” And one might add: “and uncertain as to substance and goal.”

For, unhappily, the opportunity was lost during the period immediately following the termination of the First World War, due precisely to the absence of Marxist substance and lack of clarity as to goal in the programs of the European Social Democratic parties. And by thus letting the opportunity slip by, the fascist-Stalinist reaction was made possible, and thereby made inevitable the Second World War, and the postwar reaction now reaching its climax in the shadow of the globe-destroying hydrogen bomb.

Nonetheless, it is not yet too late to heed the warnings of Dr. Bang and De Leon, and, for that matter, of Marx and Engels, who never tired of warning that the historical process is not an automatic affair, nor a checkerboard game, and that the victory of socialism is, and must remain, dependent on the classconscious acts of the proletariat. And this implies education—socialist education. And, once again, as a Socialist educator, Gustav Bang ranks among the best.

Crises in European History remains one of the best studies in the materialist conception of history. Larger works have been written on the subject but few if any are more valuable and effective. One of its outstanding virtues is its brevity, its conciseness, apart from its scientific soundness. It is difficult to conceive of any intelligent, literate person remaining unaffected by its logic and its marshaling of facts and incidents that demonstrate the complete validity of Marx’s celebrated hypothesis. Dr. Bang also wrote a monograph entitled *The Materialist Conception of History* (den Materialistiske Historieopfattelse) in which he dealt more particularly with the *theory* of this Marxian key to the unlocking of the door that leads to a complete understanding of what has happened in the past and *why*, as well as to a better understanding of the events of the present and the probable future. It is hoped that it may be possible to translate this important work for publication in the *Weekly People*, and possibly as a pamphlet. For at no previous critical period in history was it more important than at this present awesome crisis to understand fully the motive power of history, the explanation of which Marx, with brilliant brevity, has summed up in the following:

“In every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organization necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which is built up, and from which alone can be explained the political and intellectual history of that epoch.”

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The Socialist Labor Party is the only organization that consistently and tirelessly has preached the scientifically sound principles formulated by Marx, so succinctly compressed in the foregoing quotation, and so ably expounded by Dr. Bang in his brilliant treatises. It will continue to do so to the end.

(The footnotes throughout are by the translator where not other-wise noted.)

ARNOLD PETERSEN

New York

Sept. 21, 1954

CRISES IN EUROPEAN HISTORY.

1. Historical Materialism.

Looking back over the history of the human race, one perceives a steady development, an uninterrupted chain of fundamental changes in all social relations. The political and juridical institutions, the intellectual culture, the customs and habits, moral concepts—in fine, everything which conjointly forms the common civilization of a given society is in a continuous process of change—birth, growth, development, decay and final supplanting by new forms. We not only live differently in the age of factories, railroads, telephones and automobiles than did our grandparents, but we also think and act quite differently; we are absorbed in entirely new interests, guided by new ideas, fighting for new aims. Times are changing and people change with them. What a span of development lies not between the mighty modern manufacturer and the modest master craftsman of the Middle Ages; and who can measure the chasm which separates the culture of our time from the way of living and thinking of the man of the Stone Age?

The history of the human race, accordingly, forms itself as a steady development, and a succession of great periods in this movement are to be distinguished. Graeco-Roman antiquity has its peculiar aspect; the Middle Ages and our modern time theirs. But the movement does not proceed forward smoothly and imperceptibly; from time to time violent clashes occur—catastrophes during which the old culture is destroyed and a new one is seen to appear. These crises, however, do not come as a bolt from a clear sky; a close observation of the movement in the preceding epoch will show how the revolutionary periods are gradually formed, how new forces appear and gain in strength until they finally burst the existing social relations. It is further seen how each revolutionary crisis itself forms the beginning of a new period of evolution, which again in the future leads to new catastrophes. The historical process of society is thus effected by a change of epochs with an even and steady development, and scenes of a violent and stormy character—but these two forms of evolution do not stand in opposition to each other any more than the “revolutionary” act of childbirth is in opposition to the slow growth of the embryo in the mother’s womb.

What, then, is this ever acting force which produces the historical process of

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transformation? The solution to this riddle was given more than half a century ago by the great Socialist thinker, Karl Marx.

Marx found that the fundamental cause of the historical development in social and intellectual life was to be sought in the changes which took place in the methods of production with which man acquired newer and more appropriate means to procure the necessaries of life and satisfy his various needs. The productive forces which at a given time are at the disposal of the people form a power to which the race is subjected; man is compelled to adapt his life in conformity to these, and he does so quite instinctively, as if yielding to a natural power. The sum of all these productive forces forms the basis of society. They determine at any given time the prevailing political institutions, the property and juridical relations; they affect the moral, the religious, the artistic conceptions and views; all social life, all cultured life obtains its nourishment from the material relations of production and the corresponding economic conditions of life. But gradually as the productive forces become developed, through new inventions and discoveries, an antithesis appears. The property relations, the juridical and political relations no longer correspond to the basis upon which they rest. New demands manifest themselves, new ideas crop up; at first vague and indistinct, but later on with an ever growing strength and clearness. The productive forces no longer find room for a continued development within the framework of the old society; they threaten to burst the trammels and to introduce entirely new social conditions. The antithesis assumes the form of a conflict between various classes, some of which by virtue of their economic position strive to *maintain*, others because of *their* peculiar economic conditions, to *overthrow* the existing social order; and these latter classes become ever stronger and their interests become more and more dominant.

Now commences a period of social revolution, during which the property relations of the old society, with their juridical and political organizations, with their social and moral consciousness, are destroyed and supplanted by a society which responds to the new demands and furnishes an unobstructed course for a continued development of the productive forces. Thus world history is developed in close concordance with the ever progressing technique of production, through which man seeks to satisfy his needs to as great an extent and with as little effort as possible. It is the simplest, purely economic relation which at any time forms the fundamental basis of all social life and gives it its own peculiar impress. Each particular epoch of the history of the human race carries within itself the germs of

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the revolution which will destroy it, and also of the new society which must supersede it. A social system cannot be overthrown arbitrarily; it is not destroyed until the productive forces which it contains are fully developed and burst the shell. And a new society cannot be introduced arbitrarily; it must come as a historical necessity, when the conditions for its appearance have been developed in the womb of the old society.

This is the kernel in the socialist conception of history. It is a conception revolutionary in its scope; it preaches revolt against the existing, the capitalist, society, and points toward the new, the Socialist Republic.

For, if the social relations continually change in accordance with the development of the productive forces, then it follows that capitalist society is but a passing phase in human history, destined to collapse and give way to a new historical epoch, based upon entirely different principles. It contains no condemnation of the present mode of production; it is strictly objective and does not present any moral viewpoint; but it contains the death sentence of this system; it points to the proletariat as that revolutionary power which must execute this sentence, and it shows the socialist society as the necessary, as the only possible successor to capitalism.

The socialist conception of history is a scientific hypothesis. Its correctness cannot be proven in the same absolute manner in which a mathematical proposition is proven—as little, for example, as it can be proven with absolute certainty that it is the Earth which revolves around the Sun and not vice versa. It can only be maintained to the extent that it stands the test of *historical facts*. But we find then that wherever it is tried, it agrees with all ascertainable facts, and furnishes the only reasonable explanation of conditions, which, without its aid, would be utterly incomprehensible. Only through it does historical research raise itself above the separate phenomena and make clear the inner connection between them, enabling us to arrive at a complete and satisfactory explanation of such social events and movements which at various times occur in the history of the race and of the mighty social changes which form the boundaries of the different historical periods. Only through the socialist conception of history can we come to an understanding of not only *what* happens, but also *why* it happens.

We shall in the following endeavor to give in broad outlines three of the most important revolutionary epochs of European history.

2. The Rise of Christianity.

The rise of Christianity took place in that period which forms the boundary line between antiquity and the Middle Ages. And this immensely far-reaching historical event is but a link in that mighty process of dissolution and upheaval through which the old highly developed Greek and Roman culture was destroyed, through which the vast Roman Empire collapsed, and through which the ancient social relations were burst asunder and supplanted by the medieval.

Ancient society was reared upon *absolute slavery*. The major part of the socially necessary manual labor was performed by slave labor—just as in our days it is performed by personally free laborers, mental and manual. And only through such slave labor was it possible for the freemen—while the productive methods were still in a crude form—to employ themselves with public affairs, to participate in war, to occupy themselves with the arts and sciences, to develop and cultivate their bodies and indulge in other diversions. The entire ancient civilization, so rich and in many ways so wonderful, rested upon this division between freemen and slaves and was profoundly influenced by this relation.

This economic status had originally proven itself to be the most appropriate and had created peaceful and happy social conditions. Small farming was the prevailing form. The population consisted of peasants, who for the sake of association and of security lived in cities, each of which formed an independent political whole. From these they attended to the tilling of the soil, located in the immediate vicinity. The slaves were their assistants; they were quite few in number and were as a rule treated well. They belonged to the patriarchal household; they worked together with their masters in the field and in the home; they were interested in the welfare of their masters and were reliable caretakers when the masters had to go to war. The primitive farming secured to the families a safe, though modest, livelihood. It was a society free from sharp conflicts, with a vigorous, independent and self-conscious peasant-democracy, devoid of great thoughts or foresight, a sober earth-bound and earth-bred peasant culture.

Thus was the earliest ancient society, such as we find it reflected in the traditional history of the Greeks and Italians. But how entirely different were not the social conditions about the time of the advent of Christianity.

Throughout centuries the ancient agricultural relations had gradually been dissolved. And it was militarism which started this slow but sure process. The wars

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to which all able-bodied freemen had to give their personal service, were of little account so long as they were confined to petty feuds of short duration between neighboring towns. But gradually as they extended and increased in duration, they became the source of much misery and many hardships. The small landowners were compelled to leave their houses and farms for long periods, and these were neglected and became dilapidated; landowners were obliged to borrow grain from their wealthier neighbors at such usurious rates that they sank deeper and deeper in debt and had to pay heavy taxes to the rich, finally surrendering their property to these. The peasants were thus being impoverished and the numbers of those holding property were growing fewer and fewer, as their land was concentrated in the hands of a small class of rich men.¹ And as it was the wars which enabled the rich to expropriate these landholdings, so it was also the wars which supplied them with labor power for their estates. The prisoners of war became slaves. The ever increasing number of slaves was sent to the market and sold at an ever lower price. The landowners availed themselves of the opportunity. Where in former days the small independent farmer had cultivated his lots, we now find vast estates, worked by great masses of slaves, driven to work by the whip of the bailiff. And from agriculture this slave labor spread to other branches of subsistence, to the working of mines, navigation, the great common workshops, etc. All of this, insofar as there was any profit in it, was seized upon by the greedy rich, employing slave labor, everywhere displacing free labor.

Driven away from land and property, the propertyless peasants gradually assembled in the great cities, particularly at Rome, to seek means of subsistence. But the competition with the cheap slave labor prevented them from making a decent living at handicrafts, trading, or other useful activities. They were compelled to lead miserable lives as slum proletarians. Mendicity, gifts from some rich man or other who would also take poor people in his service in order to raise himself in public esteem, but above all *public charity*, became their only sources of revenue. The free proletarian was not only a citizen, having the right to vote at the election of officials, which right opened to him opportunities for sharing in the big bribes by which the rich bought popular favors, but he also possessed the privilege of obtaining aid from the state.² From olden time it had been customary for the public

¹ “The internal history [of ancient Rome] simply resolves itself into the struggle of small versus large landed property, specifically modified, of course, by slave conditions.”—Karl Marx.

² “The Roman proletariat lived at the expense of society, while modern society lives at the expense of the proletariat.”—J.C.L. de Sismondi, quoted by Marx in his preface to *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

to endeavor to satisfy the needs of the proletariat by distribution of grain and other victuals, by feeding them gratis, and also by giving them access to all kinds of amusements. The proletariat demanded such support, and as their numbers grew, their demands became greater and greater. The ruling class was compelled to meet these demands. The hungry populace was a restive lot, and if their hunger became too keen, violent, revolutionary explosions could be anticipated.

What a difference between our modern working-class proletarians, who through their labor support society, and that proletariat of hungry individuals which then flocked to Rome and other great cities, unaccustomed to work through generations of inactivity, with no other resources than the private and public charity, unable to give, but eager to receive—a population which only consumed of the wealth of society.³

In order to procure means wherewith to satisfy the hunger and demands of the continually increasing proletariat, it became necessary to extend the possessions of the state, to subject foreign nations and force them to pay taxes. The ruling powers eagerly seized upon the opportunity. They thereby not only established peace within and checked the uprisings of the proletariat, but they also acquired great riches through the exploitation of the conquered countries, as governors, tax gatherers, moneylenders, and monopolizing merchants. The demands of the proletariat for a living at the expense of the state, and the insatiable greed of the plutocracy were the moving factors in the *policy of conquest* of the ancient states.

THE SOCIAL COST OF SLAVERY.

At the time of Christ, the conquest of the then-known world by the Roman Empire had been accomplished. Rome, the Roman ruling class, as a fantastic monster, extended its dominion to all sides, from the interior of Asia to the Atlantic Ocean, from as far north as England down to the Desert of Sahara, as the great exploiter, absorbing the wealth of all nations, concentrating an incomprehensible luxury in the hands of a few, and forcing all society further and further down in misery and poverty. Whatever was left of free peasants and artisans, was fleeced by tremendous taxes—not without reason did the Roman “publicans” become the object of the hatred of the population—and sank deeper into hopeless poverty. The communes throughout the different countries had to obtain loans at exceedingly

³ “The Roman proletarians became, not wage laborers, but a mob of do-nothings more abject than the former ‘poor whites’ in the southern country of the United States....”—Marx.

usurious rates in order to pay the enormous high taxes, and fell thereby into the clutches of the Roman financiers, who did not let go until the last particle of wealth had been extracted. Whatever wealth there was in the conquered countries was brought to Rome.

The social conditions brought about by this exploitation were so bad that it was not only quite common for people to sell themselves into slavery, but they also felt greatly relieved once they, as slaves, were no longer subjected to the worries and sufferings which they had undergone as freemen.

The ever increasing proletarianizing of the great mass of the population, the gigantic concentration of wealth in the hands of an infinitesimal number of individuals, the ruthless and ever farther reaching exploitation—that is the movement observed at the time of Christ throughout the vast Roman Empire. Apparently there is a similarity between this development and the one which the capitalist mode of production produces in our days. But only apparently so. In reality the social conditions were then of an entirely different nature.

While the capitalist method of production forces into existence an ever higher working technique, endless inventions and discoveries, which enable the race to produce an increasing amount of the necessaries of life and objects of pleasure with less exertion, thereby creating the necessary conditions for a higher form of society, in which the technical progress can fully redound to the benefit of humanity, through the socialist method of production and distribution—there was nothing in ancient society which corresponded to this; no germ of a higher form of society; everything pointed downward and backward, nothing upward and forward.

DISSOLUTION OF SLAVE SOCIETY.

Slavery, the fundamental basis of the whole society, formed an insurmountable obstacle to all technical progress. It followed, that when slave labor was as cheap as it was, there was no incentive to seek new, more appropriate working methods by which labor power might be saved. A machine which made it possible to do the same amount of work with less men, in shorter time and with less efforts, would in but a few cases be a saving to the master, because the acquisition of such would entail far greater expenditures than could be saved by reducing the working force. The cognition of natural sciences which slowly developed had, with very few exceptions, little or no effect upon the general productivity.

It was not only through its cheapness that slave labor hampered technical

progress, but also through its baseness. The slaves no longer, as in the old patriarchal days, lived under the same roof as their masters and went with them to work, but were kept locked up in barracks closely watched. They were unintelligent, unreliable, disinterested, lazy, and could only be driven to work by the bailiff's whip. All the bad qualities were cultivated and promoted by the conditions under which they lived. For the sufferings to which they were subjected they took revenge by torturing the domestic animals on the estates, by destroying the implements wherever they had the chance and by doing as much damage and being of as little use as possible. It was possible, to a certain extent, to force them to do the crudest, the simplest work; but for the finer, more complicated work their ability did not suffice. It would have been quite impossible to put the great mass of them to a task requiring care and forethought, interest and skill.

The *stagnation of productive forces* thus became a necessary consequence of the prevailing social property relations of the master's property rights over his workmen's lives. They became paralyzed; there was no room for their further development within the framework of slave society. The existing juridical conditions had to be burst before newer and more advantageous productive relations could be established. Everywhere the superiority of free labor gradually came to be recognized, and an adaptation in accordance with this conception was begun. Toward the decline of ancient Rome it became quite common for the masters to liberate their slaves or give them a small wage which in later years would enable them to buy their freedom; but the liberated slave remained in a state of dependency on his former master, to whom he had to give up part of his income, or pay it as a yearly tax. And the income derived from these released slaves who earned their living as artisans or merchants, was generally far greater than the surplus which the slave produced over and above his keep. Such was the condition in the cities.

In the country a similar movement manifested itself. The vast estates, cultivated by slaves, were found to be more and more unprofitable. Instead, the landowners began to parcel out their land and lease it to semi-free peasants who had to pay a fixed yearly rent or give up a certain part of the product. In this manner the rich made greater gains than they did from slave labor.

Thus old society was gradually dissolved; *medieval society* was reared on its ruins, though as yet only here and there, and in vague forms.

The paralysis of the productive forces which was produced by the social

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institutions of the ancient world did not mean only *stagnation*; it also meant *retrogression*. It was not the majority of the population alone, but it was society as a whole which became impoverished and whose sources of wealth gradually became exhausted.

The exploitation by the state and the rich of the population of the Empire carried with it a continuous squandering of values. While under the capitalist system of production the great mass of wealth which the capitalists absorb is invested in new means of production, in factories, mines, land improvements, means of transportation and other things necessary to produce new wealth, under the old social system there was little or no opportunity for such a productive application of the booty acquired. The taxes and usurious interests, which like a golden stream were flowing from Asia, Europe, and Africa into Rome, were lavishly spent on festivals, theatrical performances, magnificent buildings, and the like. They merely represented a never ceasing exploitation; always to take and never to replace. Growing poverty, misery and decay throughout the Empire was the necessary result; and year after year it became worse.

Other causes contributed to this state of affairs. The soil became exhausted. The managing of the vast estates of the rich Romans was rapacious, they were veritable grain factories with the least possible number of domestic animals, with a reckless utilization of the soil, regardless of its capacity to yield; with the greatest possible immediate gain in view, and no thought whatever for the future. Greater and greater quantities of grain were sent to Rome, Alexandria, and other large cities, and no attempt was made to restore to the soil in any form the substance taken therefrom. The resources of the soil became exhausted; its fertility decreased; its capacity to support the population declined. And militarism at the same time meant a continued drain on society.

Ever greater were the sacrifices demanded for the defense of the extensive boundaries of the vast Empire against barbarian peoples. The Roman citizen army did not suffice, and the oppressed and starved proletariat became more and more unfit material for war. Hired barbarian troops had to be contended with; they became increasingly expensive, constantly demanding higher pay as they realized how indispensable they were. The military burdens grew incessantly, swallowing a greater and greater portion of the wealth which was scraped together from all over the world. In order to satisfy these military demands, peaceful pursuits had to be abandoned. The wonderful roads could not be maintained; the great water mains

collapsed; the extensive drainings, undertakings, which had transformed desolate, fever-breeding swamps into fertile fields, were given up, and the regions became depopulated and were withdrawn from civilization.

The result of it all was decay, a sure and steady march to poverty everywhere. It was a society which had lived beyond its means, and now approached its inevitable destruction. It creaked in all its joints; everywhere the dissolution which took place was felt. In all classes a feeling of discomfort prevailed. Everyone was perplexed and disheartened by the disasters looming up. There were no great cheerful future possibilities; there was only decadence and darkness.

These desperate social conditions were deeply impressed on the minds of the populace. They gave the *intellectual life* a different stamp, and thus came to prepare the way for Christianity and its victorious march throughout the world.

In the petty agricultural society of the earliest days, the religious conceptions had been a sort of rationalistic nature-religion, where the natural elements of which little or nothing was known had been given human form. Mysticism was entirely absent. There was no such thing as a personal god idea; the priests, appointed by the state, attended to the regular offerings at certain times, and so long as they were properly observed the gods had no further claims on the citizens. Sin and consciousness of sin were unknown concepts. If a man acted in the interest of the state, of society, he acted well; and only when he outraged public welfare was the anger of the gods aroused. How he acted in private life was his own concern. The question of life hereafter did not agitate his mind to any extent—the present life demanded his whole attention; and if anyone formed any idea at all of things beyond the grave, it was at most a vague conception of a gray and joyless shadow world.

HOPELESSNESS AND MYSTICISM.

How utterly different were the religious and moral conceptions of the minds toward the close of antiquity, oppressed as they were by the growing social misery and hopelessness! Unrest, insecurity and discomfort dominated all minds. Just as there was no sign of a way out of the misery of the old society to a society on a higher and happier plane, there was no way of reflecting a healthy and robust view of life out of this chaos, a view that would spur the members on to struggle for the realization of new social ideals. While the increasing dissolution of capitalism in our days creates a richer and fresher conception of life for the subject class, as they

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gradually become conscious of their social position and historical mission, the dissolution of ancient society created a sense of general insecurity, perplexity, moral weakness. People felt as if they were on unsafe ground, and sought, terror stricken, refuge in anything which held out promise of support and consolation. These sentiments took hold, above all, of the proletariat, of the great mass of poor freemen and ex-slaves, steeped as they were in poverty, and with no resources whatever. It must be remembered how radically the proletariat of those days differed from that of our own time. The modern wage workers, as individuals, have no chance, no hope of individually being able to raise themselves to a more profitable or safer position. But considered as one of a class the worker has a world to gain through the social revolution, which is the result of the class struggle. Not so with the ancient proletarian. He felt himself abandoned to social forces which he could not combat. He saw no way out of misery, neither through individual efforts nor through a united class fight. His position was hopeless in an entirely different sense. The only real and lasting liberation which he could think of did not lie beyond the borderline of existing society, but beyond terrestrial life—there, and there only, might he hope for relief. His thoughts struck the road of mysticism and were draped in dreams and poetry, and not in consciously directed acts.

A savior was dreamt of, one who should come and redeem humanity through supernatural means, and it was for a time believed that the first emperors should accomplish this. Their persons were regarded as superhuman, as divine, and many prodigious things were related about them. A comet appeared after Caesar's funeral; it was the soul of the deceased ascending to heaven, the abode of the gods.

But the Empire could not check the process of decay. Social misery grew, and mysticism increased correspondingly. People's thoughts dwelt more and more on the life hereafter; since earthly life was as bad as it was, then surely there must be a life beyond where recompense was to be had, redemption for the present sufferings. The gray shadow world, which agitated so little the minds of the people in the old, happy days, became formed along Christian lines at the close of antiquity. Ideas of punishment and reward after death for acts committed on earth, of a pure heavenly justice, began to crop up. The moral consciousness was influenced by these conceptions. The idea of "sin" became ever more dominant; the concept of a personal god, with prayers and supplication, began to take the place of the old, purely businesslike god-worship conducted by the priests as "attorneys" for the citizens of the state.

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The traditional, naive rationalistic mythology was unable to satisfy this religious need. It was transformed and adapted to suit the demands of the times, or was entirely superseded. The Oriental religions of a decidedly mystical character and with many features which resembled Christianity had for some time had a number of adherents in the western part of the Roman Empire. They gained gradually a great following among the population which craved for mysticism. *Monotheism* forced its way through with greater and greater strength, the belief in one god took the place of the old nature-religious belief in various gods, each one performing a certain function. "The unknown god," for whom, the "Acts" relate, the Athenians built an altar, is a significant example of the new religious life which was being born; and many of the statements in the writings of contemporary philosophers are so much like the Christian idea that—were it not an absolute impossibility—we might think them written under the direct influence of Christianity. Along with monotheism appeared other, apparently quite opposite conceptions of an infinity of good and evil spirits, conceptions akin to the belief of Catholicism in angels, saints and devils.

Simultaneously, superstitious conceptions sprang up in prolific multiplicity. The nerves were overwrought, and the weirdest ideas found a fruitful soil in the terror-stricken minds. We find in those days a myriad of unusual conceptions which everywhere were reflections of diseased social conditions. Seers, fortune tellers and conjurers found a large and ever increasing clientele; in all different happenings were seen forebodings of coming events. It is interesting to note how, in the popular belief, things happened which are parallel to many of the miracles mentioned in the New Testament. It was told how divine beings begat children with earthly women, and also how holy men ascended to heaven without leaving a trace of their bodies. There were wonderful cures related of the lame becoming active and the blind gaining their sight. Even the sober historian Tacitus describes how the Emperor Vespasian cured a blind man by moistening his eyes with saliva. They told of awakenings of the dead. The famous miracle worker Apollonius met a funeral procession bringing the corpse of a young woman to the grave; he commanded them to leave the litter on the ground and promised to change their sorrow into joy, and as he touched the dead and uttered some unintelligible words, the young woman arose, spoke, and went back to her parents' house. Significant is it to note that the early Christians did not in the least question the ability of the pagan "magician" to perform miracles, but they ascribed it to the influence of the devil and evil spirits.

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It was not only a series of new religious conceptions, a new faith and superstition which grew out of these turbulent social conditions, but the purely *moral conceptions* were also transformed under the direct influence of the dissolution of the old order of society. These took on a new meaning, which removed them more and more from the antique morals and brought them nearer to the Christian.

The sight of all this growing need and misery bred a compassion, a feeling of pity, which had been quite rare in the old days when need and misery appeared only exceptionally in society. Private charity became burdened with greater and greater problems as the various state institutions decayed. With charity increased also the recognition of the personal worth of the good deeds as a source of intellectual satisfaction and justification for the benefactor himself. That it was better to give than to receive—an idea which had been utterly incomprehensible in former days—was generally conceded at the close of antiquity. Such concepts as love of mankind, neighborly love, acquired meaning. Among the proletariat a feeling of interdependency developed; they sought refuge and consolation from one another.

A peculiar feature of this increasing sense of duty and fellowship toward other men, aside from the greater force with which it appeared, a force which gave it a far more deep-rooted character than formerly, was its extension to include strangers and slaves. The identity of interest which the old primitive society naturally created was limited to include people belonging to the same state, or rather city, and to free citizens only. The stranger, the foreigner, was looked upon with suspicion and was considered an enemy to whom no one was under any obligations of any kind; “enemy” and “stranger” were expressed by the same word; and the slave was looked upon as a domestic animal with some reasoning ability, who in the master’s own interest was treated well because in the long run it proved to be the most profitable; his master might take a liking to him as he would to a dog or a horse, but no more. The social development, however, had now broken down these barriers.

The Roman Empire embraced within its boundaries people of the most heterogeneous nations; international intercourse brought them continually in contact with each other. And as the various races in this manner were “shaken” together, they no longer thought first and foremost as Romans or Greeks, Teutons or Syrians, but as *human beings*, and thus the dividing line between freemen and slaves was gradually wiped out. The great mass of liberated slaves formed a transitional link between them; their ancestors had been slaves, their descendants

would be freemen. Several slaves rose to high and influential ranks in the state, as the advisers of the Emperor, “ministers,” positions which the freemen of the upper classes, through inherited class prejudice, for the greater part declined. The increasing realization of slavery as an untenable social institution no doubt contributed to this changed conception of the slave; and the numerous proletarian freemen who did not own slaves, but on the contrary, lived under conditions little better than those of the slave, had no reason to entertain the notion that the slaves were human beings of a different and lower grade.

Thus paganism—the religious and moral conceptions of antiquity—was in full process of dissolution long before Christianity had gained recognition. “The great Pan was dead.” This, the myth related, was the plaintive cry, such as the passing skipper heard it. That means that the old nature-religion no longer satisfied man. The changes in social relations influenced the consciousness, dispersed former conceptions and compelled man to seek for and grope along new spiritual paths. And he was instinctively more and more forced in that direction which later came to be known as Christianity.

How far this tendency had been carried at the time of Christ is shown by the writings of the Roman philosopher Seneca. One of the foremost students of ancient philosophy sums up his teachings in the following: “The body, or as he contemptuously calls it, the ‘flesh,’ is something so worthless that we cannot estimate it too low; it is but the mortal frame of the soul, a dwelling where it temporarily resides, but where it never feels itself at home, aye, a burden which oppresses it, a chain from which it longs to be relieved. . . . In itself the soul is as much above the body as the deity is above matter, and the true life of the soul only begins when it leaves the body. . . . The present life is to him but the prelude to a better life, the body but a hostelry, which the soul leaves to return to its higher home. He looks joyfully forward to the day when he shall burst the bodily chains, ‘the birthday of eternity,’ as he calls it with an expression which also the early Christians used; he depicts that eternal peace which awaits us above, the freedom and bliss of heavenly life, the light of understanding, which will reveal the secrets of all nature; nor does he forget the reunion after death, the summer of the perfect souls. He also conceives of death as the great judgment day, on which judgment shall be pronounced on all of us; and he sees in life hereafter the force of moral life. That the soul some time shall leave him does not trouble him when he pictures its reappearance in another form.”

EARLY CHRISTIANITY: RELIGION OF THE OPPRESSED.

We see how the necessary elements for the spread of Christian teachings had been created through the intellectual, religious and moral currents, each of which with logical necessity sprang from the social changes at the end of antiquity. The “fullness of time,” as it graphically was called, had arrived. When Christianity in the first centuries of our era spread among those colonies of Jews, scattered throughout the Roman Empire, it found their minds prepared. It gave definite form to those conceptions which had taken hold of the consciousness of the population, particularly the proletariat. And it was not only its religious and moral ideas which met with sympathy, but also its social ideas.

Christianity, in its first and purest form, was *a religion for the proletariat*, for the poor, suffering and oppressed in society. These were the people to whom Christ spoke. Immediately before his first appearance as a teacher, he read in the synagogue of Nazareth the prophecy of Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord *is* upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, . . .” (St. Luke 4:18; Isaiah 61:1) In his foreboding the nature of his activity is outlined. And what he later says coincides: “. . . Blessed *be ye* poor: for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed *are ye* that hunger now: for ye shall be filled. Blessed *are ye* that weep now: for ye shall laugh.” (St. Luke 6:20–21) “Come unto me, all *ye* that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (St. Matt. 11:28)

It was also the common people that gathered around him and listened to him. His apostles were poor fishermen and artisans, and great was the anger and indignation of the pillars of society, the pharisees and scribes, because “publicans and sinners kept close to him to hear him.” It was just the miserable and despised people who sought refuge with him, and found not only consolation for the soul but also practical defense against those who were hard on them. The story of the woman caught in adultery is in its sublime simplicity the most scathing expression of contempt for the existing moral hypocrisy, and the answer he gave applies as strongly today: “. . . He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.” (St. John 8:7)

Thus his message was one of compassion and leniency for the poor and outcast in society; but for the rich he had but hard and threatening words. The rich man suffered grievously in hell, not because he was so very wicked and sinful, but simply

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because he was rich and enjoyed his wealth, “clad in purple and costly linen and lived every day in magnificence and joy,” while Lazarus slept at his door and ate the crumbs from his table. Again and again is the same conception of wealth expressed. His is an absolute denunciation of any society where there are rich and poor, affluence and want. “. . . woe unto you that are rich! for ye have received your consolation.” (St. Luke 6:24) “. . . Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. . . . It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.” (St. Matt. 19:23–24) And when the wealthy man, who has kept all the commandments from his youth, asks what he must further do to inherit eternal life, Jesus answers: “. . . If thou wilt be perfect, go *and* sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven. . . .” (St. Matt. 19:21)

In the proclamations of the disciples the same rejection of all wealth is repeated, and particularly in the James letter the rich are denounced because of the exploitation and suppression to which they subjected the poor: “*Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats?*” (St. James 2:6) [Emphasis added.] “Go to now, *ye rich men*, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon *you*. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire. Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days. Behold, *the hire of the laborers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth*: [emphasis added] and the cries of them which have reaped are entered into the ears of the Lord of sabaoth. Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton; ye have nourished your hearts, as in a day of slaughter.” (St. James 5:1–5)

It was, accordingly, a decided proletarian tendency which dominated Christianity in the first centuries of our era, a tendency which theology of later times only succeeded in misrepresenting by sophistically exercising a most reckless violence against the old traditions. And just as proletarian was the positive social ideal which Christianity proclaimed.

CHRISTIAN COMMUNISM

It was the *communism of property and consumption*, the communistic form of society which was the natural expression of the social longings of the ancient proletariat, and which in the first Christian congregations was not only proclaimed

but practiced. It was as yet impossible to form a social ideal of productive socialism—the cooperative commonwealth—because the historical conditions for such an order of society were wholly lacking; the consumptive communism, the *enjoyment* of things in common, became the ideal of the proletarians of those days.

This principle is prominent in the Gospels, and particularly in the “Acts.” He who would follow Christ had to give up all his property, donate it to the congregation, and the congregation lived in a common household, maintained through common ownership. It was not a voluntary matter whether or not one should place his belongings at the disposal of the congregation. On the contrary, it was considered a mortal sin to neglect. Ananias and his wife Sapphira were punished with death because they had withheld part of their wealth for their private benefit (Acts 5). The Christian was to be personally propertyless, and could only be co-sharer of the common possessions. In the “Acts” we find a description of the original Christian congregations, and find them constructed in accordance with the commands of Christ, based upon the ideas of an absolute communistic relation of property and consumption.

“And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all *men*, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.” (Acts 2:44–47)

“Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, And laid *them* down at the apostles’ feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.” (Acts 4:34–35)

It is conceivable how such a communistic society would absorb the great mass of the starved and oppressed proletarians, not only in Palestine, but also throughout the vast Roman Empire. But it will also be seen that its duration, of necessity, would be short. The number of destitute people to be kept satisfied grew rapidly, but the amount of wealth at disposal increased very slowly. Soon the bottom would be reached. At the beginning they rested content with the idea that Christ would soon return and that the end of the world was at hand. But as time went on the difficulties increased. From the letters of the apostles, particularly those of Paul, we receive a vivid impression of the sharp admonitions which were administered in

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order to obtain necessities for the support of the poor in the community. Very early, in the course of but a few decades, pure communism disappeared, as in the nature of things it had to, because the class interests which there found expression, those of the proletariat and petty bourgeoisie, had as yet no future before them. It was changed to a decrepit charity for the support of the clergy at the expense of the congregation; to the sacrament of the Lord's supper as a last remnant of the old-time meals, in which all participated; here and there also to a monastic life and semi-caricatures of the days of the early Christians.

The wealth which was collected for the community was more and more used for the support of that upper class of ecclesiastics who gradually raised themselves above the rest of Christian society, and the clergy made ever greater demands for personal contributions from the members of the congregation. Thus the old Christian communism was gradually transformed into the medieval, exploiting church. Theology simultaneously became active, explaining away and misinterpreting the expressions and statements of the New Testament regarding wealth and poverty, to rob them of their "salt" and adjust the Christian teachings to suit the ruling class in society.

But still, long after, there were sects trying to carry the program of ancient Christianity into effect. As late as the close of the Middle Ages the old Christian ideals played their role in the class struggle. And even today the accounts given in the "Acts" are condemnatory of the hypocrisies of our time, of the hypocrites who endeavor to show, Bible in hand, the right and justification for private property, whereas no socialist agitator has used stronger language against nor more mercilessly denounced this right than did Christ and his disciples.

3. The Reformation.

The time about the year 1500 is marked by a long chain of important events and changes which paved the way for all later historical development. The Italian Renaissance had created an elegant and superior art, sparkling with life and beauty; the ideas of humanism, which, from the universities of northern Italy had spread to the countries north of the Alps, gave birth to entirely new scientific conceptions and methods of reasoning; the Lutheran Reformation cleared away the religious superstition which formerly rested heavily upon the mind. The use of gunpowder, the invention of which was made at about that time, developed an entirely new war technique, with mass armies of hired infantry making superfluous the heavily armed cavalry of the nobility. The art of printing paved the way for an extension of the cultivation of the minds of the population and put an end to the monopoly of literary knowledge and employment which the clergy until then had enjoyed; the great discoveries of the sea route to India and of the new continent, which emerged from out of the mists of the Atlantic Ocean, extended the horizon of humanity far beyond its former narrow limits. All this was accompanied by violent social conflicts which shook the foundation of society, sharp collisions between the various classes. The bourgeoisie and the peasants were struggling for supremacy against the ruling classes of the old order, against the nobility and the clergy. It was a crisis where the old and the new met in desperate combat; old ideals went down and new ones arose; it was one of those epochs of transition where life is lived more intensely than usually, an age of revolution, "when it is a pleasure to live," as one of the great fighters of that time, Ulrich von Hutten, said.

MEDIEVAL SOCIETY.

It was medieval society which went down before the forces developed in preceding centuries. And it was the *dawn of capitalism* which gave the impetus to this enormous upheaval. *Capital* had stepped upon the historical stage of the world as a revolutionary power. It appeared as yet only as purely commercial capital, affecting only the circulation of commodities between one country and another, and between one man and another, and did not directly enter into production. Nevertheless its effects were far reaching. All social life was seen in a new light; all social relations were disturbed and dissolved. Entirely new and deep-striking conflicts arose between the various strata of society, and entirely new thoughts

sprang from this fermenting chaos.

The economic conditions prevailing in the Middle Ages proper, when the Graeco-Roman culture of antiquity was finally destroyed, were based upon the production of natural objects. Commercial life was weak and had played an insignificant part in society as a whole. No exchange of commodities took place. Articles of utility were produced individually and consumed by the producer himself without buying or selling. Whatever was produced was subjected to immediate consumption and could not be transformed into money. The peasant family which lived entirely upon the products of the farm without economic intercourse with the world at large, preparing its own food products, its own clothes, household utensils and primitive working tools, is the type of this period. It was a period where the material and intellectual culture of the common people was very low and showed no sign of progress. Whatever was beyond the peasant's immediate environment was looked upon with suspicion; no fresh impulses could penetrate from the outer world; the priest and the monk were the only ones representing a higher intellectual force and before whom all bowed, blindly and without criticism. An incentive to better and more intelligent work, which is otherwise found in a growing population for which bread must be procured, was wholly lacking; the pest ravaged with few years' intervals and kept the number of the population low.

Just as absolute, however, as was the isolation with regard to all strangers, was the feeling of mutual interest which developed within the community. Remnants of the communistic conditions of antiquity were still to be found. The land was owned collectively and was partly used in common, and such a commonwealth was at that time the most appropriate.

The prevailing social order had formed itself in obedience to this economic condition. Since the commodity and money circulation was as yet insignificant, land became the natural expression for wealth. The secular and clerical potentates who had raised themselves had appropriated all the land in society. The peasants were tenants and had the right to the use of the land, but under the suzerainty of the proprietor, to whom they had to pay an annual tax in the shape of various products of the farm, certain stipulated quantities of grain, meat, etc. This was the form which exploitation assumed in medieval society. But the pressure brought to bear was not very intense. So long as production of articles of utility was for immediate consumption, and so long as it was impossible to dispose of the products in any other way, so long was there no incentive for further fleecing. So long as he had an

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abundance for his household, the lord was satisfied—he had absolutely no use for any surplus inasmuch as he could not realize it in money or exchange it for other commodities.

The entire medieval culture received its impress from these social and economic conditions; the handicrafts, commerce and city life, which was forced into the background by agriculture and was mostly an adjunct to the household of the seignior or the prelate; the seigniorial manor with its solid architecture and heavy but ostentatious luxury; the stagnant intellectual life; the power of the Catholic Church over the mind; art and intellectual culture in its various manifestations; the church buildings and reredoses, the ingenious scholastic philosophy and the native folk songs.

Extremely conservative was the entire medieval social system, with no incentive for progress. The power which was to revolutionize society had to come from without. It was not the feudal lord or the bishop, living on the surplus product of the peasant, who carried the future in his folds—it was the merchant, arriving as a new element, beginning to buy and sell.

When world trade began to expand, the doom of the old medieval society was pronounced.

Already in the 11th century signs of an increasing commercialism began to appear in Italy. The Crusades increased it tremendously and extended it to the rest of Europe. For a couple of hundred years one army of crusaders followed another to the East; Christian empires under European princes were formed, and the merchants followed in the wake of the armies. Knowledge of Oriental culture created new needs, new demands, which could only be satisfied through trade. Ever more trade connections were established with the peoples of western Asia; ever greater masses of the products of the East were carried across the Mediterranean to the Italian seaports, whence they were shipped to the various European countries and exchanged for their products. Gold and silver, hitherto forged into tankards and drinking cups, etc., were now put into circulation as money; products commenced to pass back and forth as commodities; and from one generation to another this movement went on at an ever increasing ratio. Prominent cities rose along the highways of commerce. The international credit system between the great commercial houses was perfected. These extended their trade throughout unexplored regions of the world. Italian merchants went into the interior of Asia, and occasionally as far as the Chinese coast. And as the onmarch of the Turks

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barred this part, the commercial efforts became mixed with adventurous desires, and the voyages of discovery commenced. In the year 1492 Columbus reached the New World, and six years later the sea route to India, south of Africa, was found.

It was from the cities of northern Italy that this movement emanated, but at an early date the countries north of the Alps were forced along. And Germany in particular played a great part in this wonderful development, which produced a complete revolution in all social relations. Along the commercial highways of Germany an ever increasing mass of commodities was transported from abroad to Germany, from Germany to foreign countries. The cities of southern Germany, which controlled the passes across the eastern Alps, entered into negotiations with Venice, and great quantities of Oriental products were consigned to them, which they sent on to other places; the north German cities, the Hanseatic towns from the middle of the 13th century secured commercial supremacy over the Baltic States, Scandinavia and England. And from the west German cities a lively trade was maintained with France. The city which became the center of this rich commercialism was Frankfort. Here all the wires were connected. At the Frankfort market “gathered all the merchants from the Netherlands, from Flanders, England, Poland, Bohemia, Italy and France; from almost all Europe they come with their goods and conduct an enormous trade,” as a report from 1495 has it.⁴

The commercial activity which thus was developed was purely capitalistic. The great commercial houses which quite often took the form of a kind of stock company operated with an enormous capital and through a many-branched mechanism of office workers, agents, buyers, commissioners, sailors, etc. Tremendous profits were piled up. How far the capitalistic spirit of speculation had been developed is best shown by the repeated attempts at monopolizing certain commodities for the purpose of forcing the price up and appropriating enormous “extra profits.” Again and again the commercial houses in the German cities were merged into “rings” for the purpose of creating artificial increases in the prices of grain, wine, iron, leather, or other commodities, again and again the monopolists effected a ruthless onslaught on competitors who interfered, by offering commodities at a lower price. And here, as everywhere, the economic forces were stronger than the juridical barriers. All injunctions against monopolies were absolutely ineffective.

⁴ To show how far-reaching this “German commercialism” of the 13th and 14th centuries was, it may be noted that in Stockholm, Sweden, the king, Magnus Smek (about 1350) declared that the town council should consist of an equal number of Swedes and Germans, so numerous were the German merchants.

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It was this economic transformation which took place at the close of the Middle Ages, and it led to entirely new relations in the domain of social life.

The products of labor assumed an entirely new significance; they were different from those in former days, where there was no use for more than the household could consume. Now they could be sold, transformed into money, and for the money new costly objects, fine garments, Oriental spices, foreign wine and many other commodities could be procured. There was now an incentive for the peasants and the laborers to intensify their labor in order to increase their products; the more they could produce, the more money they would have. But they were not allowed to keep them. For now exploitation by the upper classes, the princes, the nobility and the Church began to increase. Formerly it had been sufficient if the peasant brought to the feudal lord as much grain, butter, cheese, meat, etc., as was needed by his family and household; anything beyond that had been useless. Quite differently now, when everything was a commodity, the value of which was expressed in certain monetary terms. "The more the better," became the watchword.

The medieval, semi-patriarchal relations were changed into a system of exploitation most merciless in character. Taxes, tithes, etc., were continually increased and ever new methods were invented to extract more surplus wealth from the peasants, to demand ever more of the natural products, which the seignior then would change into florins and ducats. The seigniorial management of the land increased as the lords gradually confiscated one tenant farm after the other. Thus a proletariat of cottiers appeared and the peasants who were allowed to keep their farms were tormented with an ever increasing socage on the seigniorial fields. And not only were the burdens of the peasants increased, but their opportunities of procuring the necessities of life were further limited. While they formerly were allowed to fell trees and to hunt in the forests, to fish in the streams and enjoy the right of sending their cattle to the common pastures, they were now denied these privileges; these now represented something which could be turned into money and the feudal lord sequestered them. These privileges, through all kinds of juridical legerdemain, were now interpreted as the private rights of the lord, and the peasants were barred out. The feudal, semi-patriarchal relations were transformed into a system of the most ruthless exploitation. For now it was money that was at stake, and where money enters mirth disappears, as the German saying has it.

THE PEASANT REVOLTS.

The old stagnant, unconcerned feeling of well-being among the peasants now disappeared, and it booted them but little to have the usurers help them through their immediate difficulties; it only made bad worse. The poverty and oppression increased from one generation to another. It was this increasing exploitation and oppression which throughout Europe gave rise to the great *peasant revolts* at the end of the Middle Ages. The peasants, armed with spears and axes, rose against their tormentors and demanded their former privileges. In France a peasant war broke out as early as the 1350s; in England in the 1380s; in Germany there were disturbances throughout the 15th century, and the movement reached its climax in the *Peasants' War*, 1525. In Denmark the bellicose peasants of Jutland and Skane⁵ rose and fought during the "Count's War,"⁶ the last desperate fight for freedom. Everywhere the attempt was crushed and the peasants brutally punished, and new, improved methods of exploitation and fleecing were applied.

While the antithesis between the peasants and the secular and ecclesiastic lords was the most pronounced of all such, arising as a natural consequence of the growing capitalistic commercial life, it was by no means the only one. As if by an earthquake, deep chasms had been created throughout society. There was the antithesis between city and country, sharper than before; the antithesis between the nobility and the merchants; the nobility, who in spite of their increasing incomes, gained at the expense of the peasants, went deeper and deeper into debt to the capitalists of the cities, and looked upon these with envious eyes and revenged themselves whenever opportunity offered itself by waylaying the traveling merchants, relieving them of their moneybags; the antithesis between the nobility and the princes—these princes, who sought to strengthen their own positions and add to their possibilities of exploitation, and who, therefore, above all else had to humble the nobility and seize upon the authority which the seigniors formerly exercised; the antithesis between the merchants and the artisans struggling for supremacy in the administration of the affairs of the city; the antithesis between the master mechanics and their journeymen, which latter, as the guilds gradually became imbued with the spirit of capitalism, began to develop in the direction of the

⁵ This latter now a province of Sweden.

⁶ So called because of the prominent part played by Count Cristoffer of Oldenburg, who—while pretending to fight for the cause of the deposed King Christian II, the "friend of the common people"—in reality was aiming at the crown himself. A secret treaty, it is said, was made between the count and the city of Lubeck.

proletariat, propertyless, and with little prospect of bettering their lot. Everywhere was a medley of conflicting interests, of new antitheses, of new class struggles.

But right through this confused mass of various oppositions there was a single dividing line which was drawn in such a manner that behind it could gather the various social layers of the population mutually to fight against a common enemy. This was the *opposition to the Catholic Church*.

THE YOKE OF THE CHURCH.

It follows, that not only for the peasantry and the nobility in the country, but also for the merchants and the artisans in the city, the Church, with its secular power, naturally appeared as a hostile power whose yoke it was the particular interest of all concerned to throw off. Rome had again become the great international exploiter, just as it had been 15 centuries previously. And the Christian teachings which originally had been the religion of the exploited masses, the poor and oppressed, had become an instrument for the exploitation of the entire world. With the increasing development of the production of commodities and the universal use of money as a medium of exchange, the Church was taken up with tendencies toward exploiting the rest of society, and by virtue of the position which it gradually had acquired, it could conduct this exploitation to a great extent and with an enormous pressure. On the other hand, by so doing, it created a feeling of hatred and bitterness among those who were made to suffer. The Church was the largest landholder in the various countries and the torturing of the peasants on its estates was by no means inferior to that of the real feudal lords. It was not only the wrath of the peasants which was turned against them; the nobility and the princes looked with greedy eyes upon the immense treasures of the Church, and realizing the booty which would fall to them, they, too, began to share the dreams of the reformers. And among the bourgeoisie the sentiment became more and more hostile against the Church. What would it not mean to commerce and exchange if the rich treasures, now used as altar vessels, chandeliers, etc., were made into money and thrown into business; what effect would it not have upon the productive activity if the multitudinous holidays were abolished and the great swarms of mendicant friars and all kinds of ecclesiastics were put to useful labor? And fancy the effect upon society if the vast sums, now spent on requiems, indulgences, etc., were put into commerce, shipping and manufacture.

Throughout the countries this sentiment had manifested itself in the last

centuries of the Middle Ages. Strong attacks were made upon the Catholic Church; congregations of “infidels” had been formed here and there whose tenets in many ways resembled those of the Lutheran teachings of later days. Gradually, as the sale of commodities and the transactions with money broke down the old economic conditions and the new relation was impressed upon the minds of the people, the warnings of an oncoming storm became more frequent and ever more threatening. And it was Germany which became the center where the storm first broke out.

MARTIN LUTHER.

Germany was then that country north of the Alps where the effects of the new capitalist commercialism were felt the strongest, and where, as a consequence, their eyes had been opened to the dependency on the Roman Church. It was felt as a source of humiliation and exploitation, not only for the various classes of Germany, but for the German people as a whole. Year after year an increasing amount of wealth poured into the coffers of the clergy, and from Germany to Rome. Germany became the milch cow whence the nourishment was procured for the greater glory of Rome. This state of affairs was looked upon as *national exploitation*. The papacy, and with that the whole Church, was regarded as a *national calamity*, it was felt as a *national disgrace*. With the development of capitalism, this sentiment became stronger and more bitter and spread farther and farther, and at the time of the appearance of Luther, nothing but the word was required to crystallize the sentiment into action.

It is significant to note that it was the question of the sale of *letters of indulgence* which first impelled Luther to come forward, and it thereby formed the starting point of the gigantic reformation movement. Few or no theological problems had the power of seizing upon the population at large to that extent, and to arrest its attention. The questions of the freedom of the will, of the blessing and influence of chastity and of good deeds, of the transformation of the bread and wine into the flesh and blood of Christ were all questions for the study-closet and might well cause agitation among the learned ones, but they met with no response from the people. Not so with the sale of the letters of indulgence. Here it was a question of money; money which year after year was taken out of the country to Rome, withdrawn from German industry and only serving to enrich the Roman popes and their favorites, while the population became impoverished. Here they were confronted with a national economic calamity; it was reasoning which everyone

could grasp, regardless of the religious principles which otherwise were attached to the sale of indulgences.

When Luther, on the 31st of October, 1517, nailed his 95 theses on the church door at Wittenburg, he still felt like a faithful believer, like a Catholic. He was one of the many monks and priests of those days who, through influences of various kinds, had become more pietistic than the official Church; but this view was easily harmonized with Catholic principles, and hundreds of theologians shared such views. He did not realize how explosive his theses were; had he foreseen the trouble they were to create, he would very likely have withheld them.⁷

However, the movement he had started soon forced him along with it. The intellectual currents which were the expressions of the economic upheaval of the time were so strong that they could not be checked. They could not be arrested by a series of modest reforms of the Catholic Church constitution; they demanded a decisive breach with the entire old Church. Luther was forced along, driven from standpoint to standpoint, by the mighty forces underlying his time. His activity changed *from being reformatory to becoming revolutionary*.

And from the purely *intellectual* spheres, Luther's revolutionary sentiment began to extend to the purely *social*. We find in his writings from the beginning of the 1520s a series of sharp attacks, not only against the clerical ruling class—which he attacks with a fanaticism of such innate hatred that its parallel is not to be found in the agitational writings of any author of later days—but also frequently against the secular powers. He directs violent reproaches against the princes and the nobles for their rapacity: “Ye do naught else than fleece and levy taxes, that ye may lead magnificent, haughty lives until the poor people cannot, and will not endure it any longer. . . . What boots it if the peasant's field bears as many florins as straw and grain; his masters only come and take so much more to add to their splendor, and expend the values on beautiful clothes, gluttony, drunkenness, mansions and the like.” And he predicts a mighty peasant revolt as the just punishment of heaven for their crimes.

But when the peasants in the year 1525 really did rise against their tormentors—the great Peasants' War which in a few weeks spread to all parts of Germany—Luther timorously shrank back. There was too much of the petty

⁷ That Luther was fighting against the excesses and use which was made of the letters of indulgence, and not for their abolition, is plainly shown by the seventy-first of his theses. In this we are told that “he who speaks against and denies the truth of the papal indulgences is liable to ignominy and damnation.”

bourgeois in him, he was too much imbued with philistine notions, had too much of an inherent, instinctive respect for the noble lords to dare to draw the inevitable conclusions from his premises. Just so far as formerly he had been forced in a *social revolutionary* direction, he was now forced in a *social reactionary* direction. Against the peasants' breach of obedience against their secular masters he now turned his wild fanaticism with a desperate blood-thirst, an absolute delirious cruelty. With his furious hatred toward the subject class in its attempt to better its condition, he stands as one of the most repulsive figures in modern history. In his brochure "against the rapacious and murderous peasants," he addresses the princes and the nobility and exhorts them to a merciless butchery of the peasants. "Inasmuch as they are evil-minded and brazenly refuse to obey, and furthermore resist their masters, they have forfeited life and soul as do all faithless, perjured, mendacious, disobedient knaves and villains. Therefore it becomes the duty of all here to strangle and stab, secretly or publicly, all such, and remember that there is nothing so poisonous, injurious and fiendish as a rebellious person; just as you would kill a mad dog; if you do not strike him, he will strike you, and with you, the whole country."

The Peasants' War denotes the *reactionary turning point* in Luther's activity. From now on his sympathy for the subject class was extinguished, and the vigorous revolutionary spirit, frequently found in his earlier writings, was dead. He was now the sworn man of the secular ruling class to such an extent that he not only warns against relieving the peasants of socage and other burdens, but actually suggests the reintroduction of chattel slavery. The Lutheran Church, which rose in Germany, and from there spread to the greater part of northern Europe, was fatedly influenced by this change; it did not become the democratic, popular church of which Luther had been the advocate, but a bureaucratic state church, with the prince as superior, as a new pope, and with a dogmatism as rigid and foreign to real life as that of the Catholic Church had been, with a duty to educate the subjects to a blind, unconditional obedience to their secular masters, a military discipline which finds its classical expression in a sentence like this: "Your common sense tells you that 2 and 5 are 7; but when the authorities declare that 2 and 5 are 8, you must believe it in spite of your better knowledge and understanding."

The Lutheran Reformation was the greatest and most conspicuous of those intellectual movements which were born of the mighty upheaval of that time. But it was far from being the only one. It was seething everywhere and the mode of

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thinking was changing.

The seeds of a new intellectual culture among the great bourgeois and peasant population began to germinate. The reformers had been compelled to write in the native tongue instead of the Latin language, which the laity did not understand, and the national languages underwent an enriching development, became polished and were formed into literary languages. And the art of printing made it possible to extend literary knowledge to ever larger spheres. The desire to read and the literary interests increased. National literature grew up.

The national consciousness became developed. Commercialism, which had removed the bars separating the single villages and provinces, and had brought the nations into reciprocity, created in the popular mind new ideas of a national entity. While formerly the people of Zealand, Funen and Jutland⁸ had felt removed from each other, now the conception of a common nation to which they all belonged took root—the idea of a national whole in contrast with other nations with their foreign languages and strange customs.

A new scientific method of research began to force its way through. The well-to-do, self-conscious bourgeoisie could not, as formerly, satisfy itself with the authority of the Bible on the fields of science. It demanded a real investigation of things, based upon observation, reason and cognition. In all countries where the development of capitalism proceeded quickest, a research of the natural sciences, of the geographical, historical and social sciences grew out which overthrew the medieval learning and departed from its methods, laying the foundation of the scientific understanding of later times.

And so all over. The moral conceptions, the artistic views, political ideals—all these several manifestations of the human consciousness were changed under the influence of the commercial activity of capitalism and the changes in social life which it effected. It was the modern age superseding the Middle Ages.

⁸ The three chief provinces of Denmark, separated by water.

4. The French Revolution.

In the year 1789 the great French Revolution broke out. It was the bourgeoisie which unfurled the banner of revolt for the purpose of acquiring full political power and of using it as a means to further the transformation of society in a capitalist direction. As in our days it is the class interests of the workers which furnish the revolutionary motive power in the whole political movement, so it was then the *class interests of the capitalists* which started the revolutionary upheaval.

The great, violent clash in France had about this time become an inevitable necessity.

Since the discovery of America and the sea route to India toward the end of the 15th century, a shifting of the center of power had taken place in Europe. The center of gravity had moved westward, from Italy and Germany to the countries on the Atlantic Ocean. The world's trade had struck new roads. The trade of northern Italy on the east coast of the Mediterranean had gone down, as a shorter route to the Far East had been found; and Germany's role as a connecting link between Italy and the countries north of the Alps had come to an end. The two countries became impoverished and collapsed, economically, politically and intellectually. The greater was the ascendancy in England, Holland, and partly also in France. Here an ever stronger commercialism was being developed; here the great cities grew with a population of active and wealthy, self-conscious citizens; here were also attempts at an industry of purely capitalistic nature. And to this economic ascendancy corresponded the culture—the scientific thinking and research, poetry and art; in all the various fields of intellectual life these countries assumed the leadership.

But this growing *capitalism* could not in the long run find room within the old political forms of medieval, feudal society. The bourgeoisie, becoming conscious of its social importance, was no longer satisfied with its humble position as a subject class of ruling estates, the *nobility* and *high ecclesiasticism*. The bourgeoisie, of necessity, had to demand a voice in public affairs, to demand abolition of all privileges which the upper classes enjoyed, and which in numerous ways oppressed it and hampered its actions; to demand political forms, with which its social and economic interests could uninterruptedly pursue their onward course. A thoroughgoing change in political life became an absolute necessity. The more bourgeois economic development advanced, the more radical became the political program around which the bourgeoisie in the countries of northwestern Europe

gathered. From its inception, and so long as it was too weak to wage successful war against old society, the bourgeoisie looked with satisfaction upon the princes when these assumed autocratic power and limited the authority of the nobility and the clergy and started a policy which sought to support and encourage commerce, trade and industry. To the bourgeoisie, enlightened autocracy appeared as an ideal institution. Gradually, however, as it felt its own strength grow, its demands increased. Demands were made for participation in the government of the state. It was no longer sufficient that the privileges of the aristocracy be abrogated, but it was also found necessary to guard against excesses from the princes. The bourgeoisie required clear and reliable information as to the financial affairs of the state; it felt impelled to take a hand in the making of commercial laws; to dominate commercial politics, taxation, foreign politics and all the different branches of public activity, which in so many ways determined its actions. It felt that it was strong enough to take the political management in its own hands. More and more consciously it strove for a new constitutional form, a republic or a constitutional monarchy, where the center of gravity would be in a *representative assembly, where the wealthy bourgeoisie had the upper hand.*

Both in England and Holland this change had long since taken place. In Holland about the year 1600, while struggling to throw off the Spanish yoke, a republican constitution was adopted, vesting the political power in the bourgeoisie. In England in 1689, exactly 100 years before the French Revolution, the power of the king had been limited through a bloodless revolution, and had secured recognition of the parliamentary form, which made the government the expression of the will of the possessing classes. In France, however, everything was as yet in the old rut.

The king had unlimited power, but the high nobility and the high ecclesiastics had preserved and extended their privileges, which had more and more become utterly senseless, unreasonable and untenable under the new social conditions.

The court and the two upper estates represented an exploitation which became more and more flagrant and which more and more was felt to be destructive of all civic activity. The burden of taxation kept the urban as well as the rural population down, while the nobility and the clergy were exempt from all taxation. The immense, magnificent and costly household of the court, with its enormous supports to the long train of royal favorites, represented an endless squandering of the national wealth. Only the nobility had access to the higher posts, while the

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bourgeoisie was excluded. All sorts of personal privileges widened the chasm between the two upper estates on the one side, and the “Third Estate” on the other, causing much “bad blood.” An indescribable demoralization was spreading throughout the ruling classes; the state was simply an object of exploitation which was squeezed to the utmost; bribery and the sale of offices flourished; administration of justice became a mockery. The peasants were fleeced through taxes and feudal obligations and were always on the verge of starvation; agriculture was in a wretched condition and as things developed further, it was cut off from all further development. All productive activity suffered under the pressure which the ruling classes exerted; its development was hampered and its vitality was sapped. The natural resources of the land were exhausted under this reckless exploitation, which knew no bounds, and which started no new, useful activities.

It was a condition which in many respects resembled that of modern [czarist] Russia. And as in Russia, so also in France, under the old regime, it was felt that a catastrophe was impending. “After us the deluge” expresses the prevailing sentiment among the ruling classes; in other words, “Let us live on in the old manner, and leave it to our descendants to meet the catastrophes which must come!”

The discontent against the old system grew stronger and stronger. The pressure from the small minority of the privileged estates bred an ever more violent counter pressure from the rest of the population. And it was above all the bourgeoisie’s demands for the abolition of the autocratic power of the king and the privileges of nobility and clergy which united the population in common action. It was the first and most conspicuous problem to be solved in order to insure further development.

PHILOSOPHICAL IDEALS AND MATERIAL NEEDS.

Once this problem was solved, it was thought a new golden age for society would loom up. It was not seen that it was only a new thralldom that was being prepared, a thralldom of the *propertyless under capitalism*. “Liberty” and “Equality” became the slogans with which the bourgeoisie won the masses—but by “liberty” was merely understood political liberty for the possessing, the wealthy classes, and by “equality” simply formal equality before the law. The whole mode of thought became influenced by the new movements and efforts. The philosophical ideas prevailing reflected the demands of the bourgeoisie for political and social rights.

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The authors became ever more daring and consistent in their attacks on old feudal society and in their glorification of the new bourgeois ideals. A mighty impression was made by a brochure published shortly before the revolution; its substance is expressed in the following strong agitational words: “What has the Third Estate been heretofore? Nothing! What does it demand to be? Something! What ought it to be? Everything!”

And finally, in 1789, the clash came. The financial affairs of the state were in a desperate condition, and the fermentation among the populace was so strong that the government did not dare to levy new taxes directly. As a last resort the *States-General* were summoned. This was an assembly representing the three estates, the nobility, the clergy, and the bourgeoisie; an assembly of a purely medieval nature. It was almost 200 years since this body had previously met. Now it came to form the starting point for that great capitalistic transformation, the effect of which was felt in all parts of Europe. No sooner had the estates convened than the tension burst into violent clashes, and now was rapidly performed that revolutionary drama, during which the old order went down.

It is not only because it forms the introduction of the political dominion of capitalism, to which we today are subject, that the French Revolution has for us a peculiarly modern interest, that it is of far more than theoretical significance, that we should understand its causes and its general nature, but also because it was a struggle between the very same elements which even in our days are contending for supremacy in society: the *aristocracy*, which represents the dying feudal society,⁹ the *bourgeoisie*, the ruling class under capitalism, and the *proletariat*. True enough, a great change in the mutual relations of the three classes has taken place during the 120 years. The capitalist class, which then led the attack against the nobility and clergy and used the proletariat as food for cannon in the battle, has since passed through the various stages from the ultra-revolutionary to the ultra-reactionary, and is now ready to join with the aristocracy in a common reactionary mass whose only program is resistance to the demands of the working class. And the proletariat, which then were few in number and of no distinct form, with but a

⁹ While this, strictly speaking, does not apply to America, it is nonetheless true that chiefly the same elements are contesting for supremacy here. The difference is that the “aristocracy” in America is not a dying feudal remnant. On the contrary. Having completed its cycle of development the capitalist class is reverting to a feudalism which in form is different—as different as is modern industrialism from medieval feudalism—but which in point of oppression and exploitation is far worse and more despotic than the feudalism of old. The process leading toward this despotism is variously known as “state socialism,” “state capitalism,” or merely government or public ownership.

hazy conception of their social position, and, as a consequence, easily led by those of the upper classes who were bent upon conquering the power for themselves, now stand as the strong, independent, revolutionary force, who consistently and consciously strive to conquer the political power in order to enable them to shape society according to their will. And if we wish to understand how the social conflicts of our time have developed historically, we must go back to the French Revolution, which contained the same class contrasts, though in a vague form, as if in an embryonic condition.

THE BOURGEOISIE.

It was a motley mixture of elements which flocked together in the struggle against the higher estates and forced the revolution along its course until the movement died out. Like a series of moving pictures, we see one layer of society after the other rise against the one which had been on top, seize the power supported by the lower layers, only to turn against those who had helped it to victory. Continuously the same movement is repeated. As soon as a group had acquired certain privileges, corresponding to its particular interests, its revolutionary hunger was satiated; it then found that it had attained all it reasonably could expect and it saw in all other demands simply the results of criminal demagogism! It was the same movement, so well known from all later political history; but that which in the slow progress of periods of evolution takes decades to mature, was brought about in a condensed form with intervals of but a few months.

First there was the bourgeoisie. But the bourgeoisie was not a homogeneous mass with mutual interests, and the mutual fear of the proletariat had not, as in our days, forced it together and wiped out the conflicting differences of its various groups. It embraced factions of various shades. Topmost were the financiers, the bankers, the tax collectors, partners in great monopolized, commercial companies, and such people who were living high upon the usurious interests on the national debt and the debt of the nobility, and enjoying the privileged position granted them by the state—people who at the most desired a certain control over the administration of the public revenues in order to prevent national bankruptcy, but who otherwise were ultraconservative. Then there were the manufacturers. These agreed among themselves to have a series of antiquated rules of manufacture of the mercantile period abolished; to modify the guild's restrictions on trade, etc., but

otherwise there were vast differences between them. The Paris manufacturers, who chiefly manufactured articles of luxury, looked apprehensively upon a movement which threatened the abolition of court and nobility—their best customers—and they quickly changed from a revolutionary to a reactionary standpoint. The provincial manufacturers, who operated with the mass consumption of the broad populace in view, went much further in a radical direction. There were the wholesalers, the retailers, the big master mechanics, the officeholders—each group with its special interests, which on certain points coincided with the political and economic interests of the other groups, but which on other points came into sharp conflicts with the interests of these other groups.

THE RUDIMENTARY PROLETARIAT.

And nonetheless variform were the relations of those parts of the population whose positions were of a predominant proletarian nature. The peasants were for the greater part in a lethargic condition of despair which could only find expression in desperate revolts and acts of incendiarism. The Parisian guild artisans and those “free masters” who led a precarious existence outside of the guilds, entertained anything but gentle feelings for each other, though they, as a rule, were equally badly off, each putting the blame for their poor condition on the other. An important role, in the revolutionary movement, was played by the “intellectual proletariat” of physicians, lawyers’ assistants, artists, writers and students, who came together in Paris. These latter furnished spokesmen to the various layers of the lower classes, speakers for the revolutionary assemblies and journalists for the revolutionary papers. Of the population subsisting through personal wage labor, there was one element which was exceedingly reactionary; it was the great swarm of lackeys, coachmen, chamberlains, etc., who waited on the rich, both bourgeois and noble families. In the course of the revolution they proved themselves to be even more fanatically opposed to liberty than their masters.

Among the journeymen the sentiment was usually strongly radical, but there were two different currents; the old patriarchal relation where the journeyman boarded with his master was practically dissolved, but the modern proletarian relation had as yet failed to make its appearance. Journeymen, for the most part, hoped to rise from the rank of wage laborers to that of masters; and their social and political radicalism assumed more often a petty bourgeois than a proletarian character. Only among the workers in the great factories—their conditions being

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similar to those of our modern wage laborers—were consistent, proletarian tendencies manifested. Socialistic efforts were of course at this time entirely out of question, but demands for higher wages, right of organization and strike, regulations against unemployment and hard times, thoroughgoing reforms in the taxation system, and general suffrage were raised by this faction.

Scanning the list of social classes, we realize what stuff the French Revolution contained for continued splits and conflicts, until the revolution resulted in what at that time was the only result historically attainable: the victory, the social liberation of the higher bourgeoisie, the matadors of commerce and industry.

We can understand how these heterogeneous elements could stick together so long as the upper layers of society had to be fought, and how they would disband so soon as a victory was won. We understand how the subject class, lashed forward by mutual need and hunger, was *now* being used as a bugbear by the various groups of the bourgeoisie, *now* being fought with the sharpest weapons.

It was the uppermost layers of the bourgeoisie which first got into power through the revolution. They made full use of the excited sentiments which had seized hold of the proletariat. The taking of the Bastille was decisive for their victory over the two higher estates; and the great peasant revolts throughout the land became the means with which they frightened the nobility and clergy to give up their old privileges. But no sooner had they reached their goal than they were stricken with terror for the movement below. They now allied themselves with the moderate elements of the nobility and the ecclesiastics for mutual resistance against the further progress of the revolution. They tried to make the governmental form a constitutional monarchy with a diet (parliament) which represented only the wealthy in the land; the citizens were divided into “actives,” the taxpayers, and “passives,” those who were too poor to pay taxes, and only the former were granted the suffrage; the worker and the petty bourgeois were carefully excluded from all political rights. A tax law was passed with the object in view of shifting the public burdens from the rich financiers over to the small dealers. Terrible punishments were inflicted upon the workers, who by common action, even in a very moderate form, sought to better their conditions.

THE GIRONDINS TAKE POWER.

The rulership of the top capitalists lasted but a few years. The revolutionary tension in society was too strong to be kept down; it produced a greater and greater

pressure and a new layer shot up. It was the party of the *Girondins*, which represented the middle layers of the bourgeoisie, not higher financial capital, nor yet the lower craftsmasters and small dealers, but the wealthy business bourgeoisie, the wholesalers and manufacturers, particularly in the provinces. Its political program was a moderate republicanism, which would secure to the possessing middle classes the chief influence in public affairs. As soon as the Girondins, continually invoking the common people, had conquered political power, they turned around and fought relentlessly against the “ultra-revolutionaries,” the party of the petty bourgeoisie, the “Jacobins,” and the still more extreme proletarian groups. They saw in them nothing but unscrupulous rioters, who were threatening “true liberty.” “Now the revolution must stop,” one of their papers said, “otherwise we risk everything which we have achieved. . . . Now we must extinguish the fire of passion, stop party disorder, prevent catastrophes, oppose riots.” The continuation of the revolution would mean anarchy, and, if necessary, had to be prevented by exceptional laws. It was property rights, capitalist property rights, which had to be safeguarded. The great, misguided and confused mass was not able to conduct state or society; “is it not ridiculous to speak of the sovereignty of the masses?” The Girondin tax policy aimed at a series of favors for the wealthy bourgeoisie; the idea of a graduated tax rate was firmly rejected; “the graduated rate is always arbitrary and therefore dangerous to property.” With deep scorn the Girondins met the demands which the hungry masses made for a maximum price on bread to prevent some of the consequences of the prevailing high prices; it would have been an outrageous interference with free competition! And it showed how unpatriotic and demoralized those people were who could propose such measures! And when the poor Parisians, early in 1793, forced by tormenting hunger, plundered some bakery shops, the Girondin press could not find words strong enough to denounce this “mob,” this “pack of robbers.”

BONAPARTISM.

Thus disappeared all revolutionary spirit and human compassion, as dew before the sun’s rays, as soon as one layer of the capitalist class had gained a position which had to be defended against a class below.

The sentiment in the lower classes grew more and more bitter through these acts of treachery. What the meaning of it all was began to dawn upon them; they began to see through that mesh of phrases and big words with which the spokesmen

and writers for the bourgeoisie tried to veil the real motives of their politics, not only for others but also for themselves; they began to realize what role they were intended for—a ladder on which the possessing classes could climb to the top, from there to turn and grind the classes below under the iron heel of exploitation so much more effectively. It was the first manifestation of the *classconsciousness* of the proletariat.

As yet the proletariat was too weak, too few in numbers, and too heterogeneous in its composition to start an independent class war leading to victory. The revolutionary movements which had the interests of the working class and the petty bourgeoisie in view, and aimed at thoroughgoing social reforms, were soon crushed. It was the capitalists who secured the power. The liberation of capitalism from the remnants of feudalism was the historical problem which had to be and was solved. And the fear of the proletariat, which the capitalists already had entertained prior to the revolution, forced them to seek refuge in a strong form of government. The military dictatorship of Napoleon followed the revolution—and later on the monarchy—conservative forms which could guarantee protection of the capitalist property rights against the increasing demands of the working people.

But the revolutionary bourgeoisie of the great French Revolution—without its own knowledge or will—cleared the road for the proletariat. For now that the obstructions which the bourgeoisie formerly met with had been removed and the capitalist method of production could develop itself to an ever greater extent, the conditions were created which made it possible for the proletariat to develop and gain strength for its own emancipation.

Year after year the great mass of the population is being transformed into wage slaves under capitalism. And the exploitation has opened the eyes of the proletarianized masses, has taught them their position in society, has shown them the goal which they must gain in order to effect their emancipation, has driven them along the roads leading to the goal, has accelerated the agitational and organization work, strengthening and schooling those working masses, whose mission it is to put an end to their exploitation and thereby put an end to all exploitation, oppression and misery. With the French Revolution the dividing line of the class struggle has been removed. While formerly the capitalist bourgeoisie stood on the left side of the chasm, foremost in the revolutionary class struggle against the old medieval rulers, and was supported by the lower classes who felt that in this struggle their interests were identical with those of the on-storming bourgeoisie, so

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now that the bourgeoisie more and more unites with those powers which it formerly fought, and the struggle shows itself to be the one between *the property-holding class on the one side, and the propertyless class on the other side.*

The French Revolution forms the prelude to the mighty class struggle of our time.

5. Socialism Foreshadowed.

The slavery of antiquity was superseded by medieval feudalism which in turn gave place to the capitalist system of production. Gradually as capitalism grew and increased in economic significance, its social influence grew also. Gradually it burst the trammels hampering its development, cleared away the old political and juridical relations, and constructed society in accordance with its own interests and assumed full power. Now we are in the midst of full-fledged *capitalism*; capital rules over man with a power such as no *autocratic ruler* ever did, and this finds its reflex in all social life.

Each of these great epochs of human history denotes an exploitation of an oppressed subject class by a ruling over-class. Only the forms have changed. The slaves of antiquity piled up wealth for the slave owners just as the medieval serfs did it for the seigniors and just as the personally free workingmen are doing it for the capitalists. Capitalism has divided society into two hostile groups, a small minority which owns the land, the buildings, the machines, the factories, raw material, and everything else required for the socially necessary labor, and an immense majority which owns absolutely nothing but its *labor power* and which is compelled to sell that labor power to the possessing class in order to exist, and forced to sell it for a wage just high enough to keep body and soul together; while the great mass of values which it creates over and above mere means of subsistence flows into the coffers of its exploiters. The lash of hunger is the effective means by which the property-holding class forces the propertyless under the yoke, and the antithesis between capitalists and proletarians, between the exploiters and the exploiters, produces the main current in all public life the earth over.

But capitalism is but a passing period in the historical development. Already a new social order is forcing its way through.

The historical significance of capitalism has been that it made possible an *extension of the productive forces* so enormously and so rapidly as was never witnessed before. New machines have made it possible to multiply human productivity many times and to bring forth an amount of wealth unknown to the people of former days. The progress of the science of chemistry has enabled us to increase the fertility of the soil to an extent undreamt of, and to produce innumerable useful objects through simple and easy methods; it has created a system of transportation which has broken down the barriers which formerly

separated single nations, shortened distance, and brought the world into an ever richer and closer reciprocity. All this has come to be under the supremacy of the productive methods of capitalism. And capitalism has itself promoted this motion, hastened its speed and caused it to extend over ever newer fields. Every new progress has brought to capitalism a new means for exploiting the workers, forcing them under its sway. The great promises which all technical progress holds out of a higher life and culture for society as a whole become, under capitalism, so many promissory notes which only socialism can meet. That mass of inventions and discoveries, which otherwise would serve to promote human happiness, becomes under capitalism a scourge for the great mass in society, a means for the capitalists to extract new increased profits out of the working class.

This is the antithesis called forth by capitalist society, the antithesis between the interests of society on the one hand, and the interests of capital on the other. And as the development goes on this antithesis, this contradiction, becomes ever more glaring. The antisocial character of capitalism becomes plainer every day. The exploitation becomes fiercer and fiercer; greater and greater is the amount of labor power and values wasted under this anarchistic system of capitalist production. The capitalist mode of production meets with more and more difficulties and produces more and more contradictions—the increasing army of unemployed with all its consequences is proof of the fact that capitalism no longer has control over the productive forces which it itself has awakened. It is plainly seen how we are rapidly approaching the time when capitalism *must* collapse and give way to a new order because it *is no longer able to progress any further*.

Simultaneously as capitalism faces its downfall, it creates the forces which must dethrone it and take the affairs of society in hand. The *working class* is growing in numbers and gaining in strength and unity, in clearness and the consciousness of its position. *The class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie* becomes more and more bitter, and is changed from a series of separate struggles into a struggle for supremacy in society. And in this struggle the working class will be the victor; every new election, every new review of the socialist forces shows that the proletariat is marching toward victory. But when the working class wins, *socialism* will be the natural result. For socialism is nothing but the natural expression of the class interests of the workers. Within capitalist society the workers accept whatever improvements they can obtain. But once they possess the power, they will not rest contented with mere reforms, they will use their power to

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shape society according to their will. They will not be satisfied with merely limiting exploitation, but will abolish it; they will not be satisfied with gaining concessions from capital, but will put capital “out of the game” entirely, and in its place set up the Labor Republic.

Then and only then can the promises offered by the age of capitalism be fulfilled; the tremendous productive process will be changed from a means of exploitation and suppression to the means of a higher life and culture, not as now, for a limited number, but for all society; all the social misery of the modern age will be abolished and all future exploitation will be made impossible.

THE RISE OF CAPITALISM.

Foreword.

The two essays, published here for the first time in English, are from a distinguished work by the Danish Marxist scholar, Dr. Gustav Bang, entitled *Kapitalismens Gennembrud*, translated (literally) *The Break-through of Capitalism*. The first, the “Introduction,” is in fact the introduction to the above-mentioned work, and the second is Chapter X of that work. This work was originally designed as volume one of a planned larger work to be entitled *The Age of Capitalism*. Volumes two and three were to follow, but apparently never materialized.

The Danish publishers’ “blurb” informs us that *The Breakthrough of Capitalism* depicts how the new system (capitalism) at first forced itself through, dissolving the ancient social order in England, “and the consequences immediately following its emergence in that country,” adding that “subsequent volumes will carry the story further, showing how capitalism spread from England throughout the world, in ever larger and more imposing forms, and also how new forces developed, pointing to the new basis of future society.”

Originally this work grew out of a series of lectures delivered by Dr. Bang at the Copenhagen University in the autumn of 1901. They created a sensation and great enthusiasm among the enormous audiences attending them—“among men and women from all layers in Denmark who sought enlightenment on one of the most burning questions of the age.”

The entire work, if completed, would have been monumental in scope, and a source of education, especially to those engaged in the socialist and labor movement. It is a great pity that, so far as is known, Dr. Bang never brought it to a finish.

It is here presented as a complement to Dr. Bang’s *Crises in European History*, thus constituting in effect the story of the fourth of the great European historical crises.

ARNOLD PETERSEN

March 16, 1955

Gustav Bang's Introduction.

To understand the society in which one lives, and to realize the degree of its development, has increasingly become the major intellectual concern of modern man, and not the least so for one whose gaze is turned to the future, beyond the demands of the workaday world. To understand the evolutionary laws of society is to master the social-evolutionary forces.

Society is an organism, a living thing, composed of innumerable cells, all acting together. The method of producing the necessities of life is the vital nerve that extends through the entire organism and binds together its several parts into a whole. Every cultural product, even the most spiritual, can in the last analysis be traced back to this. For every change in the manner in which the necessities of life are produced and distributed, there is a corresponding change in the social structure, that is to say, a corresponding evolutionary step. All history springs from this source.

Like every other organism, society is in a constant process of development. As the productive relations are altered, new forces are born. It is an eternal struggle between the old that vanishes and the new that appears, and year by year outworn forms of the past are pushed aside. Thus society constantly changes character—not by sudden leaps, but through a gradual growth from the old basis. The present never constitutes an absolute break with the past, but is a continuing consequence of it. “Revolution” and “evolution,” “overthrow” and “development,” are in reality two words expressing the identical concept. A violent clash happens only when outlived forms of the past stubbornly block the road of the new forces—only then may it become necessary to explode them forcibly instead of removing them in orderly ways.

In this eternal evolutionary stream there are distinguished at different times different principles governing the productive relations. From time to time the prevailing mode of production yields place to the new. Since it is the production of the necessities of life that determines social relations, all cultural life takes on a new coloration, irrespective of its particular nature. A new historic era has commenced.

It is easy to recognize the main phases in the history of social evolution. But it is impossible to draw sharp lines of demarcation between them. One glides into the other until it is suddenly realized that one is deep in another age. Nor does the

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change take place at the same time everywhere. In the maturity of one age there may be found rudimentary survivals of the previous, as well as embryonic formations of the oncoming period. But in the course of time the former become increasingly obsolete while the latter gain increasingly in shape and strength.

We find ourselves at present in what is called the age of capitalism. This designation speaks volumes. It conveys the characteristic of that which is essential in our concept of present-day society. In modern society, in contrast to all former societies, capitalism has become the fundamental basis of life. It is the very life-principle of our age. The manner in which the necessities of life are produced and distributed has in all essential respects become capitalistic and, even where capitalism has not yet fully conquered, its dominant influence is in evidence. Directly or indirectly, capitalism is determining in every respect. Its activities are reflected in all modern culture. All modern history is the story of how capitalism grew out of the conditions that created it, of how it broke through barriers, conquered outmoded production methods, subordinated the earth, transformed life; but it also reveals the manner in which, at the same time, it gives birth to the new germinating forces leading to its own collapse and demise. It reveals, in short, the new forces arising in the very flowering period of capitalism, forces that aim at altering the basis of society from capitalist to socialist.

To understand this evolutionary process is to understand the age in which one lives; it is to understand one's self.

THE RISE OF CAPITALISM.

Chapter X.

I.

The England that had emerged under the creative hand of capitalism contained two nations. In the words of Benjamin Disraeli (Lord Beaconsfield):

“Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws.”¹⁰

These were the possessing and the propertyless classes, the capitalist class and the proletariat.

The society-dissolving activity of capitalism had started at the very moment that capitalist production had begun; it had continued with increasing force as capital expanded; it had wiped out the intermediary forms and profoundly deepened the contrasts. Racial differences, religious divergences, personal characteristics, all were blotted out in the momentous social process. The Scottish and English capitalist became one; the Irish and the English worker—one Catholic, the other Protestant, one mercurial and violent, the other calm and self-controlled—were melted into one mass. Between the British capitalist and the British proletarian there was nothing in common. They were separated by a gulf across which the language of the one could not be understood by the other, and where the thinking of the one was alien to the other.

There had been a previous era when England had housed two nations, a ruling and a ruled nation. That was three-quarters of a millennium ago, when the Normans ruled over the Anglo-Saxons. Then, as subsequently, the ruling group had been the few, the oppressed the great majority. But then the relation had been imposed from without and suddenly, through invasion and conquest, and the conflicting contrasts had gradually become reconciled in the measure that the two

¹⁰ Disraeli, *Sybil or: The Two Nations*. Edition of 1899, page 76. In this novel, the subject of which is taken from the revolutionary stirrings in Lancashire in 1842, there is given a lively and truthful account of the circumstances of the life of the English proletariat.

nations by degrees had absorbed each other. Now the situation was reversed. The new cleavage had proceeded from within, produced by forces acting in society itself. There was no reconciliation as a result of a normal development. On the contrary, the cleavage became sharper and ever more precipitous. Year after year the conflict between the capitalist class and the proletariat became ever more pronounced, in mode of thinking, in spiritual and intellectual respects, and in point of opposed and opposing interests.

Between these two nations, where one rules over the other, there is always warfare, undisguised or concealed, in major battle or guerrilla fighting. How the war is carried on between the two peoples inhabiting England is a question of far-reaching interest. Its interest is of more than just a historic nature. For this war is the great class struggle raging in society in our age.

The peculiar nature of this war lies in the conflicting relations created by capitalism. The bourgeoisie, the ruling capitalist class (in whose interest it is to preserve peace as far as possible, because war means insurrection against its own power) insists that there are no real conflicts between capital and labor, hence no cause for war. Capitalist and proletarian, so it is argued, stand in no hostile relation to each other. They complement each other and the one cannot exist without the other. The proletarian cannot exist without capital, i.e., he cannot exist without an accumulation of wealth applied to instruments of production, raw materials and consumer goods. Capital cannot exist without workers who yield a part of the values created by the use of their labor power and the constant expansion of capital. The two elements condition each other and cannot possibly be separated. Each misunderstanding is incidental and of a temporary nature that can be quickly settled through the leveling process of free competition. So the capitalist tells us.

The claim is false, as are all the claims by which the capitalist class justifies its right to existence. Ignored is the fact that labor power is a nature-endowed possession that cannot be separated from the person of the worker, whereas capital is dependent and in flux, never attached to any particular person. Labor power and its possessor, the worker, cannot be separated, while on the contrary capital is only accidentally attached to the person of the individual capitalist. Under the present system of capitalism, the workers cannot do without capital, that is, the means of production. But they can quite well do without the capitalists! The latter, however, are impotent and powerless without the workers, that is, workers who produce surplus value for them. Every struggle by the workers against the introduction of

improved means of production is reactionary and doomed to defeat in advance. The struggle against their capitalist application, however, is a natural and essential characteristic of the modern class struggle. The magnitude of surplus value points to the limitations within which the workers can achieve gains under the capitalist system. The socializing of the means of production points the road to their ultimate emancipation.

II.

It took a long time before the British working class clearly saw through the false claims of mutual interests and harmony between the classes, and a still longer time before it consciously began its struggle for emancipation from capitalist exploitation and ceased fighting for mere petty gains. But earlier, at the very inception of capitalist production, it rose instinctively—now here, now there, in one way or another—against the capitalist exploitation process. Gradually the several movements converged, the unclear conceptions matured, and the class struggle became enlarged and more systematic, even though it did not then, nor does it now [in 1900] (due to the exceptional position of England), achieve the clarity of purpose attained on the continent.

The first uprisings of the English proletariat (and they can be traced back as far as a proletariat existed in England at all) were the spontaneous results of hunger and general misery. Their aims—insofar as there were conscious aims at all—varied according to the special circumstances. Here it was an attempt to seek relief from their sufferings by a particular group of proletarians; there it was an effort to prevent the adoption of rules under which it was thought their misery would be increased. And so forth. The uprisings may be considered from the general viewpoint that they were protests against the process of exploitation that capitalism initiated, and they took varying forms: sometimes as hunger-revolts of a general demonstrative character, not directed against particular individuals; again as threats against capitalist agents; and, finally, as efforts to destroy machines and terrorize the industrial capitalists who contemplated their installation.

This latter particularly created the greatest terror among the capitalists. It is of special interest, in that it furnished expression for the hatred of machines that smoldered among the workers. Unreflecting, through pure instinct, they sensed what the introduction of machines would do to them, and soon they had experience aplenty. From the close of the 18th century there commenced an endless series of

disturbances over the increasing use of machinery, and the disturbances continued well into the 19th century. Factories were set on fire, machines were destroyed, either by stealth or through popular risings, and the capitalists were frightened to such an extent that they moved their establishments elsewhere. The harshest measures against the rioters failed to prevent repeated attempts at destruction.

These developments were serious while machines were still used only for the processing of cotton. They became even more serious when the wool industry was drawn into the technical development. By reason of the new technique the cotton industry had been able to expand and to attract to itself new labor forces. As regards the workers in the woolen industry, however, the advent of machines could only mean a violent expulsion of labor power and the consequent decline in the working-class standard of living. They felt themselves increasingly threatened, and their feelings found expression in increasingly frequent and violent outbursts. At the turn of the century (1800) their hatred was directed particularly against the fulling mills, and serious demonstrations resulted.

In these circumstances were found one of the causes of the growth of the unrest commencing at the beginning of the century. Another cause was the general misery prevailing during the [Napoleonic] wars. Large masses of the population were sunk into a state that made existence scarcely possible and which, moreover, was one of extreme uncertainty and violence. Brief periods of recovery were followed by periods of depression, affecting particularly the standard of living of the proletariat, each depression breeding new disturbances.

The third chief cause, and the one that brought violence of the wildest character, was the direct and conscious part played by the bourgeoisie, especially the prohibition they had caused to be enacted against the efforts made by the workers to organize into trade associations. Originally adopted in 1799, and strengthened and sharpened in 1800, the prohibition had robbed the working class of all lawful means to elevate itself through planned combinations. Every trade organization was denounced as a conspiracy, and it became a crime to belong to one.¹¹ While the “labor aristocrats” (those skilled in trades) actually were little

¹¹ In 1810, the London *Times* typographers were sentenced to prison terms varying from nine months to two years because they had formed a trade union and attempted to strike. In pronouncing sentence, the judge declared:

“Prisoners, you have been convicted of the most wicked conspiracy to injure the most vital interests of those very employers who gave you bread, with intent to impede and injure them in their business; and, indeed, as far as in you lay, to effect their ruin. The frequency of such crimes among men of your class of life, and their mischievous and dangerous tendency to ruin the fortunes of those

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affected by the law,¹² those employed in the great industries were made the object of continued persecution whenever they attempted to organize, and again and again the most barbaric punishment was inflicted upon those who made the attempt.

Obviously it became impossible in the long run to prevent the workers from joining together in associations for planned action. The character of these associations was stamped by the circumstances of their formation. They were secret; the names of the leaders were generally unknown to the majority; pompous initiation ceremonies took place, accompanied by the singing of religious hymns, the persons participating being garbed in surplices, and oaths were taken on drawn swords and skeletons. At times the new members were required to swear loyalty to the association under threatened punishment, such as having their hearts pierced or being disemboweled.¹³ The methods employed by these associations corresponded to the mystical aura surrounding them. Open wage struggles conducted in peaceful manner (cessation of work, etc.) were dangerous because they would have exposed the organizations to public view. Terror tactics, such as arson and destruction of machinery, assaults and the writing of threatening letters, were possible without revealing the existence and workings of the organization. If occasionally individuals were caught, they would stoutly deny that they had acted with premeditation in collusion with others, and the organization could thus continue its existence and continue to use such tactics. It was hoped that through these tactics the capitalists could be frightened into forgiving such excesses.

III.

During the first quarter of the 19th century, while the ban on forming associations was enforced, England was the scene of an endless series of labor disturbances, all aimed at demonstrating directly against the machines, indirectly against the capitalists who introduced them. They occurred sporadically here and there, now apparently without inner connections, now as links in the chain in a conscious and consistent policy in widespread and well-organized efforts.

employers which a principle of gratitude and self-interest should induce you to support, demand of the law that a severe example should be made of those persons who shall be convicted of such daring and flagitious combinations [trade unions], in defiance of public justice, and in violation of public order. No symptom of contrition on your part has appeared—no abatement of the combination in which you are accomplices has yet resulted from the example of your convictions.”—Quoted by Graham Wallas (among others) in his *The Life of Francis Place*, London, 1898, pp. 200–201.

¹² Cf., for example, Langford, *A History of Birmingham Life*, Vol. II, pp. 207–208.

¹³ S. and B. Webb, *History of Trade Unionism*, pp. 79 and 113.

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[At this point Dr. Bang enters upon a detailed discussion of the Luddite uprising against the machines, which started in Nottinghamshire in the month of March, 1811, directly prompted by the terrible misery prevailing among the stocking and lace workers. The Luddite uprising has often been related and need not be retold here.¹⁴ Detailed accounts of this futile and senseless (though understandable) uprising are readily available. A good account of it was given in the *Weekly People* of September 4, 1954. It convulsed England from stem to stern, frightening the British capitalists out of their wits, and was even discussed in that holiest of holy, the House of Lords, where the poet, Byron, sharply attacked the law, adopted by Parliament in 1812, which provided the death penalty for anyone convicted of having destroyed machinery.¹⁵ Suffice it to say that after repeated outbreaks and suppressions, the movement died out, as in the nature of things it was bound to do. Dr. Bang observes that when the storm had subsided “the English class struggle entered upon a new era, the era of trade unionism.”—A.P.]

THE FIRST ORGANIZED STRUGGLES.

It began [Dr. Bang continues] with that brief efflorescence that had marked its appearance on the Continent. The men who had worked so hard for the right to form trade associations—among them particularly the London master tailor, Francis Place—had believed that this right would in fact precisely prevent the formation of trade unions.¹⁶ It was assumed that the workers would only enter upon temporary agreements for mutual action whenever a conflict would arise.¹⁷ However, the very opposite proved to be the case. The immediate consequence of the law’s adoption was a violent flareup of the trade union movement all over England. Countless organizations appeared and a series of violent wage struggles took place—struggles that commenced without preparations and without the sound judgment required to understand the power of the ruling class. The workers met

¹⁴ One of the best accounts of Luddism is given in William Felkin’s *History of Machine-Wrought Hosiery and Lace Manufactures*, pp. 301–342.

¹⁵ Speech in the House of Lords, February 27, 1812.

¹⁶ See particularly S. and B. Webb’s *History of Trade Unionism*, pp. 102–161.

¹⁷ In 1825, Francis Place wrote: “Combinations will soon cease to exist. Men have been kept together for long periods only by the oppression of the laws; these being repealed, combinations will lose the matter which cements them into masses, and they will fall to pieces. All will be as orderly as even a Quaker could desire. He knows nothing of the working people who can suppose that, when left at liberty to act for themselves, without being driven into permanent associations by the oppression of the laws, they will continue to contribute money for distant and doubtful experiments, for uncertain and precarious benefits.”—Graham Wallas, *The Life of Francis Place*, p. 217.

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with defeat almost everywhere, having no realization of the strength and weakness of the acquired weapons. They became despondent, and their young organizations were soon dissolved, or at any rate lost all significance. There followed also the crisis of 1825 and the subsequent bad years of unemployment and misery. The quickly formed movement as quickly collapsed.

The movement staged a comeback toward the end of the 1820s, this time under more propitious circumstances and with enlarged goals. But these very goals were at this time altogether fantastic. The idea was presented of an all-embracing “trade union,” which would constitute a giant combine of workers of many or all crafts. These attempts were made almost simultaneously from several quarters. On the initiative of the cotton spinners, there was formed in 1830 a large national association, chiefly embracing the textile workers, and a few others. It was soon dissolved.

Of similar brief duration was an alliance formed of building workers of diverse crafts, even though this alliance had been more solidly constructed. From the close of the year 1833 through the autumn of 1834, this movement reached its highest point with the formation of the “Grand National Consolidated Trades Union.” It was formed primarily under the influence of the utopian Socialist, Robert Owen, and was intended to include all workers of all crafts. Its aim went beyond the limits of all existing possibilities, and was wholly utopian. The idea projected was that when this “grand union” was constituted, and one craft after another was organized separately, it should take over the collective production, each group working in mutual cooperation with the others. With one bold stroke the “national union” would carry England from capitalism into socialism! The scheme of this new society originated in the head of Robert Owen, and was proclaimed by him and his followers as the new evangel! It was assumed that all that was needed was a conscious desire on the part of the workers to give the scheme reality. There was no conception whatever of the organic laws of society. The plan immediately won extraordinary approval. A few weeks after it was launched it had a membership of a half million workers of all crafts, industrial and agricultural workers, men and women. The spirit was high among the leaders, who confidently looked forward to the great events of the very near future!

On the basis of later years’ experience and knowledge, it is easy to understand that “the great goal” was unattainable, and that the attempt was doomed to failure as sudden as its flaring up. No social revolution can be effected through such

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sudden and arbitrary intervention. It can only materialize through preparation and guidance at the historically right moment. Entirely apart from its historical impossibility, the large organization was altogether too loose in its construction. The members were gained, and not the least so, by the fact that they were not required to pay regular membership dues, and the organizations were altogether too quickly heaped together and as quickly disintegrated.

Accidental events occurred in great number—a number of strikes broke out; in the beginning the leadership attempted to come to the aid of the strikers, but this soon proved hopeless; one defeat was followed by another; the workers became disillusioned; and at the same time the hatred against them increased among the bourgeoisie.

The fear of the big trade union was a natural one on their part. This fear had been considerable at the outset and it increased as the movement grew in extent. The strikes, many of which were directed against “the public,” added to the growing antipathy in circles where hitherto indifference had prevailed. The authorities began to take vigorous action whenever the occasion presented itself. A painful impression was created when in March, 1834, six agricultural workers in Dorsetshire were sentenced to seven years’ deportation because they had caused the induction of new members under oath in keeping with the laws of the organization. The sentence was of doubtful legal validity, but it was affirmed, and giant demonstrations on behalf of the convicted men were fruitless. Simultaneously, the capitalists succeeded in one way or another in destroying segments of the union. The workers were presented with prepared statements for their signatures, giving them the choice of pledging to leave the union or lose their jobs. Having no hope of being able to secure the necessary help if they refused to sign, the workers in masses did so, though only after considerable resistance. The big union was scattered to the four winds. By autumn of 1834 it had completely collapsed.

Its fate was typical. As it had happened here, so it would happen elsewhere and whenever a labor movement suddenly arises, proceeding from a central point and building from the top down. The movement would grow with feverish haste, reach tremendous proportions, and then early die out. The framework that should have held it together, the cells of which it should have been composed, did not materialize. Yet, such attempts did not prove entirely fruitless. They served as “fertilizers” in a number of ways. Gradually new movements appeared, more circumscribed in extent, but of greater depth.

IV.

Despite the general despondency and hopelessness that pervaded the ranks of the British workers, the experience and lessons acquired were not wholly wasted. A number of the newly created unions survived, however weakened and poverty stricken. For a long time, however, chaos prevailed until gradually new and stronger organizations made their appearance. But now the ruthless capitalist exploitation that had preceded these events made itself fatefully felt. It was only among the so-called labor aristocrats—the “elite workers”—that organizational efforts gained strength. The large majority of unskilled and poorly paid workers lacked as yet the economic stability and mutual feeling of solidarity to combine in strong unions. It could hardly be otherwise in view of the wretched conditions to which capitalism had reduced them. Trade unionism, accordingly, thus changed from being a lever for combining the proletariat to a wedge that split it in two—a small “upper class” and a large “lower class,” without common interests and often in sharp conflict with each other. Nevertheless, these unions had their effect on the proletarian movement, however unproletarian they were in character, for they pointed the way to the future struggle to be waged against capitalist exploitation, not merely through guerrilla fighting, but against the capitalist system itself.

ORIGIN OF THE “COOPERATIVE”.

One of the by-products of the struggles during the 1830s was the cooperative movement, which had developed along lines parallel with the trade union efforts.¹⁸ Here, too, Robert Owen had been foremost in activity, and it bore the same utopian character that marked Owen’s other attempts. The idea was to merge the whole working class into one gigantic society, owning “stock exchanges” where articles of consumption could be purchased—not with money, but with labor vouchers! In this way, it was argued, distribution could be arranged in “the new moral world,” similar to production through the big trade union combination!

The practical application of this idea was, of course, impossible. One failure followed another and the “labor exchanges” eventually utterly collapsed. Chronologically the collapse of the “cooperatives” coincided with the collapse of the trade union movement. First and foremost the effort was directed toward emancipation from the capitalist “middleman profit” by establishing consumers’

¹⁸ G.J. Holyake, *The History of Cooperation in England, Its Literature and Its Advocates*, Vol. I, London, 1875.

associations with stores owned in common by the members. Next came the “production associations”—and production here was confined to commodities that were indispensable to the workers, such as bread, meat, etc.

Leading in this respect was the “Pioneers from Rochdale” (in Lancashire).¹⁹ This society came into existence as a result of the terrible poverty prevailing during the winter of 1843–44. With caution and through clever tactics it prospered, and its membership and its business turnover increased greatly. Its success furnished the impulse for the starting of similar establishments in working-class circles elsewhere. However, in less than 20 years the “Rochdale Pioneers” association had changed character completely, and had become an ordinary joint-stock enterprise. The original stockholders sought to keep out new ones, and the wages in the workshops were kept down to the normal minimum, while the profit distributed among the stockholders was boosted to the highest point possible. The enterprise that had commenced as a proletarian weapon in the struggle against the capitalists terminated in raising a few proletarians from that status to become members of the petty bourgeoisie. In like manner fared other similar societies where they did not dissolve under constant quarreling among the members, as frequently happened.

The flood tide of the early 1830s eventually ebbed. The proletarian effort to transform with one stroke English society from the ground up was frozen into petty bourgeois respectability, with separatist craft unions among the “labor aristocrats,” who looked down upon the less-favored layers of the working class and only reluctantly permitted them to organize into penny-piddling cooperative societies whose members lacked all sense of solidarity with those excluded. Each of these many groups sought as best it could to improve the lot of its own members, sought to wrest from the capitalists exploiting them certain petty concessions. The groups were in no sense to be conceived of as factors in a great, common class struggle, aiming at the raising of the working class to the level needed to adopt proletarian emancipation as its goal.

In the meantime, however, a new element was added in the struggle—the political movement.

In the earlier struggle there had been no political element at all, neither in the tumults resulting from the struggle against the machine, nor in the trade union and cooperative efforts. Robert Owen himself was quite without any political understanding. He was more of the aristocrat than the democrat, fatuously

¹⁹ V.A. Huber, *Sociale Fragen (Social Questions)*, V. Nordhausen, 1867.

believing in the possibility of erecting a socialist society in the midst of a state ruled by landowners and capitalists. From its inception the proletarian movement had been socially abstract. Its consequences—trade unions and cooperatives—had assumed a nonpolitical, and partly an anti-political character. But circumstances soon forced the fighting proletariat to strike the political road, and the turning point was reached in 1832 when the new election laws were adopted.

[Here follows a somewhat detailed account of this struggle in which the bourgeoisie was so deeply involved in its attempt to equate its economic power with corresponding political power, at the expense of the landed aristocracy. The circumstances of this struggle, too, are fairly well known and need not be retold here. Dr. Bang brings out the manner in which the capitalist class invoked the aid of the proletariat in order to gain political supremacy, and succeeded in doing so at the expense of the workers, who, as the struggle ended, were left out of consideration as far as their participation in elections was concerned. As Bang summarized it: "In the cities only the houseowners, or tenants paying at least £10 in annual rent, were entitled to vote, and in the country districts only the capitalist farmers were so entitled—the rural workers not at all." All the promises of reforms made by the capitalists to the workers as bait to obtain their support were forgotten.—A.P.]

V.

The proletariat [continued Dr. Bang] had been betrayed, and they knew it. They began to perceive that only through independent action could they make any progress. For obviously any cooperation with the bourgeoisie ran counter to all common sense, since the interests of the two classes were diametrically opposite. The capitalists were given added political power without the slightest gain to the workers—the circumstances attending the latter would be no less oppressive and slave-bound. The capitalists, with the aid of the workers, had acquired new powerful political means that could be used with equal effectiveness against the workers below and the landed aristocracy above. *The emancipation of the working class must be its own classconscious work.*

Thus ever larger portions of the proletariat began to realize the necessity of independent political action. The collapse of the trade unions and cooperatives had taught them the impossibility of making radical adjustments in a society where interests hostile to the working class were predominant. The legislative acts of the

“reformed” Parliament had revealed the opposition of the capitalists to the thoroughgoing social reforms so desperately needed.

CHARTISM ENTERS THE CONTEST.

During this period of increasing understanding of what ought to be done, the strange movement known as *Chartism* was born.²⁰ It was the first forerunner of the socialist movement of later years. It started with a “workers’ union” (“The Working Men’s Association”), founded in London in 1837. Here, during the summer of 1837 was worked out the program (“People’s Charter”) which gave the movement its name. It contained six demands: (1) general suffrage for all adult males; (2) annual elections to Parliament; (3) secret balloting; (4) abolition of property qualifications in order to vote; (5) compensation for members of the Lower House [the House of Commons], and (6) equally divided election districts. Participating in working out the “charter” were workers as well as members of the radical party—the extreme left wing of the liberal bourgeoisie. The last mentioned, however, soon took fright, and once it became clear that the movement was assuming a proletarian and democratic character, they quickly withdrew.

By 1838 the Chartist movement had emerged in formidable strength, and soon assumed giant dimensions. In 1837 a proposed new election reform had been rejected in the Lower House, by a vote of 509 to 20, and the law of 1832 was declared to be the final settlement of the issue beyond which no further steps would be taken. All hope of a peaceful settlement of the workers’ demands was destroyed. An independent uprising was deemed necessary. The terrible wretchedness that the workers suffered from during these years strengthened the revolutionary spirit among them. A large-scale, planned agitation commenced, spreading like wildfire. The media used were the daily papers and public meetings. Several Chartist papers were started and, though the stamp tax was considerable, their circulation increased greatly. Most important among these was *The Northern Star*, published in Leeds and directed by the Irish attorney, Feargus O’Connor, who soon became the soul and spirit of the movement, and the idolized chief of the Chartists. Of

²⁰ The chief work on Chartism is still R.G. Gammage’s *History of the Chartist Movement*, New Edition, Newcastle o.T. and London, 1894. Among the several accounts may be especially mentioned L. Brentano’s “Die englische Chartistenbewegung” in *Preussische Jahrbuecher* (“The English Chartist Movement” in *Prussian Yearbooks*), Vol. XXXIII, pp. 431–447 and 531–550, Berlin, 1874; and P. Valera’s *L’insurrezione chartista in Inghilterra* (*The Chartist Insurrection in England*), Milan, 1895.

greater effect than the press, however, were the speeches. Meetings were held, attended by several hundred thousand people. They were generally held in the evening, after quitting time, and in the open, in the glare of torches.

The participants arrived armed, and the banners under which they gathered bore inscriptions that in succinct, sharp language proclaimed the workers' demands. Among the speakers who exerted the greatest influence through enthusiastic and flaming oratory was a dissenting clergyman, Joseph Rayner Stephens, representing the extreme radical wing of the Chartists—the “physical force men,” who considered it hopeless to attempt to gain anything by mere peaceful demonstrations. It was he who (at a grand demonstration in Manchester, attended by 200,000 persons) expounded the principles of Chartism and the purpose of the Chartists: The struggle is not for mere formal political rights, but for the things these rights could secure—increased well-being, higher standard of living, etc. “Chartism, my friends [he exclaimed], is no political movement, where the main point is your getting the ballot. Chartism is a knife-and-fork question: the charter means a good house, good food and drink, prosperity and short working hours.” (Quoted by Frederick Engels in *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*)

In the summer of 1839 it was thought that the time was ripe. The movement had reached such an extent and such strength that it was assumed that the capitalists would not dare to oppose it. At the beginning of the year a standing committee, “the Chartist Parliament,” had met in London. Here the radical wing was in an unquestioned majority, the moderate elements having in part withdrawn. Shortly after, this committee had moved on to Birmingham, where the Chartist movement had its largest number of adherents. Physical-force threats were uttered with increasing vehemence. In July a petition with 1,280,000 signatures was presented to the Lower House, which, on July 12, rejected the petition without discussion, by a vote of 237 to 148.

Once again the workers had been disappointed in their expectations; and there seemed nothing left except open rebellion. On July 15 a fierce street battle took place in Birmingham. The city was set on fire, and only after a terrible blood bath did the troops succeed in establishing “order.”

At the same time it was debated whether to apply pressure by withdrawing savings bank deposits, demanding gold for paper currency, and, as the last and strongest means, the general strike. The capitalists attempted to divert these currents from themselves, carrying on a lively agitation among the workers against

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the corn tax that the landed aristocracy had maintained for many years. If the workers could be persuaded to abandon demands for universal suffrage and, instead, be induced to agitate for the abolition of the corn tax, the capitalists would gain greatly thereby.

The prices of the workers' "necessities of life" would go down, thereby making it possible for the capitalists to resist demands for higher wages, and perhaps even to effect a reduction in wages. However, the workers were suspicious—they saw through these schemes, and the anti-corn-law agitation met with little sympathy among them.

VI.

The period from 1840 to 1848 presented a series of ups and downs for the Chartist movement—now it seemed to have gone to pieces, now it seemed to flare up with unexpected strength. Early in 1840 the government had succeeded in weakening the movement, through severe measures against revolutionary utterances, by imprisoning some of the leaders, by inflicting harsh punishment on participants in disturbances, and by the massing of troops in areas most seriously affected.

By the spring of 1842 the Chartist movement had again recovered sufficiently to lend hope that renewed action was possible. A new petition was presented to the Lower House, this time with many more radical societies participating, and with signatures numbering 3,300,000. When this also was rejected the movement again assumed a revolutionary character. Early in August a general strike broke out in Lancashire. In Manchester and vicinity all work stopped with the exception of that in establishments supplying the absolute essentials, and in the case of places where a work stoppage would cause destruction of perishable goods. Steam engines were put out of commission, without doing permanent damage to them. The conduct of the workers was marked by exemplary calm and order. The strictest discipline was maintained, and no violence took place, either against persons or property. The general strike spread to other areas in England, but soon apathy set in, because the capitalists did not yield, and many returned to work. After a few weeks the whole movement collapsed.

During the following five or six years Chartism declined further, and before long it became infected with the same utopian fantasies that marked the movements of the earlier days. Plans were proposed to purchase landed estates and

turn them into small “socialist” colonies; little by little they then would grow together and extend over the entire English society. When attempts were made to put these plans into practice they encountered, of course, insurmountable obstacles. Also, they directly served to weaken the Chartist movement by dividing the goals and diverting some of the revolutionary spirit into channels terminating in swamps.

Again the efforts were not wholly fruitless—something was gained during these years. To be sure, none of the attempted political reforms materialized. However, one social reform measure was won, one long striven for by the workers. Under pressure of popular sentiment the 10-hour law of 1847 was adopted, not alone for the children and adolescents who worked in the textile industry, but also for the adult women working in the industry. In point of fact the working day of adult males was fixed at the same length. This law was of decisive significance, for it marked a definite break with the traditional principles of “noninterference” and signaled the first upward step for the English proletariat. However, it was not without vigorous opposition on the part of the capitalists that it was forced through, and every effort was made to abolish it. The year before (1846) the capitalists, however, had recouped their loss. The corn law was abrogated.

Then came 1848, with the February revolution in France, and the tremendous convulsions all over the European continent that even reached the British Isles. For the last time Chartism flared up, but its vitality was exhausted, and after a fruitless effort to create demonstrations, it collapsed in impotency. Its collapse was complete. Capitalism had at length ridden out the storm.

That happened which had to happen. Just as the great movement from the beginning of the 1830s terminated in petty bourgeois tinkering, so 15 years later Chartism had to terminate. It *had* to do so because historically it was not in consonance with the evolutionary stage of the period.

Capitalism was not sufficiently ripe for overthrow. It was in its ascendancy, both as regards inner and external development. It had barely put the first lap behind, and it was to pass through a series of phases before the germs of its dissolution could manifest themselves. Preparations for its coming collapse could be made, the collapse could be hastened, but this could be done only by the workers gaining in strength, organizationally, tactically, and in consistent progress, and in the measure that the bourgeoisie became weakened. A big victory that in itself meant a definite step toward a new social order could not yet be won.

And just as little as capitalism was ripe for overthrow, so in the same measure

was the proletariat unready for victory. The proletariat had not yet been schooled in the class struggle; it lacked the hardening, the firmness, the discipline that only a slow, tough, year-by-year struggle could supply. It lacked that depth of classconsciousness which lends endurance despite all disappointments and defeats, and it was wanting in that understanding of the laws of social evolution which is essential in order, successfully, to take advantage of the evolutionary process. The Chartist movement furnishes the best proof of that. Directed toward a goal, in and by itself modest enough, and with a clear understanding of the significance of that goal as an intermediary step toward new goals, the English workers rose. They assembled for mass attack, but they were untrained, unprepared troops in whom the fires quickly ignited and as quickly became extinguished. After each defeat the movement disintegrated for a period of time, and when it again rose little if anything had been learned from the defeat. The organizations were structurally the same, the tactics were not adapted to the new situations, and the tools of the struggle remained almost unchanged. There was no development, only repetition of past mistakes, and on a larger scale. The trade unions and the cooperatives stood entirely outside the movement for the political emancipation of the proletariat. The various elements in the class struggle were split each for itself and were not capable of being merged into an organic whole. The collective, coalescing force needed to propel forward was completely wanting.

Thus Chartism, like similar previous proletarian uprisings born of capitalism's early development period, was fated to fail, and fail it did. Toward the end of April, 1848, its failure was an acknowledged fact. And with that, for a great many years to come, there came an end to all serious attempts at crushing the power of English capitalism. The disappointments had wearied the proletariat. The palliatives applied had begun to take effect, especially the 10-hour law of 1847. Classconsciousness became weakened among the workers, class feeling and class hatred were suffocated in apathy, and indifference and impotency prevailed generally.

But just at that point the curtain was raised on the first act of the mighty drama of the international working-class movement of our age.

It was from a small circle of exiled revolutionaries and workers of various nationalities, gathered in London in 1847, and connected with similar circles in other countries, that an invitation was extended to two German social economists to write a program for them—a manifesto, wherein clearly and sharply would be set forth the ideas that heretofore had been vaguely entertained by them. The two men

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were the 29-year-old Dr. Karl Marx and the younger (by two years) businessman, Frederick Engels. In February, 1848, there was issued the *Communist Manifesto*. Modern socialism had spoken its first word. For the first time the great battle cry sounded throughout the world:

“Proletarians of all countries, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains. You have a world to gain!”

Capitalism had emerged from its formative period, and stepped into the age where it now was master of the world. But at that very moment it was confronted by an awakening proletariat, arming itself, for defense and attack, for eventual victory.

(THE END)