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CLASSICAL SOCIAL THEORY AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION OF 1848*

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Three of the classic "founding fathers" of sociology (Comte, Marx and Tocqueville) were contemporary observers of the French Revolution of 1848. In addition, another important theoretical tradition was represented in contemporary observations of 1848 by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. The present paper summarizes aspects of the views of these theoretically minded observers, notes some points at which more recent historical research suggests revisions to these classical views, and poses three arguments: (1) The revolution of 1848 exerted a direct shaping influence on classical social theory through lessons (some now subject to revision) learned from observation of the revolutionary struggles. (2) The 1848 revolution influenced classical social theory indirectly by contributing to the submergence of the radical French revolutionary tradition (along with utopian socialism) after the defeat of the June insurrectionaries and Bonaparte's coup. (3) Both writers in the classical tradition and current researchers have failed to thematize adequately a basic transformation in effectiveness of national integration, communication and administration which made 1848 in crucial ways much more akin to 1789 than it was direct evidence for the growth of class struggle and the likelihood of further revolution in advanced capitalist countries.

To Alexis de Tocqueville and Karl Marx, sociologically the foremost among contemporary observers, the mid-19th century revolutions seemed not only echoes of 1789 and other predecessors but harbingers of something new. Tocqueville saw a threat to social order in the increasing protest of 1847 and 1848 which was posed not just by revolution but by the eruption of an insidious, continually growing, struggle of class against class. In October 1847, Tocqueville (not unlike Karl Marx), drafted a "manifesto" (planned for publication by a group of parliamentary associates though never in fact published). He identified the actors in political struggle in terms of underlying economic identities:

Soon the political struggle will be between the Haves and the Have-nots; property will be the great battlefield; and the main political questions will turn on the more or less profound modifications of the rights of property owners that are to be made. Then

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we shall again see great public agitations and great political parties. (1971: 15)

Marx also saw the struggle in class terms, of course, and blamed the bourgeoisie for forcing the workers into combat. Like Tocqueville, he saw the future presaged in the June days:

The workers were left no choice; they had to starve or take action. They answered on June 22 with the tremendous insurrection in which the first great battle was fought between the two classes that split modern society. It was a fight for the preservation or annihilation of the *bourgeois* order. The veil that shrouded the republic was torn asunder. (1850: 67; emphasis in original)

Liberal republicans had formulated the notion of "permanent revolution" in the early nineteenth century, but it was amid the defeats of 1848 that it came to take on the meaning not of gradual reform but of a need to extend the revolutionary struggle beyond bourgeois limits:

While the democratic petty bourgeois wish to bring the revolution to a conclusion as quickly as possible, and with the achievement, at most, of the above demands, it is our

interest and our task to make the revolution permanent, until all more or less possessing classes have been forced out of their position of dominance, the proletariat has conquered state power, and the association of proletarians, not only in one country but in all the dominant countries of the world, has advanced so far that competition among the proletarians in these countries has ceased and that at least the decisive productive forces are concentrated in the hands of the proletarians. (Marx and Engels, 1850: 281)¹

Yet the revolution was not permanent, and the struggles of 1848 to 1851 were among the last major upheavals of a passing revolutionary era rather than a new beginning.

In this paper, I want to suggest a few ways in which the French revolution of 1848 helped to shape classical social theory. I will first look at the views of contemporaneous theorists on the revolution, arguing particularly that one important contemporary view in 1848 failed, precisely because of its defeat in the revolution, to gain full representation in classical social theory. I will briefly note some of the revisions later historical research has imposed on the understanding of 1848 received from the classical theorists. Lastly, I will suggest a crucial sense in which the 1848 revolution should be seen as tied to Western Europe's past more than its future, something partially obscured by the forward-looking orientation of the most influential contemporary theoretical observers.

I

In a widely read essay, Raymond Aron has described the views of 1848 taken by Comte, Tocqueville and Marx. Not only was each of these a contemporary witness to the events of that revolutionary year (and two of them participants of note). Aron reasonably enough takes Comte, Tocqueville and Marx to be among the founders of three great traditions of sociological theory: the exclusively social (in

¹ Given Marx's later theoretical stress on precise definition of classes, it is worth noting the imprecision of phrasing here—e.g. "more or less possessing classes")

many ways conservative), the autonomously political (or liberal), and the economic (or radical). Indeed, Aron finds this triangulation of perspectives to be a mirror of the conflict itself, with its monarchist, liberal democratic and radical/socialist forces. And he suggests that something of the same triangulation is characteristic of twentieth century social conflicts:

. . . in the course of the period from 1848 to 1851, France experienced a political conflict which, more than any other episode in the history of the nineteenth century, resembles the political conflicts of the twentieth century. As a matter of fact, in this period one can observe a triangular conflict between what are known in the twentieth century as fascists more or less liberal democrats, and socialists, which we find again between 1920 and 1933 in Weimar, Germany, and which is still observable to a certain extent in present-day France. (1968: 303–4)

There is some truth to this characterization, given the limited range of comparison (i.e., which 19th century conflict is most similar to those of the 20th century) but there is even more reason for caution. Bonapartism, for example, may have shared with fascism a combination of nationalism, appeals to order and efficiency, but fascism was emphatically *not* a carry over of old-regime monarchism but a specific creation of modernity. Hitler, moreover, is flattered far too much in any comparison with Louis Bonaparte; the comparison is only somewhat less outrageous for Mussolini. There were, of course, some structural similarities to the situations within which these different "rightist" movements came to power, and in the politics of personality which triumphed partially in 1848 and fully in the 1930s. Even if we granted more similarity to the ideological forces than I find justified, we would still have to note the very different structural underpinnings available to movements of left or right in the twentieth century: effective national communication systems and administrative apparatuses, for example.

Perhaps 1848 is better seen as chronology would suggest, representing a crucial juncture between the classical age of revolutions and the modern era, halfway between the

French revolution and the rise of fascism. In any case, we must be clear as to which dimensions are similar and which are different. Whether the glass be half full or half empty, Aron's strategy of theoretical comparison is an interesting one. I shall summarize and augment his descriptions and contrasts, and then take the occasion to point out how one crucial dimension to the intellectual lineage is left out, for reasons very directly related to 1848.

•The revolution panicked the aging August Comte and he found considerable reassurance in Bonapartist rule. Comte had little interest in representative institutions, constitutionalism or the parliamentary system (the last of which he regarded as a mere accident of English history). Comte thought political arrangements were not fundamental but superficial, and needed mainly to be brought into line with the general evolutionary progress of society. Thus he could even find something good to say about communism, writing (or at least publishing) immediately after the 1848 revolutions, because he understood it to be emphasizing the importance of the economic over the political, of property over power: "It is a proof that revolutionary tendencies are now concentrating themselves upon moral questions, leaving all purely political questions in the background" (1851-4/1975: 356). Some of this change, Comte thought, was due to the influence of positivism and ultimately signaled a decline in the dangerous tendencies of metaphysical, revolutionary thought:

And here we see definitely the alteration that positivism introduces in the revolutionary conception of the action of the working classes upon society. For stormy discussions about rights, it substitutes peaceable definition of duties. It supersedes useless disputes for the possession of power by inquiring into the rules that should regulate its wise employment . . . (1851-4/1975: 356).

Comte stayed out of the way, for the most part, in 1848, and actually celebrated the coup of 2 December. Earlier, Comte had seen (and pronounced healthy) a tendency in mass politics itself toward accepting dictatorship:

In the midst of political convulsion, when the spirit of revolutionary destruction is abroad, the mass of the people manifest a scrupulous obedience towards the intellectual and moral guides from whom they accept direction, and upon whom they may even press a temporary dictatorship, in their primary and urgent need of a preponderant authority. Thus do individual dispositions show themselves to be in harmony with the course of social relations as a whole, in teaching us that political subordination is as inevitable, generally speaking, as it is indispensable. (1830-42/1975: 277)

As Aron summarizes:

He was, quite simply, overjoyed at the destruction of those representative and liberal institutions which he regarded as linked to critical, metaphysical, and therefore anarchistic spirit and also to a blind worship of the peculiarities of the political evolution of Great Britain. (Aron, 1968: 304).

Tocqueville, by contrast, was a major political figure in the 1840s, both before and after the February Revolution. Though he eventually became a prominent minister in the post-revolutionary government, he hoped that revolution would be avoided and greeted its eventuality with sorrow (though I do not find in the *Recollections*' passages on February the sense of despair and despondency which Aron does). Tocqueville saw Parisian radicalism as genuinely popular, if misguided and dangerous. As he commented on the June days:

One should note, too, that this terrible insurrection was not the work of a certain number of conspirators, but was the revolt of one whole section of the population against another. The women took part in it as much as the men. (1971: 170)

Considering events at a greater distance, Tocqueville reverted to a more typical conservative stance. As Minister of Foreign Affairs, he spoke to defend the French Republic's military attack on Italian republicans. He described the Roman revolution as having begun "with violence and murder," and claimed legitimacy for the government's aim to "complete the rout of, or

rather to master the demagogic faction" which was responsible (1971: 388, 382).

Tocqueville identified revolution primarily with bloodshed, disorder and threat to property. He had little sympathy for the July monarchy, but at least could muster the faint and ambiguous praise that its government "one of the most corrupt, but least bloodthirsty, that has ever existed" (1971: 46). The revolution of 1789 had gone far beyond anything Tocqueville could consider legitimate in its attack on the old regime, and many in 1848 (as in 1830) were prepared to extend the revolution still further into other areas of social life, as well as to attempt once again to establish a republican form of government. Far from seeing 1848 as a simple continuation of 1830 or 1789, however, Tocqueville went out of his way to note that "the men charged with suppressing the Revolution of 1848 were the same men who had made the Revolution of 1830" (1971: 47). He emphasized in this context his general view that "one time will never fit neatly into another, and the old pictures we force into new frames always look out of place," or as a variant phrasing had it, "all historical events differ, that the past teaches one little about the present" (1971: 48).

But Tocqueville did not think the 1848 revolution purely a matter of accidents and specific, voluntary causes. He identified as general predisposing causes the industrial revolution; the "passion for material pleasures;" the "democratic disease of envy;" the workings of economic and political theories (particularly those which encouraged "the belief that human wretchedness was due to the laws and not to providence and that poverty could be abolished by changing the system of society"); popular contempt for the ruling class and especially the government; administrative centralization; and the general "mobility of everything—institutions, ideas, mores and men—in a society on the move," a sort of general proneness to upheaval (1971: 79). Nonetheless, Tocqueville hardly identified those general causes with some ideal of progress. On the contrary, whatever the ideals of the revolutionaries (Tocqueville thought many were more opportunistic than idealistic,

and he was not sympathetic to the more socially radical among them) the net result was, in his view, to replace a semi-legitimate, more or less liberal and moderate monarchy with what he called a 'bastard monarchy,' an authoritarian regime. Tocqueville was a partisan of the Republic as such, hostile to Bonaparte whose imperial ambitions he decried and to the June insurgents against whom he was prepared to fight in the streets. Yet as a sociologist, he thought from the beginning of the revolution that an authoritarian outcome was most likely.

Though he was less centrally involved than Tocqueville, it is Marx who is most widely associated with the French revolution of 1848. Marx's two main retrospective essays on the revolution ("Class Struggles in France, 1848–50" and "The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon") are among his most important works of political analysis. Moreover, Marx's concerns have, especially recently, been very influential in setting the agenda for historical scholarship about the revolution. It is partly due to the notion that 1848 is a crucial test case for marxism that the June days have loomed larger than February in recent publications, that socialism has received more attention than republicanism or nationalism, that the various elections of 1848 have been probed more for clues as to why Louis Bonaparte won than for explanations of the weak showings of the radicals.

Marx and Engels each wrote literally dozens of occasional articles about the events of 1848–1851, as well as several more substantial retrospective pieces. The revolutionary movements of 1848 (not just in France) marked a crucial turning point in their work. Not only was this the single point of the most active, immediate political involvement in Marx's life, it was the end of the pre-history of marxism in both political and, less directly, theoretical terms. Politically, Marx approached the revolution committed to the unity of bourgeois democratic and socialist causes; he left the revolution reconciled to the unification of Germany under Prussian leadership (because Prussia represented industrialization against the agrarian interests of Southern Germany) and he left the revolu-

tion convinced that the radical, socialist cause was doomed to defeat when it started its march under the banner of bourgeois democracy.

Writing in 1850, Marx was still able to see one crucial gain from the June defeat in Paris:

By making its burial place the birthplace of the *bourgeois republic*, the proletariat compelled the latter to come out forthwith in its pure form as the state whose admitted object is to perpetuate the rule of capital, the slavery of labour . . . Only after being dipped in the blood of the *June insurgents* did the tricolour become the flag of the European revolution—the red flag! (1850: 69–70; original emphases)

The coup of Louis Bonaparte in 1851 erased any short term optimism Marx had about French leadership of European revolution. It did not, however, change Marx's basic conceptualization of the revolution as a play of social classes defined by material interests, nor his understanding of 1848–1851 as merely steps on the path to ultimate socialist revolution in Western Europe. One of the central messages of "The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon" is that the radicals of 1848 looked back too much, borrowed too much language from the past, failed to act on a clear understanding of the class struggle characteristic of capitalist society, and hence wound up replaying 1789 as farce instead of waging proletarian revolution as such. In "The 18th Brumaire . . .," the June days still signify the point at which it became clear that "in Europe the questions at issue are other than that of "republic or monarchy". It [the defeat of the June insurgents] had revealed that here *bourgeois republic* signifies the unlimited despotism of one class over other classes" (1852: 111).

Marx's scathing antipathy towards bourgeois republicanism and bourgeois democracy can only be understood in the context of 1852, when bourgeois regimes had proven themselves capable not only of supporting authoritarian governments but of engaging in extremely bloody repression of popular revolts in several countries. In the revolutions of 1848, the European

democratic movement had just gone down to its most resounding defeat ever. This is crucial for understanding marxism because Marx and Engels had previously maintained their strongest political associations with radical democrats and nationalists. Despite the rhetorical appeal of the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx's focus on workers was largely theoretical and did not, prior to the revolution, preclude an assumed unity between workers and bourgeois democrats. It was the defeats of the revolution which led Marx and Engels to turn their own attention primarily toward the labor movement and to break off most of their involvement in radical democratic circles (Lichtheim, 1964: 78). In politics, Marx concluded, Britain and even more the United States were the exceptions, though in economics Britain might show Germany its future. Though Marx held out the prospect that the U.S., Britain and Holland might find a peaceful, nonrevolutionary path to socialism, he also predicted that eventually the bourgeoisie of the United States would be led to assume authoritarian modes of repression just as its counterparts had done.

Looking at the February revolution in retrospect, Marx could see it only as hollow, perhaps all the more so because of his own early enthusiasm for revolutionary democracy during the days of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*. Marx's approach to the June insurgency was to identify the reasons for what he saw as a defeat of the proletariat and its bourgeois allies. His approach was in some ways quite similar to Tocqueville's, as Lindemann, among others, has observed:

Both Marx and Tocqueville, so different in background and sympathies, believed that the June Days were the opening chapter of a fundamentally new kind of struggle, a portentous clash of capital and labor, of propertied and unpropertied. (1983: 83)

Marx and Tocqueville shared a contempt for Bonapartist rule after 2 December, but saw different social explanations for the regime. Marx saw Bonaparte as propped up by the peasants and as a compromise between finance and industrial capital.

Tocqueville, on the other hand, blamed not an underlying interest so much as revolution itself for leading to the Bonapartist outcome:

Louis Napoleon's candidature. Here again one sees the stamp of the February Revolution; the people *properly so-called* is the main actor; events seem to create themselves without any outstanding figure or even the upper or middle classes appearing to do anything. (1971: 348; original emphasis)

What was wrong with Napoleon III, so far as Tocqueville was concerned, was not his similarity to a monarch, but his dissimilarity; the very way in which he furthered material interests in society while undercutting the spirit (and reality) of enlightened political participation even among elites; his willing sacrifice of political legitimacy at home and his pursuit of empire abroad. Though Tocqueville shared little of the hopeful attitude of the monarchical parties towards Louis Napoleon, he was completely prepared to take their side against socialism and revolution:

Without wishing to be carried away by the monarchical parties, I have no hesitation in voting with them on all measures designed to re-establish order and discipline in society and to strike down the revolutionary and Socialist party. (1971: 348).

Tocqueville wrote this just a few sentences before he declared that "Louis Napoleon struck me as the *worst* of ends for the Republic, and I did not want to be implicated therein" (*ibid.*, original emphasis). This worst of ends, it would appear, was still better than further revolution and the establishment of a so-called "social republic." In other words, rather strikingly, Tocqueville was prepared to act just as Marx's theory predicted he would, to see order and property as inseparable, and worth the sacrifice of even the republic itself. Still, there is more to Tocqueville's ideas on legitimate government than Marxian class interest. Tocqueville was, as Aron affirms, a passionate devotee of political freedom as one of the most important of possible goods.

The great fault of the reactionary drift towards Louis Napoleon was that it would bring about "a state less free than the Monarchy" (*ibid.*). Tocqueville reported a "profound sadness":

I think I can see my country's freedom vanishing under an illegitimate and absurd monarchy. (1971: 349)

As Tocqueville withdrew from public life to write his memoirs, Marx withdrew to England in what proved permanent exile, and to the British museum to embark on his heroic struggle with the political economy of capitalism. As he did so, he took with him a deepened sense of the ultimate futility and/or triviality of attempts at political reform which did not address the fundamental class divisions in society. Indeed, one of the most enduring impacts of the revolution of 1848 (and not just for Marx) was to sever the sometimes tense unity which had previously joined socialists and democrats. But in an era in which neither socialism nor democracy could be taken for granted, it should not be assumed that "objective interests" made obvious for any subaltern group the answer to the question of which to favor or whether to pursue both simultaneously. Curiously, Marx closed the "18th Brumaire . . ." with the suggestion that Napoleon III, in trying to be the patriarchal benefactor of all classes, faced a contradictory task and in trying to meet the contradictory demands on him threw "the entire bourgeois economy into confusion" (1852: 197). In economic terms, at least, Louis Bonaparte was far more successful as Emperor than Marx predicted.

Let us turn back momentarily to Aron's characterization of the analytic traditions Comte, Tocqueville and Marx embody (if not in each case found). Tocqueville appears (along with Montesquieu) as progenitor of "a school of sociologists who are not very dogmatic, who are essentially preoccupied with politics, who do not disregard the social infrastructure but stress the autonomy of the political order and who are liberals" (1968: 332). Aron identifies himself with this "French school of political sociology;" less nationalistically

we may also see some similarities to Weber.

Comte appears as founder of a tradition culminating in Durkheim which Aron considers the “official and licensed sociologists of today.” “This is the school which underplays the political as well as the economic in relation to the social. It places the emphasis on the unity of the social entity, retains the notion of consensus as its fundamental concept, and by multiplying analyses and concepts endeavors to reconstruct the social totality” (*ibid.*). To an unfair degree, in fact, Aron’s essay on 1848 uses Comte as a stand-in for Durkheim, ignoring a number of important divergences in their approaches.²

Marxism, for Aron, “combines an explanation of the social entity in terms of economic organization and social infrastructure with a schema of evolution that guarantees its followers victory and the peaceful or violent elimination of heretics” (*ibid.*). This seems an unfair characterization not least of all because of its attempt to impugn marxist social analysis by links to popular marxist political eschatology and totalitarian regimes labeling themselves marxist.

But I want to leave aside the question of fairness in these characterizations for the time being; I think nearly everyone will grant that Aron sensibly identifies three major schools of sociological theory, and that these are the three most central theoretical schools, at least with regard to macrosocial analysis, in the classical tradition. I want to ask, very briefly, why these three traditions emerged as dominant after 1848.

² The comparison is unfair primarily to Durkheim, whose sociology was far more substantial and nuanced (see also n.8 below). In particular, Durkheim’s sociology is not founded nearly so much on a notion of consensus as Aron implies. Exploring how society may *still* be knit together *after* the relative consensus of the *conscience collective* has been ruptured by division of labor and social differentiation is central to Durkheim’s sociological task. In this stress on the idea of consensus, and especially in the last phrase of the quotation, Aron seems somewhat to be damning Durkheim by association with Parsons as well as Comte.

II

During the revolution itself, there were two other noteworthy intellectual positions in the streets, the Constituent Assembly and the barracks. These had intellectualizers, but none of them has attained prominent stature in the history of social theory. One of these was the tradition linking utopian socialism, communitarian radicalism and some forms of anarchism. It envisaged not only political and economic reform but qualitative transformation of inner life, social relations and dealings with nature. Closely related and sometimes overlapping was the French revolutionary tradition with its ideals of justice and equality, its rhetoric of rights and its affirmation of direct public action as their ultimate defense. After 1851, the French revolutionary tradition (or more broadly, the tradition of bourgeois revolution in general) was incorporated into the academy as a tradition of political theory in a way both stripped of ties to revolutionary programs and segregated from concrete social analysis. The communitarian, utopian tradition became a submerged alternative, a minor channel parallel to the main stream—at least in academic terms. It remained a vital force in popular politics.

Nonetheless, protagonists of the 1848 revolution were guided largely by these two traditions. In particular, the events of 1848 were understood by contemporaries very largely through reference to the events and ideas of 1789. Louis Napoleon’s coup may have seemed only a farcical repetition to Marx, but it seemed like tragedy to Tocqueville and real life to the millions of French people to whom it brought reassurance or defeat. By the French revolutionary tradition, I do not refer only to the attempt to understand later revolutions by fitting them into the template of 1789 (though this was indeed done in 1848 as in 1830).³ By the French

³ In fact, between the two revolutions Louis Blanc took it upon himself to respond to Marx’s and Arnold Ruge’s proposal for Franco-German radical collaboration with a disquisition on the French Enlightenment and revolutionary traditions, the lessons of 1789 and how the German Hegelians might profitably learn from the French how to avoid certain false steps such as excessive focus on militant atheism

revolutionary tradition I mean not only the use of ideas *about* the revolution of 1789, but the continuing currency of some of the ideas which informed the revolution of 1789 (these ideas include understandings of work and basic social groups as well as more explicitly political ones; see Sewell, 1980).

Tracing the impact of this tradition on social theory, Steven Seidman describes its central ideas as justice and social equality, which in turn were taken to be preconditions to happiness, social solidarity and freedom. As he writes:

It is hard to exaggerate the extent to which the French revolutionary tradition, from Rousseau to the egalitarians, Babeuf, Blanqui, and Proudhon, made social equality and social justice the centerpiece of its ideology. (1983: 148)

But to limit an account of the French revolutionary tradition to these two ideals is to deprive it of much of its radical force. Beyond justice and equality, the tradition also included an affirmation of the direct action of “the people” as the ultimate source of political legitimacy. The traditional rhetoric was often cast in a language of rights. By 1848, it was common for this revolutionary tradition to have been fortified by a strong admixture of utopian socialism and communitarianism. While

(see Kramer, 1988: 125–6). Proudhon was distinctive among the French socialists for his aversion to religion (see Woodcock, 1972: 90–1, 100–101), and he was not an unambiguous apostle of revolution. Nonetheless, writing to Marx in 1846 he reflected the French revolutionary tradition of social thought when he spoke of turning “the theory of Property against Property in such a way as to create what you German socialists call *community* and which for the moment I will only go so far as calling *liberty or equality*” (1875/1969: 151, original emphases). In this same letter, Proudhon sharply criticizes what he takes to be Marx’s tendency to authoritarianism or dogmatism:

. . . although my ideas on matters of organization and realization are at the moment quite settled, at least as far as principles are concerned, I believe that it is my duty, and that it is the duty of all socialists, to maintain for some time yet an attitude of criticism and doubt. In short, I profess with the public an almost total antidogmatism in economics. . . . for God’s sake, when we have demolished all *a priori* dogmas, do not let us think of indoctrinating the people in our turn. (1875/1969: 150)

discourse about equality and justice could thrive in respectable academic circles, this more radical variant combining the revolutionary tradition with communitarian and utopian thought was excluded from the academy and became an almost entirely extramural and sometimes largely submerged tradition. It became disreputable in considerable part precisely because its adherents were defeated in the revolution of 1848.

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon was foremost among the theorists of this tradition active in 1848. Today, Proudhon usually figures only as a footnote to the history of social theory, and gets only slightly more attention in histories of political radicalism. In both cases, he is remembered mainly as the object of Marx’s criticism. But he was without question more important in the France (and much of the rest of Europe) of 1848 than Marx, and indeed, his thought had a more profound influence on the Paris Commune in 1871 and later on syndicalism and especially on the theory of Georges Sorel.⁴ The radicals of this tradition (after Rousseau) have tended to be written out of academic histories of social theory. In some cases, this is because they did not write abstract theory of much note; in other cases it is simply because academics have grudgingly admitted marxism to academic discourse under the illusion that it is the only intellectually serious radical theory—an illusion marxists have generally been at no pains to dispel.

The impact of the 1848 revolution on thought in the utopian socialist and French revolutionary traditions was thus ironic. No school of thought informed popular radicalism more, but the defeat of this popular radicalism seems to have discredited both its largely populist rhetoric and its utopianism. This discrediting, however, has been only in certain relatively specialized quarters. Marx, after initial overtures failed to produce an alliance, could hardly hide his contempt for Proudhon, and even before 1848 had made him the butt of *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Proudhon, in turn, called Marx “the tape-worm of socialism,” Woodcock, 1972: 102).

⁴ See, for example, the substantial appendix of “Exégèses prouhoniennes” in Sorel (1921).

Non-radical academic theorists seem to have been prone to follow Marx in condemnation of Proudhon and other populist and utopian socialists, even if they could agree with Marx on no other point. Yet, as Lindemann puts it, throughout the nineteenth century, most French workers

remained involved in small-scale production and distrusted concentrated industry. If it is possible to select any one figure who spoke for them it was Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. (1983: 106)

That Proudhon's work, like the rest of the populist, utopian, radical tradition, was rejected decisively by the intellectuals but not by the people presumably galled the intellectuals all the more.

Proudhon's thought, like that of many syndicalists later, must always seem hard to classify in left-right terms, and accordingly dangerous. As some syndicalists could slide into fascism, so Proudhon (like Cobbett in England) spoke in many ways to a readership of what I have called "reactionary radicals" (Calhoun, 1982, 1983a). This way of thinking has not altogether vanished in any Western country, but its first flowering had a longer life in France than in England (and indeed was more important in the 1848 revolution than its English counterpart was in the late Chartism of the same period; Calhoun, 1983b). This was so partly because of France's relatively gradual pace of industrialization and attendant social transformation, and partly because liberalism took root so weakly that it neither siphoned off much popular support, nor encouraged the pitting of ideas of freedom against justice in popular thought.⁵

Proudhon himself faced the February revolution with mixed emotions. On the 24th of February, he noted in his diary, "they have made a revolution without ideas" (Woodcock, 1972: 118). Nonetheless, partly at the urging of followers, Proudhon sprang into action as a leading promoter of the idea of the "social

⁵ I shall not attempt to follow up the other possible continental comparisons here. For better or worse, the French experience of 1848 has exerted the dominant influence on classical social theory.

republic." Proudhon was one of the socialists defeated in the Constituent Assembly elections in April. He was also (apparently not entirely out of sour grapes) a leading critic of the idea that a republic with universal suffrage would suffice to bring about revolutionary change. He argued that simple reliance on universal suffrage, as opposed to direct action, would open the republic to backsliding toward monarchy and minimize the chances for following the political revolution with an economic one. Proudhon argued that the potential harmony of interests which was claimed as the basis for representative government was in fact the true basis for anarchism, while the attempt to establish representative government without the economic action to bring interests truly into harmony simply gave rise to an authoritarian government acting on behalf of some interests against others:

Who says representative government, says harmony of interests; who says harmony of interests, says absence of government. (1852: 271)

The claim was not totally dissimilar to Marx's notion of the withering away of the state, though the paths envisaged by the two men differed markedly.⁶

Proudhon's prominence grew through the revolutionary months. He was on the list of nine members proclaimed as a provisional government in the abortive insurrection of 15 May and he succeeded in winning election to the Assembly in June (alongside Victor Hugo, Adolphe Thiers and Louis Napoleon). At first Proudhon thought the June days were the work of political intriguers and provocateurs. But by the second day he became convinced that the insurrection was genuinely, if very vaguely, socialist in inspiration. "Its first and determining cause was the social questions, the social crisis, work,

⁶ In 1846 Proudhon had written to Marx that he had abandoned belief in "what used to be called a revolution but which is quite simply a jolt. . . . we must not suggest *revolutionary* action as the means of social reform because this supposed means would simply be an appeal to force and to arbitrariness" (1875/1969: 151, original emphasis).

ideas," he reported (quoted in Woodcock, 1972, p. 130). More clearly than most, he identified *both* the June insurgents and the Mobile Guard as members of the working class (in the loose, pre-Marxist sense). He explained the insurrection essentially as the result of four months of unemployment followed by the attack on the National Workshops. In addition to such references to direct experience ("great events are always explained by little causes," 1852, p. 16), Proudhon's explanations of revolutionary events tended to rely very heavily on ideas. He saw the government mired in dogma handed down from previous governments (for example about public safety); he saw the coup d'état of 2 December as "the strictly logical consequence of the ideas that predominated in France between February and December '51" (Proudhon, 1969: 164).

Indeed, Proudhon's first impressions of the 1848 revolution were quite negative. He even anticipated Marx's famous (1852) characterization of repetition in French revolutionary history; as Proudhon wrote in February 1848:

I can hear the workers shouting: "Long live the Republic! Down with hypocrisy!" Pour souls! They are in the grip of *hypocrisy*. The very people who are going to become rulers are its unwitting agents and the first to be taken in. Intrigue is rife and gossip wins the day. Drunk on historical novels, we have given a repeat performance of the 10th of August [1792] and the 29th of July [1830]. Without noticing it, we have all become characters from some farce (1875/1969: 154; original emphasis).

What Proudhon required before he could give himself more fully to the revolutionary cause was confidence that the events were not "artificial" but rather the product of "primitive spontaneity" (see Tocqueville's conclusion that this was so; 1971: 348, quoted above). Proudhon never wavered from an interpretation of revolution as essentially an act of the people at large, rather than of established political leaders. In 1849, he sharply attacked the notion that revolutionary change might be brought about by enlightened governmental leadership:

Any revolution from above is inevitably . . . revolution by dictatorship and despotism . . .

All revolutions, since the first king was crowned down to the Declaration of the Rights of Man, have been brought about spontaneously by the people. If there have been times when governments have followed the people's lead, this has been because they were forced to do so. Nearly always governments have prevented, repressed and struck at revolution. They have never, of their own accord, revolutionized anything. Their role is not to aid progress but to hold it back. Even if, which is unthinkable, they understood the science of revolution or social science, they could not put it into practice. They would not have the right to do so. (1849/1969: 156-7)

The point of mentioning Proudhon is not to claim that he was a thinker to stand beside Tocqueville or Marx or even Comte in his sheer intellectual contributions (though these are not without interest). It is rather to call attention to the now submerged tradition which took the French revolutionary ideals of equality and justice to a radical extreme, which combined them with communitarian notions of solidarity (sometimes giving more stress to fraternity than did the French revolution itself), which counted on the direct action of "the people" (or, by 1848, the proletariat, understood in a loose, non-marxist sense as all who labor) as the crucial subjective force in history, and which was willing to think in terms of utopian transformations. The very discrediting of this line of thought by its defeat in 1848 has made later analysts forget or deny what an important role it played in the revolutionary ferment.⁷

The submergence of the radical French revolutionary tradition (and linked traditions in other countries) was bound up with the weakness of democratic liberalism in continental Europe. Echoes of the bourgeois revolutions continued in the discourse of academic political theorists about rights, equality and justice (most prominently in the English speaking countries) but it was severed from sociological theory, which in turn flourished more

⁷ Sewell (1980) is a prominent exception.

on the European continent.⁸ During the 1840s, however, there was a powerful popular resonance to the communalism of utopian socialism and to a populist version of the French revolutionary tradition. After 1851, both of these (partially overlapping) traditions lost intellectual respectability, if not popular appeal. This loss, indeed, is one of the reasons why ideas of communal radicalism, direct popular action and the unity of equality and justice as ideals have had to be partially reinvented to figure, as they have, in political and social theory since the 1960s. Indeed, it would not be altogether far-fetched to say that the insurgencies of 1968 brought respectability back to some of the ideas of the insurgents defeated in 1848.⁹

⁸ This tradition would certainly resurface, perhaps most prominently in Sorel, as mentioned. Michelet (Proudhon's friend and equally an apostle of "the people") was an important intellectual adherent to part of this tradition, but we might note that it is an attractive oddity of Edmund Wilson's *To the Finland Station* (1972), considered as a history of radicalism, to devote extensive attention to Michelet; he is more commonly ignored. In direct relation to Aron, it is worth mentioning that the French revolutionary tradition figured prominently in the thought of Emile Durkheim (see Seidman, 1983). Durkheim should not be reduced to a Comtean, even if his work can be faulted for its lack of treatment of politics (and its implication that politics is epiphenomenal to the truly fundamental underlying social forces). Indeed, when Durkheim considered himself in relationship to radical political thought, it is reasonable to assume that Sorel loomed larger in his vision than Marx or marxists. Nonetheless, Durkheim is a somewhat peculiar representative of the French revolutionary tradition, because he combined loyalty to the Republican state with a minimization of the political (here I disagree somewhat with Seidman, 1983, who regards Durkheim as more fully affiliated to the French revolutionary tradition; this is possible, I think, only because he narrows the tradition to the ideas of equality and justice, disregarding its affirmation of direct popular political action and its rhetoric of rights). To affirm the revolutionary tradition as embodied in the state and celebrated in its collective representations was an altogether different thing from adhering to the revolutionary tradition in a sufficiently radical way to make one a revolutionary oneself.

⁹ For most of the twentieth century, one might have faulted social theory and sociological analysis for giving inadequate attention to revolution. More recently, largely but not exclusively under the influence of a revitalized marxism, a great deal has been written on the subject, but even marxist and other sympathetic accounts have often treated revolution in a "normalizing" way. They have stressed the purely political and economic dimensions of revolution

III

Classical social theory, in any case, derived three main lessons from the revolution of 1848. Like phases of the revolution, they can be labeled by three famous months. The lesson of February was that undemocratic governments might (at crucial moments) be toppled easily, though democratic stability would prove hard to establish. Later experience has led to a debate about whether the failure of liberal democracy in 1848 in fact led directly to fascism.

The lesson of June was the class allegiances had become central to politics, and for better or worse a class struggle to go beyond "mere bourgeois democracy" had begun. Any assumption of a unity of interests among the people was held to be outmoded. Here recent revisionist history has challenged the received understanding directly. A distinguished line of work has argued that artisans figured much more prominently than anything like a marxist proletariat in the revolution of 1848 (Price, 1972, is perhaps the pivotal source for this argument; see also the discussion of the language and organization of labor in Sewell, 1980, and the summaries of implications in Calhoun, 1983b and Katznelson and Zolberg, 1987). This revisionism had succeeded sufficiently by 1983 that Traugott dubbed it the "new orthodoxy." There has been notable controversy, however, about just how to theorize the prominence of artisans. One line of thought has been to assimilate them to a broader, more internally diverse understanding of the proletariat, still within a basically marxist conceptual framework (Aminzade, 1981). Another has been to argue that this fundamentally undermines the theoretical meaning of Marx's categories, and at the same to the exclusion of broader cultural and socio-psychological currents; they have underestimated the role of passion and exaggerated that of calculation (not unlike a good many retrospective accounts of 1968). But the enthusiasm of artists for some revolutions, the exuberance of new freedoms, the exhilaration of a sense of radically new possibilities (even when sometimes apparently illusory) should not be denied their place in sociological accounts. The issue is much the same as the marxist denigration of utopian socialism, simultaneously a historical inaccuracy, an error of political tactics and an impoverishment of theoretical imagination.

time obscures crucial disjunctures between the artisans (and other radicals who stood more on traditional foundations and often used a populist rhetoric) and the modern working class (Calhoun, 1983a).

The classical lesson of June has been challenged further by research arguing that Marx and Tocqueville were both wrong to see crucial differences of class background (or indeed other dimensions of social background) between the insurgents and their repressors during the June days. Mark Traugott (1985) has recently put something of a capstone to the argument that there were no crucial background differences between the two sides of the June struggles by which to explain their allegiances.¹⁰ Rather, he argues, the specific history of the organizations into which they had been socialized and through which they were mobilized should be the basic focus of explanatory attention. Among the implications of this analysis is an emphasis on the fluidity of political allegiances in revolutionary situations, their malleability under pressures of organization and discourse (though Traugott gives little weight to ideas). Revolutions may indeed be the result partially of underlying structural factors, and these factors may have an impact on the sides people take, but the mediations of specific, contingent historical factors is enormous.

The lesson of December (both 1848 and especially 1851) was simply that revolution tends to produce a Bonapartist or authoritarian response among "the party of order." Revolution could not on this view yield a stable liberal regime. Classical social theory has tended, however, to assume a rather evolutionary view of the relationship between politics and economics. In the French case, a comparison with Britain has been based on the assumption that France's

¹⁰ Traugott's conclusions are somewhat broader than his data. He shows substantial similarity of self-declared prior occupation among members of the National Workshops and the Mobile Guard, but this hardly exhausts possibilities for meaningful differences in structural position or background experiences. Nor does Traugott's work justify dismissing the impact of the age differences noted by contemporaries and later analysts alike. Traugott's "organizational hypothesis" should be taken as one partial explanation among several, not a full alternative.

economic development was somehow "retarded". In some arguments this is due to her revolutionary history (and its incompleteness); in others the France's recurrent revolutions result from this supposed economic backwardness. But recent scholarship challenges this very economic assumption (see esp. O'Brien and Keyder, 1978). Authoritarianism did not make the Second Empire ineffective economically. Nor was the popular ideal of slowing down industrial change altogether foolish, even in economic terms (Calhoun, 1988). One aspect of the classical lesson of December is confirmed: revolution and reaction both seem to further centralization and growth of government.¹¹

IV

Before closing, I want to point to a lesson about revolution which could have been drawn from 1848, but was not (even though it is closely linked to the last point about administrative centralization and government growth). I cannot, unfortunately, develop it substantially within the scope of this paper. In fact, both Marx and Tocqueville drew the opposite conclusion to the one I will suggest, partly because they failed to notice adequately a crucial social change.

To a great extent, 1848 marked the

¹¹ The contribution of revolution to bureaucratization and centralization of government was the main lesson drawn from revolutionary history by Weber, though he had little to say about 1848 in particular, or revolution in general. In fact, it would appear that Weber considered 1848 a *coup d'état*, not a revolution, and stressed the extent to which strengthened governmental bureaucracy made "true" revolution impossible:

With all the changes of masters in France since the time of the First Empire, the power machine has remained essentially the same. Such a machine makes "revolution," in the sense of the forceful creation of entirely new formations of authority, technically more and more impossible, especially when the apparatus controls the modern means of communication (telegraph, et cetera) and also by virtue of its internal rationalized structure. In classic fashion, France has demonstrated how this process has substituted *coups d'état* for "revolutions": all successful transformations in France have amounted to *coups d'état*. (1922/1948: 230).

last Western European revolution in the classical urban mode. It was based on (a) the concentration of power within the city, (b) the existence of an urban public sphere in which political ideas could circulate widely beyond immediate social segments,¹² (c) the existence of an urban crowd prepared to take up arms (and experienced in struggle), and (d) the potential support of normally relatively apolitical “traditional groups” outside the urban public sphere who had long-standing grievances to motivate action against the old regime (e.g. peasants, small-town artisans and some small-town professionals). These potential bases for revolution did not vanish overnight from Western Europe, of course, but they never came together amid the right conjuncture of opportunities again, though they figured in the less successful events of 1871 in Paris and 1905 in Germany and Russia (and of course the Bakuninist dimension of Russian radicalism echoed Proudhon—and failed to gain state power in 1917, though it contributed to the toppling of the old regime). Wherever one marks the end, however, 1848 must be considered a moment in the decline of this sort of revolutionary potential, not the point of take-off or acceleration.

One of the things which emerges most clearly from accounts like those of Tocqueville and Proudhon is how much the drama of the revolution was played out in face-to-face interactions and personal relationships. Not only were the various revolutionary elites in direct contact with each other, but it was possible for rumor to run like electricity through the circuits of the Paris streets. On the morning of 24 February, Tocqueville heard from his cook that “the government was having the poor people massacred” (1971: 46). As soon as he set foot in the street, he could “scent revolution in the air.” Walking to the house of one of the King’s counsellors, he met and questioned a member of the National Guard who was hurrying to take up arms in defense of the people.

It is a fact remarkably overlooked in social theory that the revolution of 1848

was made almost entirely in Paris.¹³ It was made in a series of highly local actions, as crowds moved, for example, from the Assembly to the Hotel de Ville. The Hotel, indeed, is aptly named to symbolize French revolutions because they were all Parisian revolutions, however much they might be echoed, spurred on or, as in part was the case in 1848, unmade in the countryside. The *National* workshops were in Paris, for example (which caused the flood of unemployed people seeking work in Paris to increase). To be sure the Republican government had to contend with problems in provincial cities. But like Louis Philippe before them, the threat ministers had to fear was from the Parisian crowd. Extending the vote with universal suffrage to the country as a whole was, as it happened, as much a way of containing the revolution as of extending it (though by 1851 parts of the countryside would be more aroused; see Margadent, 1979; Agulhon, 1970). Even when revolutionary action took place throughout France, it was organized as a proliferation of local confrontations. The national government was highly localized; it could only be attacked in one place: Paris.

It is perhaps not shocking that Marx and Tocqueville should take this urban character of the revolution so much for granted. Marx theorizes it, for example, in terms of the differences of interests between the urban proletariat and peasants. But Marx does not consider the implications for the theory of revolution of the end of the old pattern of urban dominance, the eclipse of the city as what Giddens (1985) has accurately, if awkwardly, called a “power container.” It has certainly been noticed how Paris was rebuilt in fundamental ways after 1848 (Harvey, 1985: ch. 3). Not only were boulevards broadened (among other effects perhaps reducing the advantage to insurgents in barricade fighting and easing the movement of troops). The distribution of industry, residence and governmental buildings shifted. But what has been less noticed is that even in France, perhaps the most centralized of

¹² I mean primarily Paris, but also, in much reduced extent, the major provincial urban centres.

¹³ Historians have been more clearly aware of this, viz Stearns: “the revolution *per se* was an almost exclusively Parisian affair” (1974: 81).

modern countries, the extent to which government was contained in the capital city declined markedly. Administration was extended throughout the country in sufficient degree that the chance of an urban insurrection becoming a true revolution was sharply reduced. Something of this was shown in 1871 when a strong urban revolt (in which Proudhonian ideas figured prominently) failed decisively to produce a national revolution.¹⁴

Revolution in the sense of 1848 (which in certain practical, logistical terms was not so different from 1789) ceased to be possible after railroads, telegraphs, improved administrative infrastructure, etc. united whole countries. In fact, one of the novel features of 1848 did not suggest a trend of increasingly successful revolutionary politics. In the June days, "for the first time, the railroads made possible a direct provincial intervention in a Parisian rising" (Stearns, 1974: 91). No modern European (or, more broadly, "rich country") government could be toppled simply by riots in a capital city. This was so partly because government itself was no longer so spatially contained. This lesson was partly learned by Marx and others observing the fate of the Paris Commune in 1871. It did not, however, penetrate to the most basic understanding of revolution which Marx, like many others, had formed in the experience of 1848 and reflection on 1789. Similarly, the significance of the French revolutionary tradition changed. It could endure as a cultural inheritance, but filial piety towards the accomplishments of a past revolution is categorically different from adopting a revolutionary stance in one's own time. It is only in the former sense that Durkheim continued the French revolutionary tradition. Moreover, the meaning of any appeal to direct popular political participation changes fundamentally with the shift of focus from Paris and various other local contexts to a France unified by media from newspapers to TV. Again, the contrast with 1968 is instructive.

Though he did not theorize the shifting place of the city or the transformation of

¹⁴ Of course, other factors were also important in limiting the scope of revolt in 1871—notably the Prussian Army.

social infrastructure as such, Gramsci, in a few brief passages, did see something of the sea-change 1848 marked in revolutionary politics:

Modern political technique became totally transformed after Forty-eight; after the expansion of parliamentarism and of the associative systems of union and party, and the growth in the formation of the vast State and "private" bureaucracies (i.e. politico-private, belonging to parties and trade unions); and after the transformations which took place in the organization of the forces of order in the wide sense . . . (1971: 221)

The transformations after 1848 were crucial to the rise of the sort of ideological hegemony which Gramsci thought characteristic of mature capitalism. In place of permanent revolution, he suggested, one saw "permanently organized consent" (1971: 80).¹⁵

After 1848, then, the revolutionary initiative was fated to shift away from the core European countries among other reasons because of their development of a new level of integrated national administration, transportation and communications infrastructure. The older revolutionary tradition continues most especially in those parts of the world where national infrastructures are weak and give primate cities overwhelmingly central roles. In these settings too, pursuit of democracy and social revolution are often likely to be combined. This is a key reason why revolutions, in the

¹⁵ One might say, of course, that there was ideological hegemony in the pre-1789 *ancien regime* as well. Gramsci's analysis suggests, however, that this was different both in kind and significance. The *ancien regime* certainly benefited like any other regime from the acquiescence of its subjects. But it did not, like the regime of an increasingly industrialized capitalist country, need to educate and mobilize its subjects to such an extent that the organization of consent presented the same sort of problem. At the same time, structural (and infrastructural) obstacles to organizing a sustained revolutionary movement loomed very large in pre-modern Europe. Last but not least, of course, there is the sense in which the modern notion of revolution depends on the existence of something resembling modern states. While premodern governments faced a variety of threats, revolution in the same sense was not one of them.

classical sense of the term, are common today only in Third World countries.¹⁶

Oddly, social theory has yet to give a central place to consideration of these sorts of changes in infrastructure. Our conceptions of revolution, and of social integration itself, remain shaped too much by experiences in directly interpersonal relations, and give too little attention to the growing importance of indirect relationships mediated by technology and complex organizational structures. These new structures actually grew faster in France and much of Europe as a result of the 1848 revolution, and the reaction against it, than they might have done otherwise. Napoleon III was a great friend to the railroad.

What was newest about 1848, indeed, was a feature directly dependent on the improved transportation and communications facilities of the era. The French revolution of 1848 was part of a crisis which shook all of Europe with repercussions on other continents. Capitalism had indeed become international and had blazed paths along which ideas of revolution, nationalism¹⁷ and democracy could flow from one setting to another. But these same paths also strengthened agencies of repression and, perhaps more significantly, agencies of ordinary administration designed to avert crises like that of mid-19th century Europe. In this sense, thinkers like Marx, Tocqueville, Proudhon and Comte figured in an international exchange of ideas which was distinctively increased if not entirely new. 1848 was a media event, publicized in newly founded newspapers throughout Europe and America. In that way, as in some others, it was a harbinger of 1968. But it was not the harbinger

of working class revolution which Marx hoped and Tocqueville feared, partly because the conditions for such revolution were more tied to transitional moments in Western European history, and less a matter of linear, cumulative change, than either recognized.

V

My main points can be summed up readily: Because the French revolution of 1848 figured importantly in the lives of several classical theorists, and because it reflected the social conditions and movements on which they focused their attention most directly, it affords us a very useful vantage point for considering some important aspects of their thought. Indeed, the revolution of 1848 exerted a notable shaping influence on classical social theory through lessons (some now subject to revision) learned from observation of the revolutionary struggles. In particular, both Marx and Tocqueville thought they saw a new feature in the 1848 revolution—an intensification of class struggle. But neither Marx's eager anticipation nor Tocqueville's fear were entirely justified. I have argued here for the importance of two main reasons for this.

First, both Marx and to a lesser extent Tocqueville underestimated the centrality and strength of a populist ideology typified by Proudhon, and the extent to which workers for whom it was particularly apt—e.g. those in small scale enterprises, pre-industrial crafts or other non-factory occupations—were the mainstay of the revolution. The 1848 revolution influenced classical social theory moreover by contributing to the submergence of the radical French revolutionary tradition (along with utopian socialism) after the defeat of the June insurrectionaries and Bonaparte's coup. The strength of this line of thought has accordingly been unfortunately easy for later thinkers to miss as well.

Second, the classical tradition (and many modern analysts) also failed to thematize adequately a basic social transformation, the improvement of infrastructure and administration, which made 1848 in crucial

¹⁶ Obviously there is a good deal of variation in the relationship between city and countryside, and in the level of national integration characteristic of Third World countries undergoing revolutions. I point here to a common pattern; I do not mean to suggest that it is the only one.

¹⁷ Nationalism was an important aspect of the 1848 revolutions, especially in Eastern and Southern Europe. It has also gone underrecognized by classical social theory, and has been rather poorly treated as something inherited from the premodern past rather than as part and parcel of modernity, but this is beyond the scope of the present paper.

ways much more akin to 1789 than it was direct evidence for future continued growth of revolutionary class struggle in the Western European countries. This is the role of improvements in transportation and communications infrastructure and partly through them in effectiveness of state organization (and for that matter of capitalist organization). Structures and agencies of power became less localized and therefore more difficult to attack by traditional revolutionary means.

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